

Little Star and Firefly

By Kurt Springs

The MV Dawn Treader was not much of a cargo hauler. Derek Ried was a former member of the Earth Fleet's Orbital Tactical Terrain Reconnaissance unit. He often told people Hercules Tape and spite held the ship together. To be fair, while it was an older vessel, Derek had worked extensively on it. Before he ever took it into space, he replaced or fabricated all parts that were dangerously worn out.

There was a reason for this obsessive maintenance. He was a single father. His eight-year-old daughter, Faith, had become the center of his life since her mother died. His time as a special operator left him with a range of skills. Some could be specifically applied to hauling cargo.

Derek set the AI pilot on the bridge.

"Let me know if anything happens," he said. "I'm going to check on Faith."

"Acknowledged."

It was in the ship's mess where Derek found her. Faith sat at the table with paper and pencils. Pausing at the door, he watched his daughter. She had her mother's blue eyes and blonde hair. Her face was focused and serious as she traced something on the surface.

"What are you drawing, Firefly?"

The child looked up and beamed when her father called her by her pet name. He felt his heart swell at the sight of her smile.

"The bear we saw at the zoo on Chandra-3," she replied, turning the tablet so he could inspect it.

Smiling, he examined the picture. Her linework had improved.

"When do we get to Arctanus-4, Daddy?" Faith asked.

"Another two days," her father responded. "Eager to meet the children there?"

Faith's happiness faded a little as she shrugged. "I guess so."

“I’m sorry I have to haul you around with me,” he said.

“Maybe I should sell this bucket and take a job planet-side.”

Her smile returned. “I understand, Daddy.”

Derek wondered how much she truly understood. It did not lessen his guilt over denying her a stable life.

The ship’s lights turned red. His daughter looked up at her father with frightened, wide eyes.

“Hazard Alert,” the AI announced. “Incoming plasma storm.”

The former soldier sprinted to the bridge. “On my way.”

Faith leaped to her feet and ran after him.

Derek threw himself into his seat. Faith strapped herself into the engineering console.

“I need a vector to get around this thing,” he called to the AI.

“The storm is too close and moving faster than we can run,” came the reply. “Suggest preparing to weather the plasma discharges.”

With a snarl, the former special operator shut down noncritical items to prevent electric overloads. He had to reroute critical systems through protected conduits to keep the excess charge generated by this event from crippling the ship.

“Deploying storm shields.”

The light of Dawn Treader’s AI blinked red. “Warning. Plasma vortex intensity is Level 5. Shields are only rated for Level 3. Seventy-percent chance of failure. Recommend weathering this in auxiliary control.”

Derek resisted the urge to curse. Without something to protect them, the engines could overload.

“Faith! Let’s get to the shielded area.”

His daughter stared at him. Her father extended his hand. Once she took it, her fear receded. They ran into the ship.

Auxiliary Control was always located deep within any ship. It served as an emergency bridge and a safe area in the event of radiation exposure.

Once Faith was settled safely into a chair usually reserved for a communications officer, Derek ran to the helm and began angling the bow to face the storm.

“Shutting down main engines,” he called to the AI. “Thrusters to maximum.”

“Acknowledged. Hitting plasma front in three, two, one—”

They lurched, and the lights on his panel flickered.

A kaleidoscope of colors filled the view screen as high-energy particles reacted with the force field.

“Time until this passes?”

The AI seemed to hesitate. “We will enter the eye of the storm in ten minutes. It’ll be an additional fifteen minutes before we clear.”

With a veteran’s focus, the man kept the craft’s most protected part toward the worst of plasma wave.

“Storm shields down to forty-five percent.”

“Can we repair them while in the cyclone?” he asked.

“Estimate adding thirty percent strength while in the eye.”

Derek grunted. "Will have to do."

He glanced back at his daughter. She was watching him—terrified but with absolute trust in her eyes. He gave her a reassuring smile before focusing on keeping the Dawn Treader from being destroyed.

One panel sparked.

"Report."

"Minor damage to the power relay," the AI announced.

"Rerouting. Entering the eye of the plasma storm."

The buffeting subsided. In the relative calm, the ship rebuilt the shielding. Derek stood and visually checked compromised systems. He would have to watch it. If it failed, the computer could end up out of commission.

Faith took his hand.

"We'll get out of this," he said automatically.

"I'm scared."

He squeezed her hand. "I won't let anything happen to you."

“We are exiting the eye,” the AI interrupted. “Shields at sixty-nine percent.”

