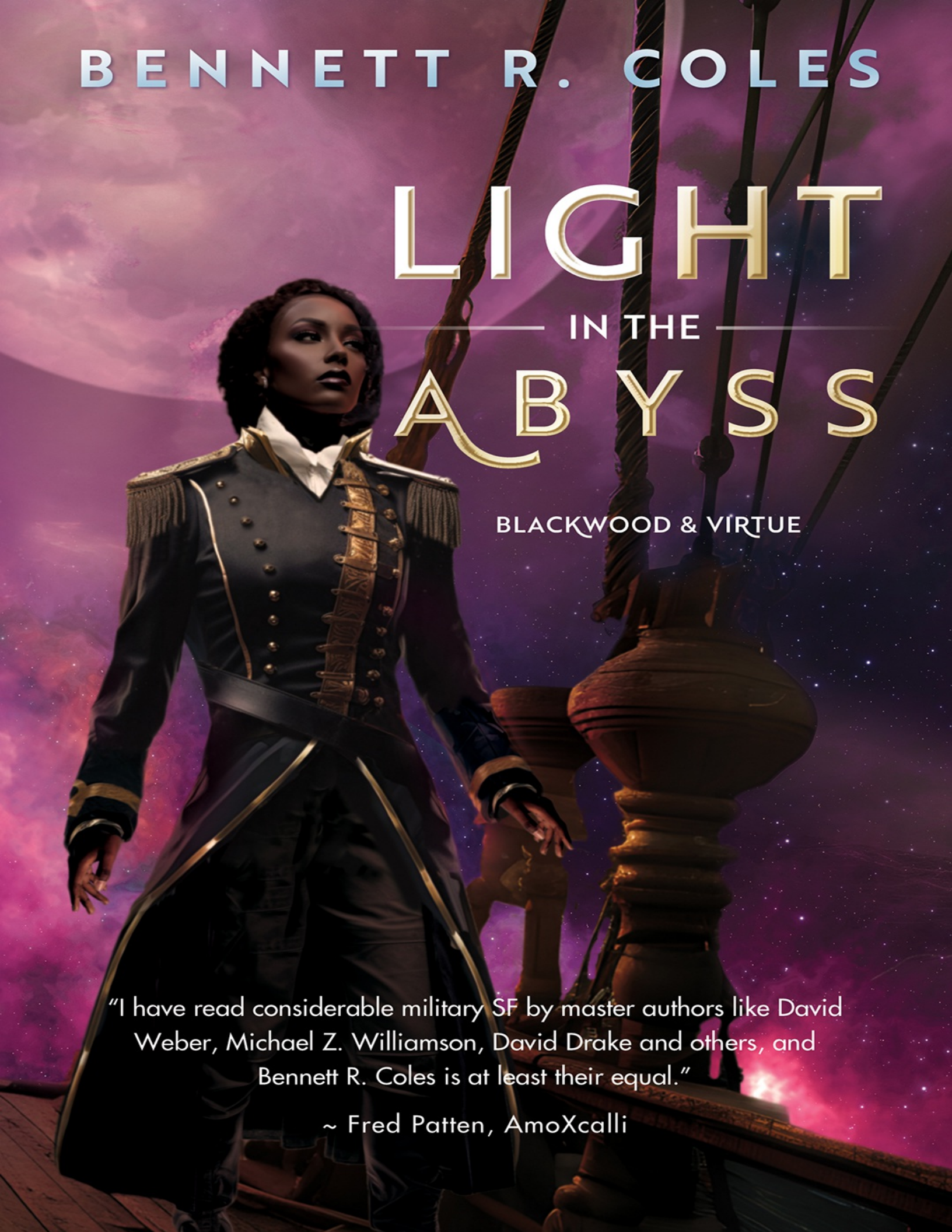
