

STARSHIP'S
MAGE

MAGE-QUEEN'S THIEF



A STARSHIP'S MAGE UNIVERSE NOVELLA

GLYNN STEWART

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BARTHOLOMEW “BARRY” Carpentier had fixed the problem less than five minutes after he’d crawled into the utility space. Buried underneath the pub in the Tau Cetan blocks, the compartment was cramped—but it was also the only access to the hardware he needed. His magic had swiftly guided him to the problem in the complex mix of power and network cables, allowing him to fix the issue with the Hawk and Rooster’s data-management system before his initial software diagnosis had finished.

The lanky young man was a Mage by Right, one of the magically gifted youths discovered by the Mage-Queen’s Royal Testers at the age of thirteen. Unfortunately, between one thing—a juvenile criminal record—and another—an inability to pass any kind of organized test for *any* reason—Barry was about as close to an unemployable failure as a Mage in the Protectorate of the Mage-Queen of Mars could be.

Even the electrician’s license that allowed him to crawl around a pub’s utility space was fraudulent. Not that anyone who’d hired him would ever realize that—or *care*.

“The blocks” were Tau Cetan social housing. Growing up there, Barry had seen the immense effort that was put into making sure they weren’t the dead end such places had been historically.

But no one lived in the blocks and went to the Hawk and Rooster because their life was in a great place. That served his purposes. There weren’t many Mages in places like this, which meant no one was looking for him.

And since the handful of businesses running in areas like this were desperately short on tradespeople, none looked too closely at his electrician’s

certificate. The only people who *officially* knew Barry was even a Mage were at his bank.

The Protectorate had a great deal of interest in making sure Mages didn't need to become criminals, after all, and he received a stipend directly from the Mage-Queen's government on Mars.

Even if he was completely useless to anyone as a Mage. He was a better electrician...but that wasn't what he *actually* did for a living either.

The diagnostic pinged complete at the same time as a message arrived on his wrist-comp. The PC was a cheap utilitarian thing, but it concealed better hardware than its exterior suggested.

The diagnostic was green—and the message made him chuckle.

I know you fixed the problem in the first five minutes. Get out here. We need to talk.

Alaina Waxer was officially “just” the Hawk and Rooster's senior bartender. In reality, she owned the place through a few layers of deception and a hired manager.

More relevant to Barry Carpentier, though, was her *other* role as a fixer for the Tau Ceti criminal underworld.



HE REENTERED the Hawk and Rooster's lounge and made a passing check of the holographic waiter's systems with his wrist-comp. The hologram's projector was older than he was—which, for the twenty-five-year-old electrician, wasn't saying much.

It was also probably older than the bartender, and Alaina Waxer was at least fifty. He'd never asked. Age was hard to judge, given the medicine of the twenty-fifth century, though he didn't *believe* Waxer had access to the literally magical class of top-end treatments.

“Barry, get over here,” the jovially large woman bellowed across the room. There was a solitary customer sitting at the bar, who received a meaningful glance from Waxer and made themselves scarce.

Barry wasn't much of one for the normal day/night cycle of Deveraux, Tau Ceti's fifth largest city. Neither was Waxer, and it was a bit before four in the morning.

They were alone in the bar now and he claimed the stool the customer

had vacated.

“Coffee?” the fixer asked.

“Black, no spices,” Barry replied.

Tau Cetan cuisine could be described as the result of a French chef and an Indian chef having a fistfight in the kitchen. Coffee flavored with karha masala was one of the planet’s favored drinks.

And Barry was allergic to key ingredients of the spice mix. Given the degree to which karha masala and other curry-style masalas ended up in things on Tau Ceti, he lived on a *very* bland diet compared to his friends.

Waxer knew that of old, and a plate of plain toast slid across the bar, accompanied by a plain white cup and a credit chip.

“For the utility room,” she told him, then winked. “And the last chunk of payment for the Courvoisier.”

Barry smiled as he tapped the chip against his wrist-comp. It was a hefty chunk of credits, enough to pay the rent on the low-profile townhouse he lived in for a while. He *technically* didn’t live in the blocks themselves, after all, though few people regarded the other homes intermingled with the welfare housing with much warmth.

He doubted his was the only one with a hot tub and a high-end entertainment suite, though.

Waxer eyed him for a few long moments of silence, then sighed.

“Could you please turn off the game? I know it helps you, but...”

Barry winced and nodded, tapping a command to shut down the video game being projected into his left eye via an implant in his eyebrow. It wasn’t a fast-paced thing—a turn-based economic strategy simulator based around fourteenth-century shipping routes—but it was almost always up while he was awake.

Focusing on one thing at a time was hard.

“It’s off,” he murmured, pulling the plate over to him. Eating would keep his hands occupied for a bit, he supposed.

“Marie was asking after you,” Waxer noted.

“Feel free to tell her I died,” Barry replied between bites of toast.

Marie was Alaina Waxer’s daughter and had been Barry’s girlfriend for an...*exciting* year. That had culminated in discovering that Marie Waxer had about the same attitude toward her personal promises as her mother had toward society’s laws.

He wasn’t even certain how many people she’d cheated on him with—

and, he suspected, neither was the elder Waxer.

“Oh, *I* know she nuked that bridge from orbit, Barry, but she *did* ask,” Waxer said.

He and Waxer had worked together before, during and after his relationship with her daughter. His impression was that his fixer thought her daughter was an idiot, but he would admit he was biased on that matter.

To himself, at least.

“You got work?” he finally asked. “The Courvoisier gig was fun, but I imagine there aren’t that many interplanetary luxury shuttles we can get notes on.”

The Courvoisier 2467 was a brand-new spacecraft model, built there in Tau Ceti, designed to carry the rich and lazy between planets in a star system in the lap of uttermost luxury and security.

Enough of the security on one of them, though, had slipped to allow Waxer to get her hands on the information of where and when it would be stored without crew on board.

Barry and his magical Gift had done the rest. Few pieces of software or hardware could impede him for very long.

“I know how much was on that cred-chip,” Waxer said drily. “Planning on getting out of the blocks?”

He shrugged, finished the toast, and began to tap his fingers on the coffee cup.

“I don’t like sitting still,” he reminded her. “Fixing your bar’s system-net connection isn’t going to keep me busy for long. My license won’t hold up to anyone with half a brain outside the blocks, so I need something to occupy me.

“And like I said, the Courvoisier was fun.”

He could *feel* her gaze on his tapping fingers, but she swallowed whatever she was thinking and sighed.

“Fun and lucrative. Not many high-end shuttles get parked and left alone, though.”

“I mean, I can steal whatever you can move,” Barry pointed out. “Let me know where to drop things off and I can get to work.”

“Do I *look* like I’m running a black-market shuttle dealership?” Waxer asked. “Moving in that kind of quantity draws attention, Barry. The wrong kind. One or two shuttles, even super high-end ones, can go missing and no one really cares.

“We start disappearing spacecraft in the kind of numbers needed to keep *you* from getting bored...”

“But you have work,” Barry said. “Or you’d have let me sit in the utility closet and borrow your net-link for games till dawn.”

“Aye.” Waxer slid a second cup of coffee across the bar, this one accompanied by a datachip.

She knew him well, the last of his first cup vanishing as she passed him the new one. The chip went into his wrist-comp and he flicked his projector back on for something *other* than a video game.

“What is this?” he asked. It didn’t *look* like a high-end shuttlecraft. The Courvoisier had stripes of literal gold in places. This one looked like a heavy-lift hauler. Big and efficient. Not *cheap* but common as dirt.

“Something far more special than it looks,” his fixer told him. “Listen. I don’t like to ask, but I know you *were* in a Jump Mage program. Can you jump?”

Barry clenched his fingers reflexively. Jump Mages were the elite of the semi-aristocratic Mages who ruled the Protectorate of Mars. They were key to crossing the gaps between stars, making them a core element of both the interstellar economy and the Mage-Queen’s military.

Like everything else he’d tried in his life, he’d failed the exams. But...he ran the fingers of his right hand over his palm, feeling the stiffness where polymerized silver was permanently burnt into his skin.

Taking a silent sip of coffee, Barry eyed Waxer.

“Marie told you,” he said quietly. It wasn’t really an accusation.

“She *did* see you naked,” Waxer said. “Frankly, Barry, every Mage I’ve ever known wore gloves, so I didn’t know it was weird. But she mentioned the palm tattoos.”

The big woman snorted.

“My girl isn’t *dumb*, but she doesn’t put pieces together the way she should, either,” she noted. “She didn’t realize you still had jump runes.”

Barry stripped the tight glove off his right hand and held it up, palm toward Waxer. In the dim light of the bar, the delicate whorls of the magical rune that would allow him to jump a starship were hard to see, but he figured she knew what to look for.

“Not so much *still*,” he replied. “But yes, I have the runes. I just can’t actually *jump*. I failed most of my practical tests as well as my theoretical.”

He shrugged.

“Give me enough *time* and I can make a jump, but I’m not good enough to be stealing jump ships, if that’s what you want. And I don’t see how any of that ties to an orbit-to-surface hauler.”

“Because that’s no hauler,” Waxer said after taking a studious glance around the empty bar. “She’s a custom job. Jump-capable.”

Barry could control his wrist computer with eye movements tied to the projector implant. He dropped a ruler onto the image he was looking at to make sure he wasn’t misestimating things.

“Nothing that small has a jump matrix,” he observed. For a Mage to move a starship required a network of magical runes woven through the entire hull. Jump matrices varied in size, but they didn’t come *that* small.

“So far as I know, nothing *else* that small has a matrix,” the fixer said. “But I am assured that this shuttle does. A custom job, built—so far as I can tell—for Her Majesty herself.”

Barry spun his coffee cup absently as he pulled more of the technical schematics from the chip.

“Not a lot of information here, but it looks like she’s *mostly* a pretty standard X-Nine-Sixty-Five,” he observed. “I know the hardware on the Nine-Sixty-Five backward and forward. Probably upgraded her, but I can open her up.

“But if she’s what you say she is, she’s got ten thousand times as much security as I can get through.”

“You’re underestimating it,” Waxer said calmly. “Because while I have no idea where she *was*, I know where she *is*. She was delivered to *Extravagant Voyage* a few days ago. She’s part of the shuttle complement for the Mage-Queen’s personal traveling circus.”

Barry’s hand twitched, locking the coffee cup in place. For a moment, he said nothing, then he very carefully took a long sip of the drink.

Kiera Michelle Alexander, the Mage-Queen of Mars, had inherited her throne at a very early age. She was roughly his own age but had been Queen in her own right for five years.

She was also unmarried and her heir was her aunt. So, the young Mage-Queen had taken a tour of the Core Worlds a few years back to be introduced to all young Mages of a certain age.

And a certain class. *Barry* certainly hadn’t been invited to the balls and parties where the system’s upper class had paraded their sons past the Mage-Queen. Not then...and not now, when she was undertaking a second Grand

Tour.

“I would love to know what you’re thinking,” he finally told Waxer. “Because while I can do a lot of things with security hardware, I’m pretty sure I can’t hack and spoof my way aboard the personal cruise liner of the Mage-Queen.”

“Do you think you can hack and spoof your way *around* said cruise ship?” Waxer asked.

Barry considered that. That was a very different question, he supposed.

“Probably,” he said. “Might have to steal some code chips or whatever, but I can manage that.”

He might not be a very *good* Mage by most standards, but he could manage pickpocketing someone with magic handily enough.

“If we get this ship, it’s a game-changing score,” Waxer told him. “My contact had heard rumors about our last few jobs and knew I had a good shuttle thief. This ship, Barry...you’re right. There’s nothing like her.

“The client figures the jump matrix is something new, modified to be smaller than ever before.”

“Huh. How much?” Barry asked.

She told him and he blinked.

“Okay. That has my attention, but the job is still impossible,” he admitted.

“Fifty/fifty split between us,” she told him. “The usual spiel. I think we can do it.”

“‘We,’ huh?” he asked absently. He’d brought up the publicly available information on *Extravagant Voyage*. Normally a cruise ship, carrying idiot tourists between the key sights of half a dozen star systems, she’d been commandeered to serve as the Mage-Queen’s traveling court for her Grand Tour.

There was no information at all available on her security measures. The Mage-Queen’s protectors in the Royal Guard and the Protectorate Secret Service were secretive groups that the system-net had little data on.

“I can steal the shuttle, but I think getting to it is impossible,” he observed. “So, I’m curious to see how you plan on earning *your* fifty percent!”

There was a long silence.

“If you were anyone else, that phrasing might have got you in real trouble,” Waxer told him. “But I guess I’ll let it slide. This time.

“Because all I *need* to bring, Barry, is the person paying for the damn thing. But what I’ve *got* is your pass onto the *Voyage*.”

A command sent the data windows overlapping on his vision away, and he focused his attention on Waxer.

“You’re joking.”

“No,” she told him, a broad grin replacing her moment of anger. “It seems Her Majesty decided that a dozen or so of Tau Ceti’s Mages are worth more extended consideration. They’ve been invited to join her on *Voyage* for at least the trip to their next stop.

“And thanks to some favors I’m owed and a few older-fashioned tricks, I can put you on the list. You’ll need to avoid the Mage-Queen herself, of course, but...we can get you *onto Extravagant Voyage*.”

Barry blinked his projector back online and studied the shuttle.

“If you can get me onto the ship, I think I can steal the target,” he told her. “And believe me, boss, I have no interest in being seen by the Mage-Queen of Mars! The moment she sees *me*, she’s going to know I’m not one of her pretty noble suitors!”

KIERA MICHELLE ALEXANDER, Mage-Queen of Mars and Protector of Humanity, was bored out of her skull.

On Mars, the delicately built redhead was generally swamped. The Mage-Queen was more than a mere figurehead of state, even if her Chancellor ran most of the day-to-day affairs of the Protectorate. Meetings, reports, reviews and decisions ate easily half or more of her day, to the point where her staff specifically *scheduled* time for her to engage in hobbies.

Her Grand Tours, however, imposed sufficient separation from the Mountain of Olympus Mons and her government to force her to delegate all of that. Plus, well, her *job* on these Tours was to Be Seen.

And find a potential husband, but Kiera was about ready to give up on that and start considering wives—and unlike her late brother, Kiera’s sexual preferences were quite specific.

Still, she’d been Queen for seven years since her father’s death, and she knew how to put on the Queenly Mask when she needed to. The ridiculously overformal dinner the Governor of Tau Ceti was putting on was as much work as the industrial-planning meeting she’d had with the Royal Martian Navy’s main shipbuilder earlier in the day.

It was also, despite the music, food and “adoring” crowd of potential suitors, a lot less fun.

“Thank you, Mage Rapallino,” she told the young man who’d just finished giving an unasked-for lecture on the aquatic life of Tau Ceti’s northern continent. The marine biologist was probably the oldest of the Mages by Blood—those born into Mage families—who had been introduced

to her that evening.

He realized he'd accidentally shifted into teacher mode in response to her passing question about the fish dish and turned a delightful shade of embarrassed red that earned him a gentle smile from Kiera.

"Relax, Venkata," she told him softly, reducing her voice to a whisper. "That was *actually* educational, which puts it above most of the conversations I've had tonight!"

Venkata Rapallino might be the oldest of the Mages being presented to her that evening, but he was still only in his mid-twenties. His impromptu lecture on his passion was hardly the reason for Kiera's boredom.

If anything, his honest interest in the source of the fish Kiera had just finished eating was the *least* boring thing she'd dealt with tonight. The dark-haired scientist's flustered reaction to her reassurances didn't hurt. In a room full of self-confidence, there was a lot to be said for a man who'd admit a mistake.

"That's the third course," a voice murmured in her earpiece. "Time to swap tables."

"Got it," Kiera subvocalized back. She picked up her wine glass and rose to her feet, bowing slightly to the four men she'd shared the fish course with.

"Duty calls, it seems, and I must move on," she told them. "I hope the Governor's hospitality continues to impress everyone. Good night."

The four chorused back their own wishes, and an older woman in the crimson-red uniform of the Royal Guard seemed to materialize out of nowhere to guide Kiera away.

"Any thoughts on that lot?" Guard-Captain Shelly Lawrence murmured. Even standing next to Kiera, she was subvocalizing over their private channel.

"The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker and the marine biologist?" Kiera replied wryly.

"Well, given that only one of those is an accurate description, I'm guessing Mage Dr. Rapallino made a more positive impression than I think *he* thinks," Lawrence said with a soft chuckle.

"I'd like to talk to him again," Kiera conceded. "But I don't think he's exactly a candidate for consort, either. He doesn't make the List."

The List was the very, very, very short set of names that Kiera was considering even a potential first date with. So far, there were ten names on it from Tau Ceti.

She didn't expect to add any more to it tonight, but the Governor had insisted on a farewell dinner. The ten names on her List were getting a better shot than anyone here, after all.

They got to spend a week on the hyper-secure cruise liner Kiera was flying around her Core Worlds on. If any of them impressed, they might even make it into her bed—that had *definitely* happened before, though it hadn't turned into more.

The whole process was organized, scaled, scored and measured. Kiera had *written* most of those scores and measures herself...but she was still starting to wonder if she was going about this the completely wrong way.

TWO HOURS LATER, Kiera had finished the seventh course of the meal and had been introduced to twenty-eight young men in total. They ranged from a trio of junior naval officers—on their finest behavior and completely suppressing anything resembling personality—to rich business heirs who merely happened to be Mages, to actors, to civilian Jump Mages, to cops, to a few scientists like Dr. Rapallino.

As Kiera made her getaway from the dessert table, she paused at the edge of the ballroom to survey the entire affair. The Governor had put a massive amount of effort and money into organizing the farewell party, but, as usual, the Mage families had turned it into another opportunity to parade young men past the unmarried Queen.