“Sit down, Firefly. Strap in.”

His daughter nodded and returned to her chair.

Derek strapped in.

They reentered the storm in a violent flash.

The buffeting of the Dawn Treader in the plasma storm made Derek grimace.

“Shields down to fifty-seven percent.” The artificial voice stayed calm and clinical.

“Calculate time to exit.”

“Twelve minutes.”

“And to shield failure?” he asked.

“Estimated loss of protection in ten minutes.”

The pilot glanced back at his daughter, who stared at the screen in terror.

“Seal the auxiliary control,” the man ordered. “Reroute all nonessential power to the shields.”

“Our defense from interstellar weather is down to sixty percent,” the AI responded. “They will now fail one minute before exiting the storm.”

He knew they were protected in this room. The greater concern was which systems the energy overload would knock out.

A loud “bang” echoed through the Dawn Treader. Three consoles sparked and burst into flames. Faith leaped from her chair, grabbed a fire extinguisher, and sprayed the agent over the blaze.

“Damage report.”

Silence met Derek’s order. The engine controls died. By then, his daughter had put out the fires. Fire warnings flashed from the main power plant. Looking at the astrogation screen, he saw the tempest had thrown them clear. Radiation levels across the rest of the ship were returning to normal.

With the helm out, the pilot unstrapped and went to the communications console.

“This is the MV Dawn Treader,” he called. “We’ve been through a plasma storm. The ship’s power plant and astrogation are down. Requesting assistance.”

He set the message to repeat, then pulled on a radiation suit.

“Daddy?”

“I’ve got to deal with a problem in engineering, Firefly. Stay here until the radiation levels turn green. Can you do that for me?”

The girl stared at him, her eyes round and frightened. Her voice was barely audible. “Yes, Daddy.”

Giving her his most reassuring smile, Derek pulled on his helmet and left the auxiliary control room.

Racing to engineering as fast as he could, Derek grabbed a heavy fire-suppression unit from the wall. What he saw upon entering was worse than he had feared. The power plant and

engine controls were in flames. They now faced radiation danger from the ship itself.

Without hesitation, the special operator-turned-space trucker played the foam over the blaze. His marker showed his suit was not rated for this level of emissions. He pushed forward with grim determination. Once close enough to the power plant, he killed the device. The lights went out, but the particle emission levels dropped. The action also deprived the fires of most of their fuel. With the help of a second suppression unit, which Derek was now glad he had paid extra for, the flames were soon extinguished.

As the adrenaline left his body, he felt nauseated and dizzy — telltale signs of acute exposure. Knowing his daughter would be looking for him, he stripped off the suit, leaving it in engineering. He then checked his own radiation levels. The damage to himself was done, but at least he would not be a danger to his little Firefly. He staggered toward sickbay, hoping against hope the auto doctor was working and could keep him alive.

Faith almost did not wait for the radiation light to turn green. Once it did, she raced down the corridor to find her father.

“Daddy!” she cried into the ship’s comm.

“I’m heading to sickbay, Firefly,” came the weary reply. “I think I have a problem.”

His daughter covered the distance and caught up to her sire as he staggered toward the door. She grabbed his waist and guided him to the bed. Soon he collapsed.

The automatic doctor slowly activated as its systems partially rebooted.

“Acute radiation sickness,” the auto doc said without emotion. “The available regimen will only slow tissue damage. Recommend setting course for the nearest medical unit.”

“With the engines out,” Derek muttered. “Not likely.”

“Daddy,” the child wept. “You can’t die. Don’t leave me like Mommy did.”

“The distress beacon is on automatic,” he whispered. “Begin the treatment. Best we can do is buy time.”

Within a few minutes, the sole crewman of the Dawn Treader lost consciousness, his little girl holding his hand as if that alone could keep him from dying.

Neither knew the ship had entered another’s sovereign territory.

The Kalis Imperium was an ancient race that viewed humanity as a dangerously unpredictable upstart species. It had only left its own solar system a century earlier. Controlling more than one thousand star systems, the Sovereign Elisha Cordez ruled from either her homeworld or the Imperial battleship Dread Star.

The Kalis almost looked human, except for their lavender skin, long ears, and structures most humans would call antennae.

She was a woman who was always unwavering in her commitment to protect her reign. If she had one soft spot, it was

her daughter, ten cycles old. Princess Jeuxalae sat in her chair on the bridge, drawing. The crew had adopted her as their mascot, a fact that made Elisha suppress her smile.

“Sovereign!” called from her tactical section. “A human ship has entered our space.”

