

**A Mutiny of Pirates:
Kinfolk**

by August Niehaus

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For my crew.

Preface

It's important to know that you're getting yourself into a book with a protagonist you might not like, for all of it—or even most of it.

This book is about a person who doesn't like themselves very much, and therefore is not super pleasant to be around a lot of the time. That's not the kind of hero everyone is looking for in their fiction, especially not their science fiction, which often serves as escapism. If you don't like that kind of hero, I don't recommend that you read this book.

I love Kin because he is someone who tries, even when it sucks, and even though (when he's tried before) he's had the same sucky results over and over.

He's an amalgamation of people I know who love science fiction and other kinds of stories about perfect, powerful heroes. I believe they dive so deeply into those stories because they want to be that kind of person, but feel they aren't.

And so, I wanted to write a book where the protagonist was someone who might be more like the people who *watch* superhero movies and play powerful badasses in video games than the people who *star* in them. I wanted to create a story where one of those people becomes a hero in the way that superheroes are heroes.

That story is *Kinfolk*.

Prologue

Five pirates swayed on the edge of a cliff.

Beneath their feet, on the odd-shaped stones secured to the rock surface, lights glowed in and out of existence. The pirates murmured in low voices to one another, naming the symbols under their boots.

“Falcon—I’ve got falcon.”

“Lotus, I’m on lotus. Who has blade?”

“Blade—no, wait, I lost blade. I’ve got key.”

The woman with impossibly long hair, Mela, had her hand in a small opening in the rock wall. She manipulated the largest of three concentric circles of stone, slowly easing it around counter-clockwise until a mechanism deep inside the cliff settled into place with a dull rumble.

Mela blew out her breath and carefully removed her hand, shaking it at her side for blood flow. Then she slid it into the same-sized opening on the middle circle.

The moon slipped free of the cloud cover and beamed brilliant blue down on the pirates’ faces. Several of them grinned and looked skyward.

The man with the shaggy beard, Keev, heaved a wistful sigh. “Ah! That beautiful blue light. I’m gonna miss it.”

Beside Keev, the skinny bald man named Andyne elbowed him and winked. “I’ll miss lookin’ at you in it, you beautiful bastard.”

The stone circles glowed and a wild beeping sound rose from the entire contraption.

Mela yelped and yanked her hand against her chest—just in time for the opening to slam shut where her skin had been a millisecond before.

She whirled on the pack, who had the decency to look sheepish. Mela stamped across the series of pads to wag her finger in each face. “OI! You idiots! It’s gonna take my whole hand off if you keep flapping your lips. Enough of the sweet nonsense and more of the *communicating* the symbols to each other. Goddesses help you if I end up with a stump.”

The pirates each looked some flavor of chastised, or at least embarrassed. But when Mela poked her finger against Keev’s nose, he closed his eyes and smirked. “Maybe you shouldn’t have engineered such a deadly trap.”

Mela pulled a face. “That was the assignment, moron.”

Their captain’s voice sizzled into their comm earpieces. “*Chronos Horizon* will be taking off shortly. I would sure regret not having you all along.”

Each of them had their own passionate reaction. Mela and Keev straightened, their expressions smoothing even while they blushed; Essis and Evell grinned broadly at one another, and Evell tucked her hair behind her ears self-consciously; and Andyne covered his mouth with a fist to hide a heavy, wistful sigh, though the corner of his mouth still visibly tugged into a smile.

Andyne moved his hand away from his mouth. “I think I speak for all of us when I say—we should be on that ship.”

“Aye,” came the crew’s response.

The pirates shifted their positions back to the four rough quadrants on the mechanism’s panels. Mela shuddered visibly, but went to stand before the lock again.

“Back to the business of trust, then,” she said. “Steady on, everyone, *please*.”

Their shoulders shifted back, their chins tilted up. Mela looked over her shoulder and gave them all a sharp, meaningful look. Her eyes told them all, *I’m depending on you*.

They began to murmur the iconography to each other as it faded in and out beneath them. There was no sign of the distraction or exhaustion plaguing them moments ago. They worked as a unit, each distinctly their own but just as clearly a collective thing.

The second circled clicked into place. Mela moved her hand into the third and final circle and started to turn it.

The glowing symbols sped up, switching faster now. The murmur rose to a hubbub as the pirates babbled to keep up with the shifting combination.

“Steady!” Mela called.

The contraption reached a crescendo of lights. Feet shifted and slid and eyes never left the ground, but no one looked distressed.

Mela slid the small circle around and steadied it precisely. With a thunderous rumble, the final component of the lock clicked into place. Mela withdrew her hand, and the opening closed with a sharp crack. Other than a faint incision, there was little sign of the impressive lock. It was just another cliff on Arion’s craggy face.

Mela whistled and turned around, throwing her arms open. “Well done, all.”

Essis and Evell, the closest pair, ducked into her embrace. Andyne and Keev reached across the panels and interlocked their fingers, their smiles matched.

Their earpieces came to life again with their captain’s voice, this time tinged with satisfaction and pride. “You have five minutes to board. See you soon.”

The pirates looked at one another knowingly, with the shared trauma and bond of those who’d been left to the most difficult task.

No one said it aloud, but they all thought it: *Soon enough, the captain will ensure we don’t remember this.*

Mela moved among her fellow crew members, kissing them each on the forehead. When she reached Evell, she pulled him to her to kiss him full on the mouth. Essis said nothing. They all let everything linger, for as long as it lasted, which would not be long.

There was always a chemical means for Chalcedon to achieve his goals.