“Well?”

Shelly Lawrence probably shouldn't, in Kiera's opinion, speak to her Queen like an exasperated mother dealing with a wayward daughter. On the other hand, Kiera felt she had to give a *bit* of leeway to the people tasked to die in her defense.

Lawrence was also a powerful Mage in her own right and, like every member of the Royal Guard, a veteran of the Royal Martian Marine Corps. Three hundred of the deadliest Mages in the Protectorate guarded Kiera, her aunt and her Chancellor, Damien Montgomery.

And Montgomery's twin toddler daughters, who were third and fourth in the line of succession. Like their father, they were Rune Wrights, Mages with the Gift to see and control the flow of magical energy in a more direct and

explicit fashion.

Including the two toddlers, there were only five known Rune Wrights in the galaxy. That was part of why Kiera was under pressure to find a partner and have kids. That Kiera *wanted* kids was also a motivating factor.

She just hadn't found a partner worth getting a sperm sample from yet.

"Let Driessen know we're coming back aboard the ship," Kiera decided aloud. Lakshmi Driessen was her head of household staff, a man originally hired to lead her *mother's* team thirty years earlier.

"You may want to at least *speak* to the Governor before we abandon the party," Lawrence noted mildly.

"*Want* is a strong word," Kiera replied. "But you're right. Get the shuttle ready for us to head back into orbit. I will speak with Governor Antonov and then I will head back aboard *Extravagant Voyage*."

She glanced around the room, packed with officials, diplomats, soldiers—and a collection of potential suitors tasked to make a good impression under the worst possible circumstances.

"No one made the List tonight," she admitted. "But I'll make sure Driessen has the pieces moving to get them invited aboard the ship. You'll want to run background checks, I assume."

"My Queen, you are sensible and intelligent, and you know damn well I already ran full checks on every person you met on this planet," Lawrence said calmly. "But yes, I will be running further checks on your invitees. I doubt I'll be blocking any of them, though."

"If there was going to be *that* level of problem, someone would have known by now!"

Kiera nodded silently and inhaled a deep breath. She'd speak to the Governor and then retreat to *Extravagant Voyage*. The cruise liner had its own issues, but at least there she didn't feel like an entire planet was conspiring to run her through a meat market!

EXTRAVAGANT VOYAGE WAS, in Kiera's considered opinion, a gaudy mess. A testament to the lack of taste of the Protectorate's upper classes. If the choice had been entirely hers, she'd have undertaken her Grand Tours aboard one of the squadron of destroyers flying escort on the big liner.

But she needed to entertain and impress and, at least theoretically, enjoy herself. So, her Cabinet had talked her into leasing the entire four-million-metric-ton passenger ship and allowing her security detail an unusual amount of luxury for the trip.

Extravagant Voyage was a flying transparent dome, three hundred meters across and fifty high. A forty-meter-thick "base" held the engineering systems for her life support and engines, but most of her volume and mass were dedicated to the garden in the dome and the small resort it held.

There were certain efficiencies to the design, Kiera had to admit as her shuttle approached the mobile monstrosity. Like warships, she was built with her floors aligned to the direction of thrust. That allowed the ship's Mages to maintain fewer layers of the powerful gravity runes that magically offset the engines and kept the entire ship at a comfortable half Terran gravity.

It was still a park someone had built a dome over and launched into space, designed to haul two thousand of the Protectorate's more profligate citizens between systems as fancy tourists.

Kiera's main hobby was building ship models. She'd long since left behind the official models that could be built and had mastered both computer-aided design and small-scale fabrication-printer programming to build herself new kits.

While she wouldn't claim to know shipbuilding *well*, she was more familiar with ships than many people would expect—and her focuses meant she was more familiar with *warships*. That practice meant she could pick out the fact that *Extravagant Voyage* was also built to protect her cargo. Two dozen rapid-fire laser antimissile turrets were positioned around the base, covering the ship from incoming missile fire.

Against any normal threat, that would be enough. Against the kind of extraordinary threat that might come after the Mage-Queen of Mars, there was an entire squadron of the most modern destroyers of the Royal Martian Navy arranged around the ship and the orbital station she was currently docked with.

“Invitations went out while we were on our way up,” Lawrence told Kiera, the Guard stepping into her compartment. “I’m sure everyone is vastly shocked and surprised to find out that all your young men have already eagerly accepted your invitation to join you aboard *Extravagant Voyage* for a more extended introduction.”

Kiera chuckled.

“Will they feel the same way after your people have stripped them naked and cavity-searched them before allowing them aboard?”

“Please, Your Majesty, we are hardly limited to such...*brute-force* methods,” Lawrence purred. “I am here to guarantee your safety. Driessen is here to guarantee your comfort. Commodore Courtemanche is here to guarantee *everyone’s* safety.”

The Mage-Queen of Mars sighed.

“Fair. I’ll check in with Driessen and then Captain Salonen once we’re aboard,” she promised. “That should get everyone moving in the right direction. I want to be on our way by tomorrow night.

“*With* the only people of actual interest this system apparently had to offer aboard!”

CAPTAIN ABHISHEK SALONEN made no pretense of being a military officer. Kiera had met civilian captains who leaned heavily into the role of “Captain” with drama and grand uniforms and so forth.

Salonen possessed some truly glorious dress uniforms that he’d produced

for events Kiera had held on his ship, but he only produced them when dealing with his passengers. Most of the time, the old Mage was in his simulacrum-chamber bridge—the one thing his ship shared with warships—wearing a standard crew shipsuit, with the only marker of his rank being that both his shoulders bore a hyper-detailed image of *Extravagant Voyage* in gold.

“Your Majesty,” he greeted her as she stepped onto the bridge. The simulacrum chamber was suspended at the exact center of every starship and held the simulacrum itself: a semiliquid silver model of the ship integrated into the runic jump matrix.

Without the simulacrum, the jump matrix was incomplete. Without the touch of a fully trained Jump Mage, with the interface runes inlaid into their palm, the simulacrum was incomplete.

Complete, the setup would allow a Jump Mage like Abhishek Salonen to teleport his ship a full light-year in the blink of an eye. Incomplete, it was fancy silverwork throughout the ship.

“Will we be ready to depart tomorrow?” Kiera asked without preamble, looking around her at *Voyage*’s unusual bridge.

For a simulacrum chamber to work, its walls had to receive a direct optical feed via fiber-optic cable from the exterior of the ship. A Mage had to be looking at real light, not a digital duplicate, for the jump magic to work.

But to put the simulacrum chamber in the exact center of *Extravagant Voyage* had required building a tower at the center of the ship. The decorated spire did dual duty as a support strut for the dome itself and suspended the simulacrum chamber five meters from the floor of the main dome.

At that moment, while *Voyage* was docked with a space station and hours at least from jumping, the fiber-optics had been redirected. Instead of displaying the outside of the cruise liner, they displayed the outside of the spire, simulating the bridge being even higher up the central tower and allowing the bridge crew to survey the park around them from above.

Kiera had to admit that *Extravagant Voyage*’s designers had known how to lean into the ship’s advantages. She was as extravagant as her name, but she wore it well.

“If you really needed us to, we could leave in...hmm...ninety-six seconds,” Salonen observed brightly. “I imagine *f*-Signs would rather prefer we actually let them retract and store their umbilicals and such, but we could sever them, break free and jump in about a minute and a half.”

“I am not quite that desperate to flee Tau Ceti,” Kiera replied, but she smiled at the Captain. He was a grandfather with a daughter her age and she appreciated his sense of humor.

“There are still a few supplies we are pulling aboard,” he admitted. “If you wish it, we could depart safely and fully loaded in about two hours. Tomorrow will not be a problem.”

“We’ll stick to the schedule. We’re not due in Eridani for a week. There’s no rush.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Salonen observed her for a moment in silence, then turned to look out over his spaceborne domain. “I understand we are picking up new guests?”

“A few. Not many,” Kiera admitted. “The ones who appear worth giving the time to make an actual impression.”

“I don’t envy you this,” he told her. “My daughter went through *eleven* partners she was dating for at least six months before settling with her wife. This whole affair makes *sense*, but it’s stressful to even watch!”

“In all honesty, Captain, this is probably the least stressful task I’ve taken on in at least two or three years,” Kiera replied. “It’s just...frustrating.”

For her purposes, she was sure she’d have been better served going to university and meeting people there. But the Protectorate needed their Queen.

IN YEARS OF WORKING TOGETHER, Alaina Waxer had almost always come through on her promises. She was clear on risks, clear on her limitations, and knew her connections. No one was perfect in Barry's experience, but her mistakes had been few and far between.

As he shifted uncomfortably in a brand-new suit that had been tailored close enough to make his skin crawl, every one of Waxer's previous errors was running through his mind on rapid replay.

He was carrying an invitation written on actual *paper*—matched to a digital file—and he had no idea how Waxer had managed to get him onto the list of people allowed aboard *Extravagant Voyage*. The suit meant that he didn't look horribly out of place as he approached the boarding tube, but nothing about the situation felt right to him.

The faceless gazes of the Royal Guards in their massive suits of blood-red exosuit armor were *not* helping his mood. Four were arrayed on either side of the door, while a ninth was checking the identity and paperwork of everyone coming aboard.

Barry was grimly certain that there was no way that Waxer could have put together false paperwork that could get him through this. But she had told him she had, and he trusted her, so he swallowed his fear and walked up to the suit of armor checking IDs.

"Invitation, huh?" A surprisingly gentle feminine voice emerged from the two-meter-tall suit. "May I see it?"

He held the paper out. It floated out of his hand, a stark reminder that every member of the Royal Guard was a Mage.

The suit was bad enough. The fact that Barry was wearing his Mage medallion, the gold coin at his throat that marked him as one of the Protectorate's elite, *chafed*. Plus, everything on the medallion except the coin itself was false.

He wore the three stars of a Jump Mage. But like he'd told Waxer, while he could theoretically make a jump, he'd failed all of his testing. He had no right to those stars.

Keeping his attention on the matter at hand was *hard*. Even knowing that if Waxer's false paperwork failed, he was in more trouble than he could possibly imagine, it was hard for him to focus—and he had his economics game up on his projector without even consciously deciding he needed the distraction.

"Everything checks out, Mage Guidi," the Guard told him. It took Barry a moment to remember that was him, but his general distraction covered it. "Is everything all right?"

"Sorry, I'm nervous," he said with complete honesty.

The Guard chuckled.

"That you're on this List, kid, means you were more interesting than about two thousand other people Her Majesty met," the woman told him. "There'll be a member of the ship's crew waiting for you on the other side to show you to your room.

"You're still more likely to muck this up than not," the Guard concluded, "but hey, how many people can say they even got to spend time with the Mage-Queen of Mars? Behave, and it won't end *badly*."

Barry nodded in acknowledgement, even as his eye-twitch ordered two more factories built in Luxembourg.

He was *quite* certain that his plans aboard *Extravagant Voyage* weren't going to count as "behaving."

A GORGEOUS WOMAN in her late thirties met Barry at the other end of the boarding tube. She was wearing a decorated shipsuit, with an image of the cruise liner emblazoned across her chest.

"Mage Guidi," she greeted him. "I'm Steward Trammer. If you'll walk with me?"

Barry nodded and fell in beside her.

“Guides instead of a map?” he asked. He’d paused his game as he entered the ship and had the publicly available information on *Extravagant Voyage* running through his projector implant.

“Aboard *Extravagant Voyage*, we value the human touch, Mage Guidi,” Trammer replied. “I can send you a download of the ship’s details, but I’ll show you to your room and give you the rundown either way.”

“Please do,” Barry asked. “I don’t like to impose on other people if I can avoid it.”

“We are here to support Her Majesty’s people and her guests,” Trammer told him as she led him into an elevator. “If you have any concerns at any time, please feel free to stop and ask anyone wearing the ship’s emblem.

“Her Majesty’s security are present throughout the ship, and they should also be able to help, but they have other priorities,” she added. The elevator moved so smoothly that only Barry’s vague sense of what machinery around him was doing allowed him to know it *had* moved.

As the elevator stopped, the projected screen on his eye told him he’d received the download she’d promised. He wasn’t sure what type of data-management system Trammer was using, but there were either implants or something else invisible in play.

She hadn’t touched her wrist-comp to have the files sent. From her expression as she glanced over her shoulder, she’d realized he hadn’t touched his to open them.

“That’s an unusual implant for a Mage,” the steward noted. “I think one of our engineers has a similar one, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen it on a Mage.”

The corneal projector was more of a tradesperson’s tool or a hobbyist’s toy than anything else. It allowed for an artificial heads-up display over the world, but the military tended to prefer visors and helmets.

Barry had seen enough hesitant or outright hostile reactions to recognize that personal implants were unpopular in the Protectorate. The fact that the secessionist Republic of Faith and Reason, the loser of a still-recent civil war, had leaned heavily into cybernetics for their soldiers and personnel didn’t help.

“It serves my needs,” he told her with a smile. “The overlays are handy.”

As the elevator door opened, he was moving files around to link the map he’d been provided to a location-tracking program he used. It would take a

few minutes to map his location against that map, but it would guide him around the entire ship once it did.

“Of course; that’s why the engineers I know use it,” Trammer agreed. “This way, Mage Guidi.”

He followed her out of the elevator and then had to pause. Blinking away his projected map, he just *looked* out at the main dome of *Extravagant Voyage*.

The gravity holding him down was weaker than he was used to, and he could *feel* the ship’s systems humming around him. Even with all of the indicators, it still managed to feel like he’d stepped into some kind of manicured estate or resort.

The elevator emerged into a glass-roofed lobby open to the air of the main dome. There were a dozen or so other doors behind him, suggesting that this was the endpoint of an internal transit system, but his attention was out the open sides of the lobby.

Paths swept away in several directions, each lined by carefully manicured trees and bushes. Everywhere he glanced, things were green, growing and alive. It had been arranged to give the illusion of distance, helping to disguise the fact that the closest set of resort-style condos were less than three meters away.

He could hear the soft burble of a water feature, though he couldn’t see it—and suspected the noise might be artificial.

Still, it made for a gorgeous—if very *managed*-feeling—garden floating through space. Tau Ceti *f* hung in the sky “above” them, and Barry spent a few seconds looking to see if he could pick out Deveraux.

“She’s impressive on first sight,” Trammer told him after a few seconds.

“Sorry, we can be on our way,” Barry murmured.

“Please, Mage Guidi, I *want* people to admire the ship,” she said with a chuckle. “My colleagues and I put a lot of work into making *Extravagant Voyage* look her best, and we appreciate the people who appreciate her.”

“She’s a wonder,” he told the woman. “I can see why the Mage-Queen picked her.”

“Security is also a factor,” Trammer admitted, gesturing for him to follow her again. “While our own security people have surrendered their control systems to the Secret Service, we’re working with Her Majesty’s people.”

“With Her Majesty aboard, I’d hope security was tight,” Barry said. “I like my privacy, of course, but I assume all the concourses are monitored?”

“The private rooms aren’t,” she said. “But yes, there are concealed drones throughout the dome that keep track of all movement. If you’re ever in trouble, stop where you are and yell help three times, loud as you can.”

“What’s the response time to that?” he asked.

“Oh, about forty seconds usually,” Trammer said with a chuckle. “I think Her Majesty’s people might have it down to *fourteen*, though. For some reason, they’re very, very twitchy.”

THE “ROOM” Trammer led Barry to was the size of his apartment in Deveraux and even better appointed. The only thing missing was a kitchen of any kind, though he at least had a fridge.

“Your wrist-comp should be on the ship-net,” Trammer told him. “Room service is included in your package. There will be no costs to you for the trip, of course.”

“Of course,” Barry murmured, looking around the suite. It was only two rooms—a luxuriously appointed bedroom he didn’t expect to be on the ship long enough to use and a glass-fronted sitting area that looked out toward the central spire of the dome.

“Thank you, Steward Trammer,” he told her. “This is incredible.”

She bowed her head slightly.

“You should have a schedule and itinerary in the email I sent you,” she told him. “I believe all of Her Majesty’s guests are scheduled for a dinner in the Scarlet Dining Room at nineteen hundred hours Olympus Mons Time.”

Barry checked how far away that was. That was a few hours behind Deveraux local time, which meant his lunchtime arrival was midmorning by OMT. He’d have seven hours before he was apparently supposed to meet the Mage-Queen.

Since he wasn’t actually on the Queen’s list of guests, he figured he could miss the dinner without drawing too much attention. Still, he wasn’t going to try and abscond with a shuttle while they were in orbit of Tau Ceti *f*, with all of the ships and patrols and sensors that entailed.

“Do you know when we’ll be leaving orbit?” he asked.

“I don’t believe that has been decided yet,” Trammer told him. “That will be available on the ship-net once it is.”

“Is there anything else you need immediately, Mage Guidi?”

“No,” he conceded. “Assuming, at least, that there’s water or coffee in here somewhere?”

“There’s a machine in the counter. Let me show you.”

THE VERY FIRST thing Barry did once Trammer left the apartment was fill the largest mug in the cupboard with black coffee and then fill several glasses of water, lining the drinks up on the work desk in the suite.

Luxury vacation ship or not, *Extravagant Voyage* played host to the kind of people who would always do at least *some* work. The desk had a link to the ship-net and a semi-capable built-in console.

The second thing Barry did was confirm that, whether by ignorance or intent, Steward Trammer had lied about the surveillance in the room. They weren't even bugs inserted by the Mage-Queen's people—there were concealed cameras built into all four corners of both rooms.

Most likely, it would take a direct order from the ship's captain or a judge to open up the recordings, but Barry had no intention of leaving *any* evidence behind. His wrist-comp linked into the ship-net even as he wove magic through the systems in his room's walls.