She immediately focused. “Course and heading.”

The officer frowned. “It doesn’t appear to be under control. It’s just tumbling.”

Her shipmaster came alongside her. “I’ll send a fighter squadron to destroy it.”

“No!” Every head turned. The princess had set her drawing tools aside and stood before them. “The vessel is in trouble.”

“It could be a deception,” the man said.

She fixed him with a look. “Or it could be real. We are the most powerful ship in the quadrant. If it’s a ruse, we’ll make them wish they hadn’t considered of it. If not, we should show compassion.”

The Sovereign looked at her daughter with a mix of pride and exasperation. She appreciated the child's sense of responsibility and the thought-out argument.

"Very well," the ruler said. "Plot an intercept course. Let me know when we can get a fix on what's happening over there. Prepare the Imperial Marines to board her, and tell them to be ready for anything."

The shipmaster nodded and carried out her orders.

Within thirty minutes, the human vessel came into view.

"Scanners indicate severe damage."

"Communications is only getting their disaster beacon. A plasma storm knocked out most of their systems."

"Life signs," the shipmaster ordered.

The tactical officer frowned. "Two. One is very weak, and the other appears immature."

The ship's commander and Elisha exchanged a glance.

“Get my armor ready,” the sovereign instructed. “I’m joining the Marines.”

Skipper tried to object. A look from her silenced him.

“Mommy?”

She turned to her daughter. “Wait in our quarters until I return.”

The child acknowledged her mother’s order with an incline of her head.

The Imperial Marines came to attention as their monarch entered the chamber. “As you were.”

A moment later, called a voice from the bridge. “We’ve caught the ship in a tractor beam. It has stopped the tumbling and slowed it to a manageable level Its registry says it is the Merchant Vessel Dawn Treader. It should be stable when you reach the airlock.”

“Let us know when we can board.”

“Understood.”

Within a few minutes. “Connected to the entryway.”

They opened their end of the tunnel and crossed the bridge in zero gravity.

She turned to a marine. “Try opening it manually.”

The man found the hatch controls. Soon, the ship lay open before them.

“Download the ship’s logs and manifests,” she ordered. “The rest of you search for survivors.”

The only illumination from the vessel itself came from emergency lighting. Their armor’s lights pushed back some of the gloom. The first sign of life was a soft sobbing. Her soldiers started to raise their weapons but stopped. The crying affected even the hardest of them.

Elisha and her people followed the sound to what appeared to be the medical bay. A human male lay on the bed, while a girl a little younger than her own daughter held his hand and wept as if her heart had broken.

At her signal, the medic moved to the other side.

The child looked up and spoke. Soon, their translators rendered the words. "Please, my father is dying from radiation poisoning."

The soldier nodded. "We need to get him to our sickbay, or he will die."

"Prepare the sick bay to receive wounded."

"Understood. We'll be ready."

The sovereign knelt, bringing her eyes level with the child's. "Come. I'll do what we can. You're safe now."

Somehow, the human's face showed trust in this stranger. It made Elisha's heart do something complicated.

The medic had attached treatment systems to the human male. Medical staff brought in a gurney. The youngster was reluctant to leave her father's side.

Her captain gripped her shoulders and whispered, "Give them room to work, young one."

The sovereign's fiercest warrior proved surprisingly tender. He gave the child time for the translator to render his words

understandable, then gently pulled her back. Elisha took charge of the human.

The lead medical staff called out a count, and they moved the patient onto the gurney. Seconds later, the team raced down the hall. The sovereign led Faith to a place where she could watch over her father without getting in the way.

“Wait here,” she told her. “I’ll be back soon.”

The girl nodded, then turned her attention to her dad.

The captain waited at the medical wing with a bag. Elisha cocked an eye at him.

“I believe the child was drawing in their eating area before the emergency,” the warrior explained, almost sheepishly. “I thought she might want these things later.”

His sovereign smiled at him.

“Also, their logs and the condition of the ship indicate they were caught in a violent plasma storm. They weathered it in their auxiliary bridge, but it knocked out systems before they could

escape. My people inspected their engine room. The human fought the fire manually in radiation conditions for which his suit was not rated.”

“All to protect his child,” Elisha whispered. “Do we know anything about him?”

“His official record shows he was once part of their special operations group: the Orbital Tactical Terrain Reconnaissance unit. Much of his career remains classified. He retired after his wife died to care for his daughter. His skill set suggests he felt this job suited him.”

“What about his cargo?”