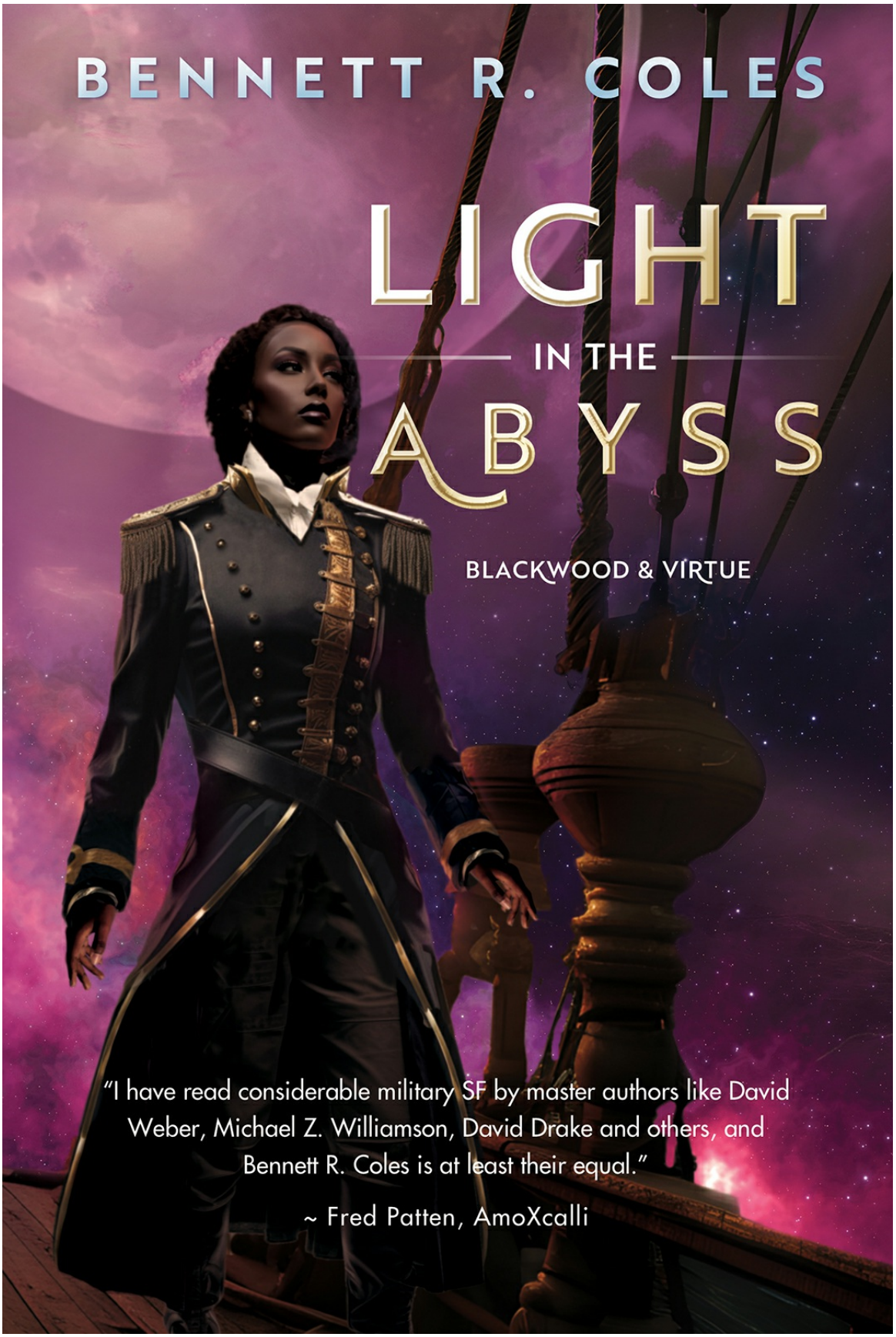