The cameras weren't, of course, linked to the same network he'd been given access to. He hadn't expected that. Between the *highly* illegal hypersensitive network sniffer hidden in his wrist-comp and his magic, though, he was able to locate the network they were running on.

He'd been given automatically generated credentials for the main ship-net. Those *shouldn't* have worked on the security network, but Barry had long ago learned how to get around that kind of minor obstacle with his magic.

He logged into the main net with them, using the sniffer and his magic to learn what the local system's positive responses should look like, then poked

at the security network. It took him two tries to break into the hardware of the cameras in the room—and that gave him access to the network feeding their data back to the main security system.

The first thing he did was erase any record of him being in the room. It had been empty for several weeks before he'd come aboard, and producing a loop of an empty room was easy. A few wires twitched with magic, a few instructions given in regular code and then concealed in the software with more magic...and then Barry had never been there.

It took him most of an hour to piggyback from his access to his room's security systems to finally break into the main surveillance suite. There wasn't *too* much he could do there, but it was fascinating for him to go through all of the drones and get a good view of what *Voyage* really looked like.

While the brook he'd heard on the way in had clearly been a speaker, there *were* two faux-lake-style pools in the dome. Both were attached to large villas tucked back from the main condo suites—presumably the true high-end quarters for the most important guests.

Barry spent a few minutes linking his new access into the console in the room. As he did so, he continued to skim through the drone feeds—until he found himself half-distractedly watching a gorgeous redheaded woman emerge from one of those faux lakes in a one-piece swimsuit.

The arrival of the exosuit-ed guard passing the woman a towel shook him into awareness of what he was doing—and of just *who* he was watching. With a surprised shiver, he shut down the feed watching the Mage-Queen of Mars and tried to focus his attention as much as he ever did.

He needed to get a daemon into the network to erase his presence as he moved around the ship. There was too much surveillance for anything except a live program to keep his face off the records.

A different face stuck in his head as he did so—but Barry was *always* distracted, so the only thing that had changed was *what* he was focusing past.



UNFORTUNATELY FOR BARRY, the ship's systems had multiple layers of security. He could circumvent a lot of it via his coding and his magic, but he needed direct access to something *on* a given network to use his magic.

The ship's surveillance systems all ran on the same network, with subdivided security that failed to slow him down. He got his daemon up and running, and tried to see if he could get into the overall security control.

The encryption and security protocols available to the personal guard of the Mage-Queen of Mars proved insurmountable, and he glared at the console's screen. His magic had been enough to extricate his software probe without triggering an alarm, but it was closer than he was used to.

"Okay, so, *that* isn't working," he murmured aloud. Leaning back to think, he considered the map on his projector and the access he had. The ship should have a listing of shuttles and so forth aboard. That wasn't likely to change now that they were leaving.

Speaking of. It took a quick search through the public ship-net to confirm that a departure time *had* been set—in the middle of the Mage-Queen's scheduled dinner.

The course he found suggested that the plan was to take the ship through a pattern that would create an incredible view while she departed. The Mage-Queen and her would-be paramours would get a show.

Barry was a decent shuttle pilot—his "job" required it. He could make sense of the course that was plotted for the starship, even if actually plotting a course for a multimegaton cruise liner was beyond him.

The ship would be accelerating at two gravities—he figured the gravity runes would keep them all safe and comfortable while she did that—for about sixteen hours before she was clear to jump. That would put them about two light-minutes away from the planet.

Plenty of distance to hide from local law with his stolen shuttle. He'd need to avoid the escort—he could make the shuttle vanish from *Extravagant Voyage's* sensors, but he doubted he could fool the computers aboard Royal Martian Navy destroyers.

The best timing, in fact, would be for him to flee *Voyage* just before she jumped. Then he could make his way back toward *f* and his rendezvous with the buyer without worrying about the Queen's ship or her escort destroyers.

Of course, the value of his target meant that its absence would be noticed. Eventually. Even a shuttle that could jump, after all, was unlikely to be used while they were in deep space.

A few queries told him that his access didn't stretch far enough for him to pin down the listing of shuttles. He needed to access the working sections of the ship and get into the administrative systems.

Fortunately, he still didn't think anyone was going to miss him at dinner. He had time.

6

KIERA WAS aware that her opinion of *Extravagant Voyage*'s style of luxury was shaped by the fact she'd grown up in Olympus Mons. Her quarters in the royal palace as a child, let alone now, had been filled with things that cost as much or more than the luxuries that surrounded her on the cruise liner.

But all of that furniture, glassware, fabric—everything, in fact, except the electronics and clothing—had been decades old. Centuries, in some cases, with some items of furniture and even cups and plates dating back to the first Mage-King of Mars two centuries earlier.

Everything on *Extravagant Voyage* was expensive and looked it, with highly paid designers not only attempting to make the objects functional but also gorgeous. The point was not only to be luxurious but to *feel* and *appear* luxurious.

Everything in the royal palace in Olympus Mons was expensive and *didn't* look it. Function, endurance and comfort had been the priorities. The point had been to create objects that would last forever and become part of tradition.

Still, Kiera couldn't help but feel a touch of disdain at the intentional broadcasting of luxury present throughout the villa she was staying in. There was only one thing on the entire cruise liner that didn't trigger that vague displeasure and discomfort—and that was her pool.

The rocks that made up the false pond were real. She wasn't sure which planet they'd been hauled up from, but she was guessing Earth. The water was clear and kept at the perfect temperature, and the space was concealed behind a wall of trees to leave her a sensation of privacy.

Of course, Kiera Alexander was the Mage-Queen of Mars. Any privacy was merely an illusion, and she *knew* there were half a dozen exosuit-ed Royal Guards concealed in those trees. Her swimsuit was incredibly conservative by the standards of Martian aristocracy, but there were limits to her comfort with her security.

“Enjoy your swim, Your Majesty?” Lawrence asked, the Guard passing her a towel. “Driessen has laid out an outfit for you inside.”

Kiera sighed as she took the towel.

“Are we at that point already?” she said. “Dinner isn’t for another few hours.”

“He’s *your* batman,” Lawrence pointed out. “If you want him to stop picking clothes for you, I’m sure all you have to do is ask.”

Normally, reducing the number of decisions Kiera had to make was a *good* thing, one that resulted in the Mage-Queen running around in versions of much the same outfit day to day. Having Driessen and the rest of her staff pick outfits for her more formal outings was a godsend.

Aboard *Voyage*, however, Kiera was reduced to daily briefings via the Link communicators from Mars. There was a limit to what she could do.

“No, he’s probably right,” she sighed. “I need some...not-fresh air.”

Her bodyguard chuckled.

“Engineering?” Lawrence asked. “I’m sure you can get Officer Chateaux to give you a lecture on any part of the ship you want!”

Kiera grinned back at her bodyguard. Lawrence had been present when the cruise liner’s chief engineering officer had realized that his monarch actually *was* interested in the ship she was flying aboard. The ensuing forty-five-minute lecture on *Extravagant Voyage*’s power systems had been fascinating to the young Queen.

Her bodyguard had been...less enthused.

“Shuttle bay, I think,” she decided. “Let’s go look at fast, pretty things, shall we? I’m sure at least one of our guests has been sent up in something shiny by their family.”

There were advantages to the fact that nine of her ten guests were members of Tau Ceti’s First Families. Their families’ magical Gifts and involvement in the original colonization had left them all wealthy, which meant the families could have private shuttlecraft.

And at least three of the young men she’d invited aboard had earned her interest by engaging her in serious conversation on shuttles and interplanetary

spacecraft.

EXTRAVAGANT VOYAGE's shuttle bays were inside the dome's thick base layer. Normal passengers would only see the working spaces of the ship on their way in—and the corridor between the main shuttle bay and the dome were better decorated than the *rest* of the lower layer.

Kiera, on the other hand, had spent time aboard the warships under her theoretical authority. Even the “undecorated” parts of *Voyage*'s interior were at least equal to the living and working spaces aboard those warships. The cruise liner's crew might not live in the luxury that their passengers enjoyed, but they were hardly scrabbling in the dirt, either.

She was still working on building a mental map of the lower reaches of the ship. There was a map loaded into her wrist-comp, but she attempted to find her way to the shuttle bay without it—along a shortcut that passengers shouldn't normally see.

Guard-Captain Lawrence accompanied her the entire time. Kiera figured the Guard had the map up on the display of her exosuit helmet, but she remained silent as her Queen got herself ever so slightly lost.

It was only when Kiera finally stopped and sighed that her bodyguard finally said anything.

“I think our shortcut has gone a bit astray, hasn't it, Your Majesty?”

Kiera gave Lawrence a dirty look.

“Why is it that you only call me that when you think I'm being silly?” she asked.

“Because sometimes I have to remind the young woman I am charged to protect that she is *also* the ruler of basically every human being alive,” the Guard said calmly. “Some silliness is required for you to be *human*, but we need to avoid risks.”

Kiera snorted and brought up the map in a holographic projection above the wrist-comp. Tracing her route with her other hand, she sighed.

“Missed the turn here.” She tapped the spot. “We're under one of the condo terraces, at least fifty meters in the wrong direction.”

“Okay. A bit more of a walk, then. Can we keep the map up this time?” Lawrence asked.

“Sure,” Kiera conceded with a chuckle. A green line flashed into existence on the display, marking her route toward the shuttle bay. “We have time, but I didn’t plan on getting lost.”

Lawrence, in what Kiera recognized as a great feat of patience, said nothing.

THE CORRIDORS they were traversing weren’t empty, but there were few enough people moving through the workspaces of the ship that Kiera had the opportunity to place each one as they passed.

She knew all of the Royal Guard and other Mages on the ship by face and name, and knew most of the crew and her security detail by face at this point. She’d put a lot of effort into building that skill over the years.

Kiera’s title came with power and authority, but all of that only mattered so far as the people around her supported her. As a Rune Wright, she had Runes of Power inlaid across her body that dramatically expanded her magical power—but even her magic only meant so much.

To be the Mage-Queen of Mars, she needed people she trusted and who trusted her. More, she needed people who encountered her to come away with a positive impression, the feeling that their Queen respected and valued them.

That the cold-blooded strategy inherent in that lined up perfectly with her natural inclinations was handy.

Still, she had a moment of surprise when a stranger stepped around a corner and her Gift instantly identified them as a Mage. But she didn’t recognize the lanky young man. He was wearing a crew shipsuit and vanished around another corner almost before she was sure she’d seen him, leaving her staring after him for a few seconds.

“Kiera?” Lawrence said. “What is it?”

“I thought I knew every Mage on the ship,” Kiera replied, focusing as she locked the stranger’s face into her mind. “But I just saw a Mage member of the crew that I don’t think I’ve even met.”

It was a nice face, she noted absently as she completed the not-quite meditative trick that stored the face in her memory palace. But if he was a Mage, she should have known him.

“Security breach?” Lawrence asked, her tone soft and concerned.

“I don’t think so?” Kiera said. “Feel free to double-check things, of course, but I think he’s crew. Just...Captain Salonen made a point of introducing me to his Ship’s Mages, and I didn’t think there were any other Mages aboard.”

“Entertainer? I’ll have someone check the crew list,” Lawrence said firmly, then chuckled. “Of course, there is another possibility, my Queen.”

Kiera glanced at her companion, realizing she’d stopped in the middle of the corridor.

“What do you mean?”

“Your Testers used runic artifacts designed by your great-grandfather to identify Mages,” Lawrence murmured. “But they are an attempt to duplicate your natural ability as a Rune Wright. It’s possible that you have sensed someone as a Mage who the Test missed.”

Kiera whistled softly.

“That’s a headache I hadn’t thought of,” she admitted. “If the Test is missing *any* Mages, though, that’s a problem.” She shook her head. “I’ll think on it. Check that list.

“For now, I still want to go look at shinies!”

In hindsight, she was realizing that putting all ten of her suitors into a single dinner *might* have been a foolish idea.

BARRY WAS WELL aware that the last thing he needed was to run directly into the Mage-Queen of Mars. If someone put together the fact that the Queen didn't know who he was with the fact that he was supposedly aboard as one of her guests, he'd be in serious trouble!

He hadn't been expecting her to be slumming it down in the working sections of the ship, though, and had relied on a uniform stolen out of a storage locker to avoid attention.

Long practice and repeated success told him that the best way to move through any workspace was to dress like a low-level laborer and look busy. His stolen shipsuit would get him most places in the base of the ship, though his need to hack through security doors would draw attention if he wasn't careful.

Trying to slow his breathing and focus on the task at hand, he ducked into a quiet supply closet. Blinking away the moment, he checked the burgeoning Empire of Greater Luxembourg in his game. A few commands assigned resources to stabilizing the western front, where the English were trying to retake their French holdings from his mercenary armies—and helped calm his nerves.

His map told him that he was close to the main shuttle bay. Unless he was mistaken, though, that was where the Mage-Queen and her terrifying red statue of a bodyguard had been headed. Maybe she was meeting one of her guests?

Barry didn't know. He *did* figure that trying to hack into the flight-control center of a shuttle bay while a Royal Guard was standing *right there* ranked

somewhere between suicidal and just phenomenally stupid.

Fortunately, *Extravagant Voyage* was designed to not need access to an orbital. She was currently docked with one, with both personnel tubes and cargo umbilicals linking the spacecraft to the *f*-Signs space station, but the design criteria meant she actually had *six* shuttle bays. Two major ones, at the “north” and “south” compass points of the circular ship, and then four smaller ones equally offset from each other around the rim.

The one closest to him was right next to the station, which *should* mean that it was shut down and quiet right now. For his purposes, that was perfect.

THE SHUTTLE-BAY DOORS were open when Barry reached them, which was sufficiently odd that he tucked himself into a corner to try to get a decent look at what was going on. He could hear faint conversation in the hangar area, but it sounded like the speakers were at the far end.

There might be people *there*, but it was still quieter than the main shuttle bay and remained his best option. A touch of magic swirled around him, drawing the shadow with him as he darted through the open bay doors and into a corner of the space.

The two big shuttle bays easily filled the full forty-meter height of the base, basically taking the form of forty-meter-wide caves a third of the ship’s diameter deep. The secondary bays, like this one, were far smaller structures. The entrance was a fifteen-meter square on the outer hull, and the shuttle bay held those dimensions for its full thirty-meter length.

It was enough space to hold two or three smaller standard shuttles and still allow for one to land. There currently weren’t *any* spacecraft in the bay, but several cargo containers—the smaller standardized units that fit inside the big interstellar shipping units—were stacked up neatly in the middle.

“Any problems?” a voice said, clear now that Barry was inside the hangar bay.

Also clear, he realized, because the speaker was *new* and had just entered the room behind him. With a shiver, he pulled his magical shadow tighter around himself as he realized just *who* was speaking.

The man who’d followed him in wore the uniform of a Royal Martian Marine Corps Mage-Major. A fully trained Marine Combat Mage likely

wouldn't even *register* the amount of effort it would take them to kill or capture Barry himself.

Four other men, in the same crew shipsuits Barry wore, were maneuvering a new container in to join the rest.

"None," one of them said. There was something ever so slightly off about his voice to Barry. "Your local contacts delivered the container as promised. We'd already temporarily disabled the detectors, so no one who wasn't in the loading tube even knows the container came aboard—and we're the only ones who were there."

Someone was *smuggling* something aboard the Mage-Queen's transport? That sounded like a terrible idea to Barry, though he assumed that the presence of a senior officer of the Mage-Queen's detail meant it was only so underhanded.

"Good." The Major strode forward, running his hand through close-cropped black hair as he studied the four longshoremen.

"Take this." He produced four sheets of paper. "They show where to put the cargo throughout the ship. Once you're done, destroy the paper. Return to your quarters and take these."

The Marine handed out something Barry couldn't see from his vantage point.

"Your service to humanity will be remembered," he told the four crew. "Let's get to work."

The crew got to work opening the container they'd just brought in, and the Major stood watching them.

Barry found himself walking a razor's edge between being terrified of being discovered—ending up in the hands of the Martian Marines would *not* end well for him right now!—and his inability to just *wait*.

He cast his attention around the shuttle bay, looking for his original target. The main flight-control offices were in the two main hangars, but even this space needed... *There*.

It was more of a cubby off the side of the hangar than an actual *office*, but it would have a console with a hard connection to the flight-control network. He didn't really need the *flight* side of things—not yet, anyway—but it would also tell him which shuttles were where.

On top of letting him find his target, combining access through the surveillance network with access through the flight network would almost certainly give him enough vectors to break in to the main administrative

system.

He wouldn't have *control* of much—he needed to be right on top of things to make his particular combination of coding and magic work to break security—but he'd be able to observe everything.

Right now, though, he realized he was already plotting a path across the shuttle bay that would get him into the cubby without entering anyone's line of sight. His shadow cloak wouldn't do much to conceal him in areas that, well, didn't *have* any shadow.

When the Marine officer finally made an approving noise and turned crisply on his heel to exit the bay, Barry sighed in relief. He hadn't been able to route around the Mage, and the Mage was the *last* person he wanted to spot him.

Keeping his magic wrapped around him, he began the painfully slow process of sneaking across the bay. It was straightforward enough, helped by the fact that the four laborers working on the cargo seemed oddly oblivious to everything around them.

As he reached his destination, he glanced back to see just what they were smuggling aboard the ship. The container was only about half-full, but the four boxes the crew were maneuvering were still large enough to be awkward.

Barry's curiosity forced him to creep back a few steps as the first box slid onto a transport pallet. It was roughly the size of four coffins bundled together, a solid-looking secured transport crate.

There was no company name or logo on the crates. There had been some kind of label, but someone had painted over it. Whatever the containers held, someone had wanted it to be unobtrusive.