“Medical supplies for the Human colony Arctanus-4. Our intelligence indicates they are urgently needed.”

The ruler of the Imperium considered this. “What is the condition of the shipment he was carrying?”

“Intact, milady. The bay and the containers had enough shielding to protect them.”

Elisha paused for a moment. "Give the child her drawing implements. She may not want them right away."

The marine entered the ward as the sovereign made her way to her quarters.

Imperial Sovereign Elisha Cordez entered her quarters. The princess rose as her mother came into room.

"We rescued two humans," she told her, removing her armor. "The male is receiving treatment for radiation sickness. His daughter is fine but worried about her sire."

The regal woman set her breastplate on a rack for the armorer to inspect.

"Since you were the one who insisted on rescuing them, would you keep the human child company?"

"Of course, Mommy."

She turned and smiled at the princess. "You have a kind heart, Little Star. I have to teach you compassion while keeping your eyes open."

The two embraced. "She apparently likes to draw, too."

"I'll get a few things," Jeuxalae said.

The monarch pushed her back. "She may not be ready to do much while her father is in danger."

The girl inclined her head in agreement.

Faith looked up as the door opened. A girl in a uniform entered with a portfolio under her arm.

"Hello," she greeted in accented Galactic Standard. "I am Jeuxalae. Mother said you might appreciate some company."

The alien pulled up a chair and sat beside her. "How is your father?"

"The doctor says they've done their best," Faith replied. "All we can do is wait."

"I brought my drawing supplies," princess offered, taking her hand. "Whenever you're ready."

To say that Sovereign Elisha Cordez had a quandary was a massive understatement. She had a human freighter captain in custody, not that he could go far from the med bay without help. She had impounded medical supplies that a colony desperately needed. Her war council wanted her to put the man on trial. Her daughter was comforting his. Twelve of her warlords were looking for an excuse to declare that the crown of the Imperium looked better on one of their heads.

The last thought made her laugh out loud.

“Who would want this thing?” She gave the imperial headdress an irreverent tap. “It gives me a headache.”

The door buzzed.

“Enter.”

The shipmaster entered. “Sovereign.”

“Anything new?”

“The human is still in a medically induced coma. Your daughter has gotten Faith to start drawing to pass the time. And the warlords are ... well.”

“The usual,” she scoffed. “The next one who demands I give up the crown will get hit over the head with it.”

The commander of her ship laughed.

“Oh, and the president of the Earth Confederation is on a direct channel,” her shipmaster told her.

“I suppose he has to call me,” she said. “Human citizen and important medical supplies. Is my cousin still in the Oberon system?”

“I believe so, milady.”

“Tell him I have a job for him,” she ordered.

“Of course.”

Once the shipmaster left, Elisha activated the screen to display an older human male with graying temples and brown eyes. The Sovereign cut him off before he could speak.

“We both know what we’re supposed to say under the circumstances, President Martin.” Her tone was of a woman who needed more sleep. “Can we pretend we’ve made all the appropriate threats and jump to the part where we hash out a

reasonable solution that staves off another coup attempt on my end?”

The human laughed. “Been that kind of day for you, too?”

“Derek Reid is in a medically induced coma,” she told him.

“His radiation exposure was severe. I can’t imagine even the most dedicated spy taking such risk with his child aboard.”

“At least he doesn’t have to sit through the political firestorm,” the president conceded. “Any way to transfer him and his shipment to human space?”

“While my council wants him tried, my own physician says it would be unwise to move him,” she replied.

“I can send you a channel to my physicians,” Martin suggested. “If they concur, it could cool the Kabuki Theater on this end.”

“Agreed,” Elisha said. “As for the medical supplies, you know of my cousin, Narvarus Malious.”

“He’s some sort of smuggler, isn’t he?” The president frowned.

“Only when he thinks a particular import law is ridiculous,” she countered. “If you can give him some kind of safe passage, he will transport the cargo to that colony without much trouble. I’ll pull some additional medicine from my own stores.”

“Arctanus-4 is short of everything. Thank you, Sovereign. What about his little girl?”

“She hasn’t left his side,” Elisha replied. “My own daughter is staying with her. Jeuxalae has not had a friend since the assassination attempt a year ago. I’ve had to keep her on my ship for her protection. As grim as things are, they’re becoming inseparable.”

The president could only sigh. “Let’s stay in touch Let me know if you need some ammunition for your council.”

“Thanks, out.”

