

***ROGUE  
PRINCESS***

B. R. MYERS

*Swoon*  
**READS**

NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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***FOR ANGELA—  
BECAUSE SHE TOLD ME TO.***

# CHAPTER ONE

**I**t was the feverish gossip of the palace maids that got Aidan's attention. He was bent over the rubbish bin, just outside the kitchen. Straightening up, he flicked a vegetable peel from the collar of his uniform and stood in the back doorway, concentrating on the girls' whispers. Several princes from the neighboring planets of the Four Quadrants had been arriving since yesterday, each one more handsome than the last.

Normally, Aidan would brush off anything connected with the royal family—they were hardly his idea of decent human beings—but talk soon turned to the gifts each prince was rumored to be bringing as they all vied for Princess Delia's hand in marriage. The idea of treasures brought in by potential suitors was too tempting to ignore.

With his usual stealth, Aidan slipped into the busy kitchen unnoticed. The other staff barely gave him a second look; it was just the girls, too busy with their own chores to afford him more than a blushing glance.

He spied the deliberate care the head chef took with displaying the flowers beside the array of mini cakes—plus the ornate napkin ring. Aidan knew the valuable piece would end up in his possession by the end of the day. His reflexes were so quick, sometimes all he had to do was notice an object and the next thing he knew, it was in his pocket.

He'd spent years successfully nicking cutlery and palace trinkets during his time as a kitchen chore boy, and had amassed a substantial escape fund. He pictured the almost-full metal box under his thin cot.

He was so close to freedom! And with the headaches coming in faster intervals, he knew his time was dwindling.

The chef beckoned one of the serving androids lined up at attention, identical in their gray dresses and white aprons. “Take this directly to the guest suite in the east wing,” he ordered. “It’ll be my head if the prince’s tray is late.”

The android’s lack of emotion made her the perfect victim, or rather innocent accomplice. Aidan watched her carry the tray out of the kitchen, making up a plan on the spot.

Images of a room full of priceless treasures filled Aidan’s imagination as he waltzed through the bustling kitchen and down the servants’ corridor. He was enough of a constant to go unnoticed, plus experience in thieving had taught him that if you looked like you belonged, everyone assumed you did.

Aidan followed the android as she took the service transporter to the upper levels of the palace. The smooth lift swooped to a stop, making his stomach rise and fall. Wordlessly, the servant made her way down the hallway of the east wing. The bright polished area was a stark contrast to his stepfather’s cottage on the fringe of the Dark District. Built into the great mountain, the palace still had traces of the hard stone within the walls and floor. It was a perfect combination of technology and raw element.

But Aidan had no use for such luxury at the moment. He was focused on his new goal. The android stopped outside a door, then pressed her palm against the calling pad on the wall. The door slid open.

“Lovely work, darling,” Aidan said, reaching up and touching the soft spot behind her ear. There was a click under his finger and the android froze. It was a trick he’d learned a few weeks back while eavesdropping on the royal android technician—blending in to the point of being invisible had its perks.

Aidan took the tray from her and put on his best fake smile. “Compliments of Her Royal Highness, Princess Delia,” he called out, marching into the room. Then he added under his breath, “Heir to

the throne, privileged daughter, and all around boring, typical spoiled royal.”

He noticed the fancy clothing on the bed. The jacket was adorned with shiny buttons and a pressed collar. Voices came from beyond the smaller door across the way. He couldn't tell if it was a heated conversation or a lovers' spat. No matter, all Aidan needed was a few precious seconds to scan the room.

Then he saw it. Nestled under one of the uniforms was the silver hilt of a dagger. Aidan put down the tray, taking care to first remove the gilded napkin ring and slip it into his pocket. It was a greedy gesture, but he reasoned a little insurance never hurt.

Picking up the embellished piece, Aidan noted the inlaid jewels and deduced this was probably a courting gift rather than a weapon. *Something this beautiful should never shed blood.*

The door opened. “You there!” A partially clothed man with a short haircut stood in the smaller doorway glaring.

Aidan gave an exaggerated bow as he hid the dagger behind his back. “Compliments of the royal kitchen, Your Highness.” He swept his other hand toward the tray, then did a quick twirl as he slipped the dagger into his pocket and made his way toward the door. “Enjoy the cakes,” he sang over his shoulder, unable to keep the smile off his face. Not only were his days of being the chore boy over, but the ornate dagger guaranteed the last bit of cash to get him a ticket off this miserable planet. The doors slid closed behind him and he let out a satisfied sigh.

The android was frozen with her arms out front as if she were still holding the tray. “Nice working with you,” Aidan said with a wink. “Forgive my hasty departure—”

“Thief!” the prince yelled from the other side of the door. “I'm calling the guards!”

Aidan scrambled for the servants' lift only to find it was on another floor. Doubling back, he sprinted down the corridor, his boots slapping a guilty echo. He turned the corner and saw the main lift ten feet down the hall. It was a risk for a servant to use it, but he had

no choice. He pressed the call button, swearing under his breath as nothing happened.

The voices of the Queen's Guard echoed like rolling thunder from the far end of the hall. *How did they get here so fast?*

Aidan looked around and spied a tall alcove. Sucking in his breath, he slipped behind the life-size statue of some long dead royal he couldn't care less about. Molding his back into the curved niche in the wall, he felt the familiar twinges to both temples and knew things couldn't get much worse. Another headache was building, and this one promised to be the torturous kind that squeezed his skull to the point of passing out. And even though it meant relief, passing out now would guarantee him a lifetime in the dungeons.

Standing as still as stone, Aidan stared at the other statue across the hallway in its own alcove. He held his breath as the guards closed the distance. He estimated there were at least three of them, and all would be armed, he was certain.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the Queen's Guard come into view. Tall and imposing, the black cloaks and swords evoked a chilling respect from anyone who came face-to-face with them.

The leader paused directly in front of Aidan's alcove. The other two guards halted.

"Slippery bugger," he muttered, looking down the long empty corridor. "Take the stairs. He can't have gotten far."

"Yes, Colonel Yashin." There was a swish of capes as the guards turned and ran in the opposite direction. Aidan slowly relaxed.

The lift sounded as the doors opened. Aidan bounded inside. He reached for the main floor button, but then paused—the guards would be waiting for him, no doubt. His finger shifted and he hit the top button.

The lift came to a stop and the doors opened, revealing the launching bay. He was stunned for a moment, never having been close to this many grand ships before. Then Aidan saw a row of Queen's Guard gliders. They had fifty times the maneuvering capability of the beat-up sky dodger he skimmed over Pirate's Canyon. They were probably trickier to fly as well, but this day was apparently made for

taking chances. All he would have to do was hop on one, and the sky would be his.

Before he could race to the nearest glider, a vessel on his left came to life. The door eased open as if summoning him. “A Queen’s Guard Patrol ship,” he whispered, equal parts awe and trepidation.

He could get much farther in a ship than an open glider, maybe even make it to another planet! No longer thinking about the metal box under his bed, Aidan seized the opportunity and eased his way inside.

He stared at the complex cockpit, suddenly overwhelmed. Anxiety set in. Aidan pulled at the collar of his shirt, frantically unbuttoning the top button. Then his hands felt the chain and the smooth disc around his neck—his medallion. Aidan touched it and closed his eyes. His mother’s voice echoed inside his head. “*Always safe.*”

With this new calmness, he took in his situation. “All right, you beautiful machine,” he said to the control panel, scanning the array of switches and buttons. “It seems you and I are destined to have an adventure.”

The general setup was similar to the smaller dashboard of the glider his stepfather owned. He was certain he could start the ship. But fly it? *Er . . . no.*

Aidan rubbed his thumb along his bottom lip, considering his next move. He knew what the future held if he didn’t take this ship. He imagined his stepfather, glowering from the head of the table, criticizing Aidan’s every gesture.

And never mind the sneers from his stepbrothers. There would be Drake, bulging arms and low forehead, grinning with each rude remark. Then Morgan, pale and apathetic, sitting beside his older brother, staring at the scene without comment—like always.