If he hadn't just seen a Marine taking charge of the delivery, Barry's moment of concern would have been stronger. He could think of four or five different ways he could draw attention to the crates without getting caught—but they weren't without risk.

And since the Mage-Queen's people clearly knew what was going on, he focused on what was in front of him.

Tucked behind the console where no one entering the shuttle bay could see him, he used his magic to connect a cable from his wrist-comp to the console. He'd set up a wireless link later, but wires were always easiest to start with.

For whatever reason, it was a lot easier for him to magically influence

technology through a wire than a wireless network.

BY THE TIME Barry had carved his way through the security protocols on the flight-control network, the four crew had departed, each pushing one of the big crates on a portable pallet jack.

Finally alone, he dropped his cloak of shadow and pulled the data up on the console. As he'd already figured out, Shuttle Bay Charlie was serving as a main cargo-access point with a heavy umbilical connected to *f*-Signs.

Shuttle Bays Alpha and Bravo both had lists of shuttlecraft stored aboard. Alpha was what he expected—luxury shuttlecraft, smaller versions of the Courvoisier he'd stolen for Waxer last time.

Bay Bravo, though, had clearly been taken over by the Queen's detail. The security codes that tried to keep him from seeing what was there barely slowed him down before he pulled the list. Every occupant of Bay Bravo was military, assault shuttles with the gear to drop from orbit and take out armored bunkers before delivering exosuiting soldiers into the wreckage.

"That's not a bad fallback," he murmured to himself. It wasn't often that assault shuttles were in civilian areas, and he'd never even had an opportunity to test his skills against military hardware.

He was confident that he *could* break open the security on even the brand-new Model Twenty-Four-Sixty-Five assault shuttles in *Extravagant Voyage's* hangar. But while they were valuable, they weren't his target, and he quickly pulled the lists for Bays Delta, Echo, and Fox.

Between the console and his corneal projector, he had all six shuttle lists up, and he stared at them grimly for a few seconds.

Charlie, as he could see with his own eyes, was empty. Delta held a pair of medium-lift cargo shuttles—not the big craft that hauled interstellar shipping containers to and from planetary surfaces but solid utility ships with internal cargo bays. Echo, like Charlie, was facing toward *f*-Signs and had been emptied.

Fox held a trio of lighter personnel shuttles that looked like they didn't even have the legs to make it to a planet and back. Literal touring shuttles, he realized, intended to take the passengers close to interesting sights and places.

What *wasn't* on any of the lists was a modified heavy-lift utility hauler.

The ship he was looking for was the type that hauled ten-meter-by-ten-meter-by-hundred-meter interstellar shipping cargos to and from planets.

It would fill most of one of the secondary shuttle bays. It *definitely* wasn't in Charlie.

So, either it wasn't aboard the ship...or it was in Echo. And *Echo*, it looked like, was right next to the secondary security hub that ship's security had been exiled to.

They would *love* to catch someone the Mage-Queen's security had missed. He needed time to put together a plan of attack.

Plus, whether he was stealing the jump shuttle or an assault shuttle or even one of the luxury craft in Bay Alpha, he needed to wait until *Extravagant Voyage* was clear of Tau Ceti *f*.

Sixteen hours from when they powered up the engines until they jumped. He figured he needed three hours to make sure everything was the way he needed.

Dinner and departure were in two hours...and that meant that Barry had at least twelve hours to sort out his plan of approach.

8

KIERA WAS NOT CONSCIOUSLY OBSESSED with prestige and presentation. She was capable of using them as tools when she needed to, but she tried to keep herself grounded and use simpler tools and places where she could.

Of course, everyone *around* her had extremely solid opinions of what was fitting for a person of her eminence. And she was far from immune to the attractions of luxuries and views.

All of which combined to put her first-night dinner with her selected suitors in the Diamond Room, a transparent-walled private dining area at the absolute peak of *Extravagant Voyage's* central spire.

From there, they could see all of the dome with ease and could look up to see Tau Ceti *f* hanging above them. It was an incredible view, especially as *Voyage* began her journey away from the planet.

The Tau Ceti System had a lot of loose debris, the result of some ancient cataclysm or failure to form. Both habitable planets had fortress formations positioned ahead of them in their regular orbits, the Impact Defense Platforms tasked with keeping Tau Ceti's people safe from meteors and asteroid impacts.

But those diffuse clouds of debris and chaos created a glorious mix of light and not-quite-smoke scattered across the skies.

The view was amazing. The food was incredible.

Unfortunately, all ten of Kiera's dinner companions appeared to have been struck dumb by the prospect of eating a full meal with her. None of the ten had been this quiet during the thirty-minute introductions she'd first met them in, but all seemed intimidated by the more intimate setting.

As the main course was cleared away, she glanced around the room, inspecting her guests. None of the ten Mages in the room were lacking in confidence, she was certain, but something about *this* setup was intimidating them.

“Was there a memo I missed about not talking in the Diamond Room?” she asked with a soft smile. “I don’t *think* I grew any extra heads since I met each of you on the surface, but everyone has been very, very quiet.”

She got some chuckles and sheepish looks in response to that, but it still took a few moments before any of them spoke up.

The one who did was the only Mage by Right in the room. Upton Ayaan Meical McGregor’s parents must have been absolutely *delighted* when their second son tested as a Mage as a pre-teen.

The McGregors were fabulously wealthy entertainment tycoons who, among other things, ran the water, land, air, and space race industry in Tau Ceti. Of their four children, only Upton was a Mage—one of those flukes of genetics that came along every so often—and he’d thrown himself into being as skilled a Mage as his elder brother was an engineer and manager.

And all four of the younger McGregors were racers. Upton McGregor had flown himself to *Extravagant Voyage* aboard a custom-built interplanetary racing shuttle. Now the blond-haired and blue-eyed Mage shrugged away his own sheepish expression and met Kiera’s gaze.

“None of us, I suspect, are quite sure of the parameters,” he told her. “The...rules of engagement, so to speak. I only know Brandon over there”—he gestured toward another of the Mages—“but that leads me to suspect that *no one* you picked to be here is the type to want to undermine others.

“But, frankly, we all know that this is a competition and that it’s quite unlikely you’re planning on keeping *all* of us,” McGregor concluded. “I mean, no one is going to argue if the *Mage-Queen* wants a harem, but I imagine you’re planning on dropping at least some of us off in Eridani.”

“So, I guess we’re wondering what you’re expecting from us,” one of the others murmured. “McGregor has the right of it. I don’t want to start any fights here, but if we’re expected to impress...”

“Fair,” Kiera told them. “I appreciate your honesty.”

McGregor being the first one to speak had certainly earned him some brownie points. She didn’t exactly have a scoring matrix going. This was something she felt should be done by...emotion and gut feeling, not logic and math.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” she continued with a chuckle. “This is the second time we’ve done this, and the last time was a bust.”

Literally, in the case of the last “gentleman”’s arm when he’d taken the fact that she’d slept with him as a sign that he’d “won.” Things had gone... very downhill from there, helped by a few mistakes of Kiera’s own.

Eventually, she’d thrown him into a wall. She still felt bad about that—but she was *also* moderately sure that Lawrence had been about to kill the man.

“From where I stand, I spoke with about two hundred and thirty young men on Tau Ceti,” she reminded them. Despite her people’s snark, she hadn’t met *every* one of the two thousand or so Mages in the right age bracket. “You guys were the ones who intrigued me the most, that I wanted to get a chance to get to know better.

“This is that chance. There’s no need to impress or rules or competition.” Boys would be boys, she was sure, which meant there *would* be competition. But hopefully it would stay...genteel.

“My staff are sorting out a schedule for the days we’re in transit, and I will be spending at least a few hours with each of you,” she continued. “The point is to get to know each other. The *hope* is for me to find a husband, yes, but I feel like holding that up as the goal is going to warp things.”

She smiled.

“Does that work for ‘rules of engagement’ for you all?” she asked sweetly.

None of the men she’d picked were stupid enough to argue with that.

PUTTING ALL of them in one room had served one purpose, Kiera supposed as she entered the office in her villa. She’d confirmed that none of the ten Mages she’d chosen to bring with her were the type to sabotage each other.

That, and apparently proving that McGregor-of-the-too-many-names had both solid insight into others and some courage. None of the rest had been willing to speak up until he had, and even then, most of them had been quiet afterward.

Kiera wasn’t going to make any decisions based on one action, but she’d admit that McGregor now had a small lead over the others.

“Need anything, Kiera?” her batman asked. “A drink?”

She glanced up at the graying man who ran her household and was doing most—if not all!—of the work of taking care of her as she flitted between star systems.

“I need to go over Damien’s messages, see where we’re at,” she told him. “Have you put together the schedule for our guests over the next few days?”

“I’ve got tomorrow sorted out,” Driessen confirmed. “We’ll probably want to talk over the rest of the trip at some point. I’ve got you marked for an hour, roughly, with each of them tomorrow. A busy day.”

Kiera chuckled.

“Self-inflicted problems,” she noted. “I’m hoping you have more planned than for us to just sit and stare at each other?”

“This is a flying resort, Kiera,” her batman chuckled. “I’ve arranged activities for each of them.”

“Thank you.”

She realized he hadn’t waited for her to say if she wanted a drink when he slid a mug of hot chocolate onto the desk.

“Do you need me for anything else, Kiera?” he asked. “I’d suggest you not work *too* hard on the updates from Mars, but I know you.”

“You’ve looked after me since Dad died,” she agreed. “Thank you. It means a lot to still have you here.”

He nodded, an odd stiffness to it she couldn’t quite place.

“I’ll leave you to your mail,” he said brightly. “We’ll talk in the morning—unless you *do* need me for anything else?”

Kiera took a sip of the thickly sweet beverage and smiled.

“No, Lakshmi,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

He bowed his way out of the room, and Kiera waved the holoprojectors and wallscreens to life. Her wrist-comp connected to the console, engaging in a complex series of electronic call-and-response to decrypt the information sent over the FTL Link communicator.

Kiera knew that her Prince-Chancellor was limiting how much detail was coming to her while she was on her Tour. That was how he was keeping her as widely informed as possible—she heard about everything she normally would hear of but at a much higher level than usual.

She trusted Montgomery’s assessment of what she needed more info on, mostly, and could ask for more information on anything and get it in minutes. It was a decent compromise, considering that her focus was supposed to be

elsewhere.

Taking another sip of the chocolate, she opened the initial daily precis. Eighty-six major items, seventeen of them marked as critical by Montgomery.

Ruling a hundred worlds was hardly simple, but Kiera and her Chancellor knew the drill by now. She reached out to open the first of the critical messages...and missed the icon on the touchscreen.

Blinking at her unusual clumsiness, Kiera found herself staring blankly at her hand for a moment as she held it in the air in front of her. It blurred in her vision and she swallowed against a sickly sweet aftertaste that she'd *thought* was the hot chocolate.

She'd been drugged—by Lakshmi Driessen?! That made no sense...but the hot chocolate he'd given her was the only vector she could think of through the fog filling her mind.

Then the fog turned to darkness and she fell into the void.

A FEW HOURS of poking around *Extravagant Voyage*'s systems left Barry with more questions than answers. Not only was the shuttle Waxer had sent him to steal missing from all of the listings of parasite craft aboard the ship, there was no record of it ever coming aboard.

Thanks to the client, he not only knew *when* the shuttle had landed on the cruise liner but even had the footage from *f*-Signs' external sensors. Comparing the two sets of records was fascinating—because everything *else* matched, but so far as *Extravagant Voyage*'s computers were concerned, the jump shuttle didn't exist.

Shuttle Bay Echo was out of the way of most of the work going on aboard the ship, not least because records showed it had been shut down before they'd reached Tau Ceti *f*. The crew had flagged that Echo would be blocked by the station they were docking at, and transferred the shuttles. According to the liner's own records, the hangar was empty.

The only active part of the ship near Echo was the security station, but Barry figured he could slip by that without issue. The whole situation was strange—though he supposed it was going to be a lot easier to steal something no one seemed to know was aboard!

One way or another, he wasn't coming back to the suite he'd been staying in. He spent five minutes sweeping the room with a set of digital, magical and chemical tools to make sure there were no fingerprints or DNA left to identify him.

When he stepped out of the suite, there was no sign anyone had been in it at all. It was late by the clock of the far-distant mountain on Mars, which

seemed to be calming most of the ship's crew. He suspected the true "day" of *Extravagant Voyage* was "the Mage-Queen is up," but since she was clearly running on Olympus Mons Time, it matched handily.

His wrist-comp said that the Mage-Queen's dinner would have wrapped up two hours earlier. Thirteen hours to jump. He only *needed* three or four hours, but the sooner he was in place, the less likely it was that any problem would keep him from getting away.

It was time to get to work.

ONCE AGAIN WEARING his stolen crew uniform, Barry found a currently unused parts cart and began to make his way to his destination. He was doing his best to remain unobtrusive and not *obviously* avoid people, but when he heard voices ahead, he pulled the cart against the wall and started going through its contents as if cataloging or searching for something.

"We need the coroner to crew quarters four," one of the voices said loudly. "A couple of our security guys, too."

"Captain doesn't want the Mage-Queen's people to know?" a woman replied. "What happened?"

"That's what the coroner's supposed to sort out, isn't it?" the first said. "But from what Jake said, one of the junkies in cargo handling decided to shoot up the entire stash they picked up on the planet. So, we got a corpse instead of a coworker."

"Show some damn respect, Hal," the woman snapped. "Who was it?"

"Dunno, but Captain sent me to go get Doc Lyle. Can I get you to round up a couple more of the sec team?" Hal didn't *sound* any more respectful to Barry.

"Yeah, yeah." The woman paused. "You're a *dick*, Hal."

"Maybe, but I'm not the dumbass that just ODeD!"

Footsteps faded away into the distance, and Barry glared at the tools in front of him. He'd met people like Hal before, the type who didn't understand what caused someone to get addicted.

Barry had spent too much time in the blocks to think that it was only a matter of being weak, after all. And something about the situation didn't sit right with him—not least the hiding it from the Mage-Queen's security

retinue.

There were more secrets being kept on the ship than *he* would be happy with if he was her. On the other hand, he was planning on being off the ship before they jumped out of Tau Ceti, let alone before those secrets came home to roost.

With the footsteps fading, he got his cart moving again toward his destination. His route kept him around corners and out of view from the security station itself, and he seemed to avoid any attention until he was practically at Shuttle Bay Echo.

He never even *heard* the Marine before the man appeared in front of him. It was the same Major he'd seen checking over the cargo in Bay Charlie, a Mage with similar height and build to Barry's own beanpole-esque frame.

"Hey, spacer," the Mage barked as he spotted Barry. "You got coms, right?"

The stranger was *trying* to sound like he was concerned, but a layer of smug self-satisfaction slipped through. He was very pleased with himself about something.

He was also trying to hide it, which only reminded Barry of his conviction that this ship had too many secrets.

"I have the administrative ship-net, sir," he confirmed in his most obsequious voice, keeping his face slightly turned away from the Marine.

"I don't have access to the maintenance listings," the Marine said. "There's been some kind of systems failure down by Shuttle Bay Echo. Looked like a coolant pipe busted and opened up some electrical wiring on the way.

"Can you flag the place as a hazard? We don't want anyone stumbling through it before Officer Chateaux can get some of your people together to fix it."

"Of course, sir," Barry said, still sounding as small and cooperative as possible as he considered the man's words. "I'll put it up and see if any of the repair teams are nearby. That sounds serious."

"Just make sure Chateaux knows, son," the strange Mage told him. "There's nothing in Bay Echo, so there's no big rush, right?"

He slapped Barry on the shoulder and strode off purposefully.

Barry carefully didn't look after the stranger...and also decided he was going to go *check* on this supposed coolant leak before he tried to get into the maintenance network.

And if he found what he expected to find, he was going to be leaving some time-delayed emails in the ship's systems. He knew he could get one to the Captain, and he figured he might even get one to the Mage-Queen.

The mess on *Extravagant Voyage* wasn't his problem. But he'd seen and heard too much over the last day or so to not think that something was rotten in the state of Denmark—and he had enough of a sense of responsibility to not want to leave that hanging.

THE LACK of an electrified coolant leak only solidified Barry's certainty that something was very wrong. As he approached Shuttle Bay Echo's main hatch, though, he realized another factor that was almost as concerning.

It wasn't clear when accessing the system from anywhere else on the ship, but Shuttle Bay Echo was completely disconnected from *Extravagant Voyage's* systems. Whatever was in there, someone had gone to a great deal of effort to conceal it—to the point where the half-casual instruction to report an incident seemed out of character.

That deception would only hold up for a few hours at most. By the time they were supposed to jump, Barry figured it was *guaranteed* that someone would come looking to fix the leak. That would draw attention to both the shuttle bay's system disconnection and the Marine who'd told him to look for it.

Something stank. Still, Barry had his own reasons to be there, and Echo being a hidden section of the ship worked for him. A gesture unscrewed the access panel next to the secured hatch, and he moved the cart to block anyone else's view of the exposed wiring.

A wire unrolled from his wrist-comp as his corneal projector overlaid a schematic on the open panel. He gestured, directing the wire to the right connection. This was all standard enough. There wasn't even any sign in the hardware of the fact that the shuttle bay had been severed from *Voyage's* systems.

A few seconds after making the connection, though, the security software on his wrist-comp started freaking out. Multiple alerts blazed across the

corneal implant, and Barry refocused his attention. *His* wrist-comp, at least, had been customized for easy manipulation through his magic.

It only took him a few seconds to secure the device against the virus that had tried to counterattack his intrusion. Still...that was *not* standard civilian security on a jump ship. He'd never seen anything like it before—and while he'd never dealt with military hardware, that seemed oddly aggressive even for military security.