Imperial Sovereign Elisha Cordez checked on the princess and the human girl. One of her guards fell in step with her. He was a soldier she knew well—Travus Felix.

“You need more sleep, milady,” he said in a neutral tone.

She stifled a laugh. “Are you my guard or my mother?”

“Since she has passed into the next life, someone has to make sure you keep yourself healthy.”

Her expression softened. “Thanks for being concerned, old friend.”

“No charge, my Sovereign.”

The guards at the medical bay came to attention. With a nod from their monarch, they returned to a posture of relaxed alertness.

Travus opened the door and stepped aside. She paused, watching the two girls draw. Faith stole a worried glance at her father, as if she felt guilty about enjoying this time with her new friend.

As the girl turned back to her paper, she caught sight of Elisha and jumped to her feet.

“It’s okay, child.” The imperial mother smiled in encouragement.

Her own daughter rose and raced to hug her.

“You should see some of Faith’s drawings, Momma,” Jeuxalae exclaimed. “She’s teaching me how to use a pantograph!”

Sovereign raised an inquisitive eyebrow at the human, who blushed under the praise and scrutiny.

“May I?” the woman asked.

Faith picked up an image the princess had brought and laid it on the table. Then she took an intricate four-armed device. She set a marker on the picture and moved it as the pencil traced the outlines she was trying to recreate. The sovereign sat entranced as she reproduced the illustration. After a few minutes, she had what she wanted.

“I am not as good at it as some people,” the human girl told them modestly.

Jeuxalae shook her head. “I think it looks fine.”

“Such devices take practice,” Elisha informed her. “Still, your hand is quite steady for your age. Would you like a break to get something to eat?”

“I’m hungry,” her daughter said, looking at her new friend.

Faith glanced at her parent.

“Tell you what,” the woman encouraged. “I’ll have refreshments brought here so you don’t have to leave your father.”

The child looked relieved. “Yes, please.”

The sovereign went to the door and had Travus go to the kitchen. He returned with food pockets and some sweets for them to share.

In both Kalis Imperium and Earth Confederation Space, Narvarus Malious had a reputation as a rogue. His relationship to the crown was not something he advertised, though it was not a big secret.

He landed his ship, the *Masis Porex*, with practiced ease on the main landing platform on Arctanus-4. He grabbed his manifest and clearances, then headed for the gangway, where cargo handlers and inspectors waited.

The human officer took the document and checked it. "Legit this time."

"Almost boring," Narvarus commented. "Maybe the patrol ship could chase me around the system after we've unloaded. Loser buys the first round."

The impactor failed to suppress a laugh. "I'll see what I can do. And thanks; another day, and the doctor says people would start dying."

The captain of the *Masis Porex* grew serious. "That's why I'm charging at cost, just as Derek Ried did."

"How is he?" the inspector asked as they let the cargo master direct the unloading.

"According to the sovereign, they will allow him to come out of the coma tomorrow. She intends to compensate him for the

contract I fulfilled for him. I hope she can keep the Imperial Council at bay.”

They fell silent for a moment.

“I thought the Earth Confederation had a string of storm satellites along his route,” Narvarus ventured.

“That’s been bothering us, too,” the inspector said. “I’m trying to get the Navy to take a look, but they have other priorities.”

“Do they have someone here?”

“Yes, why?”

“I have an idea that could help both sides.”

Inside thirty-six hours, the *Masis Porex* closed on one of the malfunctioning satellites. In his copilot seat was a human intelligence officer, woman named Captain Helen Rodriguez. In the back were technicians who could figure out what happened.

“I’ll close to within twenty meters,” Narvarus told his temporary crew.

The engineers had their spacesuits on. “We’re ready.”

The sleek Kalis vessel pulled into a station-keeping position.

“Okay, I’m cycling the airlock; don’t damage my ship.”

Captain Rodriguez shook her head. “I wouldn’t have you on this team if we didn’t need your hauler. What does *Masis Porex* mean in your language, anyway?”

“You’re curious,” he deflected, giving his best, rakish grin.

She rolled her eyes.

“You are interested in my culture,” he coaxed. “And of course, you’ve been attracted to my devilish good looks.”

“Please,” she growled in irritation.

“We’ve got the crippled satellite,” came the call from the comm. “You two lovebirds, cool it while we get it back aboard.”

Helen turned crimson. Narvarus burst in laughter.

“I thought your people had no sense of humor,” the intelligence officer noted.

“Just our nobility,” he quipped. “The rest of us, especially the ne’er-do-well rogues, can laugh all we want.”