*I’m done with them,* Aidan thought. The dagger and the ship, and the opportunity they represented, were making him brave.

A jaunty sense of hope quelled his apprehension. “Machines are simple,” he said, hoping to sound confident. “Just tell it what you want it to do.”

He pressed what he assumed was the main power button. The



computer-generated voice of the ship was serene. “Prepare for launch. In T minus ten . . .”

There was a shudder as the ship’s power thrusters came to life, knocking Aidan off his feet. The back of his head bounced off the hard floor. The computer continued to count down as Aidan fought the darkness creeping around the edges of his vision. This time he was certain things couldn’t get much worse.

## *CHAPTER TWO*

**T**he afternoon sun stretched across the luminous tile of Delia's chamber, just reaching the edge of her pedestal. From this vantage she could see across the kingdom. The palace looked over the residences of the lords within the high walls, then the surrounding lake, and farther down she could see the raised homes of counselors and dukes. The whole area was a tiered settlement built into the massive mountain. Then lower still, private landowners. The Dark District was there too, underneath everything else.

But Delia's attention was focused on the cloud cover in the distance. She chided herself for not checking the atmospheric conditions more closely. It would be particularly miserable luck to have planned everything else, but fail because she'd forgotten to check the stupid weather.

"To the left, princess," Marta said, her metallic voice detached yet respectful. She knelt at the hem. "Thank you."

Delia conceded, turning on the spot. She could now see her younger sister, lounging on the chaise by the floor-to-ceiling windows, her finger scrolling across her infotablet.

"Yes," Shania said to the screen. "No." Then she paused. "Hmm . . . maybe." Her face was serious, but Delia knew her younger sister's impish tone too well not to see through the sober countenance.

"Your interest in my torture borders on sadistic voyeurism," Delia told her. She felt Marta's hand brush against the end of her braid as she worked, her hair so long it nearly reached the floor.

"I'm researching the eligible bachelors that arrived last night . . . for your benefit, of course." Shania continued scrolling, and then her face lit up. "Oh, here's one! Prince Quinton of Rexula. He's good-looking, has a degree in biospheric chemistry, and says he's an accomplished competitor in battle ball." She giggled, then added, "I have it on good authority that all the men from Rexula are trained in the necessary skills of battle and proper conduct of the court."

Delia rolled her eyes. "Rexula has the largest supply of plasma in the Four Quadrants. It's his energy supply I'm more interested in than his battle ball skills."

Advisor Winchell stood over Shania, her braided hair tucked under her decorative headpiece of wallowing goose feathers. "Rexula is our closest planetary neighbor and largest trading partner." She then glided across the room, her richly patterned robe flowing behind her. The only noise was the tapping of her cane on the tiles.

Seeing that Advisor Winchell was about to meet her gaze, Delia dropped her eyes to study Marta, now quietly working on the side seam of her wedding gown. She winced as Marta took a straight pin and secured a bit of fabric in place. The fit became more constricting with each tiny alteration.

Shania smiled at the infoscreen. "Can you imagine?" she said dreamily. "Someone strong enough to fight, yet graceful enough to dance you around the ballroom?" She gave a lazy sigh.

"If you're so thrilled with the prospect of marrying a complete stranger," Delia said from the pedestal, "why don't you get up here and take my place?"

"I'd love to!"

"That's enough, girls." Advisor Winchell put up a hand to silence the pair. "Don't take this parade of suitors lightly. It has no more to do with love than any of the other matches I have overseen all these years."

"Strange," Shania said. "You've always struck me as a romantic, Advisor Winchell."

Delia braced for the reprimand, but their elderly mentor ignored Shania's remark and instead put her attention back on Delia. "As first-

born to the queen, you benefit from all the advantages that station in life affords. And as firstborn, you know you have . . .”

“All the responsibility that comes with that privilege,” Delia finished. She knew the speech by heart. “Still, I can’t help but feel as though I’m being bartered off like a secondhand droid . . . sorry, Marta. No offense intended.”

The seamstress stayed quiet. The fabric tightened around Delia’s chest, making it difficult to take a deep breath. Desperation came to the surface as she began an argument she knew she’d never win. “But why do I have to be married right away?” Delia asked. “Why can’t I be one of the Queen’s Guard for a few years, or learn to become a diplomat, or go to the university first, or why—”

“Why can’t you stand still?” Marta interrupted. Delia felt the sharp poke of a pin, but she stayed silent.

The room went quiet—Marta never interrupted.

Delia’s pulse picked up. Something like suspicion flashed across Advisor Winchell’s face. Then it returned to its usual regal mask of appropriate apathy.

“Ouch,” Delia said, flinching away from another pin stick. “A little less rough please, Marta.”

“The intermittent fidgeting has caused the task to take fifteen percent more time to complete than I originally calculated.”

Shania snorted from the chaise longue. “With so much mathematics inside that circuit board of yours, Marta, you’d be better suited to teaching at the university than making dresses.”

“Sewing is my directive,” she replied, her robotic voice never wavering.

Advisor Winchell turned to Shania, “You know very well that androids are forbidden to hold independent employment. They are here to serve us.”

Delia stayed quiet. Marta couldn’t feel the sharp, barbed tongue of Advisor Winchell. How ironic to have two of the most unfeeling women in the kingdom here while she prepared to wed a complete stranger.

A sudden wish for her mother overwhelmed Delia. She pictured

the queen, her own long braid now highlighted with shades of gray. She was meeting with the council at this very moment. But if this arranged marriage was as important as everyone kept telling her, the queen should be here.

“When do we get to meet all the princes?” Shania asked. “I’ve heard all seven are already here.”

“Seven,” Delia repeated tiredly.

“Mm-hmm! There’s Hagar from Lazlo—it’s a small planet with only a handful of families, but he owns most of the waterway so he’s adept at sailing. Then there are the twins, Maxim and Mikel from Tramsted, who obviously have no shame in doubling their chances. However, considering their fabulous fashion sense, they’re certainly worth putting in the serious contender category.”

Delia huffed, “I’m not going to marry a pair of twins!”

“Stop interrupting.” Shania rolled her eyes. “You’re taking all the fun out of this. Then there’s Oskar from the Kalasta Belt—now, he’s interesting, because he holds the record for weight lifting in all of the Four Quadrants. The problem is that his neck is quite large and it makes his head look absurdly small in comparison. Then there’s Armano from Delta Kur, Felix from Trellium, and lastly, lovely Quinton.” Shania sighed with a look of dreamy satisfaction. “The palace is turning into a wonderfully well-stocked man depot.”

“You speak as if they’re something to eat,” Advisor Winchell reprimanded.

A panicked pulse quickened under Delia’s skin. She was brave about sword skills and giving speeches to the leaders of the Four Quadrants—she was even brave enough to face Advisor Winchell once in a while.

But taking a husband?

Fear began to poke through her bored mask of composure. She sniffed, then mentally packaged the fear and pushed it far down, deeply hidden so no one suspected.

Shania continued, “Where are they keeping them, Advisor Winchell?” Her voice went up an octave. “And how will you ever choose, dear sister?”

“I will choose the man who will benefit Astor the—ouch!” Delia jumped to the side as if shocked. A pin was sticking out of her side. “Marta!”

Marta thrust another pin into Delia. “Sewing is my directive—my directive.” She continued to stab the needle through the fabric, more roughly. There was a tear in the dress, a red spot appeared.

Shania screamed.

Advisor Winchell pressed the security button on the wall. “Droid emergency! Princess Delia’s chamber!”

Delia pulled away, tripping off the pedestal.

“—my directive—my directive.” Marta’s voice became static; her hands clawed for the hem of the gown. Delia stared, amazed—then she remembered to scream.

Pulling her way free of the fabric, Delia dashed across the room, then subtly grabbed the satchel she’d hidden behind a chair. While everyone was watching Marta, she slipped out the side door and into the servants’ corridor.