Chapter One

Kin's eyes burned from staring at the bill taped to the corner of the vidscreen.

The due date was three months past, and nobody had called. But at that price, *someone* would—Kin was sure of it.

With a sudden, cheery chirp, the call he'd placed to fulfill his duties at last began the laborious process of locating and connecting to the closest planetside tower on Suza Six. Next to the icon of a satellite sending bursts at a planet, the price rolled up another hundred units of Galactic Standard Credit System currency.

Kin sat up straight, his back screaming with the agony of nearly two motionless hours. Adrenaline made his fingers tingle. He tried very hard not to look at the numbers floating to the side, and instead concentrated on the name under the icon.

Kile Hanford.

Whatever the price tag ended up being, it was worth it, Kin told himself. It was worth it. He remembered how frustrating it was to live on Suza Six's tidal-locked daylight side and only ever get video messages, even from people who said they loved him, because it cost too much to sling the signal around the planet.

Kin wasn't trying to make his son feel that way.

A series of colored waves slowly resolved into a boy with dusty dark curls, a battered pair of hologlasses pushed high on his nose, and a mouth pulled into a line far more sour than its fifteen years should allow.

Sixteen, Kin corrected himself. *Kile is sixteen today.*

The adrenaline had severed the connection between his brain and his tongue, so Kin immediately wished he could take back what came out of his mouth: "Hey, Kile! Keeping yourself chill?"

I sound like a father, Kin snarled inwardly. *Always wondered if I'd know when I crossed that threshold. Yeah. I definitely know.*

Kile shifted his shoulders and pushed his glasses up the last microscopic distance between nose and forehead. "Dad. What's up?"

Kile's features twitched, like he was about to burst into a fit of rage. Kin reminded himself furiously that Kile's resting face wasn't a reflection on him, that it was normal. It was just who Kile was.

Kin threw his arms out and tried to channel all of the excitement he'd felt when he'd first placed the call hours before. "It's your birthday, kid! Happy birthday!"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"So?" Kin said after a beat. "Got any big plans for today?"

Kile actually rolled his eyes. "Um, actually...it was technically two days ago."

Kin deflated.

Once, he'd always had the energy to laugh those kinds of hits off, keep going without faltering. But the realization of just how badly he'd missed landed somewhere between his ventricles.

"Oh—of course. I'm so sorry." Kin's chest tightened. He pushed his hair out of eyes, fighting the urge to end the call then and there. "System differences. We warped into the Eklias system about a week ago. I haven't adjusted yet."

Kile fiddled with his sweatshirt strings. "Yeah, okay."

Kin felt himself sliding down a slope slick with desperation. He took in three sharp, painful breaths. “Hey, so, uh. Too late to get you something?”

Kile didn’t look up. “Like what?”

“Well, uh, whatever you...whatever you want. Pick something!” Kin forced a laugh. “I mean, not *anything*, hahaha...ha. Ha.”

No response. *Something* had to land. Kin was desperate to connect with Kile. He hadn’t seen his son in person in years, not since going freelance. Not since he’d left Suza Six to fund Kile’s future. His mouth kept moving. “We could go, you know, shopping now, take a spin in the virtmall...”

Nothing. Kile stared, stone-faced, across the endless distance.

The tightness in Kin’s chest was unbearable. He broke eye contact. “Well, we don’t have to go shopping together. I can just send you a budget.”

Now Kile rolled his eyes. “Yeah, okay. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The words slapped Kin across the face. It took everything in him not to bare his teeth. His hands shook as he balled them into fists. *At least you have a living father, Kile*, he almost said. Instead: “Hey, I just promised you.” The best he could do.

Now Kile was looking him straight in the eye again. “Lotta good those do.”

It was like Kin was staring into his own disapproving reflection.

He fell into a memory, hard.

Kin looked down at his hands: smaller, less calloused, somehow sharper and softer at the same time. He looked up and beyond himself, at the great wagon wheel half-buried in the dirt of the church floor—the symbol of the Goddess’s endless wheel of time, the time in which She is all things.

The Goddess’s shapely yet formless likeness rose above Her altar. This was the Goddess’s Church, the one he’d attended his entire childhood.

And Kin was dusty, penitent, shaking with fear and the tears of a boy Kile’s age. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

Goddess, what have I done? What do I do?

There was no one at home to ask.

He knew Arnetta didn’t want the baby, not really—especially not if she was on her own. Kin had promised her, over and over: at first, that if she gave herself to him, he would be there for her; and then, when she had and they were in this mess, that she wouldn’t be alone.

Arnetta still hadn’t decided what she was going to do.

Kin didn’t know if he wanted to be a dad, but he knew he didn’t want to lose any child of his. And he knew that if being a dad was his lot, he would never leave his child behind the way *his* father did.

“Please...please... I need guidance. Help me. Please, Goddess. Give me a sign.”

A hand descended lightly but reassuringly on Kin’s shoulder. “Son? Are you alright?”

Kin startled, registering that he was whispering his prayer aloud. He sniffled, trying to hide his tears in his sleeve. “I—I’m asking for a sign.”

The face of the Church’s lead pastor blocked out some of the soft overhead light. The man gave Kin a kindly smile and then turned regally to look beyond him to the altar.

Kin’s eyes were drawn there, too, to the metal distressed to look like cracking wood sinking into the earth. The altar was trapped in mortality and the cycle of death, as were the subjects of the Goddess—but still it served to praise Her with its existence. As did Her subjects.