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Promontory Press

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Dedication

To the crew of His Majesty's Canadian Ship EDMONTON

and

United States Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment 407

Spring 2023

Hacia La Grandeza

CHAPTER 1

"The solution is simple: more rum."

Commander Lord Liam Blackwood noted the approving nods around the small, round table. His four companions were making a show of looking relaxed, lounging as best as the uncomfortable wooden stools allowed. Around them, the tavern was bustling with late evening energy and he doubted anyone was paying them the least bit of attention, but nevertheless he leaned forward.

"Keep them drunk; keep them happy. And keep them looking at you. Hopefully we're in and out before anyone notices."

"Hedgie and I," Petty Officer Amelia Virtue said at his side, "already have a plan for the distraction. But more rum will always help."

Amelia grinned at Able Rating Mia Hedge, who smirked back and lifted her mug. Downing the contents in a single, long gulp, Hedge slammed it down and reached for the bottle in the center of the table.

"More rum!" she shouted to the distant barmaid.

"Easy there," growled Chief Petty Officer Harper Sky. Her powerful frame hunkered against the table, incapable of relaxing.

"You heard what the boss said," Hedge replied triumphantly, refilling her cup. "This is the simple solution."

Liam assessed his team again. They were all, like him, children of the Halo and as a group they were probably the palest in the room. On a planet this far into the Hub, where the countless stars closed in and daylight was perpetual, most patrons of the tavern had darker complexions ranging from olive to brown to deepest black. Skin tone didn't matter amongst

common folk like these – as it did amidst the nobility – but it would certainly catch the eye.

Amelia and Hedge, in their worn, tapered, busty dresses, looked like any random pair of fairly young, fairly pretty, fairly poor girls out for the night – they'd blend in just fine with the growing crowd in this working-class tavern. They even complimented each other: Amelia was the sweet brunette; Hedge was the sultry blonde – a rarity in these parts that would prove useful if Amelia's plan worked.

Chief Sky wore a practical, form-fitting tunic that highlighted her broad shoulders and powerful arms. With her cropped hair – although she'd let the top grow a bit – and cold eyes she looked as always like an enforcer. That would be particularly useful when the time came, and right now it kept any would-be suitors far away from the table.

Lieutenant Mason Swift was dressed in local working clothes that masked his lean build, and in this crowd of laborers he almost looked skinny. He matched the girls for style and was supposed to be their companion for the evening, but his dour expression and shaved head made him look more like their grumpy uncle than their friend.

"Try to look like you're having a good time, Mason," he chided.

"When you and Chief Killjoy here get moving, it'll be a lot easier."

"Fair enough." He scanned the room again, noting a trio of serious-looking men making their way between the tables toward the dark stairs at one end of the room. "I think our contact is almost here, anyway."

"I see him," Sky muttered, nodding toward the near end of the bar. "Purple coat and gold buckles, talking to the barkeep."

Liam let his eyes drift casually in that direction, spotting the target easily in the sea of drab browns and beiges. He always wondered what drove petty kingpins to show off their wealth – it made them so easy to spot. Sure enough, there was Max Strongback, a merchant who had come to His Majesty's attention over the past few years for a few questionable business deals – and more than a few sudden, mysterious deaths of competitors. His network of influence in this small corner of the planet Sapphira was growing, as was the amount of surveillance His Majesty's diplomatic corps applied to him.

None of this was of any interest to Liam or the Navy, but that steady surveillance had revealed Strongback's connection to a recent incident here on Sapphira that most certainly was. And the meeting Strongback was about to have in the tavern's upper room was one that Liam intended to drop in on.

"You all clear on the escape plan and the rendezvous?" he asked quietly, eyes mainly on Hedge. She wasn't a usual member of the ship's reconnaissance team, but Amelia had convinced him that, given the setting, she'd be a natural asset.

Hedge was busy adjusting her dress to show off her two best natural assets, but she nodded to him. His glance around the table confirmed his confidence in the rest of his team.

Strongback was now making his way through the tavern, gazing benevolently at the seated patrons who glanced up at him. He was a force to be reckoned with, and he knew it.

All the more reason, Liam decided, to take him down a peg. He rose slowly from his stool. "It's time."

Sky stood as well, eyes scanning the room. Liam smoothed out his long, black coat and adjusted his high collar. His outfit was subtle, but to the discerning eye was clearly from the finest tailor. No-one here on the tavern floor would give it more than a second glance, but in the upper room he knew it would speak volumes.

He gave Amelia's shoulder a squeeze.

"Be careful, darling," he whispered.