Years of playing hide-and-seek with Shania had afforded her a mental blueprint of every corner of the palace. She made it to the vertical transporter and hit the button for the landing bay.

She felt a temporary twinge of guilt about not telling Shania her plan, but her younger sister would never have been able to keep the secret to herself. The android technician dispatch team would be there soon, she reasoned. Besides, the glitch she’d programmed into Marta’s SHEW had only a half-life of two minutes—barely enough time for Delia to escape.

Shaking, she opened the bag and put on the stolen uniform. The pilot’s jumpsuit was several sizes too large. Her long braid bulged under the fabric at the back, but that couldn’t be helped. She put on the helmet and slapped down the visor. She was one of the elite pilots of the Queen’s Guard—at least for now.

The doors of the lift slid open. Shania wasn’t kidding, there must be half a dozen new ships since last night.

The takeoff alarm pierced the air.

Delia hadn’t anticipated another ship departing at exactly the same

time she'd planned her escape. Regardless, she had to act now or she'd never have another chance.

She ran to the small Patrol ship she'd readied last night. Then she saw its back engines had already started to fire. Delia input the code for the door and jumped in, silently reprimanding herself for messing up the preflight timing so badly. In one move Delia locked the door and rushed forward to the cockpit.

“Argh!” She tripped, then fell onto something squishy.

There was a muffled cry underneath her. “Galaxy’s sake!” a voice said—a male voice.

Delia pushed herself up on her elbow and stared at the stranger through the visor still obscuring her face. His eyes were wide and panicked. A bruise on his cheek added color to his pale face.

“Get off my ship!” she yelled.

He sat up so quickly it threw her off balance.

Delia was about to threaten him when the computer’s soft voice announced, “Takeoff initiated.”

There was a massive shudder. Then Delia and the stranger were thrown back as the ship blasted forward.

## CHAPTER THREE

Aidan didn't have time to reply to the female pilot before his back rammed into something hard. The pull of gravity kept him in place as the ship powered forward. Through the windshield he saw the opening of the landing bay grow bigger at an alarming rate.

"Oh no!" The pilot jumped up and clambered her way to the control panel. She strapped herself in and started to manically press buttons and flick switches.

Just as the ship freed itself from the landing bay, there was a moment of gliding; then the nose of the craft dipped at a terrifying angle. Aidan's stomach twisted. The sky was replaced with a blur of darker colors as the ship began to plummet. He tumbled from the back of the ship, slamming into the copilot's chair. The pilot had her hands on the control stick, but she was still leaning forward.

"Pull up!" Aidan cried out. "We're going to crash!"

"Are you mad?" she asked. "Secure yourself in the chair!"

Aidan noticed her voice was laced with annoyance instead of fear. He could only stare out the window, gripping the sides of the chair to keep from falling into the front glass. They were heading straight for Black Lake, the water that surrounded the base of the palace. A crash at this speed would be like hitting steel itself.

Aidan heard his mother's voice, ". . . *always safe.*"

Then at once, he was lifted as the pressure of the dive eased away. He slumped to the floor as the ship leveled off, sucking in gasps of air, amazed he was still alive.



“Secure yourself,” she ordered him again. “Unless you have a death wish.”

*Yes, ma’am.*

Shaking, Aidan crawled into the copilot’s position and pulled the straps over his shoulders. He took in the scenery and was lost for words. They were barely skimming the water, a trick he wouldn’t even try on his sky dodger.

His earlier panic was replaced with awe as the pilot eased up on the controls enough to slip over the embankment, clearing the high wall. Once they were over this last safety perimeter of the palace, the urban part of the kingdom came into view.

Most of the manors in this area were raised on massive stilts, creating whole new neighborhoods in the sky. He stared enviously as the ship glided over the sparkling buildings. The lush greenery of the gardens and decorative shrubs was a stark contrast to Aidan’s home.

He was more familiar with the Dark District below, and its dim streets. The housing units built side by side reached for the sky—but not high enough to escape the shadow of the larger, more expensive neighborhoods above them. The kingdom was one of varying heights, built on stilts when land ran out. The higher your home, the higher your rank in society. The twin suns always shone on those at the top.

Gazing at the magnificent homes, Aidan was reminded of the incredible risk he’d taken—a lowly chore boy for the palace had no place inside a Queen’s Guard ship. He snuck a peek at the pilot. Her visor was still down, but he could tell by her grip on the steering stick that she was comfortable in this machine. Still, he noticed the rise and fall of her chest, and saw she was breathing faster than him.

He cleared his throat and tried his hand at a casual tone. “My stop is coming up. Perhaps at the next clearing you can—”

An alarm sounded on the radar. The pilot cursed, something he couldn’t quite make out.

“Hold on!” she said, pulling the controls sharply to the left. The ship dipped into darkness, disappearing under the broad platforms of the stately homes. The pilot twisted side to side, sending them into

a dizzying slalom around the steel risers. Aidan saw on the radar that two larger ships were closing in on them.

“Hit the auxiliary jets!” she yelled at him.

The control board was massive, and nothing looked familiar to him. “What? Which button?” he said, panicked.

“The blue one!”

There was a multitude of blue buttons on the control panel in front of him. “Which blue one?”

The radar alarm continued to sound. The ships behind them were within shooting range.

“The largest one, you lunk!”

“They’re all large!” Aidan made a split-second decision and slammed his fist on one of the buttons. The steel supports flew by in a rush of gray.

With a jubilant shout, she sent the ship even deeper into the shadows, closer to the land’s surface. They weren’t far from the Dark District. Aidan pictured them slamming into a row of greasy shacks with nothing left but a pile of smoking ash.

But the pilot adapted quickly and kept them in the air, barely missing the plasma train tracks that crisscrossed above the darkened neighborhoods. Aidan hung on to the safety straps over his shoulders. The radar became silent, proving the larger ships were unable to chase them in such a tight space. She altered the speed and soon they were gliding comfortably. The gentle hum of the cruising engines filled the space between them.

After a few heartbeats of silence she said, “Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure. Is it normal to have your stomach and heart occupying the same space in your throat?”

She made a sound of vague irritation behind her visor. Soon, the Dark District disappeared behind them. Aidan knew what came next: the tangled forest and then the canyon.

“So,” she began. “What are you doing on a ship if you don’t know how to fly?”

“That’s classified,” he said. “And I might ask why someone from the Queen’s Guard is being chased by other Queen’s Guards?”

She turned to him, and even though her visor was still down, he guessed she was trying to read his mind.

"I could tell by the radar," he explained. "It identified both ships." When she turned back to the window, he said, "Must be quite a scandal. I'm guessing you're flying solo as a result of your need to die in a ball of flames. Is that why you have no copilot?" The tops of the thorny trees reached up from below.

She stayed quiet.

"Nice day for a flight through the country," he said, taking in the view. "I love this ship, actually. I must look into getting one for myself." With the adrenaline kick easing away, a calmness settled inside his chest. The forest began to give way to thatch shrubbery.

Aidan noticed the speed drop. The pilot wordlessly eased them down into a rare clearing, just at the edge of the tangled wood. She pressed a button and the back hatch lifted open.

"Are we picking someone up? Maybe a long-lost copilot of yours?" He wiggled his eyebrows for effect.

She nodded to the door and then looked back at him.

"Honestly, your communication skills are holding you back," he said. "Also your need to remain anonymous is a bit troubling. Is that why you were thrown out of the Guard?" He snapped his fingers. "That's it! You have an unmistakable rebellious air about you." He dropped his voice and leaned closer. "I hope I'm right, because that makes you a whole lot more interesting."

"You talk too much," she said.

"Only when I'm right." He leaned back, gesturing at the expanse in front of them. "I can see it now. You're a flying ace who soared to the top of your class, but you can't stand the constraints of working for the queen. I get it . . . truly, I do. Must be tough living in all the sunshine and opulence."

She let out a long sigh as if weighing her next words. Finally she said, "You don't know what you're talking about. I'm not a pilot, I'm a member of the court. And even though it's none of your business, I'm hoping to avoid marriage."