Kin trembled. *The Goddess has no eyes for an inadequate boy like me.*

The pastor spoke as if from a place of dreams. “The Goddess speaks through that which we will listen to. The words of someone you love. The sight of a dove at sunrise. The wag of your dog’s tail. Have faith, son. You will hear Her.”

The pastor’s words swam through the warm air, settling in Kin’s ears like summer bugs. He squeezed Kin’s shoulder and withdrew, removing himself through a heavy door that closed without a sound.

Kin let out the breath he’d been holding. His chest didn’t feel as tight. He looked up.

“Please,” he murmured, “please...”

Through the half-moon of windows above the altar, framed as if by intention in the center, the Man on the Moon beamed down at Kin with a beatific expression.

Kin gasped. “Dad!”

Grief and reassurance passed through Kin in waves. He broke down and sank to his knees, babbling gratitude not to some distant saint or even the all-knowing Goddess, but to his own father.

“Thank you, Dad. Thank you, thank you. Dad... I hear you. I hear *You*, Goddess. I will keep my promises. I will do as I said. I will ask her to marry me.”

The moon’s smile was unchanging, and its light unflinching.

Kin’s heart sank. His father wasn’t there to guide him. He had to rely on the face in the moon.

I won’t do that to my baby. I’ll be there for the baby, because Dad couldn’t be there for me.

A fist tightened around his heart, and tears streamed down his cheeks.

That isn’t Dad’s fault.

It was as if someone was massaging the guilt into Kin, and with it, the present. He snapped back to reality, his belly full of turmoil. *It isn’t Kile’s fault, either. Kile is who he is. And I love who he is. It’s my fault.*

Kile had always been Kile, ever since he was born. Never wanted to look his parents in the eye, didn’t smile much. But he wasn’t broken, he was just Kile.

“Dad?”

Kile blinked his dark eyes at Kin, a faint frown creasing his forehead. He peered across the waves carrying their message such a great distance.

Kin’s spirit rose to meet the concern. “Oh, uh—I was just thinking about Ember’s Edge. I caught the latest episode last night. What was Andi *doing* with the O’kaz, anyway? I thought he would—”

He stopped himself, because he’d registered that Kile was tuned out. “Ember’s Edge,” the animated show that Kin had devoured in his childhood—and which had made a comeback with a remake these twenty years later, targeted at Kile’s age group—was usually the one thing they could both agree on. But Kile wasn’t paying attention. He looked beyond his vidscreen to something in real-space with him, something in the room.

The thought of seeing Arnetta made claws scrabble in Kin’s belly.

But then: “Marsa! Hi!” Kile was actually *smiling*.

A bob-haired girl about Kile’s age popped into view on Kin’s vidscreen next to Kile, flashing bright brown eyes and a contagious smile. “Oh! Is this your dad? Hi, Kile’s dad!”

Then she turned the grin up at Kile, and he *beamed* in response.

A shockwave rocked Kin. He hardly registered the rest of what they said: Kile shortened Marsa’s name, offered her something. She laughed, maybe a farewell to Kin. They disappeared.

Kile didn't hang up the call. Their heavy footsteps and giggles followed them out of the room, eventually leaving a buzzing silence.

Kin let the white noise linger for a long time, counting his shallow breaths. Then he ended the call.

Chapter Two

Kin pushed his hand into the wall, into the familiar twisted collection of wires and pipes and jagged metal edges. Every sharp pain in his hand marked another repair in the *Truly, Truly* that one of the Damn Shames had made in the ship's storied lifetime—a chronicle of reality to which Kin tried to tether himself.

He almost hoped one of the edges would draw blood. At least then he'd have a reason to hit the hallway floor with his knees.

His head pounded. He assumed it was from staring at the vidscreen and that damn bill for two hours. But he knew that wasn't why he ached.

All those years he'd justified *everything* for Kile. He'd let Kile be who he thought Kile was, didn't discipline him for what Kile's teachers always called a poor attitude. Kin had thought he'd understood his son. No, he had seen what he *wanted* to see.

And Kile had played him.

Sweat poured down Kin's forehead. His chest was tight, and the harder he thought about his breaths, the shallower they became. He leaned heavily against the wall, relishing the crush of hard wire casing on his bare arm.

Kin's entire adult life had been wasted on that child. Here he was, putting his own desires and pursuits on hold, putting his life on the line, and Kile was deceiving him with a smirk—
“Kin?”

Fray's voice cut into Kin's barreling train of thought and her hand touched his elbow.

Kin startled, hard. He landed on his feet and spun, reminding himself furiously against the rising instincts, *I'm at home. I'm at home. This is the Truly. I'm at home.*

And that's Fray.

His captain, Freyja Sintre, hadn't brushed her hair—it was falling in a funny way behind the shaved side of her head. Still, with the arrogant tilt of her head, the private smile constantly playing on her fine, narrow lips...

She looked like royalty.

She might as well have *been* royalty. She ruled the Damn Shames, a competent and reputable mercenary gang, with a fair and even hand, beloved by her whole crew and others besides.

For all she was royalty, however, her eyes and forehead creased with worry. She tipped her head back to look into Kin's face, the way she always had to. She wasn't short—he was tall.

“Fray. Hey.” Kin forced out a chuckle that he hated as soon as he'd unleashed it. It sounded fake to his own ears. “Scared me.”

“Clearly. What's going on?” She narrowed her eyes, then tipped his chin down and sniffed the air in front of Kin's face. “You *look* like you've been drinking.”