A few gentle software probes into the network confirmed what he was expecting. The hatch was running on independent software *and* hardware. It wasn't obvious from the wiring he could see, but tracing the flow of data, it looked like everything in the door had been rerouted back into the hangar itself and then fed into entirely new hardware.

Hardware not just unconnected but *unrelated* to anything on the ship. The only reason Barry could think of to do that was if someone was worried about back doors in the hardware or firmware.

Like the person who'd secured Shuttle Bay Echo had been worried someone was going to show up with firmware overrides to get past his security. Barry had heard...rumors of such things, in the hands of the Mage-Queen's top agents.

He supposed if there was anywhere to be worried that people with the Mage-Queen's personal magic keys might go poking, it was around the ship *carrying* the Mage-Queen of Mars.

Unfortunately for whoever had set this up, Barry didn't have said firmware keys. He just had his usual bag of tricks, which meant that while it was going to take him a few minutes, nothing they'd set up was actually going to stop him.

WHOEVER HAD PUT TOGETHER the security modules and code that had Shuttle Bay Echo locked down was *good*. Barry had never before met a door that could hold him up for more than about ten minutes—though he would freely admit that he hadn't, for example, tried to crack bank vaults.

He was a *shuttle thief*, after all, and shuttles had very different security protocols—including physical-part lockouts.

The systems that had been rigged up to secure the hatch, however, were

closer to the systems he was used to on high-end aircars and shuttles than on any door he'd ever seen. It took him over thirty minutes to break through the door's systems—long enough that he was worrying about who was going to come through behind him and was considering using his magic to brute-force the door.

Somehow, though, Barry figured that cutting the door open with his magic was *definitely* going to trigger some alarms. So, he stuck with it and breathed a sigh of relief when the hatch finally slid open enough to let him through.

The *second* relieving piece of news was that he was definitely in the right place. He'd been pretty sure, but it was still a reprieve to actually *see* the utility hauler he was looking for. The ship didn't *look* special—but the fact that she was inside a secured shuttle bay that had been cut off from the ship's networks told Barry everything.

The jump shuttle was an ugly thing, all fuel tanks and extendable gantries wrapped around a personnel pod barely big enough to provide the two-person crew a place to sleep. She was a working spacecraft, one that no one would take a second look at.

But even a momentary glance at her serial numbers confirmed she was the one he was looking for. If this shuttle wasn't actually the jump shuttle—somehow—she was still the one the client had asked for.

So, she was the one Barry would deliver.

He looked back at the hatch behind him and considered the situation. It was still almost half a day until the jump, and he didn't want to leave with his prize much before then. Except...he was pretty sure the Marine Mage-Major would be back inside that time. There was *something* going on there.

But...if something secretive was going on, that would also limit the Mage-Major's ability to ask for *help*.

Between rejiggering the aftermarket security modules and a little bit of magical welding, it only took Barry about five minutes to *permanently* seal the hatches into Shuttle Bay Echo.

That left him alone with his prey, and he took a few minutes to just pace around the gangly-looking spacecraft. At first glance, there was no sign that she was magical beyond a faint buzzing sensation in his teeth that he'd never felt before.

Examining her, though, the truth slowly became obvious. The problem the people upgrading her had encountered was that large chunks of a utility

hauler were open to space for ease of maintenance and operation.

Those pieces of the shuttle had still needed to be included in the jump matrix, but they weren't easily concealed. The Rune Scribes who'd modified the ship had done an impressive job, but Barry was *looking* for the runes.

And he found them. Someone had turned one of the most ubiquitous midrange in-system craft in the Protectorate into an interstellar jump ship.

He wasn't sure *why* someone would have done that—but he did know that someone else was prepared to *pay* for it.

WITH THE HANGAR sealed behind him, Barry took his time opening up the shuttle itself. It was this layer where people tended to hide the most...*active* anti-intruder devices. Anything more than locks or an alarm was supposed to be illegal for anyone outside the military, but someone *always* thought they were above such rules.

Given how unusual the shuttle was, he wasn't surprised to locate a few bits of nastiness. The pair of fully automated turrets set to activate if the wrong security codes—or even wrong security *connections*—were used was special, though.

There was an entire false access setup that needed a physical key to open. Barry spent longer finding the hidden keyhole than he spent picking the lock, though, and the system behind it was extremely familiar.

He'd just cracked its twin to get into the hangar. The pass phrases and codes might have been different—but it wasn't like Barry was *using* the usual unlocking methods.

Resetting the system and activating the same sequence that had opened up the hatch took him about a minute. All told, it took him less time to breach the shuttle than it had taken to breach the hangar itself.

“Good sign, good sign,” he murmured to himself. Schematics for the base shuttle type appeared on his corneal projector, but moments after he'd opened them, he realized they were useless.

The hatch was supposed to lead into one of four compartments, stacked two on top of each other in a line. The forward two compartments should have been shorter, the lower acting as the airlock, and what limited passenger space the craft contained and the upper half as the cockpit.

The back section would have been the minimal living quarters and the internal engineering spaces.

Instead, the entire lower section had been opened up and reduced in height. Instead of entering through a two-point-five-meter-square meter-thick airlock into a roughly two-and-three-quarter-meter-wide space four meters long, Barry discovered that the inner door of the airlock was partially blocked.

The interior hardware of the shuttle had clearly been heavily reorganized, giving up the onboarding and passenger space and lowering the ceiling to barely two meters. The airlock opened directly into the squashed and extended engineering space.

Barry's eye implant was a display, not an actual neural link. He couldn't feed the systems he was looking at into the computer to assess them, but he could tell glancing around that these weren't the systems that would be mounted in a utility hauler.

The engines more closely resembled what he'd have expected to see in one of the assault shuttles belonging to the Mage-Queen's security detachment. Despite the clear attempt to keep the exterior ordinary-seeming, this shuttlecraft was clearly packing a great deal more engine power than it should have.

Despite all of the changes, however, Barry quickly confirmed that the access up to the cockpit was still where it should have been. Scrambling up the ladder in *Extravagant Voyage's* reduced magical gravity, it was quickly obvious what the engineering space had been modified to create.

No utility hauler had the space to put a magical simulacrum at the dead center. Everything on this one had been moved around to make the inclusion of the simulacrum possible. Most of what should have been the cockpit was taken up by an additional computing center managing bundle after bundle of fiber-optic cables that split out to cover a bulkhead with a hatch barely large enough for Barry to duck through.

It had been a long time since he'd set foot in the simulacrum chamber of a starship—and even that had been on the rundown ships used for Jump Mage training. If nothing else, this was much, *much* smaller.

The simulacrum in the center of the ship was less than twenty centimeters across. There was no question what it was, though, and the new control space had been set up around it. The pilot's chair was inverted, with additional runes around it that Barry realized had to be gravity magic.

He could move around the area of inverted gravity toward the hatch he presumed led to the quarters, but the zone around the chair and the simulacrum had the opposite pull to the rest of the ship. A test with his hand confirmed that the shuttle's magic overpowered *Voyage's* in that small area.

It was a clever use of space—though it still meant that the living quarters were smaller than the cockpit had originally been. This was very clearly intended to be a *one-person* spacecraft now.

With a deep breath and a careful assessment of the position, Barry stepped *up* into the gravity well around the chair, grabbing a bar that he realized was at the perfect height for him to do exactly this, and rotated himself down into the seat.

The height of the bar told an interesting story. It looked like it might be adjustable, but it was locked in the right position for Barry—which suggested the Marine Mage-Major he'd seen, who was of a height with him, was the likely owner of the ship.

He'd figured that.

“The problem, Barry,” he addressed himself aloud, “is that a pissed-off Marine Mage is going to go through that hatch like it isn't there. So, let's get everything moving, shall we?”

THE BIGGEST SURPRISE to Barry was that the security around actually *flying* the shuttle was “merely” a third iteration of the same specialty encrypted cipher modules that he’d run in to on the hangar access and the shuttle entryway.

They were capable and clever bits of hardware, but to *him*, they were even less of a barrier the third time than they had been the second. He was still going to have problems convincing all of the systems to talk to him—and the jump computer was a fully stand-alone installation, he judged—but he had flight controls and communications thirty minutes after settling into the seat.

It was an extremely comfortable seat, too, the kind that adjusted to his body and even did intermittent massage on key points as his muscles started to lock in place. He had a very similar one in his computing setup at home—and it cost almost as much as a quality aircar.

Once he had control of the shuttle’s communications, he carefully linked in to the network for *Extravagant Voyage*. None of the daemons he’d left in the systems reported issues, and he considered his situation.

Barry couldn’t access Shuttle Bay Echo’s systems from the main ship network, but even if he had to go physically access the consoles, that wouldn’t take him long. Between the various stages of the process, he’d spent the three hours he’d flagged as the minimum to secure control of the shuttle.

It would have taken him longer if the shuttle’s master hadn’t used identical security systems for access and control—and then set a third copy of the same to secure the shuttle bay.

In fact, he suspected... A few commands opened the link to Shuttle Bay Echo's local flight control, and he chuckled in amusement. Assuming that Mage-Major was the shuttle's pilot, the man had possessed a great deal of faith in his custom cipher modules.

The actual flight-control systems for the hangar were locked to the shuttle. Barry could have undone that with access to the console, but since he controlled the shuttle now, he didn't need to. Whenever he was ready to go, he could easily open the hangar and get out into open space.

The problem *now* was the limited feed he was getting from the cruise liner's exterior sensors. Barry was confident in his ability to outrun, confuse and evade regular police and High Guard craft. He'd back his skills and tricks against the Tau Ceti System Defense Force, though he knew the edge was a lot thinner there.

He wasn't going to try to convince half a dozen Royal Martian Navy destroyers that he was innocent, and he *knew* he couldn't evade their sensors or outrun them. A single assault shuttle in competent hands could end his heist within minutes of his leaving *Extravagant Voyage*—let alone the six million-ton-plus warships on the screen.

But even as he was considering the ships on the screen, a half-forgotten sensation rippled through him—and the sensor screen flickered.

Blinking away the sudden disorientation, he realized the warships were gone. So was the Tau Ceti System.

They hadn't been supposed to jump yet. By the clock he was following, they were still over ten hours away from their planned jump point—and there was *no* reason to jump the big cruise liner without taking the destroyers with her.

"That is *not* right," he whispered. "And whatever is going on, I don't want to be anywhere near this."

He jumped into motion. He'd already got halfway through setting the shuttle up for launch, and now he finished the work. The shuttle had been *physically* prepped for this, he observed. He hadn't had time to check fuel status and whether the lines had been attached or anything yet.

Now the check lights for those items flashed green. The shuttle had been ready to go, he realized, and that fit a very ugly pattern taking shape in the back of his mind.

It wasn't his problem. He repeated that to himself as he ran through an abbreviated safety checklist—and then ordered Shuttle Bay Echo to open its

doors. The entire bay acted as an airlock around him, alarms warning anyone who'd somehow sneaked past the sealed doors to get the hell out.

Whatever was going on aboard *Extravagant Voyage* was not Barry Carpentier's problem, he repeated to himself. There were Marines, Secret Service, even *Royal Guards* aboard the ship to make sure that the Mage-Queen of Mars and her guests were safe.

Given all of that security firepower, he was surprised that he managed to prep for launch and open the bay door without any challenge from the cruise liner's crew. There was dead silence on the general channels.

Not even anyone asking where their escorts had gone.

That silence only accelerated Barry as he brought the shuttle's maneuvering thrusters online and flung her out of the ship. Once he was clear, he began the staged process of bringing up the more powerful engines to get clear of the mothership.

That should *definitely* have drawn attention. The miniature simulacrum chamber had the same direct-optic-link exterior view as the larger version, and he turned a baleful glare on *Extravagant Voyage*.

"What the hell is going on?"

Barry was sufficiently engrossed in the weirdness of the situation that it took him three whole seconds to realize *he* wasn't the one saying that.



THE LACK of response from the cruise liner was of significantly lower importance than someone being aboard Barry's stolen shuttle. It took him a moment to realize that the person had to be in the quarters that he hadn't yet entered—though the sudden stream of angry swearing certainly helped locate her!

Locking the shuttle into a course directly away from *Extravagant Voyage* at a thrust her gravity runes could absorb, he flipped around the useful bar again and strode to the hatch to the last compartment.

Flinging open the door, he found that the living quarters had seen the same level of reconfiguration as the rest of the ship. Where there once would have been two sets of bunk beds, there was now a comfortable-looking single bed on one side, with a kitchenette replacing the second set of beds.

Still on the bed and struggling to get herself upright was the absolute

worst possible individual to be aboard the shuttle craft. Even Barry had *no* problems recognizing the slim redheaded royal trying to wriggle herself off the bed.

He had no idea *why* Mage-Queen Kiera Alexander was on his stolen shuttle—let alone why she was cuffed in the shuttle’s single bed!—but he doubted it was anything good for him.

“Who the fuck are you?” Kiera snarled at him. “If you think you’re going to get away with this, you are very, *very* wrong!”

The fact that Barry was still breathing told him *something* was going on—and he realized what Alexander had clamped around her wrists.

They weren’t merely manacles solid enough to hold a cyborg. They were *Mage-cuffs*, built with materials that drew magic away from the prisoner and then augmented, as he understood it, with runes that did even more of that.

He wouldn’t have expected them to hold the Mage-Queen of Mars, but what did *he* know?

“If I help you stand, will you at least promise not to murder me immediately? I’d like to work out what’s going on myself?” he asked.

“You got Driessen to drug me and kidnapped me,” she growled. “Why would I trust you for a damn second?”

“Well, frankly, because I didn’t do that,” Barry said dryly. “*I* just stole a shuttle, which seems to have come with an extra passenger that I *really* don’t want to deal with.”

He glanced around the quarters.

“I wonder if the escape pod is in the normal place,” he murmured.

“You have got to be *fucking* kidding me!” Alexander shouted. “If you’re not my kidnapper, let me out of these damn cuffs.”

Barry wasn’t going to do *that*—he liked breathing, and he suspected being around the Mage-Queen in her current level of anger *without* her power being restrained was a terrible idea.

He did at least help her to stand.

“I think I’m leaving the cuffs on for now,” he admitted. “I would like to live through this spectacularly fucked-up situation. Right now, I’m thinking that involves stuffing you in the escape pod for your people to pick up.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” she repeated. “Look, if you give up now and let me ping my security, I’ll rig a deal where you walk free if you give us your conspirators. I doubt you got this far on your own.”

“Your Majesty,” Barry replied, hoping that his sarcastic edge didn’t drip

on the floor *too* hard. “I’m here to steal a shuttle, not get involved in Protectorate politics. Plus, *my* conspirators have nothing to do with kidnapping you.”

He half-led, half-pulled her behind him as he headed toward the front of the shuttle, where the escape pod should be. For her part, Alexander stopped dead once they were in the simulacrum chamber.

“What the hell is this?” she snapped.

“A shuttle rigged with a jump matrix,” he told her. “I figured it was yours.”

“I didn’t think that was possible,” Alexander said slowly. “But if this is a simulacrum chamber, we’re in space. And I don’t see the rest of the flotilla, so what game are you playing?!”

Barry sighed and tapped a command on his wrist-comp, highlighting and zooming in on *Extravagant Voyage*.

“No one on *Voyage* seems to have noticed this shuttle leaving,” he said. “And I have no idea where your escorts are, because we jumped just before I took this shuttle and ran.”

“You’re not helping any sort of case here,” she told him coldly. “Look, fine. If you *didn’t* kidnap me, let’s go back to the ship. You tell Guard-Captain Lawrence and me everything you saw and encountered leading to this, and we forget you stole this shuttle.”

“Or what?” he asked. “No offense, *Your Majesty*, but I’m not overly impressed with monarchs offering deals. We’re going to the escape pod. Once I’m ready to jump this ship back home, we’re going to fire you off toward *Voyage* and your people will find you.

“Everybody wins.”

“You have a very strange definition of ‘win,’” she growled.

“The only win I care about,” he admitted, “is my getting out of here with this shuttle and getting paid. Beyond that, I have no interest in causing any *other* harm, and I would very much prefer *not* to get involved in any *political* mess.”

“I suspect it is way too late for that, Mister...”

“Please, *Your Majesty*, I am *not* fucking stupid enough to give you my name,” Barry told her. There was no way he could pretend to not be a Mage, but the fact that there was no record of his face aboard *Voyage* should keep him safe.

With a gesture, he used his magic to open the access to the forward

computing center. The escape pod *should* be the—

A brilliant blaze of light interrupted his thoughts and schemes, the simulacrum-chamber systems automatically darkening the feed to protect their eyes as the ship he'd zoomed in on vanished in a ball of pure-white nuclear fire.

And any *easy* solution to Barry's situation vanished with it.

KIERA *KNEW* she was groggier and duller than she was pretending to her... not-captor? She wasn't entire sure *what* the beanpole of a Mage who'd been about to shove her into an escape pod was.

Well, she knew *one* thing about him: he was almost as shocked as she was to watch *Extravagant Voyage* die in a ball of flame. Both of them just stood in the shuttle's simulacrum chamber, staring at the fading light in horror.

There had been roughly two thousand people on that ship, Kiera knew. One way or another, *all* of them had worked for her. The only people who hadn't either been her security, her staff or the ship's crew had been the poor bastards she'd brought along to get to know better.

"That...that..." The words *that isn't possible* couldn't quite clear her lips. She couldn't argue with reality. Any tendency toward *that* had been drilled out of her by her father.

A monarch could afford no illusions.

So, Kiera faced her situation as squarely as she could and tried to establish what was happening. She couldn't allow herself to grieve. She had to focus on the task at hand.