"By stealing a ship?" he asked. "Sounds like you're running away."

“Not exactly, but . . . yes, in a way, I suppose.”

Aidan blinked a few times, trying to digest this bombshell. The day was full of surprises. “This fellow you have to marry,” he began. “Is he another member of the court?”

“He is royalty, yes.”

“Is he cruel? Unbearably disgusting to look at or something?”

“No,” she said, although her voice was uncertain. “I don’t think so.”

He tried to study her body language. It always served him well when trying to gauge which pocket to pick, but this woman was impossible to read. “Hmm . . . forced to live in luxury with someone who is neither nasty nor lowly in appearance,” he said. “Yes, I can understand why you’d want to run away from that nightmare.”

Her helmet mimicked a thoughtful gesture by tilting to the side. “Who are you?” she asked. “I don’t recall seeing you before. How did you get access to the landing bay?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head apologetically. “That’s classified.”

“At least six new ships arrived at the palace last night.” Her posture straightened. “You were on one of them, weren’t you?” She pointed her finger at him. “You’re one of the princes competing for Princess Delia! How dare you carry on without telling me who you are!”

“She wishes,” he snorted. Then he waved a hand at his modest outfit. The simple pants and collared jacket were hardly royal attire. Still, he silently expressed a small amount of gratitude that even though he was dressed like a palace chore boy, he wasn’t covered in rubbish stains, which most days he usually was.

He pictured the prince’s fancy uniform with the brass buttons, wishing he’d taken the jacket as well as the dagger.

The dagger! An idea started to form.

“You’re right,” he said, dipping his chin, feigning guilt. “I arrived on one of the ships last night, but as a worker, not a guest. After all, what kind of prince worth vying for our future queen wouldn’t travel without his own trusted . . .” Then he paused—she said she was escaping!

“How far exactly are you planning to go in this ship?” He smiled, hoping it looked charming. “It would be a shame not to let it stretch

its legs. Let's see how fast you can get this machine going! How about another planet? I'm quite handy to have around, plus I can pay you." Would she take the dagger as payment?

The pilot remained silent.

He tried another tactic. "And don't take this the wrong way, but someone traveling the galaxy alone is at risk and, if I may add, hints at unpopularity. You need protection."

"Protection?"

"Absolutely." He smiled again, putting a hand to his chest. "I come highly recommended. My family has been protecting royalty for generations." He even had a fancy dagger to prove it!

There was a gasp from behind the visor. Then she mumbled a few words under her breath that Aidan was quite certain were curses. "You're a bodyguard?"

He held up his hand as if taking an oath, pleased she'd helped him out with this brilliant lie. "One of the best in all the Four Quadrants."

"Then why are you on this ship? I'm assuming the job description of a bodyguard is to guard another body."

The smile froze on Aidan's face. He gave himself a mental slap. "Er, the truth is . . . my prince is absolutely awful. I loathe him so much I fear that I might kill him myself. In fact, he should have a bodyguard to guard him from me."

"Which prince?" The tone of her voice hinted she already knew the answer.

"I can't say," he whispered. "It's classified. Plus, I'm hoping to escape with you, so what's the difference anyway?"

"That's not going to happen," she replied smartly.

"I completely understand your hesitation," he lied. "And I promise we can talk all about it once we get to whichever planet we're escaping to." He put his attention back on the control panel. "Now, which button gets us back in the air?"

"You're not coming with me," she said. "I appreciate your situation, but I have bigger problems to deal with."

“You mean the handsome and rich fellow you’re being forced to marry?”

A small nervous laugh escaped from her. “My mother would like you,” she said. “She thinks I lack passion.”

“I doubt anyone who’s ever met you would underestimate your passion. Certainly not anyone who has ever flown with you.” Then he frowned at her. “Sorry, who is your mother again?” he asked, as if he knew any women at all.

She gestured at the open door again. “You need to leave.”

“You’re letting me off here? This close to Pirate’s Canyon?!”

“So?”

“So that means there are pirates close by.” He stared back at her incredulously. “Obviously you’ve never encountered them. Then again, most people don’t get a chance to talk about them since most of them don’t survive the first encounter. Are you getting the picture? You’re sending me to my death.”

A bird began singing outside. “Pirates were outlawed ten years ago,” she answered smartly.

“Yes, but nobody told them.”

She checked the radar again. “I can’t take you with me,” she said, the plea in her voice obvious. “Trust me, the guards will pick up my signal soon.”

Aidan weighed the danger of risking another flight with this daredevil or the wrath of what might be waiting for him back home. “Is there nothing I can say to change your mind?” he asked.

“If they catch me the penalty will be severe; however, if they catch us together—I can promise whatever punishment the queen has in store for me will be one hundred times more miserable for you.”

Aidan mulled this over. Perhaps, he’d stretched all his luck for one day. At least he was out of the palace alive. He should be grateful for that. In addition, he still had the dagger to sell. Besides, this woman, whoever she was, seemed unstable and erratic, not exactly the finest qualities in the person flying the ship you’re riding in.

“You’ve got a point,” Aidan agreed, unbuckling his harness. He made his way to the back, but then paused at the doorway.

She was still strapped into the pilot’s chair, but was turned around, facing him.

Without warning a sudden heaviness settled in his bones. “Will you grant me one last grace, then?”

She nodded.

He pictured himself sneaking around the palace, staying in the hiding places as he spied on grand rooms full of courtiers, eyeing jewelry and dropped coins. But if he knew this woman’s name, he’d make sure not to steal from her. “Maybe tell me your name,” he asked. “Or at least let me see your face?”

After a moment’s hesitation, she flipped up her visor.

The dizzying trip in the ship earlier was nothing compared to the falling sensation Aidan felt as he looked into her eyes. He’d never seen her this close up before . . . and in person.

In the small cottage, directly above his cot, was an old infoscreen, battered around the edges with spiderweb-like cracks distorting the images of the daily updates from the palace. But even then, there was no mistaking the rich brown eyes and aquiline nose.

*I’ve been riding with Princess Delia this whole time.*

He bowed his head, partly in respect, but more so in embarrassment. “Beg pardon, Your Highness.” In a daze, Aidan jumped out onto the soft forest floor. He backed up a few steps, staring at the ship. He had to admit, to land in such a small clearing took a considerable amount of skill. It was a shame they’d never fly together again.

A twig snapped behind him. Suddenly a massive bulk dropped onto his shoulders.

# CHAPTER FOUR

**D**elia rolled her eyes. “Pirates,” she whispered. Ridiculous.  
*Classified!*

She should have demanded his name, or at least the name of the prince he was guarding.

Her hand was on the steering controls; one finger tapped a random beat. She thought about his expression when she revealed who she was. Unlike most of the young men in court, who were all nervous smiles and anxious grins, the bodyguard’s reaction to her true identity was so quick, she was sure it was genuine surprise. But there was something else she wasn’t used to seeing on all those other faces.

Regret? No, she decided. More like remorse at getting caught.

An alarm grabbed her attention. The radar showed a Queen’s Guard ship with two smaller deluxe gliders approaching at full speed. Delia did a quick calculation. She had less than three minutes before her ship would be spotted.

A muffled cry came from outside. She listened carefully, then heard another.

Delia flicked on a tiny screen to her left. A monitor came alive with the outside view of the back of the ship. “Oh!” She hardly believed what she was seeing. Invisible hands pushed on her chest, squeezing tightly. Her eyes flicked to the radar showing the Guard’s closing distance, then back to the image on the screen.

Letting out a frustrated growl, she unbuckled her safety straps and



made her way to the back of the ship, easing the door open. *One, two, three . . .*

Delia jumped out and ran toward the trees, zeroing in on the figures locked in a battle.

A man with long hair had latched himself onto the back of the bodyguard, choking him in a tight arm hold, his face showing a bluish tinge. Delia pulled off her helmet and took aim. The man's eyes lifted to acknowledge what was about to happen a second before her helmet made contact with his nose.