Kin frowned. “I have no—”

“But you don't *smell* like you've been drinking. What's wrong.” Fray rarely asked questions when she knew the answer. Worry tightened her shoulders and the line of her mouth.

Kin wished he could shrivel inside himself and disappear. He hated to do this to her, and he did it far more often than he liked. He was supposed to be the sweep of this gang—the one who rode last to help the others. Not the one who needed more help than any of them.

“Nothing,” he mumbled. “I mean, not really.” Her stare pierced him, and the truth roiled in Kin's belly. He wasn't sure how much truth he could free without throwing up. “I mean, I called Kile. It was...kinda weird. No big deal. So, what—are you, uh, going somewhere?”

Fray shrugged and looked around the empty hallway. “I was coming to find everybody. I thought we should try going out tonight. Reward ourselves. Though you look in no mood.”

The lights flickered in an ugly way as Fray cocked her head at Kin.

He shrugged and answered carefully. “Happy to go with.”

“Happy. Yes, that’s exactly how you look right now.” She tapped her lips with a finger, catching her chest-length hair up with her other hand.

With her curls up, Fray looked strikingly like she did when she’d led their flight into battle as part of the Human Authority Government’s 1146th Special Ops squadron.

Kin’s breath hitched in his throat. “Fray, I’m fine,” he forced out.

She stepped close and pressed her body against his arm and hip. “You are not.” She was right. He wasn’t. Not when she touched him like that. Her voice tickled his ear with her soft breath. “I can hear your thoughts, you know.”

For the first time since she’d shown up, Kin managed something of a smile, though he exaggerated the accompanying glower. “*Cannot.*”

Fray brushed the tip of his nose and chuckled, low and close. “Do not doubt me.”

Kin breathed a word he hated to utter, and meant it: “Never.”

Fray put her lips against his ear, and for a moment, there was nothing else in the world. “Then stop lying to me.”

She withdrew, eyebrow arching, not so far that she’d abandoned him, but far enough to make it clear there was distance between them so long as he refused her the truth.

Kin sighed and slumped, ready to relent to the nausea. But her nearness chased it away. “Sorry. Yeah. I...it was Kile’s birthday. I thought it was today, it was two days ago, he...made sure I knew that.”

“So, a typical conversation with your son.”

“That’s the thing. He—there was someone over with him. A girl. He *smiled* at her.”

Fray snorted. “Kile?!”

“Yeah, right?” Kin snorted too, a soft half-chuckle. “Well. Anyway. Doesn’t matter, it’s done now.”

Fray folded her arms and regarded Kin coolly. “Kin. How does this relationship benefit *you*?”

Kin bristled. He almost wished her hand was still on his arm so he could swat it away. “You can’t ask me that. You don’t understand.”

“Oh? I don’t?”

Kin’s snarl was harsher than he’d intended. “You don’t *have* kids.”

Fray got up in his face, nose to nose. “Your assumption, bucko. You’re right—I do not—but that doesn’t stop me from understanding the consequences of having them.”

The implications hung heavily in the air between them.

Kin cleared his throat, dismissing a fleeting temptation that had fluttered through him, with Fray’s lips this close. But he was still angry. “Well, if you did have them, maybe you wouldn’t ask such selfish questions.”

The fire flared in Fray’s eyes, which were grey-green today. “*Excuse me?* You do *not* get to project your morality onto my theoretical motherhood. You do what you do because you believe in it. Not because of *any* other reason. I expect that of you, as a member of the Damn Shames. As someone I’m supposed to trust.”

Fray never raised her voice to any of the Shames unless they were in a tactical situation, but she might as well have been a drill sergeant destroying Ensign Kin. The truth of her words flayed him.

In Kin's mind's eye, he saw the Man on the Moon, its solemn face pinning him in place.

Promises. It's always about keeping my promises.

He sighed softly and collapsed in on himself, trying not to let his posture falter, but failing. She was right. If he was truly a good man, he would keep his promises.

"Kin," Fray murmured, sliding her arm around him in a tight embrace, and they were back to the equilibrium they always seemed to find.

"You can count on me, Fray," he said against the top of her head. "Always. No matter what."

"I know."

When Fray finally broke away, she'd composed herself and there was no sign of vulnerability as she tossed the hair out of her eyes. "Come on. We're going to the Spyglass Cavern."

Kin winced. He hardly knew of a club with a reputation for more scum and villainy. He'd seen it in an obscure vid once as a kid: the Spyglass was where you went if you wanted sex, of every kind and as much as you wanted. It wasn't really his bag.

"Don't look so excited!" Fray laughed, pointing at his face.

"Mmm," Kin managed, baring his teeth.

Fray slipped her hand into his and stood perfectly still for a moment. Then she freed herself and strode off down the hallway, looking for the rest of her crew.

The gentle touch made Kin realize that maybe there was a good reason to go to a place like the Spyglass, and that reason was to get Kile off his mind. At least for a few hours.

The Damn Shames made their way through a relentless rainstorm towards a suggestion of brightly-colored light, which slowly resolved into a well-lit wooden building front attached to an intimidating cliffside.

Kin was tired of the razor-edged grass hacking at his legs through his clothes. He was tired of the rain clawing his face. He was tired of staring at Rahab's ponytail bobbing a few meters in front of him.

"I hear it's one big orgy!" This was Riph, bellowing against the wind. "Nothin' but bodies everywhere at the Spyglass."

Rahab reached up to twist her matted hair into a knot on itself on the back of her skull, throwing a scoundrel's grin over her shoulder. She cackled into the chilly wind. "And I hear they got *every* kind of company."