That certainty lasted all of about fifteen seconds before a mixture of remembering Driessen handing her the drugged hot chocolate and Guard-Captain Lawrence's gentle teasing hit her at the same time, and she collapsed against the bulkhead, sucking in deep breaths.

Then the stranger was there, his hand on her shoulder as he looked down at her.

“You need to sit down,” he told her. “Come on.”

Kiera barely registered being moved back into the living quarters and eased onto the bed. Her not-captor searched for a moment and then found a chair.

“I have to stop our engines,” he told her as he stared at the folding furniture. “I’ll be right back.”

Kiera stared blankly at her hands, trying to keep her grief to something quiet. She had made a *point* of knowing her entire retinue to one degree or another. And now they were gone. All of them.

“What the *hell* happened?” she asked the air. As if in answer, the rumble of the fusion engines cut out.

Rubbing unshed tears from her eyes, she managed to find some semblance of calm by the time the Mage returned.

“Well, either this is a very clever plan or you’re as much in the dark as I am,” she told him. “What the hell is going on?” she repeated.

“Damned if I know,” he admitted.

She realized now that he was the unknown Mage that she’d seen in crew uniform. It seemed that he hadn’t been some statistical fluke at all. Just a liar.

“Your honesty is somewhat in doubt here,” Kiera warned.

“Look, I stole a shuttle,” he conceded. “I have a rendezvous to sell said shuttle. I have a rep to maintain, and if I don’t deliver the shuttle, some quite-nasty people are going to start wondering whether I’m still useful enough to them to be worth the secrets in my head.

“So, my priority—until someone killed a couple thousand people—was to finish the job and get paid.”

“And now?” she asked. He didn’t strike her as nearly as callous as he said he was. Someone *that* callous wouldn’t have dealt with her grief before slowing the shuttle to preserve their fuel.

“Right now, my priority is surviving. The first part of which is going to be working out just where in the void we even are.”

“At this point, we’re better off if we work together,” Kiera pointed out. She still wasn’t sure if she could trust this man, but she knew she’d be a *lot* more trusting if she wasn’t currently Mage-cuffed.

For that matter, regular Mage-cuffs shouldn’t have been enough to contain her power. The Runes of Power inlaid in her flesh should have been more than enough to overwhelm the runes and silver alloys of a standard set of Mage-cuffs. For this set to work, someone had put true Runes of

Nullification on the inside of the cuffs, where they pressed into her skin.

The stranger—he *still* hadn't given her a name—was studying her in silence, and his gaze flicked to where her hands were cuffed behind her back.

“Don't take this the wrong way, *Your Majesty*,” he told her, “but I am quite certain I can get us out of here on my own. At which point I have every intention of falling back on my *throw you in an escape pod* plan.”

He shook his head.

“Look, rest,” he instructed. “Your day appears to have gone better than it might have, but it's still been rough on you. Being drugged out like that doesn't give you any actual *rest*. Trust me.”

Something in his tone suggested that was from bitter personal experience.

“Treating me like your prisoner is not really serving your argument that you're *not* my kidnapper,” Kiera said archly.

“No, I can see that. But it turns out that I have a problem with authority, and I am *well* aware that taking those cuffs off would mean you can kill me with your brain,” he told her. “So, I'm going to solve this problem myself, *Your Majesty*.”

The sharp tone he put on her title made her want to throw things at him. But the truth was that with her hands locked behind her back and her magic contained, unless this *idiot* released her, there wasn't much she could do to help him.

Even if he was kind of cute.

BEING in close proximity to Kiera Alexander did not, Barry was realizing, make the woman any *less* distracting. She terrified him in about six different ways, and he was *not* okay with taking the easy way out and leaving her cuffed.

He just didn't see an option that didn't leave him trapped in a ten-meter-long crew pod with the most powerful Mage alive while she was utterly, homicidally pissed the fuck off.

It was easy and it was dangerous and it was probably going to screw him in the end—but he *didn't* trust her not to immediately reverse the tables, magically bind him and hand him over to her troops for an interrogation that wouldn't help *her* at all.

Since Barry had no illusions about his ability to withstand modern interrogation techniques, he was reasonably sure that interrogation would help the Mage-Queen break a few low- and mid-level players in Tau Ceti's organized crime, including Alaina Waxer.

The universe would probably be better off if a few of the names he could name went away—but he knew that whoever named those names would probably *also* “go away.”

It would confirm that he wasn't involved in her kidnapping, but he'd be completely screwed either way.

Plus, while he hadn't admitted as much to the young woman he was trapped with, he was reasonably sure he *couldn't* unlock the Mage-cuffs. He didn't know much about them, but he understood that they were almost as resistant to external magic as to their captive's power.

And Barry couldn't actually pick locks without magic.

Sighing, he stepped through the forward hatch and examined the navigation computer. The shuttle's regular systems wouldn't have the databases or algorithms necessary to map out the stars around them and locate where they were.

Just standing in the simulacrum chamber told him as much as using the main system would: they were in the deep void. Anywhere up to a full light-year away from Tau Ceti—and he couldn't easily pick the star out from the rest of the universe, which he figured meant they were at least a few light-months out.

He ran a set of wires from his wrist-comp into the nav computer, setting his antivirus software to maximum sensitivity first. Unsurprisingly, the software reported that the nav computer attempted a complex software handshake he didn't have the protocols for.

And as soon as his system missed those, it dumped an entire series of hostile software back over the link. Since Barry had been expecting that, it was all isolated, and he took a few minutes to poke at its code.

Thankfully, it looked like the computer wouldn't do anything drastic—like wipe itself, for example—without receiving some kind of message from the attack software. Whoever had coded the viruses hadn't expected quite as effective a lockbox as Barry had constructed, which bought him some time.

Potentially not much, though, and he warmed up his software tools while his magic searched through the nav computer for the now-familiar cipher modules.

Given everything else that the shuttle's master had used the cipher modules for, Barry figured they'd used them for the computer as well—and he was right. There they were. There was an extra layer of security with the viral counterattack, but that had been present in one of the setups before.

Complicated and effective as the cipher modules were, he had their number now. It still wasn't a fast process, but it was straightforward enough.



IT TOOK a lot for Barry to focus on something without distraction—but even with distractions, he often wasn't fully aware of what was going on around him. He didn't realize until he'd successfully unlocked the nav computer that

he was being watched.

Alexander was standing in the hatch to the simulacrum chamber, her hands still cuffed behind her, watching him with an odd expression.

“I was going to offer to help,” she told him. She pointed her chin downward at a chain she was wearing around her neck. “I’m wearing a version of a chip we give my Hands that contains root-level overrides for all Protectorate computers.”

Barry’s gaze followed the chain down from her neck and rather farther than he should have. He realized he was tracing the chain into her cleavage and immediately snapped his gaze up to her face, trying not to flush.

From the flash of a mischievous grin that crossed her face—before fading back into a worn expression of stress and grief—she had definitely noticed.

“It wouldn’t have helped,” he admitted. “Though knowing that particular rumor is true explains some of the oddities on this bird.”

Alexander tried to move her hands, sighed, and then settled for a half-questioning head-tilt, half-glare.

“All of the security is based around completely nonstandard physical modules,” he told her. “I’ve got their number and I can break them pretty easily now, but I was wondering why they had something so unusual and kept using it.”

“If they knew about the overrides...” Alexander shook her head. “I’d say no one is supposed to, but as you said... Rumors. My Hands use them often enough that they’re not a well-kept secret.”

The Hands of the Mage-Queen of Mars. That was a name to send shivers down Barry’s spine. In some ways, the *Hands* scared him more than the Mage-Queen herself did. *She* was a monarch, a font of authority, but basically a politician raised to the job.

The Hands were troubleshooters. Emphasis, from the stories he had heard, on *shooters*.

“But if you don’t have any kind of override...” She glanced past him at the computers. “Nonstandard hardware architecture. I’m guessing at least partially nonstandard software architecture. It would have to interface with the standard wrist-comp OSes, but the parameters for that are well established.

“Still, nonstandard soft-, hard-, and firmware... How are you getting into their system?”

“Magic,” Barry said with a chuckle. He figured that the Mage-Queen of

Mars would have guessed that.

There was a surprisingly long silence.

“You’re not being metaphorical, are you?” she asked.

He blinked.

“No?”

“I have studied every type of magic known to humanity,” Alexander told him quietly. “I have read documents and gone through research that I would have to imprison anyone else looking at. I wield a particular magical Gift that is shared by less than ten living human beings. I know as much about *alien* magic as any living human.

“I have never heard of anyone using magic to directly influence technology.”

Something in how she was looking at him made him very uncomfortable.

“That’s...strange,” he replied. “And now I feel like I’m going to be vivisected if I let you get me into your people’s hands. No offense, Your Majesty, but I think I’m going to lock you in the living quarters now.

“Calculating the jump is going to take a while, even once this thing gives me our coordinates.”

“I can calculate the jump for us,” she said sharply. “And I think, sir, that you should give me a *bit* more credit than to think that the man who appears to have saved my life, however accidentally, is heading for a laboratory table!”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But while you seem sane enough, you are the Mage-Queen of Mars—and I am a thief. You will have to excuse my paranoia, I’m afraid. I *will* get you to safety. But I will look to my own survival first.”

Sort of. He was surprised when his brain gave him *that* thought. Something about the young woman was more distracting and unsettling than anyone else he’d ever encountered.

She did, at least, let him lead her back to the living quarters and lock her in.

One of them, at least, should get some rest.

KIERA WASN'T GETTING any rest. Even locked in the living quarters, she found herself pacing the narrow slip of space between the kitchenette slash eating counter and the bed. There was enough equipment to cook properly in the tiny space—possibly even for two people—but there clearly wasn't enough space for more than two people to eat.

And one would be sitting on the bed.

With her hands locked behind her, she couldn't even *examine* the Mage-cuffs. That was, she conceded, part of the *point*—but it was frustrating as all hell. She could still see and feel the magic around her. Even the Runes of Nullification on the upgraded cuffs couldn't seal that part of her Gift.

She suspected that if she could *see* the cuffs, she might be able to shuffle them around enough to separate some of the nullifiers from her skin. If she reduced that effect enough, she could potentially salvage enough of her magic to break free.

Then she would be able to have a more-level conversation with the frustratingly unique cute idiot currently taking way too long to calculate a jump. There was no way they were more than a light-year from Tau Ceti, which meant it should only take an hour or so at most to calculate the jump back.

If she was being honest, it would take *her* longer than that to do the calculations. But while she wasn't sure how long it would take her not-captor to do the math, she had the distinct feeling that he was *far* from a fully trained Jump Mage.

She turned on her heel for the ninth or tenth time and glared at the hatch.

No one could use magic to influence hardware and software. It wasn't... outside the realm of reason, she supposed, but most of what Mages could do was variations on changing the energy levels of things.

It would take a very specific and very targeted change of energy levels to do anything inside a computer. To be fair, a lot of spells involved similarly focused changes—but usually in more-resilient targets than computer hardware.

The Mage in the pilot's seat was unusual. Unique. Also uniquely frustrating. There was no reason she would turn on him. She believed him when he said he wasn't involved in her kidnapping—which meant that her kidnappers, including Lakshmi Driessen, had died aboard *Extravagant Voyage*.

That particular betrayal was like a sore tooth. She couldn't stop poking at it. Lakshmi Driessen had been working for the royal family since before she was born. He'd served Kiera's mother until her death, then her brother until *his* death.

He'd entered Kiera's own staff as the deputy head, but her previous head of staff had retired a few years later. Driessen had stood by Kiera's side for half a decade—and he'd helped change her diapers as a baby.

His betrayal made *no sense* to her. She couldn't even be glad that he'd died in the mess that her thief had made of the kidnapping attempt. She wanted Driessen alive so she could ask him questions!

And that would never happen now. The strange part was that she didn't see how her batman had been planning on making it off *Voyage* before the explosion—he was neither a Mage nor a pilot, so there was no way this shuttle was his.

Someone else had been planning on flying her away from *Extravagant Voyage*, and there wasn't enough space on this shuttle for Driessen. Or any of the other traitors inevitably involved in the bombing.

Guard-Captain Lawrence and her people had been the best in the galaxy. Kiera wasn't sure *how* her attackers had got around them, but she had a grim suspicion of who. Only one organization out there knew enough about the high levels of Martian government to have specialty-built hardware to offset the override codes.

The same people who'd killed her father and brother.

Nemesis.

Remembering that name made her snarl at the air, and she half-

consciously slammed her shoulder into the hatch—and was surprised when it clicked open and allowed her back into the simulacrum chamber.

Her thief looked up/down at her from the chair on the roof and shrugged sheepishly.

“So, it turns out there are no interior locks on this shuttle,” he admitted. “You really *should* rest, though. I will guarantee your safety, Your Majesty.”

That was the first time he’d used her title without adding enough acid sarcasm to risk the shuttle’s hull integrity—and there was a strange, distracted confidence to his promise, too. Like he wasn’t quite thinking about what he was saying, and that made him mean it more.

“The vast majority of the people who have been around me for the last half-decade just died,” Kiera told him quietly. “I don’t think sleep is going to come easily.”

The Mage met her gaze.

“I’m still working through the jump calcs,” he admitted. “Take the passenger seat if you want. There’s not a lot of space in this ship.”

SETTLING into the chair as comfortably as she could, Kiera spent the first few minutes just trying to be covert about studying her not-captor. He was slightly taller than her, with both of them tending toward a lanky frame readily described as “beanpole.” His skin was pale and his hair was a dark brown, almost black—the shade of freshly brewed coffee.

It took her a few minutes of observation to realize that he had a visible strip of metal on the underside of his left eyebrow—and once she was looking at it, she saw the lights from the projector dancing across his eye.

She wasn’t sure what he was looking at on the implanted display, because the calculations for the jump were displaying all over the simulacrum-chamber walls. He was working through them. Slowly. Laboriously.

Incorrectly.

She stared at the error for about ten seconds, then settled on a solution. She *scoffed*. Loudly and derisively, while being very obvious which chunk of his math she was looking at.

She met his glare with a winning smile—one that sharpened as he went back to that section of the math and reviewed it. Despite being an idiot, her

thief wasn't stupid. He found the error and fixed it once she'd hinted at where it was.

This wouldn't be as fast as her doing the math herself—but, on the other hand, irritating the hell out of her unnamed new acquaintance was worth something in itself.

As a distraction for her, if nothing else.

KIERA DIDN'T REMEMBER FALLING asleep. She was only aware she *was* asleep when a gentle hand shook her shoulder and she started awake.

At that point, of course, she rediscovered that she was bound. Her magic was gone. Her friends and personal staff were dead. And she'd wrapped her arms around the back of the seat in a way that, in the clarity of hindsight and pain, had been a terrible idea.

"Your Majesty," the Mage greeted her. "I'm sorry to wake you. You needed the rest, but we may have trouble."

She blinked her fatigue away, trying not to lose herself in the man's dark eyes as she moved her arms. He spotted her problem and raised an eyebrow.

"May I help?" he asked.

"Please."

With a bit of assistance from the stranger, she got her arms unwrapped from the chair. Pins and needles rippled along her limbs as the blood rushed back to them, and she winced as she nodded gratefully to him.

"You said 'trouble'?" she finally asked.

"How quickly would you be expecting a rescue?" he asked. "Because my jump math is not done yet, and a ship just showed up."

"We're twenty-nine light-weeks out from Tau Ceti," he continued. "No one is going to show up here by accident. They knew where we'd be."

Kiera grimaced against the pins and needles, wishing she could rub her arms.

"*Theoretically*," she said slowly, "if one of the Trackers was in Tau Ceti, they could have tracked the jump and put together a rescue contingent. But

the nearest Tracker is...days, at least a week, away.”

She shook away the last of her fatigue as fear stabbed into her.

“No, thief. If there’s someone out there, they were working with the people who tried to kidnap me. Show me the ship,” she instructed.

He didn’t visibly move, but she realized he’d interfaced whatever control mechanism his projector had with the ship. His eye twitched in an odd-looking pattern, and a section of the simulacrum chamber’s optical feed was replaced with an overlay screen.

The ship in the image looked innocent enough. It wasn’t a warship or anything of the sort. It was, in fact, *Extravagant Voyage*’s less-extravagant younger cousin in many ways.

Lacking the gorgeous dome of the luxury liner, it was a more-economical passenger transport. Under a million tons, no massive false ecosystems or anything of the sort. Just a ship designed to move five or six hundred paying passengers between systems at a slow but acceptable pace.

Except that Kiera Alexander built starship models as a hobby and had built a model of the exact class that the strange ship was pretending to be.

“That’s not right,” she said aloud. “They’re *pretending* to be a Hyperion X-Ray Seventeen. Passenger liner, five-hundred-fifty thousand tons dry. Carries six hundred passengers, four hundred crew.”

Her thief was waiting for the other shoe.

“‘Pretending’?” he asked softly.

“They’ve got bits on there that are from the X-Ray Sixteen, the Nineteen, and what looks like a Rodriguez Orbital Guard corvette,” Kiera told him. “And those blisters...” She nodded toward part of the ship.

“Those aren’t part of the Hyperion X-Ray design at all. Those are heavy laser emplacements. And those points there and there”—she gestured again—“aren’t shuttle bays. They’re trying to look like it, but they’re too small if you know the proportions of the ship.

“Those hatches are almost certainly covering missile launchers.”

She exhaled a long sigh.

“Four battle lasers,” she concluded. “Likely on the lighter side, but... Probably concealed antimissile defenses, too. Those two hatches probably cover three to four missile launchers each.”

“This is a utility hauler, Your Majesty,” her thief told her.

“So, unless you know a way for an unarmed shuttle that masses about fifteen hundred tons to fight off a pirate ship massing almost *six hundred*

thousand tons, I really suggest you release me,” Kiera murmured. “I promise you, my thief, that you are *not* going to end up in a jail cell.”