With a cry, the man loosened his grip. He slumped off the bodyguard, his back thudding the ground. Writhing in the dirt, his hands covered his face as rivulets of blood spilled out between his fingers.

After catching his breath, the bodyguard straightened up, wiping the dust from himself. He looked at the bedraggled man on the ground, then back to Delia.

Although pale, he gave her a smile that looked just like Shania when she was making faces behind Advisor Winchell's back. "Is it just me, princess," he said, "or are you my worst stroke of luck?"

"You're welcome," she replied, jutting out her chin. There was a strange vibration under her skin that she found quite distracting.

"That's rich," he replied. "If you hadn't forced me out of the ship, I wouldn't have been attacked."

"If you hadn't stowed away on the ship—"

He put up a hand, interrupting her.

*He interrupted me!*

"Beyond my control, remember? Classified," he said. "Your argument is poor. But lucky for me, your aim is true."

His smug tone made her grit her teeth. *Foolish man!* She opened her mouth to refute, but he'd already turned his attention to the attacker on the ground.

"In all honesty, my friend," he said to the man. "That broken nose was a waste of natural beauty. I have nothing to give you."

The man pushed himself off the ground, one hand still covering his face. "You have no idea what having nothing means," he said. His voice was rough, but with an underlying weakness.

His desperation unnerved Delia. She looked up at the sky, expecting the Guard ship to appear. She pulled on the bodyguard's arm. "We have to leave."

His fair eyebrows rose and his smug smile appeared again.

A flush of embarrassment warmed her face. We? What in the galaxy was she thinking?

Without warning something slammed into her back, propelling her forward. Her cheekbone hit the ground with a hard smack. She saw a flash of blade and froze. A handful of her braid was pulled tight, wrenching her neck.

"Careful, Tomas!" the man in rags warned.

A knee dug into Delia's spine. Her eyes watered, but she kept staring at the knife. *Not my hair*, she prayed, *anything but that*.

"I . . . I don't want to hurt you," a small voice quavered behind Delia.

*He's only a boy!*

"We can give them her braid, right, Papa? They asked for something valuable, didn't they?" His grip was tight, but Delia could feel him start to shake. Adrenaline was like fire in her veins. *How dare they!*

She brought up her elbow, but before she could make contact with the boy, he was lifted off her back. She rolled over and jumped to her feet, hands ready for a fight.

"You squirm like a greasy eel!" the bodyguard said. He had the ragged, thin boy in a tight grip, his arms pinned at his sides. "And smell just as bad."

The knife the boy had used lay on the ground. She picked it up and rolled her eyes. It was so dull it couldn't even cut a mini cake in half.

"Please . . ." The man started to cry. He reached out, turning his palms upward in a pleading gesture. "We had no choice." The boy wiggled free from the bodyguard and ran to the man. They embraced each other, trading desperate sobs. The man looked at Delia. "I've been sanctioned to Delta Kur. We'll be separated."

Delia's heart pounded inside her chest. She wrapped her long braid around her arm several times, like she used to do as a little girl during

thunderstorms. “Sanctioned? To Delta Kur?” she asked. She knew the desert planet needed workers for its factories. In exchange, her planet of Astor received free manufactured goods and parts for androids and machines. “It’s almost a six-month-long trip. I thought it was volunteer.”

“It is for some.” The father wiped his face with a dirty sleeve, smearing the clotted blood across his cheek. Delia’s stomach turned liquid. “My brother has an android shop there, he’s expecting us . . . but only workers are given passage.”

At this the boy clutched his father’s shirt, trying to bury his face. His crying had subsided into tired sobs.

“My brother is the only family we have—the only chance Tomas has for some kind of future.” The man’s tears began again, but he ignored them. “He’s a good worker, and he’ll be stronger and a bit older when they arrive . . . but they still said no.”

“Okay,” the bodyguard said slowly. “So you ended up jumping at us from the trees because?”

“Protection,” he replied. “The pirates said they’d take us on . . . take care of Tomas. But we had to prove ourselves first.” He swallowed and held the boy close.

Delia’s scalp stung from where the boy had pulled her hair. “There are no pirates on Astor,” she said. “It was outlawed ten years ago.”

The father stared at her as though she had two heads.

“They exist, Your Highness.” Then he lowered his voice. “They’re watching us right now.”

Delia took a defiant stance, readying herself for another fight. “Or maybe this is just a ruse to create a diversion to escape,” she said. “Or perhaps someone else will drop from a tree. Honestly, who taught you to fight that way?”

“Your critique knows no bounds,” the bodyguard said. “These beggars are pleading and all you can—” A handful of earth exploded in the space between Delia and the bodyguard.

“It’s them!” The father bent down, covering his son with his own frail body.

Another section of ground blew up, making Delia lose her balance. A glider screamed through the air just above their heads. She

could barely believe what she saw. The driver had long blue hair and a matching beard. He gave a rebel yell as he hurled several small spheres.

“Bombs away!” The bodyguard dived at Delia, sending them rolling on the ground, arms and legs tangled together.

One of the black spheres exploded close enough for Delia to feel the heat on her back. With her breath stuck in her throat she stared into the face of the bodyguard.

“I suggest a hasty escape in our ship.” He stood, pulling her up with him.

The pirate circled around again, purposely blocking their pathway to the ship.

“The trees,” the bodyguard yelled as he made a grab for her arm. “It’s our only option!”

Delia zeroed in on a black sphere on the ground. Ignoring the warning alarm in her head telling her to run, she went for the bomb. It was hot in her palm. Her thumb pressed into a groove on the side, and immediately it started to vibrate. The grinning maniac was nearing overhead. “Eat this, pirate!” she screamed, throwing the bomb straight at him.

The explosion was timed perfectly. The blue-haired pirate cursed and swerved so severely his glider nearly crashed into the thatch along the edge of the clearing. There was a yelp; then he disappeared into the sky, leaving behind a black plume of smoke.

The bodyguard stared at her with his mouth open. “Do you always choose certain death over the easier escape?”

“You’re welcome . . . again,” she said. “For a bodyguard you seem to require a lot of protection.”

The father and son whimpered from the ground.

A quick-moving shadow made all four look up. Delia’s heart sank as two Queen’s Guard gliders circled, then swept into the clearing, kicking up dust. She shielded her face with her arm.

The guards swiftly dismounted and made their way toward her. She recognized the first man as the senior guard who had been serving her family for at least a decade. Honor kept her feet rooted to the ground.

“Colonel Yashin,” she said, hoping her voice carried a fraction of her mother’s commanding grace.

“Princess Delia,” he replied, his tone soft, regretful almost. “I’m on orders to return you to the palace.” Then he turned, momentarily distracted by the two desperate figures, still hugging each other. He motioned for them to come forward.

“Are you all right?” The second guard bowed to her. When he raised his chin, she found herself staring into a pair of handsome eyes. Upon closer inspection she noticed his uniform was different.

“Um, yes,” she stammered, trying to place the man. “Forgive me,” she said. “Are you part of the Queen’s Guard?”

“Not for Astor,” he said. “I’m from Trellium.” His words were like a perfect march, never missing a beat.

With visions of the small but heavily militarized planet near the edge of the Four Quadrants, Delia figured out who he was. Since her mother had announced the arranged marriage she had been researching the potential candidates. Although, unlike her sister, she was more interested in the goods and services they were offering—not their romantic intentions. The image of the muscular prince on her infoscreen didn’t quite capture the stern expression of the man in front of her. “Prince Felix,” she said.

“Lieutenant Prince Felix,” he corrected.

She blinked. “I’m sorry we couldn’t meet under more appropriate circumstances.”

“When the colonel received orders, I volunteered to come along.” He nodded smartly, then clicked his boot heels. From the corner of her eye Delia saw the bodyguard step back as the father and son timidly made their way closer.

Colonel Yashin took notice as they approached, then made a face and put a gloved finger under his nose.