Riph cupped his mouth and hollered at Rahab. "That's puttin' in mildly. Try *multiple* of every kinda company."

She shot him a vicious glare. "Yeah, Peripheral, that's...that's every kind."

To his credit, Riph didn't wince at his full name. "I hear they'll let you drink marruq blood," he practically purred back.

Rahab bared her teeth. "You put a drop of that on your lips and I swear on my whole damn trashteroid I'll—"

They both stopped to glare at each other. Kin forced a dry chuckle and pressed past them, taking the lead in the six-wide fan of Damn Shames spread out through the tall grass: Fray, Riph, Rahab, Kin, and then Dog and Dragon, a couple the Shames had recently hired on.

Dragon and Dog both kept shooting Kin odd looks. Kin wasn't sure what to do about them, so he kept walking.

Now the group was close enough to the Spyglass that he could see the cliché beer-pouring animation, along with a pair of what *could* have been lit tobacco sticks. Sea-blue letters spelled out the establishment's name: SPYGLASS CAVERN.

Kin's stomach flip-flopped.

The sea of grass finally broke. They stood on land cleared in front of the cliff and its strange business. Kin blinked against the wind and rain.

For the second time that night, someone touched his elbow.

This hand wasn't familiar and comforting, and it came with a furtive hiss. "Pssst."

Kin extracted himself from Dragon's hold, only to turn and find himself staring down Dog. They were waifish, deceptively light and unthreatening. But Kin had seen Dog fight...and kill. They were hardly to be underestimated.

They tilted their head at Kin. "We hear the Spyglass has some very nice private rooms. Try anything once, they say."

Kin snorted and pushed past Dog. "You do that."

Neither of the couple seemed particularly perturbed. "He's not very much fun, is he?" Dragon said, half-calling.

Fray snort-laughed in her distinct way. "You have no idea."

Kin's cheeks warmed. "Oi, come on," he said gruffly. He didn't understand Dog and Dragon. The pair were married and seemed extremely happy together, but they also seemed keen on...expanding their territory. The idea baffled Kin. He couldn't find *one* good woman who wanted to settle down with him, and if he had, he'd make sure she knew his attention was never elsewhere.

But it wasn't his problem. As long as Dragon and Dog respected his boundaries, they could be whoever they wanted to be. They were good Damn Shames, if nothing else.

Rahab was just a curly-haired silhouette waving Kin in from the doorway. "You coming, molasses-ass?"

Kin plowed ahead to join her, wanting to be out of the weather. "Sorry. Yeah."

The lobby was a modest room with twin blackwood doors, a crackling fireplace, and a pretty three-eyed clerk at the desk. The clerk caught sight of Fray, blushed deeply, and waved the group onward.

Rahab quirked an eyebrow at Fray, then spun around to put one hand on each door and throw them open at the same time for a dramatic entrance to the Spyglass Cavern proper.

Kin flushed with secondhand embarrassment. He grimaced apologetically at the clerk, then followed Rahab into the club.

The Spyglass stole his breath.

The wooden inn front was built around the entrance to a sprawling luminescent cavern, the walls and ceiling of which were made of a soft white stone. The designers of the Spyglass had kept the cave's natural beauty and inhabitants, but still achieved a very humanoid aesthetic with tasteful lighting and polished surfaces everywhere. Private islands—almost ecosystems—of lush, brightly-colored life sprang up every few meters, carefully buttressed by tasteful screens and lit with ambient glow from faux foliage.

Walking between the plush benches and hammocks, weaving around bar stools and bong stations, beautiful creatures from across the galaxy stood, strode, crouched, and sprawled everywhere. Some were scantily-clad in eye-popping finery. Some wore nothing at all.

It was simultaneously a sensual garden of wonders and the *hottest* club Kin had ever been to. He gulped. It was everything Riph and Rahab had said it would be, and then some.

The gazes of patrons and staff slid towards him, then tactfully moved on when he didn't respond. *Fair enough*, Kin thought, though something in him winced. He wasn't like most of the other Shames. Most of the crew were at *least* some variation of "loosely bisexual"—some looser than others. None of them were monogamous, except for Kin. Rahab called him the only normie in the gang.

Even tonight, he just wanted to get *drunk*.

"Interest you in a little company?" someone called.

Kin glanced towards the voice. It came from one of two women entangled in one another, their lips too busy on one another to form words. He shook his head. "Nah. Thanks."

"Suit yourself," said the other woman, sticking out the barest tip of her tongue at him before returning to ravishing her partner.

Kin shuddered and scanned the room, calculating where the best booze might be had. He spotted a blue crystal counter that glowed from within, draped with several clusters of drunk and happy patrons. Their entangled limbs in various configurations was a good sign.

A familiar head of dreadlocks swung on the far end of the bar. A nugget of relief turned in Kin's stomach. He made a beeline for Riph.

"Hey. Kinda thought you'd be out there somewhere."

Riph grinned as he looked up, patting the stool beside him. He raised his short glass up, catching the bartender's eye. "Oh, I like to take my sweet time. You *know* this isn't the first time I've found myself somewhere like this."

The manicured bartender brought a second glass of whiskey and set it down in front of Kin. Riph gestured his thanks.

Kin sipped the golden drink; it had a decent taste and heat. He appreciated the fire that filled his chest.

"The secret," Riph said in a conspiratorial voice, "is to wait until someone wants to be with *you*."

Kin thought of the pair he'd ignored to find Riph. "Heh. Subscribe for more hot Riph tips."