“Aren’t you noble?”

“I was, but I could stop laughing, so I was disinherited,” the Kalis smuggler said.

“Your cousin reinstated you,” the woman pressed.

“Our Sovereign has a cruel sense of humor. It means ‘Lucky Lady’ in your tongue.”

“Okay, we’re in. Airlock closing, cargo deck pressurizing.”

“With you as soon as you finish the decontamination process,” Narvarus replied.

Once the cargo hold was pressurized and decontaminated, Narvarus and Helen rejoined the technicians.

“This baby didn’t get damaged. Someone shut her down,” the lead technician called from the access panel. “They have a hidden video feed. We’re trying to retrieve its last transmission, which was almost a week ago.”

They watched the screen as a sleek vessel approached. It was unmarked, yet Narvarus stiffened.

“That is a Kalis stealth ship,” he observed.

“Your intelligence service?” Helen asked.

The trader scoffed, “Define our intelligence service. Each noble house has its own spies. Many rich enough to afford at least a few of these. Let’s hope they don’t know about your video feed and get careless.”

A form in spacesuit kicked away from the ship’s airlock and drifted toward it.

“Any idea which faction?” the captain asked.

Narvarus shook his head. “Quite a few would seek to provoke you and destabilize the Imperium. They might even... Wait! Freeze that.”

A gloved hand reached out. A crest appeared where the glove joined the rest of the outfit.

“Fascinating,” Shipmaster Malious said. “My cousin will be most interested in seeing this.”

“Do you recognize the symbol?”

“It isn’t ours, at least not exactly,” he replied. “It belongs to a mercenary guild. The suit is standard Imperium. The ship

suggests several noble houses, but this organization works for three of them. I'm willing to bet two are paying them. If you can make a copy of this, I'll be happy to take it to my Sovereign cousin."

He grinned at them. "If we ask nicely, perhaps she'll let us attend the meeting. I suspect the guilty party's expression will be priceless."

At first, Derek Ried felt a heaviness. He heard children's voices, and one sounded familiar. Slowly, memories trickled back. His daughter helped him to the med bay, knowing he was dying.

Faith!

His eyes remembered how to open, and the sounds became more distinct. He recognized his Firefly.

He tried to sit up, but the weight in his limbs allowed only a slight movement. The voices stopped.

"Dad?"

He felt a familiar hand take his and found his little girl there.

“Daddy, your back.”

The man attempted to talk but only managed a cracking wheeze.

“Here, Shipmaster Reid,” a voice offered from the other side of the bed.

He turned his head and saw another child holding a container of liquid. She looked only a slightly older than Faith, but she was Kalis.

He took the straw between his lips. The drink tasted like starlight and quickly soothed his parched throat.

“Daddy, this is Jeuxalae. She is a real princess, though she said I could call her Jess, since it’s easier to say.”

“Pleased to meet you, Your Highness,” Derek greeted her.

The child smiled at him. “The pleasure is mine, Shipmaster.”

After returning the smile, he turned back to his daughter.

“Are you okay, Firefly?”

“I’m fine, Daddy. She kept me company while I waited for you to wake up. She likes to draw, too and is good at it.”

The princess shook her head. "We've been teaching each other. She does some things better than I do."

"When the heir admits she isn't perfect, it's a sign she's growing up," came a voice from the door.

Derek turned and saw a regal lady standing at the entryway.

"You're awake," the woman observed. "I am Sovereign Elisha Cordez. You've met my daughter."

"I have. Thank you for looking after my child. How long have I been out?"

"About a week, your time," she said. "You had severe radiation sickness. We needed to bring it under control and reverse the degradation."

The mother turned to her offspring. "Little Star, it's the night cycle. Since her sire is awake, take your new friend to your room and get ready for sleep. I don't think he needs to be monitored."

The girl glanced her father.

"Go ahead, Firefly. Daddy will be alright. You need a proper night's rest."

She smiled then climbed onto the bed to kiss him.

“Good night, Pappa.”

The princess looked at Faith, who nodded. She leaned over and kissed him on the other cheek. Then the two gathered their drawing supplies and left.

Derek turned his gaze back to Sovereign Elisha Cordez.

“You have an ‘I’ve got bad news’ look in your eyes,” he observed.

She smirked despite herself. “You’ve just met me, and you know the looks in my eyes?”

“My late wife had made that face when Faith flushed a ball down the disposal unit when she was two.”

She laughed, then asked, “What is a firefly?”