“Colonel,” Delia said. “This boy and his father are in need of transportation to the preparation facility for Delta Kur. I will return with you to face the queen, but only after we’ve secured passage for both of them.” Then she added, “After they’ve been given hot meals and comfortable clothing for the journey . . . and a bath.”

She sensed his hesitation as he remained still.

“I am to be your future queen,” she said. “Such a favor will be remembered—just as easily as the denial if you choose not to assist me.”

The muscle tightened in his jaw, but he stayed quiet, and she knew she’d won. Delia continued, “You can pilot the Patrol ship with me and the two . . . uh, volunteers on board.”

Colonel Yashin let out a long breath, then gave her a curt nod.

“Thank you,” the father said to her. His dark eyes were wide and certain. “I will never forget your generosity.”

“Yes,” she said, dropping her gaze. Her stolen pilot’s uniform felt bulky and ridiculous, as if she had been caught playing dress-up. “Make your way to the ship.”

Looking mystified and in shock, the father and son followed the commander to her stolen ship.

“I’m certain the pair are in good hands with Colonel Yashin,” Prince Felix said. “Perhaps you’ll allow me to escort you back on the gliders, instead?” The prince’s offer was graced with the curve of a smile.

Delia looked forlornly up at the horizon. Instead of escaping, she’d be returning to an irate monarch. The sense of victory from her confrontation with the colonel dissipated into heavy obligation.

However, even though she’d warned the bodyguard he’d have to face repercussions, she was unsure how her mother would react to his presence on the ship. He said it was classified. Perhaps she knew about it all along. More than once she’d told Delia that being queen meant holding many secrets.

Prince Felix stood by, waiting for her answer.

“I suppose,” she replied. “But please keep in mind that my hap- penstance escort is not very good with machines and should ride with the colonel instead of taking the other glider on his own.” She tried to hide the smile, unable to resist taking a jab at the bodyguard’s flight capabilities, or rather lack thereof.

“Who, princess?”

Delia looked around and her mouth dropped open. The body- guard was nowhere to be seen.

# CHAPTER FIVE

**A**idan watched them from the shadows of the thick trees. Earlier, he'd maneuvered his way to the edge of the clearing, and then while the princess was busy making swoony eyes with the young guard, Aidan had slunk to the closest glider. His own sky dodger was constantly breaking down, and since he had to rely on parts he scrounged from the picking stations to fix it himself, he was familiar with the basic circuitry of most fliers.

All it took was waiting until everyone's attention was on the father and son; then Aidan simply rearranged the thin cables of the plasma injector from the thruster and slipped back farther into the trees. It cost him a few thorns through the thin fabric of his clothes, but he had no choice. He wasn't supposed to be there and going through the forest on foot was impossible.

The glider was his only means of getting out of this mess. And even though he was at a good distance from them, he could see the older guard was strikingly similar to the one who'd almost caught him in the alcove, hiding behind the statue.

With a sudden panic, Aidan realized he still had the silver dagger—if the guard searched him it would be the end. Period.

For the second time that day, Aidan used his natural skills of stealth and blending in to avoid the palace dungeons. There was only one thing he excelled at more than pickpocketing, and that was standing still. He practically became one with the trees while Princess Delia and the young guard discovered that only one glider was working.

Although it was part of his plan, Aidan found it impossible not to roll his eyes when she slipped onto the glider behind the young guard, her hands resting on his waist as they waited to take off until the Patrol ship took flight.

When the clearing was empty at last, Aidan congratulated himself on such a fine plan. Still, a feeling of loss curiously shadowed his spirit as he reconnected the injectors to their appropriate circuits.

Mindful to stay low enough to avoid detection, Aidan steered the glider away from the clearing. Soon he had a bird's-eye view of the tangled forest, and within a few minutes, he was soaring over his favorite spot.

He dived into the deepest gorge of Pirate's Canyon. Large curving rows and furrows in the earth showed trails of the giant sandworms moving below the surface. One wrong move and he'd be a meal for the miserable gluttons. And yet, part of him was mesmerized by the patterns. He took a chance and flew as close as he dared. What's the point of having a Queen's Guard glider if you're not going to do a few stunts?

With barely a change in foot pressure, the sleek glider moved with his own actions. He wasn't flying the machine, he was feeling it. The glider represented a perfect collaboration of material and energy. And the engine was so smooth and quiet!

The euphoric sense of freedom was staggering. He slipped around and around the massive earthen columns made from centuries of wind and rain. The tight turns and dizzying speed made his stomach fall and rise.

Rise and fall.

The sand stung Aidan's face. He squinted tightly, then blinked several times, trying to clear his eyes.

*What I'd give for a pair of goggles!*

He dipped the nose of the machine down, putting it into a dropping spiral as he raced to the bottom of the canyon, relishing the wind in his hair.

He skimmed the surface, watching the patterns of sandworms. Then he noticed the bulge of sand in front of him. He held his



breath as the meaty head of the eyeless sandworm launched out of the ground. With a victorious cry of escape, he pulled up at the last moment, just as a sandworm closed its jaws, snapping on the dust in his wake.

Aidan would never be able to achieve this velocity on his own sky dodger. There was a liberty to this moment he found addictive. He laughed out loud and immediately started to choke on a mouthful of sand. Harsh reality was always interrupting his best times. Then he thought of his best daydream.

Delta Kur.

A lifetime on a desert planet sounded perfect to him.

*Live in the sun all day instead of scrounging out a life in the constant darkness of the surface?*

Fine.

*No insults to dodge?*

Double fine.

*And machines as far as the eye could see?*

Even better.

Machines were less complicated than people. Machines might burn you or cut you if you didn't know how to work them properly, but they never made you feel undeserving or worthless. In all the burns and gashes he'd had while fixing his sky dodger or digging through the picking station piles, there was never any shame in that pain.

Delta Kur used to invoke a lightness in his heart about the new life it represented for him. When he'd first learned about the one-way tickets available for any citizen, he applied secretly, but he wasn't chosen.

Aidan wasn't vain, but he knew he was physically and mentally more capable than half the people who lined up with him at the application station. All of them were in similar circumstances; loners, not necessarily looking for a new home, but to escape the lack of one.

The teasing and berating from his stepfather when he'd returned that night was so severe he was completely convinced he'd never be strong enough. He pushed the dream away, tamping it down hard,

like the muddied back alleys of the Dark District. But eavesdropping on the palace staff as he gathered the food scraps for the rubbish, he discovered you could buy a ticket. In that moment, Aidan resurrected the dream he'd buried, and he started using the skills he had to escape Astor.

He didn't always get a fair price from Griffin for the stolen trinkets, but his escape fund was steadily growing, and now he had the dagger. Surely that, coupled with the rest of the cash in the metal box, was enough for freedom.

Angling the glider out of the canyon, Aidan activated the hover mechanism and bobbed in the air. The twin suns were setting, creating a crimson band across the sky—the same color as the blood from the thief's nose.

He pictured Princess Delia swooping in, brandishing her helmet as a weapon.

*Princess Delia saved me!*

Another bout of laughter rose, but Aidan kept his lips closed this time, fearing a mouthful of sand. Then the lingering amazement of the memory faded. Who would he tell? Who would believe him?

He thought of the boy, Tomas. How he'd grabbed a fistful of her braid at the nape of her neck. The rest of her hair had been tucked inside her pilot's uniform. Her brown eyes were thick with terror. The knife was never near her throat—only her hair.

There was value in human hair. Some of the shops on the shadier end of the Dark District sold it illegally. The princess's hair would fetch an astronomical amount. But there was something else, a foggy memory from his childhood, something about the royal family. He winced as the headache began to grow in the back of his skull. He'd been able to fight off the first one, probably because of all the adrenaline—meeting a princess in disguise tends to distract from pain, he reasoned.

But with only the sunsets for company, Aidan knew this one was going to be bad. He peered over the side and down into the gorge. One of the sandworms poked its massive head out of the ground, screaming a death warning.