Riph laughed, a little too loudly. "You could really use a lay, my friend."

"Hmph. That obvious, huh?" Kin swirled the glass in front of him, watching the way the liquid made waves on the crystal.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, bud." Riph nudged Kin with an elbow and flashed a very white grin. "Not gonna get past *anybody* in close quarters. Whew! You smell of it."

"Of what?" Kin growled, taking a huge gulp of whiskey.

Riph's grin widened. "Drought."

"Hmph." But Kin wasn't angry, just thoughtful.

Riph was about as tall as Kin was, but Kin always felt a little smaller in Riph's presence. Riph was larger than life, though not because he tried to be the biggest person in any room; he was just tuned in to the universe at a different level. A certain aura of understanding emanated from Riph, and it was easy to get caught up in it if you sat close enough.

Kin was grateful Riph had let him hang around as far back as boot camp, when they'd first been assigned to the same squadron. Riph kept him grounded.

Both drinks were about three quarters gone, the world blessedly a little fuzzy, when a strong bare-backed woman slid between them. She pressed her belly against the crystal counter and turned dramatically towards Riph. Her braid whacked Kin in the nose. She smelled like fruit wine.

“Hello,” she said to Riph.

Kin wrinkled his nose. That wine was the same Arnetta always drank.

At the thought of his ex-wife, all of the pleasant warmth he’d managed to pile on himself slipped away into the void, and Kin’s guts were left screaming into it.

“Well, aren’t you a beautiful thing,” Riph said to the woman.

The woman’s hand moved lazily across Kin’s back. “You too?” she asked softly.

He arched away. She cocked a pretty eyebrow and pouted, but it wasn’t attractive.

“No, no. Have fun.” Kin didn’t find it hard to turn back to his drink.

“Think we just might.” Riph’s low, content chuckle made Kin’s stomach twitch.

But when Kin examined the feeling, it wasn’t jealousy. It was a passive regret that he couldn’t understand what would compel a man to make that kind of sound to a stranger.

He nursed what was left of his drink, shaking his head when the bartender caught his eye and quirked one eyebrow. Kin didn’t like to drink alone; it put him in a dangerous kind of headspace.

A whisper of hair and feathers, and another woman sidled up to the stool three down from Kin’s. She caught his eye and sized him up visibly, a smile tickling her gorgeous pink lips.

“Excuse me? Hi.” She wiggled three fingers at him, letting her smile overtake her face. Her cheeks glowed with warmth, and her eyes sparkled with mischief.

For the first time since arriving at the Spyglass, Kin’s heart skipped a beat. Still, reality set heavily in his belly. He didn’t want her to be disappointed in him. “Hey. Listen.” He cleared his throat, quaffed the last of his whiskey. “Just don’t...expect anything.”

To his surprise, she laughed merrily and scooted two stools closer. “Why would I expect anythin’? You’d be the one payin’.”

They were next to one another, but she hadn’t touched him yet.

She leaned low over the counter and tilted her head so her straight hair fell over her face.

“Why are you even at the Spyglass anyway? If you don’t want to be here?”

Her hair hid her eyes in a way that made Kin want to push it away and then kiss her. “Long story.”

The woman licked her lips without smudging her lipstick. “I got nothin’ but time.”

The image of Fray rose up in Kin’s mind, stilling his impulses. He coughed and shifted. “My captain—”

The woman wiggled her eyebrows. “Oh, that purple-haired chick? She’s *bangin’*. Already met her.”

A shiver rocked Kin’s midsection. The Fray in his mind briefly transitioned to taking the woman’s face in her hands, bringing their lips close together... He stopped himself, grabbing the stool in a death grip.

At the same time, the woman said, “Fray said to...say hello.” Biting her tongue, she lunged to grab a handful of Kin’s hair. She pulled it—not so hard that it hurt, but enough to tip his head where she wanted it and command his entire attention.

Kin’s whole body responded to her. His breath was shallow, ragged. He was a lost cause now. He made a noise, not quite a word. *It’s okay*, he told himself frantically. *I gotta get my mind off Kile anyway.*

The woman's lips formed the shape of her words against his earlobe: "I have my own room."

Kin was a shivering mess in her hands. "Take me there."

He let her lead him towards a blue slash of light, which illuminated the mist behind a tantalizing mess of slender cavitree silhouettes. The grotto already made Kin's head swim, and it didn't take many touches of the woman's impossibly soft fingers to bring him vivid images of what awaited him.

Past a maze of tall, trimmed bushes, the woman pushed Kin into a large, cushy chair with no arms—the reason for which was quickly apparent as she knelt beside it and sprawled on his lap. She guided his hand to her hair, tangling his fingers in it, smiling encouragingly at him.

Kin relented and played with her hair. She wriggled under his touch, the motion becoming torturous as she made her excruciating way up his lap until she was right against his belly.

Then she gave him a look that was pure smolder and fiddled with the latch on his pants. "This okay?"

Kin shifted, but not to get away from her. "Nnf. Yeah. Real good. Keep—keep going."

The bushes that protected them from prying eyes rustled and an intruder stumbled inside the space with them, pressing his back against the wall and putting a finger to his lips.

Incredulously, Kin locked eyes with the stranger, choking off a swear. "What the—?!"

A sixty-odd man stared at Kin with a wild look halfway between panic and glee. His buggy eyes goggled and his spidery fingers twisted. His voice rasped out, a cajoling wheeze: "They...*follows* me..."