Feeling a stronger, Derek sat up. “It’s an Earth insect. Its abdomen is bioluminescent. I started calling her that name because she would run around with a flashlight after dark, chasing insects.”

“You may have noticed I call Jeuxalae ‘Little Star,’” the sovereign replied. “They’ve been inseparable since they met. There’s no one else her age on the ship.”

“You’re putting off the bad news,” the ex-OTTER coaxed.

“My government wants you on trial for spying,” she said. “I don’t believe you are, but I have factions who will use any excuse to take my crown. I’m trying to delay things to get you and your daughter out of harm’s way, but—”

The comm chimed. “Milady! Your cousin is on subspace.”

Elisha frowned. “Put him through.”

Within a few moments, her cousin’s image appeared. From the background view of his cockpit, he had entered interdimensional space.

“I’m en route to rendezvous with the Dread Star,” he began. “We have information you may find interesting.”

Elisha frowned. “We?”

The rogue grinned at her. "It has to do with your guests, and I told some friends you wouldn't mind if they watched Councilors Keffer and Mitowes' faces fall off."

She shook her head in exasperation.

"I estimate my arrival time to be in four hours," Narvarus added.

"I'll be waiting."

To say the Imperium had built its capital on Kalis Prime to impress was an understatement. The city's massive architecture, crafted from rare minerals, conveyed Kalis' superiority to all who beheld it. At least, that was the architects' intention.

Derek regarded it in silence. "When the Romans conquered the Celtic tribes, they would bring the captured leaders to Rome to awe them with imperial grandeur. One chieftain was unimpressed and reportedly said, 'All this, and you still envied us our hovels?'"

"Many Kalis would agree with him," Narvarus replied.

Elisha glanced at them but otherwise remained silent. The trip down to the planet was uneventful. Earth agents were coordinating with hers. Faith and Jeuxalae were drawing and talking.

“There are council members whose families have coveted the crown for generations,” she said. “Even if we’re successful, the fact that the information and help came from foreign sources may cause trouble later.”

“That is why I was not upset when the family disowned me,” Narvarus commented.

Elisha gave an unladylike snort. “And your unique skills are why I un-disowned you.”

“And I thought you were getting back at me for something.”

She laughed out loud. “I’ve missed you, cousin. You have a way of making me realize how ridiculous Imperium politics can be.”

The sovereign looked at Derek. “You will be kept under guard. You are supposed to be a prisoner, after all. Travus’ll make

sure the girls are safe.” She turned to the human intelligence officer. “Captain Rodriguez, you are here to investigate some anomalies with your satellites.”

Helen inclined her head in agreement. “I’ll otherwise stay out of the way unless I’m needed.”

Soon, the shuttle touched down at the Imperial Hall.

Derek watched Elisha pause at to gather herself. Then, the woman straightened, pushed open the door, and swept into the Hall. The rest followed. The councilors rose as they passed.

Helen Rodriguez moved to a chair reserved for visiting dignitaries. Narvarus Malious took a spot below the throne, while his cousin ascended the dais to her seat of power.

One Kalis councilor remained standing. “Why is there an additional human in our hall, and where is this human’s runt? They should all be on trial for espionage.”

“The child is being watched, Mitowes,” Elisha countered. “Or do you wish to traumatize a young girl?”

Another councilor took man's arm. "The children are not punished for the sins of the parents in the Imperium, though the sovereign's choice to watch this human's offspring is curious."

Keeping his expression neutral, Derek remembered the briefing that these men knew about the princess's friendship with his daughter. They were trying to use it as a wedge.

"The question you have put before us," the sovereign pressed on, "is whether Mr. Reid's ship drifted into our space because of damage from a plasma storm or as part of someone's larger design. Information my people have gathered points to this as an operation against my government."

Derek watched the shock ripple through the Imperium Council, as though Sovereign Cordez had conceded. *They're congratulating themselves already.*

"Intelligence recovered by Shipmaster Narvarus Malious suggests Reid was set up so his ship would tumble into our space," she continued. "And he was personally blameless."

It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water on the council.

“May we see this information, Sovereign?” one woman asked.

“Of course, Councilor Afelia,” the spacer answered for his cousin. “Your question dovetails nicely into the inquiry Helen Rodriguez is making for her government.”

A holographic display appears.

“Earth Confederation satellites have monitoring systems to detect tampering,” he continued. “The devices monitor interstellar anomalies, such as plasma storms. Under normal circumstances, they could have warned Shipmaster Reid of the approaching storm, allowing him to maneuver around it rather than trying to weather it. He received no such warning, putting his, Faith’s, and the colonists’ lives who needed the medicine he carried at risk.”