He ventured back to the city as darkness began to fall. Mindful of vengeful pirates who might be hiding in wait, he felt a bubble of panic build in his chest. If he was caught, they'd take his most precious possession, his mother's medallion, and then his life.

Aidan flew northeast, just skirting the edge of the tangled forest as the headache intensified. The throbbing worked its way from the back of his head to his temples. He would have to land soon or he'd crash, and well, what was the point of surviving this far into the most interesting day of his life only to end up dead in a crumpled heap?

Besides, he had to stay alive out of spite. He was certain no one would miss him or even come looking for him. And if they did, they'd probably pick the glider for parts and leave him there, thorny vines pushing up through his rib cage as the years went by.

A bitterness filled his mouth and heart. Tomas and his father were on their way to Delta Kur and a new life. The princess had granted passage to them so easily.

How stupid he was! Only at this moment did Aidan recognize that was his chance. He could have asked her to grant him the same grace.

The glider flew over the treetops, barely missing the two-foot-long thorns. A group of starlight bats momentarily blocked Aidan's way as they took to the sky, spooked by his sudden presence in their home.

The memory of Tomas and his father clinging to each other brought a punch of something else that overshadowed the bitterness. Jealousy.

He blinked hard, denying the tears and rush of self-pity. He increased the speed, inching his foot lower on the controls. Leaning into the turns, he saw the edge of the Dark District take form.

The glowing tracks of the suspended plasma trains zigzagged closer. He dropped speed and cruised just above a slick alleyway. He brought the smooth machine down, carefully tucking it in between two narrow buildings. No one would ever come looking this close to the picking stations for a Queen's Guard glider.

The headache was really threatening now. But Aidan only had to make it another block and he'd be all right. He turned the corner and focused on the sign ahead. It groaned on its rusty hinges. Although

the lights were dimmed, the outline of Griffin's bony shoulders could be seen, hunched over his workbench.

Aidan tried the door, but it was locked. A strange silence followed as the headache took over. He felt his muscles go limp one by one, and then his vision went.

*Blacker than her hair*, he thought, amazed that he could have a concrete thought as he plunged to the earth.

## *CHAPTER SIX*

**I**nsolent child!” Advisor Winchell’s voice reverberated off the twenty-foot-high ceilings. “Insufferable! Dim-witted!” Her cane hit the marbled floor with each exclamation mark.

Delia stood in her stolen pilot’s uniform. It hung from her body like an outer layer of extra skin. Her feet were numb and her arms dangled heavy by her sides. When she and Prince Felix had returned to the palace, a senior guard escorted her directly to the throne room to see the queen. Instead, Advisor Winchell was waiting for her.

With her chin tucked in, barely lifting her eyes, Delia listened to the scathing rant as the light from the two suns moved across the throne room, marking the time.

She’d learned long ago to let Advisor Winchell finish her whole argument before coming to her own defense. No disobedience was too casual for the elderly woman’s sharp tongue.

Once, when Delia and Shania had snuck into the royal kitchen after bedtime with the intent to have another slice of honey petunia cake, she had caught them on the way back to their rooms and kept them up until dawn, telling them legends of horror about disobedient children being punished by the ghosts of their ancestors.

Now, Delia stood in place, feeling like that little girl again. She watched the large patch of sun move across the floor, then up the ornate throne, hitting the inlaid crystals one by one. Rainbows momentarily painted the wall covered in portraits of past queens. As the

lecture continued, their expressions seemed to warp from regal elegance to condemnatory glares.

“The entire fleet was put on alarm because of your unbridled spirit!”

Tap, went the cane.

“Your impulsivity put this whole kingdom at risk!”

Tap.

It was on the tip of Delia’s tongue to mention the bodyguard and how she chose helping him over a quick escape. She was brave, not impulsive. She even gave that man and his son passage to Delta Kur.

“You may have jeopardized the marriage pact! Your lack of seriousness concerns the court! Astor may have lost its last hope!”

TAP. TAP. TAP.

“That’s quite enough.” A regal voice from the back of the room sliced through Advisor Winchell’s last scolding. Delia’s mother had finally arrived.

There was a rustling of silk and tempered footsteps. Then thin fingertips touched Delia’s chin, tilting her face upward. She forced herself to meet the eyes of her mother. “I understand you’ve been busy this morning.”

“Your Majesty,” Delia said, curtsying automatically.

The light illuminated the queen’s hair, picking up the few silver strands of her braid, elaborate and entwined with the crown on her head.

Delia always saw herself in her mother’s face: brown skin, high forehead, and square jaw—features of a queen. But not today. The only thing reflected back to her at this moment was her mother’s disappointment.

Advisor Winchell’s posture stiffened as the queen floated past Delia and took her place on the throne. The room was silent; even the former queens in the portraits seemed to be holding their breath.

“Please explain your actions, daughter. I was under the assumption you understood the importance of this gathering we’re hosting.”

“I do, Your Majesty,” Delia replied. “I have been researching

suitable matches, determining which will benefit our kingdom the most—and likewise who I should avoid insulting.”

“You’re concerned about making enemies?” At this Queen Talia raised an eyebrow. The lines in her expression seemed more prominent than usual.

There was a sting of guilt as Delia worried about the undue stress she’d put her mother under, and thereby the kingdom.

The queen continued, “I’m impressed with your ability to look at all the consequences of each choice. However, this does not explain why you sabotaged a state-of-the-art android and stole an elite ship.”

Advisor Winchell made a sound at the back of her throat. Her cane tapped on the floor, and Delia assumed she was silently hurling insulting adjectives in her mind.

“Sabotage?” Delia replied, her mouth suddenly dry. “I only put a glitch in Marta’s SHEW.”

“The stimulating humanoid equalizing widget is a complex piece of technology.” The queen reprimanded her with each syllable. “Marta had to be shut down.”

An unexpected force slammed into Delia’s heart. “Shut down! You mean permanently?”

The queen nodded.

“But I programmed her to return to normal after a few minutes. Shut down? No, that doesn’t make sense.” She pictured the android who had been specially modified to serve as her royal first maid. She was to be with Delia forever.

Queen Talia tilted up her chin in a well-practiced move Delia had studied for years. There was an edge to her voice when she finally spoke. “It would seem you’re not as proficient with her circuits as you think. She had a high-level clearance. Playing with it may have jeopardized the safety of the palace. Even though there has been no indication the resistance from the Dark District has organized itself beyond anything more than a gang of disgruntled ex-miners, we can never lessen our steadfast vigilance.”

“Marta is not a spy for the resistance,” Delia replied under her breath, flirting with the edge of defiance.

“Such audacity,” Advisor Winchell grumbled.

“An important trait for a future leader,” Queen Talia remarked.

Advisor Winchell dropped her gaze, looking to the side.

The rebuff was a small victory to Delia. Still, the guilt of Marta’s fate pulled on her heart.

Queen Talia took in a long breath. “Your marriage means a great deal to our people,” she said. “I thought that was clear.”

“I am fully committed, Your Majesty,” Delia replied truthfully. For as long as she could remember she had been groomed to take her mother’s place when the queen was summoned by her ancestors. Just like all the former queens in the portraits on the walls, Delia knew she was one of many who had been born into the responsibility of taking care of Astor. “It is my duty to not only wear the crown, but to be the crown. I only thrive if the kingdom thrives.”

A rare smile of approval graced her mother’s features. “Our energy crisis could be solved with a marriage pact made with the prince from Rexula. I assume he’s made your list of potential candidates.”

“Prince Quinton,” she answered. Delia pictured the blue planet, a globe of oceans separated by a scattering of islands, each one as diverse as the next. She’d gone several times with her mother on royal visits. When she returned she filled Shania’s head with tales of water people and seaweed palaces, when actually it was rustic compared to Astor, rich in resources of the sea and the hearty people who lived there.

“He has,” Delia started. “However, Prince Felix from Trellium offers military prowess if the resistance continues to grow.”