The adrenaline hit. "Get out!" Kin roared, pushing the woman away and fumbling with the latch to his pants. "This is a private booth!"

The old man smirked and leered at the woman from the depths of his thick white beard. "With private things that happens, I sees." He was wearing a chestpack, the kind tourists used to keep their hard cash and overpriced souvenirs safe from pickpockets, and there was a sword thrust into the sash tied around his scrawny waist. He was a pirate wizard from another era.

The woman curled her lip, looking from Kin to the old man. "Ew. You should've said you were bringing your old man. Not how I do things." She brushed past the old man, stumbling against the bush before she vanished.

The old man watched her go. The smile vanished from his face, and he tucked himself back into the lee of the wall.

Kin threw up his hands and went to the entrance. "Great. Just what do you thi—"

The old man's finger appeared in Kin's view. "Shhhhhh. There."

The finger directed Kin's attention to... *Oh, shit.*

Military training had given him an eye for others who had the same. Kin sized up the ten-odd figures clustered at the doorway to the Spyglass and noticed the way they took up positions in sync, the tension and weight they carried, the imprints of weapons under their shirts.

They were dangerous operatives. And they were making themselves very hard to notice in the party environment. Shifty, but professionals, and paid like it. Someone *really* cared about getting their hands on the old man.

Kin looked down at the intruder's pack. No, that was the more likely target, the way the man was hugging it. *Probably he got fresh with some warlord's favorite jewels.*

"What's going on? Who are you?"

"I needs protection," the old man wheedled by way of an answer. "I haves a very important thing. It must be kepts safe."

Kin pinned the old man against the wall by the throat with a flick of his wrist. He used an old trick Riph had taught him, pushing pressure points in the man's neck. The man wouldn't run out of air, but he'd feel like he might.

"What made you think this particular booth was a good idea?" Kin snarled. "The truth, old man."

"Your reputation!" the man choked. "You bes a Damn Shame, does you not?"

At "Damn Shame," Kin's blood went cold. They hadn't exactly signed the guestbook. He needed to tell Fray to change her hair color; they were becoming too recognizable.

But at the thought of Fray, he knew she would want to know what this old man was up to, and what he had, or knew, that was so important he was getting pursued into an unspoken safe zone by an overkill number of trained professionals.

Kin had to take the old man to Fray. She'd kill Kin if he didn't and found out later he had such a person of interest in his possession.

So he got up into the old man's face. "Aye. I'm a Shame."

"Takes me to your captain." The man's buggy eyes and the drool at the corner of his mouth told Kin everything he needed to know.

He's rightfully afraid of me.

Kin spoke through his teeth. "You'll come this way." He turned the old man's face in the intended direction. "Act like we're going to another pleasure room together. Don't you make a funny move. You'll get nowhere near my captain if I suspect you'll do her harm."

The man bobbed his head furiously.

Kin released the old man with a firm shove, then went as calmly as he could manage into the hallway. He willed his every nerve to be still, to not make him look nervous or suspicious to anyone watching.

The old man waited a beat and then leisurely swaggered after Kin. He'd even managed to drop his arms to his sides and not hug the damn chestpack.

Kin realized halfway down the hallway that he had no idea where Fray had ended up—and that he had to look like he knew where he was going.

He took a right without hesitating.

Once the old man was around the corner, too, Kin paused and took a discreet sniff of the air.

Sure enough, Fray's distinct lilac perfume was nearby. Kin followed his nose to a copse of purple trees, deceptively open to view but blanketed all around by dark, light-absorbing vines. A heavy black door opened inward at Kin's touch.

His ears adjusted before his eyes did. The pleasurable moaning made his ears burn and his cheeks go hot. He cringed at what he saw.

Fray was...she was enjoying herself. So much. With *two* beings.

Am I the one who's broken?

Behind Kin, the old man cackled.

The moans abruptly stopped. Three silhouettes slowly untangled themselves from one another, none of them in a hurry. Kin could tell which one was Fray by the billow of hair; then she confirmed it by flicking on a handheld light. She was decidedly unclothed.

Kin coughed and looked away, as far as his suddenly-resistant skull allowed. "Fray, I—shit. Sorry." Kin tried to fill the sudden silence with his apology.

"It's alright. What's going on?"

Kin hooked a thumb at the old man, trying to apologize with his entire posture. "This old man decided to interrupt my night so I could interrupt yours."

Fray smiled a private smile. “Nothing that can’t be resumed at a later time.” She waved at the other two figures, and they scurried away, giggling. Fray gestured to the intruder, regal as a queen as she pulled a sheet around herself to diminish distractions. The fabric tucked into her hip like robes on Old Earth royalty. “Old man, explain yourself.”

The old man straightened, the coy act abandoned. “I am Tarsus. I looks for the Damn Shames. I seeks protection.”

Fray raised an eyebrow, first at Tarsus, then directing it at Kin without moving more than her eyes. She set her light down on her thigh. “For what, and from what? I don’t have time to waste tonight, Tarsus.”

“From *them*,” Tarsus grunted, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. “For...*this*.” And he plunged both hands into his chestpack, in a motion Kin had seen once before.

Before a makeshift bomb exploded on the battlefield.

“BOMB!” Kin roared, diving at Tarsus, covering the chestpack with his body.

A brief flash of guilt over Kile’s future flashed through Kin. It took all of his willpower to remain there motionless, but he kept telling himself, *if Fray survives, it’s worth it*.

Seconds passed. Long ones.

“Uh. Well. Guess it isn’t,” Kin said.