There was a long silence.

“Turn away from me,” he instructed. “I don’t actually know if I can undo these, but I can sure as hell try.”

Even realizing that he’d used magic on the computers, she’d expected him to try and undo the Mage-cuffs with a key. It had never even *occurred* to her, despite everything, that he almost certainly didn’t *have* the key.

Instead, she could feel his magic working behind her, dueling with the magic of the Mage-cuffs as he tried to work on the technology without interfacing with the cuffs’ magic.

It shouldn’t have worked. Even *Kiera*, with five Runes of Power inlaid into her skin, would have exhausted herself overcoming a normal set of Mage-cuffs, let alone the Rune of Nullification—enhanced ones her captors had prepared for her.

But she could *feel* him thread the narrowest of gaps to insert his magic into the combined electronic and physical lock. She sucked in a breath—and then released it as the cuffs finally clicked free.

“To be completely honest, Your Majesty,” he said quietly as he pulled the cuffs off her arms, “part of the reason you were still in those was that I wasn’t sure that would work, and I was worried that Mage-cuffs powerful enough to contain you would somehow screw up my magic.”

Kiera nodded as she exhaled, feeling the blood rush into her arms and her magic flood back into her system. She turned back around, meeting the gaze of the young man who—however frustrating he’d been about it—was now half of their chance of getting out of there alive.

“Call me Kiera,” she instructed. “I think we’re there.”

He snorted.

“Call me Barry,” he replied. “You’re right. What happens to me is...in your hands now.”

She looked at the ship on the screen and shivered.

“No, Barry,” she told him. “I think it’s going to take both of us to get out of this alive.”

BARRY WASN'T ENTIRELY sure what had convinced him to trust the Mage-Queen. Part of it, he suspected, was that she had apparently trusted *him* enough to fall asleep in the observer seat. Part of it, he also suspected, was just how peaceful and adorable she had looked sleeping.

He cursed himself for a fool. However nice she might seem and however pretty she was, Kiera Alexander was still the *Mage-Queen of Mars*. There was no way the monarch of humanity was going to play fair. She couldn't. That wasn't how politics *worked*; even Barry knew that.

But right now, she was entirely correct. He was relying on their engines being offline to conceal them from the unknown ship, but that wouldn't last for long. They might not have been firing off a miniature star, but the shuttle was still warmer than the rest of the empty void.

With his hands on the simulacrum, he could *feel* the space around the ship through the jump matrix. It wouldn't let him augment his magic—only the actual jump spell could work with the runes to do that—but it gave him a decent sense of his surroundings.

He could feel the heat they were venting into space and tried to smother it with his magic, directing it away from the strange ship.

If he succeeded at all—and Barry was not at all sure he *had* succeeded—it was already too late. The shuttle's communications systems beeped with an incoming transmission.

“That's, what, a minute coms delay?” Kiera asked.

“About half that,” he told her. “A bit under nine million clicks.”

He flipped the message up on the pilot's display. The interior of the

transmitting ship's bridge made much less pretense of innocence than the exterior. It was very clearly a warship bridge, with the Captain looking at the video pickup over the silver simulacrum of his ship and multiple stations positioned around the sphere of the simulacrum chamber.

"Crux, what the hell are you doing?" the pirate commander asked. "You're supposed to have been back in Tau Ceti hours ago. I didn't think we'd *need* to know where you jumped the damn liner to.

"Report in. You know the time limit we're under."

"Crux," Barry assumed, had been the Marine Mage-Major who appeared to own this shuttle. The corvette's unnamed commander clearly knew about the whole plan that Crux had executed—which almost certainly meant that they knew the Mage-Queen was supposed to be aboard.

He glanced over at Kiera. He'd played the message openly enough that she'd clearly *heard* it.

"I'm going to try lying to them," he told her. "But they're already headed our way at twelve gees."

"And they may well have a second Mage aboard for a microjump," she replied. "If they get close enough, I can make them regret that, but...not at eight million kilometers. And if they have military missiles on that ship, they..."

She swallowed hard, and Barry fought the impulse to try to hug her to reassure her.

"They *will* destroy this shuttle if they realize I'm unrestrained, well before they let us into a distance where I can affect them with my magic," she said quietly. "Even *I* need an amplifier to affect a warship at any real range. With just a jump matrix..."

She trailed off thoughtfully.

"Right. Lying to them," he repeated.

Keeping the position of the incoming ship on his corneal projector, he pulled up the coms suite and considered his approach. Settling on *panicked and uninformed*, he activated the video pickup.

"Sir! I'm glad to see any help out here," he said quickly. "Something went badly wrong on *Extravagant Voyage*—I don't know what! Mage-Major Crux ordered me aboard this ship and clear while he went back to handle something aboard the liner.

"But then she *blew up*. I...I think the Major is dead, sir! Please advise!"

The recording shot across space, and Barry felt like he had stones in his

stomach as he waited for the response.

Sixty seconds passed. Enough time for a response, but only silence answered him—and the pirate corvette continued to close at high acceleration.

Even assuming they were planning on blowing past the shuttle without slowing, they were over two hours away. But Barry had no illusions about his ability to complete the jump calculations in two hours. He was at least three or four hours away from being able to jump still—and despite Kiera’s “assistance” before, he had the suspicion she wouldn’t be *that* much faster.

Finally, the coms suite chirped another message receipt, and the stranger in the unfamiliar uniform appeared on the screen again.

The Captain wore an amused smirk, as if Barry’s communication had been a great joke and not informing him that thousands of people were dead.

“You lie like crap, kid,” he told Barry. “So let’s try this again. I am Mage-Captain Edmund Stanford Kron of the Protectorate Special Covert Operations Service. My colleague, Crux Aloysius, was aboard *Extravagant Voyage*, carrying out critical operations.

“You have his ship, so I suspect that Major Aloysius is dead. I sincerely doubt you killed him, but I suggest you come clean very quickly.”

A threat indicator on Barry’s console flashed red, and Kron smiled coldly.

“If you are unfamiliar with the systems on your borrowed spacecraft, the indicator that just turned on is informing you that my people just locked you in with active radar. Talk quickly, son, because if I do think you killed my friend, well...missiles aren’t *that* expensive.”

Barry winced as the recording ended, and he checked the console. Unsurprisingly, Kron was not bluffing. The red icon flickering at him was a threat-detector system, saying that they were being hit with sufficient radar to lock them in for targeting.

“At least they can’t hit us with the lasers from this range,” Kiera told him. “If you’re willing to let me at the simulacrum, I can probably stop the missiles they can throw. But...”

“But what?” he asked.

“Never mind,” she said. “Focus on the task at hand. What are you going to tell them? As the man said, you can’t lie for shit.”

“Then I try not to lie,” Barry said. He closed his eyes and exhaled, considering his options. Finally focusing on the video pickup again, he activated it.

“Look, Captain Kron,” he told the stranger. “I don’t actually know *anything*. I stole this shuttle, realized I was in the middle of nowhere and then watched the ship my fallback plan relied on vaporize itself.

“I don’t actually know your Crux; you’re right. I’m guessing he was on *Voyage*. I wasn’t. I’m also guessing, though, that you know about the passenger I have locked in the bedroom.”

He sent the message before he could reconsider that, and glanced back at Kiera.

“Two truths and a lie?” he murmured. “Or something like that.”

“Pretending I’m still a prisoner, huh?” she asked. “Dangerous.”

“Right now, Kiera, you’re the only chance I see of getting out of this without them killing us both,” he admitted. “From what you said, so long as they think you’re still restrained, we have a chance.”

“And the moment they realize you’ve freed me, Kron is going to start finding out how many missiles two Mages with no practical experience in antimissile defense can stop,” she conceded grimly. “Let’s see what they have to say.”

Her gaze meeting his was fierce, and Barry consciously drew on some of her fire to support his own determination.

“I’m not turning you over to them,” he said softly. “But I’d really like to not die here today.”

Kiera reached out and touched his shoulder, sending a shiver of warmth through him. She was still standing on the floor as he sat on the ceiling, making it weird to meet her gaze.

“Neither of us has eaten,” he pointed out. “Can you check the kitchenette and see if there’s like...I don’t know, sandwiches or premade meals or something?”

She laughed at him.

“I’m sorry, did you just ask the Mage-Queen of Mars to make you a sandwich?”

Despite everything, he found himself laughing along with her. Her giggle was absolutely *delightful*—and given how much darkness he knew she had to be facing right now, it was good to hear.

“No,” he finally corrected. “I asked the Mage-Queen of Mars to make *herself* a sandwich and *maybe* find me one at the same time.”

She grinned at him for a few more seconds before the humor faded into her previous stress lines. But she nodded anyway.

“Yeah. It’s a good plan. Let me see what I can find.”

She disappeared back into the bedroom slash kitchen, and Barry stared blankly at the pilot’s controls and screens around him. He had his corneal projector linked into the system as well, trying to track everything going on around them.

Not that there was much. He *should* continue the jump calculations, but it was difficult with their lives in danger. Right now, there was their stolen shuttle, the pirate corvette, and a debris field that *had* been two thousand people.

The coms suite chirped at him, and he realized that, however unintentionally, he’d sent Kiera away while he received the pirates’ response.

“All right, son,” Captain Kron told him levelly. “Your honesty is noted and probably buys you your life. If you knew enough and were equipped enough to steal the shuttle, I’m assuming you have a client waiting for it and you’re in this for the money.”

He smiled, showing a set of too-perfect, too-white teeth.

“Believe me, my little thief, I have money to burn. Bring me that shuttle and its ‘passenger.’ I will deliver you to a safe system of your choosing with ten million Martian dollars in cash chips.

“Don’t... Well.” Kron shrugged. “I need that passenger. Do not underestimate me, little thief.”

The message ended, and Barry stared off into space for several seconds, his brain in about nine different places. Frustratingly, one of said places was Kiera emerging from a swimming pool, dripping wet.

That hardly reassured him on his level of logic with regards to her. On the other hand...when it came to refusing giant bribes, *logic* was rarely the main push.

He smiled. He needed time and there was an easy way to get that.

A few commands later and he was looking straight into the camera again.

“Make it twenty million, Captain, and I’ll think about it.”

KIERA KNEW she'd missed something when her thief—*Barry*—entered the tiny living quarters with a tired expression on his face. She hadn't gone so far as to make sandwiches, but she'd found a couple of standard RMN self-heating rations.

"Eat," she told him, sliding one toward him.

"We don't have a lot of time," he said, but he took the ration and stared down at it. "What is this?"

"The packet said butter chicken. I'm not sure the cook had been to Tau Ceti, let alone India," Kiera observed. "But it's edible."

"They know you're aboard," Barry told her, still staring at the food. "They offered me ten million to deliver you to them."

"I feel undervalued," she replied automatically, before she even considered the situation. As the reality sank in, she took one last bite of the faux curry and slid it to one side.

"I mean, ten million dollars for the Mage-Queen of Mars? I'd think I'm worth more than that."

"I asked for more money to buy time," he admitted. "But..."

He shook his head and dropped the fork back into the ration box. She didn't think he'd even taken a bite.

"We can't trust them," he told her. "And..." He stared down at the food, then finally lifted his head to look at her face.

Something in her thief's expression sent a wriggling sensation through Kiera's stomach. It wasn't fear, but it was a close cousin in some ways.

"It's not just about money. It usually is, for me and the folks I live and

work with, but it can't *just* be about money," he said levelly. "A couple thousand people already died today. I'd like to get through this mess without anyone *else* dying—but I'm not handing you over to anybody you don't tell me is okay."

If Barry thought Kiera needed protection, he was *adorable*. On the other hand, all he'd needed to do was not tell her about their offer and fail to run, she supposed.

"What are our options?" she asked.

"They'll reach us before I can calculate the jump," he admitted levelly. "And I'm discovering that there's a level of distraction that wrecks my ability to do high-order multivariate mathematics, even with computer assistance.

"How fast can you finish the jump?" he asked.

Kiera grimaced.

"Jump calculations are..." She sighed. "I'm not sure I could pick up your calcs halfway through; I'd have to start from scratch or close enough to make no difference. Couple of hours. I haven't jumped often."

"We're losing time," he admitted. "They're coming for us at twelve gees, and the base velocity vectors were in their favor to start. If we match speeds, it will take a few hours...but if they decide to end us or microjump... And it sounded like Captain Kron had a plan for if I decided to play games."

"So, we play a different game," Kiera said, reaching out to take his hand. His fingers were warm against hers, and she felt him shiver. "Tell them you've got me locked in the bedroom and you'll take their deal. You're not sure you can get me out on your own, so you'll need help, but they'll hopefully plan to bring you aboard.

"And that, Barry, will get them into my reach." She smiled. "And it has been demonstrated, I believe, how foolish it is to let a member of my family loose near a spaceship you'd like to keep."

KIERA DIDN'T REALIZE she was still holding Barry's hand until he had to let go to rotate up into the pilot's chair. There'd been no discussion of their shared grip, only a reassuring strength shared between them.

She settled back into the observer seat, scanning the information on the ship as Barry tapped the command to receive the newest message.

“You’ve got some backbone, I see,” Captain Kron declared. “And while your negotiating position is weaker than you think, you have some idea of the value of your passenger.”

He paused, then chuckled.

“Very well, little thief. Twenty million. You’ll find a course attached to this message. Once you’re done thinking and have made the correct decision, let us know and adopt that course.”

The message ended and Barry met her gaze.

“There aren’t many choices left to us,” she told him. “Though I’ll need that chair before we’re done.”

“Can you fly?” he asked.

“Nope,” Kiera admitted. “But I need the simulacrum if I’m going to be able to do anything useful. So, you fly us, but once we’re there...”

There wasn’t enough space in the shuttle’s simulacrum chamber for her to interface with the simulacrum chamber *without* being in the inverted pilot’s chair. Not without getting very cozy with Barry, anyway.

In a physically awkward way, she firmly informed the part of her brain that said that would be fine. What was *wrong* with her? He hadn’t kidnapped her himself, but he’d certainly left her in the Mage-cuffs for hours—and he was a thief!

A thief who’d breached the security around her and stolen a shuttle from her ship... A shuttle which, to be fair, hadn’t been supposed to be there and had been in the service of the people who *had* tried to kidnap her.

She shook off her momentary distraction and gestured to Barry.

“Tell them you’ll take their money, Barry,” she instructed. “And then match their course. How long will it take?”

“Let me see,” he replied. The numbers were flashing across his eye as he did the math on his odd implant, and then he sighed.

“Well, it took us forty-ish minutes to get this far, and now the time to zero-zero rendezvous is what their time to catch up to us at full speed was,” he observed. “Two hours, forty minutes. An hour of both of us accelerating toward each other, and then a hundred minutes of shedding velocity.”

“How fast can this thing go?” Kiera asked.

“According to the controls, her standard is eight gravities. Not sure if that’s the engines or the gravity runes, but I’m figuring that should be safe enough.”

He put his finger to his lips for a moment and then looked into the video

pickups.

“It’s a deal, Captain,” he told the stranger. “I’m bringing up my engines and vectoring along your course. I make zero-zero in one hundred sixty minutes.”

“TURNOVER.”

Barry’s soft words woke Kiera from a fitful doze. Given her fire-filled nightmares, she didn’t really mind, and she looked up at him in his inverted seat.

“We flipped? I didn’t feel it,” she admitted.

“The gravity runes are fully charged,” he told her. “Crux, whoever he was, took good care of his ship. The eight gees the controls call our standard thrust is more about the engines than the runes.”

“Makes sense,” Kiera agreed. “Most gravity runes can handle up to ten gravities—and the military version that handles fifteen just requires more maintenance. It’s not classified or anything.”

“A hundred minutes now,” he told her. “How close do we need them to get?”

She grimaced.

“My aunt took out a battle fleet with her magic once,” she told him, thinking back to what she’d been told about *that* mess. Her aunt was Mage-Admiral Her Highness Jane Alexander—and Kiera also knew Mage-Admiral Alexander’s then-Flag Lieutenant well. She’d heard a lot about their ugly skirmish to escape enemy captivity.

“But that was literally inside planetary orbit,” she admitted. “I think... well, the closer the better. But fifty thousand clicks is probably the best I’m going to manage.”

“Well, so far, everything looks...”

The silence trailed on for a few seconds until she cleared her throat.

“Barry?”

Her thief shook himself and refocused his attention back on her, not on whatever items had stolen his concentration. Kiera was already learning that her thief didn’t so much have a train of thought as a herd of sheep. They mostly moved in the same direction, but there were always *some* going

astray.

“I didn’t expect him to actually pay me, no matter what, but it looks like we might have convinced Captain Kron less than we thought,” he told her softly. “On the other hand, he clearly doesn’t realize how much control I have of Crux’s ship.”

Four new icons appeared on the display, bright green triangles arcing away from the unnamed pirate corvette toward them.

“Our sensors see nothing,” he continued. “Not even the slightest blip to suggest there’s anything else out there.

“Except that I have *full* access to this ship’s communications and networking. And it turns out that our friends didn’t think to cut her out of what I think is their background tactical network.”

“Meaning...we’re getting telemetry from their hidden ships?” Kiera asked. “Magically concealed, I presume?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “All I can tell you is that, yeah, I’m getting low-energy omnidirectional location beacons for four small craft they just launched. They’re encrypted frequency-hopping low-energy signals, designed to avoid attention.

“Except that we *have* the protocols to receive them and the computer got them automatically.”

“Any idea what they are?” Kiera asked.

“Like I said, our sensors don’t see anything,” he admitted. “But they’re moving too slowly to be missiles—and to hide like that, I’m assuming they have to have Mages aboard?”