“Hmm,” the Queen commented, her tone solemn. “Both choices have something to offer. I wonder if there is a way to secure the plasma and the peace. Perhaps solving the energy crisis will remove the angry motivation of the resistance?”

“But what about the pirates?” Delia asked. “Don’t we need protection from them?”

“Pirates were outlawed ten years ago,” Advisor Winchell said, giving a tsk at the end of the sentence.

“Yes, but nobody told them.”

Advisor Winchell gasped. “Rude!”



“Enough.” Queen Talia put up a hand, a slight gesture that worked instantly at commanding attention. Delia studied her mother. Perhaps it was the change in the sunlight, but the dark circles that sometimes appeared under her mother’s eyes were more pronounced.

Advisor Winchell remained quiet. Her respect for the queen outweighed any other emotion or motivation.

*One day she will have to show the same respect to me,* Delia thought. The notion gave her a momentary burst of confidence.

“You’ll start meeting the rest of the suitors tomorrow,” Queen Talia instructed. “The gliders will be at lakeside midmorning.” There was a lightness in her tone that hadn’t been there earlier. “While inspecting each prince, it would be prudent to take full advantage of your greatest asset.”

“My intuition,” Delia replied automatically.

“Which is?” her mother prompted.

“The guidance of my ancestors.”

The queen smiled and closed her eyes, saying a small prayer.

Although Delia didn’t want to bring up the fact it was her intuition that led her to steal the ship in the first place. Taking advantage of the queen’s apparent mood shift, Delia said, “Even though the resistance is not a threat, maybe we should be concerned about people so starved they attack with dirty knives.”

Queen Talia’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“And why are the rules for going to Delta Kur so strict? Why are we breaking up families for the sake of android parts?”

Advisor Winchell and the queen shared a look, and then both turned their attention to Delia. “Exactly what have you been up to?” Queen Talia asked.

Delia kept her mother’s gaze, unable to let go of the image of the father and son. “Is there no way to improve our business relations with the desert planet? Delta Kur is one of our biggest trading partners, and yet we continue to exchange our people like they’re slaves.”

“Not slaves,” her mother clarified. “Willing citizens who consider relocating a beneficial venture. And while I appreciate the intensity of

your research into the political structure of the entire Four Quadrants, might I suggest an easier option to improve trading of goods rather than stealing ships.”

“Yes, please, Your Majesty,” Delia replied, resigned.

“Simply choose the prince from Delta Kur.”

She groaned inwardly. “Prince Armano?” His profile picture on her infoscreen had showed a smiling face surrounded by an elaborate style of fair hair. Delia knew she had nothing in common with this grown man who enjoyed collecting various spaceship models and had memorized the entire nine seasons of *Comet Patrol*, a long running series featuring the antics of a security robot dog.

The queen smiled and continued, “It pleases me to hear you’ve been doing your research. Still, it’s obvious by today’s actions you need reminding that your immediate attention must be focused on securing a suitable match. It is essential you choose someone who benefits Astor without fault.”

Exhaustion and frustration were closing in. Delia blurted out, “But why the rush? I’m only eighteen. I won’t be required to do anything remotely important for at least—” She paused, unable to put a time limit on her mother’s life.

“It is tradition.” Those three words echoed forlornly through the throne room. “Marriage will secure the contract for life,” Queen Talia said. Her tone hardened. “Leaving no room for negotiation.”

“And consider the resulting heirs,” Advisor Winchell added. “They will strengthen the bond more than any handshake between planetary leaders.”

Delia was stunned to silence. Although she knew her life belonged to the crown, lately it had become all too real. First a husband and now children?

The throne room became too warm. Her cheeks began to burn just thinking about it. She imagined the safety of her suite and the comforting escape of her bed. “May I be excused to my room?” Delia asked. “I want to use any time left to study more matches.”

The queen nodded.

On shaking legs Delia curtsied, then took her leave. She almost

made it to the doorway before her mother's voice halted her midstride. Delia suspected she did that on purpose, as if she was on a leash.

"One last detail requires clarification," Queen Talia said. "Why steal the ship?"

Delia organized the words in her mind first, hoping the conviction in her heart would translate into sounds. "I was going to Rexula, to see if I could barter a deal for the plasma."

The queen's jaw dropped slightly. "Before you've even met Prince Quinton?"

"I wasn't going as a potential bride, but as a diplomat. I wanted to prove there was another way to save the kingdom than having to marry. I thought the risky action of stealing, or rather borrowing, an elite ship justified my actions . . . considering the potential benefit."

"A benefit that can be easily negotiated with a marriage contract," Queen Talia replied. "We do not break with tradition." She paused and narrowed her eyes. "Is that the main reason for stealing the ship?" she asked. "To barter a better trade deal?"

Delia felt the power of her mother's stare. "Yes," she lied.

"And now you fully understand why that is no longer necessary?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good, then I'll expect no further rogue maneuvers on your part."

Delia bowed her head in submissive agreement.

The queen let out a tired sigh. Then she motioned to the decorative doors that led from the throne chamber. "I suggest an early evening considering we want you at your best and most attentive tomorrow. Perhaps when you return to your room, you'll see this upcoming marriage in a different light."

Following the queen's ambiguous concluding statement, Delia left the throne room.

Unfocused on her surroundings, images of the day would not leave her alone; the thin boy, the murderous pirate, and the bodyguard with the hair so blond it was almost white.

He was unlike anyone she'd ever met. And there was an underlying wariness that she couldn't shake, a speck of doubt that clung to her clothes like the dust from the clearing.

*“Is it just me, princess, or are you my worst stroke of luck?”*

“More like the other way around,” she mumbled to herself. If the bodyguard hadn’t been on the ship, she would be on Rexula now asking for a meeting with the king. What harm could it have brought? At least she would know she’d done something to try to prevent the marriage.

Preventing the marriage, her real reason for taking the ship. She almost stopped in her tracks—she’d lied to the queen.

With her pulse quickening, Delia hurried along the corridor, praying she wouldn’t run into any of her suitors on the way—then she immediately wondered which prince the bodyguard was running away from.

And where had he disappeared to?

She focused on the memory of the clearing and the last time she saw the bodyguard, slowly inching his way farther into the trees. There’s no way he could have vanished! Then she practically smacked her forehead. The broken Queen’s Guard glider! He sabotaged the machine on purpose!

*Worst stroke of luck.*

Delia gave her head a shake. How could she run a kingdom if she couldn’t even manage a trip to Rexula and a runaway bodyguard?

She arrived at her room with a lingering sense of unease. Everything had been cleaned up from earlier. Even the pedestal had been removed. She pursed her lips, thinking of Marta, now destined for the scrap factory. She was the victim in this miserably failed mission. It wasn’t her fault Delia had ruined her circuits.

At first she didn’t see it, but the last rays of the sunsets hit the glass case at an angle, catching her eye with a glint.

Delia approached the glass case and carefully lifted the protective cover. This was the surprise her mother had waiting for her—the marriage crown.

She stared at the inlaid stones. Every crown told the tale of its wearer. This one had the stone representing her birth month; the light pink crystal was cut with precision that only an android could accomplish.

The other jewels represented her mother's birth month and the main mineral of Astor, once a plentiful resource, but now extremely rare. At one time, codlight could supply enough energy to run every machine on the planet for years, unlike the quickly depleted plasma they now relied upon.

Rexula had copious amounts of plasma.

Still wearing the pilot's uniform, Delia took the crown and made her way to the full-length mirror. Unceremoniously, she placed the crown on her head. Her neck muscles hardened as they took on the extra weight.

The reflection was the opposite of regal. Her face was smudged with dirt and there was a faint bruise on her cheek from when she'd been pushed to the ground by the young boy, Tomas.

There was a strange shiver that ran from her cheek all the way to the tips of her fingers. She pictured the bodyguard, wondering how far away he'd gotten on the glider.

Then she recalled something interesting he'd said. Only now did the vague suspicion finally clarify itself. It was the real reason he was stuck in her mind.

If he was a new visitor to Astor, how did he know about the pirates?