Tarsus coughed out a laugh. Fray cleared her throat.

Sheepishly, Kin got up and offered Tarsus a hand.

Once he was on his feet, Tarsus patted Kin’s wrist condescendingly. “Heh. He reacts quickly, he does. No, no...this bes merely a bomb of *information*.” He rummaged in the slightly dented chestpack, then spilled several items onto the edge of the bed. Fray leaned forward, tipping her light so it illuminated her eager expression.

“Fascinating,” she said breathlessly. “That almost looks like—no. It cannot be.”

Kin leaned in, too. There was a scattering of currency he didn’t recognize, a weathered black book, a flat silver object about the size of his palm... And a folded square of something like parchment.

This last was what Fray’s hand darted out to touch. The material was slashed with deep purple lines connecting silver dots, which winked to life when the light passed across them.

“It is what you thinks it is, lady,” Tarsus said, folding his hands over the chestpack.

“That’s Captain Sintre to you, Tarsus,” Kin said through his teeth.

Fray subtly motioned for Kin to stand down. “If it is what I think it is...it’s worth a *lot*.” She held Tarsus’s gaze steadily.

“Indeed. Why do you thinks I comes to pirates, eh? Not for cuddles.” Tarsus dropped his gaze and smoothed the sheet on the bed with a careful hand. “Protects me. Protects the map and the journal.”

A map. Kin’s heart flip-flopped. Maps worth dying for led to things people didn’t want found. Maybe even things valuable enough to buy Kile’s freedom once and for all.

I could take him away from his mother’s lies. Learn who he really is, somewhere he’s comfortable.

Kin’s stomach ached. He leaned forward in anticipation of Fray’s answer.

Fray plucked the map off the bed between her pointer and middle finger and flicked it towards Tarsus. “*Who* is following you, Tarsus? And don’t be funny with your answer.”

Tarsus took the map out of her hand and gathered the other things back into the chestpack.

The door exploded inward.

For a moment that lasted far too long, the world was smoke and fire and shouting and pain.

Kin was down on one knee. Time rolled by at half speed. A huge chunk of debris struck a glancing blow off the plate in his left shoulder. Blood poured into his eyes, hot and stinging.

Kin blew out an unsteady breath and touched the ragged-edged shrapnel wound in his side. It was shallow; he would have to power through it.

Fray's purple hair spilled over the bed she had slammed into with the force of the blast. Blood pooled under her head, but she moaned weakly.

"Shit! *Shit!* Fray! Fray, can you hear me?" Kin crawled forward on his padded knees until he was beside the bed, clutching at the air around Fray's suddenly-fragile body. "Answer me, Fray!" He took her hand and squeezed it as hard as he dared.

Her eyelids fluttered open. "Kin. Kin." Her lips were cracked and bleeding. She tried to focus on his face.

Kin touched her cheek as gently as he could, hissing as he smeared his blood on her skin. "I'm here, Fray, I'm here." He brushed the hair out of her eyes.

More smoke, more gunfire outside. Kin winced at the sounds of shattering crystal and groaning metal. *They're really shooting up the Spyglass. Damn.*

Fray's body stiffened suddenly and she squeezed Kin's hand back with startling strength. "Tarsus! Find...the map...Kin, we need it..."

He stared at her. "What? No, Fray, I won't leave yo—"

Fray leaned up, grunting with the pain and strain. "Dumbass, *find the map!*"

Her voice left no doubt: it was an order. And Kin obeyed her. He always did.

"Tarsus! Tarsus, where are you?" He plowed through rubble as if it were a rocky swamp.

"Find Tarsus and get us out of here, Hanford!" Fray yelled again.

"Yes, ma'am." Kin pawed away big chunks of fallen wall and shattered tree, trying to find the old man.

At last, Tarsus's ashen face protruded from beneath a draw of what must once have been implements of pleasure. Kin pushed the box away to reveal a sticky mess of guts and blood and matted beard. "Tarsus! Tarsus..."

The chestpack was the only reason Tarsus wasn't already dead. It had stopped the largest points of a brass lamp, the smaller spikes of which were buried in Tarsus's shoulders and neck. He was missing a hand and a good portion of his left side. His thick eyebrows oozed with blood.

But his iron will burned behind his eyes when he opened them to stare at Kin. "She will not rests... she will not rests..."

A chill passed through Kin. Despite everything, his lips formed a question: "She...who?"

But Tarsus's strength faltered. His eyes drooped closed.

Kin took Tarsus by the shoulders and tried to pull him free of the rubble and the drawer, but the old man's body was smashed and falling apart. If Kin freed him, Tarsus would bleed out in seconds.

As if reading Kin's mind, Tarsus smiled without opening his eyes. With great effort, he raised his hand and rested it on the punctured chestpack. "It means nothing now, pirate. Listens. Takes the map. Takes the journal. Takes it all away from me. Takes this curse and puts it somewhere no one unworthy finds it."

This curse.

The words struck a dire chord of fear in Kin's soul. He didn't care if there was treasure at the end of the map—he didn't want to welcome any kind of bad luck into his life. Or Kile's. Or Fray's.

Kin swallowed hard, trying to focus on the present, on the dying old man in front of him.

Tarsus tried weakly to pull off the chestpack. Kin stilled the futile movement with his hand. “It’s keeping your wound from bleeding out,” Kin said helplessly.

Tarsus smiled again, more faintly this time. “This...is knowns...”

His chest heaved and his nearly-severed legs twitched so hard his boots slammed on the ground. Then he died.