“An elaborate ruse,” Councilor Mitowes scoffed. “The Earth Confederation disabled its own satellites, giving Shipmaster Reid

an excuse to drift into Imperium Space. And you, Sovereign, are allowing a human child to corrupt your heir.”

“A youngster of eight,” Narvarus replied, “corrupting a princess of ten. If you are speaking of some elaborate grand plan, can I have a glass of what you’ve been drinking?”

That brought laughter from the other council members.

“However, I think you are referring to a child’s mere presence showing the heir new ways of thinking,” the shipmaster continued. “She has seen a tracing tool which is primitive yet still effective, and the two girls are sharing their knowledge of art. Horror of horrors. Now, let us unpause so we can observe what happened.”

The council watched as a spacecraft, Kalis-designed but unmarked, approached the satellite.

“Allow me to head off the councilor’s next argument. Yes, this type of ship is used by people who are not Kalis, as is the space suit we are about to see. It bears a symbol where the glove attaches. It is not proof of anything without the evidence our sovereign’s own service collected. Let us continue.”

The recording continued playing until the mercenary's mark appeared.

"The Chevron Mercenary Guild," someone gasped.

"There are only three houses who have dealings with them," Elisha announced coldly. "Again, not proof any of them did anything wrong without further evidence."

She nodded to one of her people.

"My agents visited to their homeworld. No direct action, but some expert slicers got into their systems."

The holographic image shifted, revealing a spreadsheet. A marker highlighted a section detailing the mission and who paid for it. Most council members gasped in shock. The two glanced at each other. Councilor Mitowes touched something on his wrist.

"This farce ends now!" Mitowes roared as the doors to the council chamber flew open.

Chevron Mercenaries burst into the room. Imperium Marines moved to protect the people. To everyone's surprise, the first two

ranks tripped over something. This bought time for Guards to move into position.

Some fire was exchanged, but the combined marine and guard force outmatched the hired soldiers, who were not being paid enough for this. They surrendered.

“Where did Councilors Mitowes and Keffer go?”

Then there was a cry from a side hall. Upon investigation, they found the authors of the coup attempt sprawled on the ground with the Faith and Jauxalae standing over them. The guards secured them before they got up.

Sovereign Elisha Cordez stared in horror. “I told you to wait in the safe room.”

“We couldn’t let them get away,” the princess replied.

Seeing the trip line trap, Derek realized something. “Whose idea was this?”

“Mine, Daddy,” Faith said. “Remember, you taught me how to do this in case we got separated, and I needed to protect myself.”

Travus approached. “Same thing in the entryway.”

The Kalis soldier looked the two girls over.

“Well done. Very effective. Don’t ever do that again.”

Once the conspirators were led away in irons, the council adjourned. Derek, Elisha, Narvarus, Faith, Jauxalae, and Elisha’s Captain of the Imperium Marines moved to the dining hall.

“I’m wondering if Mitowes was right.” The sovereign dropped into her chair.

“That my daughter might be a bad influence on your heir?” Reid asked.

Narvarus shook his head. “I think she’s teaching her she doesn’t have to be helpless. She can take initiative.”

“Agreed,” Travus said. “They just need to learn risk management.”

The two girls rolled their eyes and took their drawing materials to the other end of the table.

Helen entered a moment later. “You’ll be happy to know my government contacted the Chevron Guild and expressed its

displeasure at having to fix those satellites. To avoid being blacklisted by a potential employer, they've agreed to pay for the repairs."

Elisha turned to Derek. "What will you do now? You helped uncover the plot to seize my throne. Grant you, I could punish them by making them sit in it for twelve hours."

"According to your engineers, the Dawn Treader needs a serious overhaul," he replied. "I think Faith is tired of life on the move, never able to make friends."

The sovereign gave him a thoughtful look. "Have you considered a career in diplomacy?"

Helen looked up. "The Earth Confederation would like to open an embassy on Kalis Prime."

Derek frowned. "I'm a cargo hauler. Not a diplomat. I don't think special operations training qualifies."

"You have more sense than most of my council," the woman countered.

Captain Rodriguez raised her hand. "Why not accept a posting in the diplomatic staff? We have people who recognize the dances. It would be good for you to know."

"Besides," Sovereign Cordez added. "Our daughters have finally found each other as friends. This can keep them together: my Little Star and your Firefly."

That decided it.

"Okay, I'll do it."