Her hand reached back to brush against his leg as he passed behind her. Her eyes lifted to meet his, but other than a sly smile she said nothing.

Following Sky, he weaved his way to the outer edge of the tavern and started closing the stairs.

*

Amelia watched Liam depart, still smiling as she admired his tall, lean form. He'd made

a big deal about how his outfit would only be noticed by those wealthy enough to appreciate fine tailoring – but, come on, how could anyone not notice a man that handsome and stylish sidling between the tables? Not that she hadn't drawn a few admiring glances herself with this dress. She felt the coarse fabric between her fingers, recognizing the skill some local seamstress had used to take cheap materials and turn them into something practical and fun. She had a sheathed dagger strapped high inside her thigh, just in case things got really bad. Liam had worried that folks seeing a weapon like that might raise suspicion, but with her hems dropping all the way to floor, she knew this dress would have to be hitched up pretty high for any revelation to occur. And if that happened, she thought with a snigger, she doubted anyone would be looking at the knife.

"Hedgie – Mia!" She reminded herself that on missions they had to use each other's first names only. "Stop playing with yourself."

Hedge cackled as she adjusted her cleavage one more time. "I love wearing dresses – so much more freeing than our uni… What we wear at work."

Mia downed the remainder of Liam's mug of rum and half-rose from her stool, sliding across to land next to Mason Swift as she collected Sky's untouched drink along the way. She draped her arm, crooked at the elbow, on Swift's shoulder.

"Care for a drink… Mason?" She lifted the cup toward his lips with a smile.

Amelia scooted over one stool, resting a hand on Swift's opposite shoulder. "I think the rum is intended for anyone who joins us."

"I'm hoping you'll join me," Hedge said to Swift with a smolder. "Back at my tenement."

"Mia!"

"It's fine," Swift said, a smile creeping across his face. "Honestly we're trying to gather a crowd."

She looked around and saw that an entire table of local men had turned their attention toward them, drunken gazes watching as Hedge traced her finger up Swift's cheek.

“Hey,” Amelia said, making a show of tapping his shoulder, “eyes over here, jerk.”

Swift turned to give her a sympathetic smile, then looked over to where their sudden audience was watching. He gave the men a quick toast with his mug. They all toasted back, downing their drinks.

“Bar wench,” Swift called out loudly, motioning the serving girl over. “Another round for my friends there. And a shot of rum for each of them.”

The men cheered in sudden appreciation. Other tables looked over in curiosity, and more than one new gaze rested on this pale, bald stranger with a young woman on either side. Swift gave the nearby table a gracious nod and looked back at Amelia.

“I think our distraction is starting to take hold.” She felt his arm brush along her back. “Do you mind playing along? It’s nothing personal, Amelia.”

“That’s right,” Hedge breathed, rising on her stool to trace her fingers along Swift’s scalp. “Nothing personal.”

Amelia let her lips curl into a sultry smile as she shuffled closer, leaning into him and feeling more eyes fixate on her. It was actually kind of fun to see the dour Lieutenant Swift transforming into a lady’s man and she ran her hand up his arm. She just hoped Liam couldn’t see the specifics from all the way across the room.

Hedge reached over to gently push Amelia’s shoulder. She knocked Hedge’s hand aside, noting the sudden rush of attention from their audience.

“Okay, I think they’ll be hoping for a fight, soon.” She scanned the distant staircase, and just spotted Liam’s tall figure loitering near it. “The others are in position.”

“We need a good reason to fight,” Hedge said with a grin. “And we need to give them a good show.”

She rose from her stool, leaned in and put her head between Amelia and Swift. Then she laid a wet, lingering kiss on his ear.

“Mia,” Amelia whispered. “This is pretend, remember?”

“I’ve never kissed an officer before,” she whispered back, directly into Swift ear. “I bet it’s fun.”

“You can’t-”

Hedge’s powerful hand suddenly shoved Amelia, knocking her backward. Her stool tipped and she crashed down onto the sticky floor. She heard a gasp from the crowd.