“They have to,” she agreed. There were stealth ships in the arsenal of the Protectorate of Mars, but they were closer to the size of the pirate corvette. They certainly weren’t small enough for the corvette to have launched four.

“Shuttles of some kind,” she concluded. “Can we interrogate that network for more data?”

“I don’t know,” Barry admitted, then smiled. “I’m betting that it isn’t *designed* for that...but I’m also betting that I can make it do things it’s not supposed to.”

His focus wandered again, and screens began to appear and disappear around him as he got to work.

Kiera could *feel* his magic working, filtering into the computers and—in a sensation that she’d *never* encountered with magic before!—very clearly going out in the transmission packets.

It took him five minutes—five minutes in which the oncoming spacecraft settled into a clear ten-gravity acceleration directly toward them. Her experience said that Mages couldn't hold that kind of stealth magic for particularly long—but at that pace, the shuttles were only an hour away.

Their Mages could almost certainly hold the stealth spell that long.

“Who even *are* these people?” her thief asked.

“Nemesis,” Kiera said flatly. “They're the people who murdered my father. We smashed their organization after that, but clearly, we didn't do as thorough a job as we thought. They know all of our secrets, and they have plans of their own that we haven't caught up with.

“And I really did think we'd wiped them the fuck out.”

“Could be...” He snorted, as if even he wasn't sure he believed what he was trying to say. “Who am I kidding? It sounds like you know exactly who was trying to kidnap you. They certainly don't seem particularly 'smashed' at this moment.”

“No. Any idea what those shuttles are?”

“Yeah. Model Twenty-Four-Sixty assault shuttles,” he said, his gaze moving away from the screens to look at her. “I can't get a lot of detail out of them, since I'm still using the low-energy beacon as the carrier wave and the bandwidth is basically nonexistent. But they're RMMC assault shuttles.”

“I don't suppose the beacon is accurate enough for targeting?” she asked.

“No,” Barry said flatly. “Well, not accurate targeting, anyway. When they set it up, they thought of that. I *might* be able to convince them to send a more-powerful transmission, enough to short-circuit their magical stealth, but...”

He sighed.

“The moment I do *that*, they know what's going on and are going to cut their beacons. And probably shoot at us.”

Ten minutes since turnover. Everything was still over ten light-seconds away, but even while the corvette and *their* shuttle were decelerating toward rendezvous, the assault shuttles were increasing their speed.

“At the range I can hit them...” She swallowed. “I don't remember the specs on the Twenty-Four-Sixty perfectly, but I know they carry missiles and light railguns. The missiles are toys against a warship, but they're *designed* to shoot down shuttles. At about six, seven hundred thousand kilometers.”

“If only...” Barry was silent again, staring at the displays, then looked back at her. “Overrides.”

“Overrides?” she asked—and then she caught up and started fishing her necklace out of her shirt. Where her Hands concealed their chip in a golden medallion in the shape of a closed fist—the symbol of their office—*she* wore what looked like an obsidian arrowhead.

It had been carved out of obsidian from *Olympus Mons* itself before Kiera was born. By her mother. The artisan who had installed the security chip more recently had been utterly *terrified* of damaging the precious gift.

She held it in the palm of her hand and shivered.

“This was my mother’s,” she admitted. “Be careful?”

Their inverted positions made his outreached hand look awkward, but she saw his gentle smile and his nod.

“I...I am honored by your trust,” he whispered as she placed it in his palm. “Genelocked, I see, but you’ve already released it. Let’s see...”

It took Kiera several seconds to realize that he wasn’t even *touching* the arrowhead. It was floating a millimeter above his palm as he wrapped it in a bubble of protective magic.

He landed the arrowhead on a scanning pad and waited.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ve pulled codes that should work. Now...give me some time.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, her gaze switching between him and her mother’s gift.

“I can’t get much data *out* of them,” he admitted. “But if I find the right pieces of code and power, wrapped in your override codes... They can’t have changed out enough of an assault shuttle’s computers to negate your authority, not without doing enough work that they might as well have built an entirely new shuttle.”

“And when you’re ready?” she whispered.

“Then we need to be very ready,” Barry said. “Because we’re going to get one shot at this, Kiera, and if we get it wrong, they’re going to kill us.”

She swallowed and looked at the displays around her.

“Then I think it’s time for us to switch spots,” she told him quietly. “Because I need to sort out how much I can do from this simulacrum.”

Unfortunately, while it was *possible* to convert a jump matrix to an unrestricted amplifier, *this* jump matrix was mostly outside in vacuum. And while there were probably vac-suits aboard the shuttle, Kiera wasn’t actually trained in EVA—and at eight gravities of acceleration, any attempt at extravehicular work was basically suicide anyway.

They had what they had and they could do what they could do with it.

BARRY WASN'T sure *what* Kiera would be able to do from millions of kilometers away. He understood the theory that the Royal Martian Navy's Mages could strike down hostiles at ten light-seconds with their magic—but that was as much a function of the ships as anything else!

He had no illusions about what he might be able to pull off. With root-level override codes and his magic, he thought he had a decent chance at short-circuiting the assault shuttles. He had *no* idea what could be done about the corvette.

Especially because putting together the kind of packaged magical software bomb he was assembling took time. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty. *Thirty*.

And then everything seemed to pop together into place, his magic weaving through override code and virus segments to tie it all together into a terrifyingly deadly gift basket.

"I don't know for certain that this will work," he told Kiera. He stood from the observer chair, stretching to try to relieve muscles strained by sitting and focusing.

"Would five more minutes help?" she asked.

"Probably not. An hour might."

"Well, in five more minutes, the assault shuttles are basically going to be on top of us," she reminded him. "And the corvette won't be long behind. I don't know what they're planning, but I doubt it's going to be an unexpected delivery of tea and fucking cookies."

Barry chuckled softly.

“Are you ready, then?” he asked. He looked at the Nemesis corvette on the displays. “She’s seven light-seconds away. Are you sure you can do something?”

“Are you sure your virus is going to take out the shuttles?” Kiera replied.

“No. I just don’t see any other choice.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, her face sinking in a way that made him want to tell her it was fine, she didn’t need to push herself.

Barry had only the vaguest idea of what overstressing magic could do to someone. It had been covered in his courses, but he didn’t really *remember* his classes. He definitely wasn’t sure what would happen to the *Mage-Queen of Mars* if she stretched beyond even her extraordinary capabilities—except that he knew he didn’t want to see Kiera get hurt.

They had no choice. He exhaled and nodded to her.

“Ready?”

“Do it.”

He pressed the command on his wrist-comp. His virus was already in the coms suite’s buffers, shivering with the power he’d forced into it. All the digital buttons did was unleash it.

He couldn’t really feel magic, not even his own—but he *felt* the moment the energy left their shuttle’s buffers. He’d concentrated a *lot* of his energy into those programs, and transmitting them pulled the last dregs out of him.

He wavered on his feet and collapsed back into the chair, watching. Two seconds for the transmission to cross the distance. Two seconds for him to see whatever happened.

Plus some seconds for his code to override its way into the shuttle’s systems, unpack itself, and execute. The “good” news was that it was going to be very obvious when—

“Fuck me,” Kiera whispered.

What had been empty pieces of space now lit up with the blazing torches of fusion rockets opened up *far* wider than was wise. All four shuttles were suddenly spinning away from them at over fifty gravities.

It didn’t *matter* if they had gravity runes at those thrust levels. Everybody aboard the shuttles would have died in the first few seconds—and the magical cloaks collapsed with the Mages conjuring them.

The shuttles themselves wouldn’t last too much longer, Barry knew. At that kind of throughput, the engines were going to fail and explode. With their crews dead, they weren’t a factor anymore.

He buried the realization that he'd probably killed at least sixty people underneath his fatigue and activated the evasive-maneuvering program he'd set up. It wouldn't buy them much, not once the seeking missiles launched, but it would...

"It's done."

Kiera's words hung in the simulacrum chamber, wrapped with an exhaustion even more bone-deep than his own.

"What?" he asked, glancing at the screen showing the corvette.

"Seven seconds, Barry," she told him, and he realized she was slumped back into the pilot's seat, her hands slipping away from the simulacrum. "You'll see about...now."

Starships had enough "body language," so to speak, for Barry to be absolutely certain of the moment when Mage-Captain Kron and his people had seen the fate of their shuttles. Engines flared to additional power as the corvette began to twist into an evasive maneuver of her own.

An evasive maneuver she would never complete as a shivering web of superheated plasma twice as wide as the corvette was long appeared out of nowhere and crashed in on the Nemesis ship.

Lines of magical starstuff crashed into the Nemesis ship like it was a toy built of papier-mâché. Whatever defenses it had, they weren't enough to hold off its fate. Fifteen seconds after Kiera had instructed "*Do it,*" they were alone in the deep void.

And Kiera Alexander, he realized, was flagging fast. He didn't have much energy of his own left, but he managed to magically release her from the straps and pull her down to him.

Catching her in his arms, he was almost surprised by how delicate she was. Like him, she was too lightly built for her height.

"I'm...okay," she whispered as she curled into his grip, nestling her head on his shoulder. She wasn't resisting him holding her. "No burnout. No bleeding. Just...I'm not jumping us for a bit."

"Me either," he whispered back.

"Bed, Barry," she instructed. "I need to rest. You need to rest."

"We can take turns," he said, slowly guiding her back toward the single bunk. "There's only one bed."

"I am aware of the number of beds on this shuttle, Barry, and if you don't come hold me in the one bed we have between us, the only thing saving you will be my complete exhaustion."

She was basically *nuzzling* his neck now.

“We’re alive,” she murmured, her breath warm against his skin. “We’ll get home, once we’ve rested. And then, Mr. Barry, you and I are going to talk about what comes next.”

He wasn’t *entirely* sure what she meant...but he had the distinct impression that he wasn’t going to object to whatever she had in mind.

The consequences of the attack on *Extravagant Voyage* play out in the thirteenth Starship’s Mage novel, *Nemesis of Mars*.

The Starship’s Mage series continues in January 2024 with *Chimera’s Star*. Preorder now!

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War was hard enough. Peace may be impossible

For seventeen years, Colonel Henry Wong and the United Planets Space Force have fought the Kenmiri Empire. They drove the alien overlords back from humanity's borders into their own stars and found allies among the Kenmiri's slaves and subjects.

Now the war is over. A great Gathering has been called of the allies who fought the war, but they only ever shared a common enemy. With the Kenmiri in retreat, a thousand new agendas are revealed.

The United Planets Alliance wants peace above all else. Their allies want everything from new homes to new empires – and all too many of them are prepared to do *anything* to achieve their goals!

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THE BATTLECRUISER SHOOK around him and Henry Wong recognized the dream. It was a familiar nightmare now, which helped rob it of the strength it had had months before.

“We have a grav-shield blowthrough,” a seemingly faceless noncom reported across the warship’s bridge. “That dreadnought hit us dead-on.”

“We’re going to get shot to pieces!” That figure had a face. Commander Kveta Vela wasn’t *that* pale and sunken-eyed in reality, though. The dream warped Henry’s old navigator into a figure of nightmare.

It fit there.

“The shield will hold,” Henry heard himself bark. With a moment of practiced effort, he separated himself from the dream-him.

He’d learned he couldn’t *stop* the dream, but months of therapy allowed him to disconnect from it.

The man in the center of the bridge of the battlecruiser *Panther* was less warped than the officers and crew around him. Tall and narrow-shouldered, Colonel Henry Wong was a beanpole of a man with short-cropped black hair, dark skin and his father’s dark Chinese eyes.

The dream didn’t distort him much as his old ship dove through the maelstrom. The figure of dream-Henry was focusing on the set of massive screens giving the bridge a view of the world around the United Planets Space Force battlecruiser.

Henry himself didn’t need to look. The arrangement of forces in the Set-Sixteen System was burned into his brain, even asleep. His perception was still pinned to his dream self’s, though, and he was dragged to it.

Set-Sixteen was a Kenmiri provincial capital, deep on the far side of the Empire from the United Planets. The Kenmiri hadn't been expecting an attack and their defense fleet was weaker than it should have been. That fleet was still five full dreadnought battle groups and the UPSF's Vesheron allies were getting hammered.

Panther's grav-shields and weapons could turn the tide of that fight—but that wasn't their mission, and the birdlike starship plunged through the Kenmiri lines.

"There," Henry's avatar said sharply. "That ship. Broos, confirm."

Commander Broos Van Agteren wasn't a normal part of *Panther's* crew. He was from United Planets Intelligence, their handler for Operation Golden Lancelot.

In person, he was a squat and dark-haired man with a ready smile and a brilliant glint to his eyes. In the dream, he was a distorted goblin, every aspect of his features twisted and torn to make him into the monster of Henry's own subconscious.

"Confirmed," Van Agteren told him. "That's the evacuation ship for the Kenmorad. The queen and her consorts will be aboard."

The ship was the size of one of the dreadnoughts pounding the Vesheron ships behind *Panther* but lacked their devastating main guns. The evacuation ship had one purpose and one purpose only: to evacuate the Kenmorad population of Set-Sixteen if they felt the planet was threatened.

A Kenmorad breeding sect could repopulate an entire planet of Kenmiri drones in a few years. They could create more breeding sects, more drones... more Kenmiri.

The Kenmiri couldn't reproduce *without* the Kenmorad.

"Ser, that's the last one. *We can't* kill her!"

Lieutenant Colonel Emil Tyson had been *Panther's* executive officer, Henry's right-hand man and lubricant who kept a battlecruiser working in the face of the enemy. The redheaded Irishman hadn't raised any complaints on the day. They hadn't known.

"Stand by all missiles and prep the main gun," Henry's avatar ordered, as if Tyson hadn't spoken. "Vela, get us in hard and fast."

Panther lunged across the void in a quarter of the time she had in real life. Suddenly, it was the moment of truth, the evacuation ship's escorts making a suicide charge at the battlecruiser as *Panther* dove toward her prey.

"She's the last one, ser," Tyson repeated, the avatar of Henry's

subconscious. The one that *knew* what he'd done, even if he hadn't then. "If we kill that ship, we commit genocide. We end a species."

Henry hadn't known the full scope of Golden Lancelot. He wasn't sure if anyone aboard *Panther* had—he knew that Van Agteren *hadn't* known when they fired. He suspected the Intel officer had guessed...but hadn't realized that the breeding sect they were firing on was the last one left.

"Ignore the escorts," dream-Henry barked. "Target the evac ship with *everything*. Fire!"

It had taken dozens of missiles and multiple hits from the main gun to take out the evacuation ship. In his dreams, however, there was only the single gravity-driver round that had finished her off. It flashed across space and detonated, turning itself into a shotgun blast of superheated plasma.

The Kenmorad evacuation ship vanished inside that blast, and Henry released a chunk of unconscious hope. Even separated from the dream as he'd been taught, he still hoped that it would end differently.

"That's it, then," Van Agteren said, the goblin-like appearance of the dream version of the man growing more grotesque by the moment. "The Kenmorad are no more. The Kenmiri will die. We are victorious!"

Henry didn't need to look. He already knew that both the version of him in the dream and the version of him watching the dream had hands covered in blood.

HENRY STARTED awake as the dream ended. He always did. Time and familiarity had eased much of the horror of the dream, along with copious amounts of therapy, but...well. He poked at the metal band wrapped around his left arm.

MedSuite detected nightmares. At this stage in your treatment, MedSuite recommends meditation.

He sighed. The band was linked into his internal network and talking to the implants in his head and elsewhere. He had enough authority over the device now to override it and tell it to give him drugs. If he did that, though, it would probably add days to his medical leave.

Rolling out of bed, Colonel Henry Wong settled himself onto the floor of his bedroom. The apartment wasn't much, but it at least gave him privacy. It

was better than the orbital hospital he'd spent the first six weeks of his twelve-week medical leave inside.

"One more appointment," he said aloud. The walls were bare. This wasn't *his* apartment—it belonged to the United Planets Space Force Medical Division. The entire building on Sandoval did.

The ground floor of the building was shops and restaurants, like most of the not-quite-downtown area of New Detroit, Sandoval's capital city. Above that was a floor of UPSF security, then two floors of medical clinics, then fifteen floors of apartments.

If his appointment went well, he'd finally be out of there *today*. Command only knew where he'd go from there—psychological casualties were notorious for being unpredictable in how long it took to return to duty, so *Panther* had a new Captain now.

He focused on the meditation, letting his anger, grief, horror...all of his emotions flow through him. He might have given the order for the final critical shot, but no one had told *him* what Operation Golden Lancelot entailed.

Henry was honest enough to admit that after seventeen years of war, he'd have signed off on Golden Lancelot. He was also honest enough to admit that he understood why the full scale of Lancelot's objectives had been kept under wraps.

It had worked, after all. Henry had gone into psych treatment in a Space Force still on a war footing. He'd be coming out of it into a Space Force on a peacetime footing.

Seventeen years of war.

Henry Wong had started the conflict with a fiancé and a starfighter. He'd ended it a divorcé with a battlecruiser.

He barely *remembered* the all-too-excited younger pilot who'd greeted the news of first contact with joy.

But the world turned and people adapted. He'd adapted to a decades-long, seemingly unwinnable war.

He was pretty sure he could handle peace.

RAVEN'S PEACE BY GLYNN STEWART

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glynn Stewart is the author of *Starship's Mage*, a bestselling science fiction and fantasy series where faster-than-light travel is possible—but only because of magic. His other works include science fiction series *Duchy of Terra*, *Castle Federation* and *Vigilante*, as well as the urban fantasy series *ONSET* and *Changeling Blood*.

Writing managed to liberate Glynn from a bleak future as an accountant. With his personality and hope for a high-tech future intact, he lives in Canada with his partner, their cats, and an unstoppable writing habit.

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