Hedge rose and threw one leg over Swift. She straddled his lap and pressed herself against him as she ran her hands up and down the sides of his head. His hands came up to caress her waist, but when he looked sideways toward Amelia, Hedge gripped his chin and turned him back to her.

She kissed him full on the lips, holding his face with both hands. A drunken cheer went up all around them.

Amelia climbed to feet, fighting the folds of her dress. “Mia, stop!”

She grabbed Hedge’s shoulder and wrenched her clear of Swift. Her friend’s face was one of triumph, but her eyes gleamed expectantly.

Amelia threw her punch, harder than she’d planned. Hedge fell backward, bouncing off the table before tumbling to the floor. Amelia felt the rush of adrenalin, fuelled by the roar of approval around her, and she backhanded Swift and sent him tumbling down as well. The surprised cheer drowned out the words she snapped down at him.

“That’s for enjoying that so much!”

Hedge was already on her feet, face twisting in rage even as her eyes shone with humor. “Let’s do this, bitch!”

Amelia screamed and threw herself into the fight.

*

Liam glanced at Sky as the noise growing at the far end of the tavern swelled into a roar. Half the room was on its feet, and those near him were starting to rise. Whatever Amelia and the others were doing, it was working.

After another loud cheer, the chant of "Fight! Fight! Fight!" started to swell around the room.

"Ahh," one of the tavern bouncers currently guarding the stairs groaned as he gestured at his colleague, "come on!"

They started pushing their way through the cheering crowd.

Sky was already up the stairs and Liam followed quickly, eyes adjusting to the shadows as he padded along the landing. A pair of guards – likely Strongback's own, based on their merchant house tunics – stood by a closed door. They stepped forward immediately.

"No visitors," the first one warned, raising his hand.

Sky grabbed his hand and twisted it. He collapsed to his knees in a cry of pain that was silenced as she slammed her fist into his face. She threw him down and raised her arm to block the strike of the second guard, palm snapping out to drive his face upward. Her second hand formed a knife-edge and drove against his throat, sending him gargling down. Any momentary sounds were swallowed up in the cacophony on the tavern floor. By the time Liam reached the door, both guards lay unconscious.

He tested the door latch – it was unlocked. Nodding to Sky, he pulled back his coat and drew his short sword and a pistol. She did the same. He pressed down on the latch again, and she kicked it open, disappearing through the opening.

Liam was right behind her, slipping through the doorway and scanning center to right with his pistol while Sky covered the left. Detecting no movement, he kicked the door shut behind him and took a better look.

Max Strongback sat in a padded armchair, half-turned and frozen in shock as he stared wide-eyed at the intruders. One guard stood behind him, slowly raising his empty hands as Liam's pistol trained on him. Close on the left was another guard, who stood motionless with

Sky's blade against his neck.

And facing Strongback in the center of the room, resting on a luxurious stool, was a Theropod.

The reptilian alien was motionless. The small, wedge-shaped head was ridged, indicating a male, and it turned on a long neck toward the newcomers even as his body remained upright, facing Strongback. Dressed in plain working clothes he clearly meant to draw no attention to himself, although his long, powerful tail was impossible to hide. His small forearms still gripped a cup of tea, his legs bent in a crouch with backward-bending ankles extending down elongated feet to triangular boots that Liam knew hid wicked claws on the three toes.

"Please," Liam said with a smile, "don't get up. In fact, why don't you two guards lie down on your stomachs, hands on heads."

Strongback's eyes narrowed in anger, but he nodded to his goons to comply. Sky shepherded them both to the side of the room where she could cover them easily. Liam sheathed his sword and moved into clear view of both seated men.

"Apologies for interrupting your meeting. My friend and I just want some information and then we'll go."

"What kind of information?" Strongback muttered.

"Not from you," Liam turned his eyes to the Theropod, "but from your visitor."

"I know nothing about this world," came the response from the translator that hung around the brute's neck as he hissed and growled in his own language. "I have only just arrived."

"That last bit isn't true," Liam said airily, "but we'll ignore it for now. What we won't ignore is the fact that you have dealings with a Theropod art… let's call him an art dealer named Shordar."

"Who?"

"Perhaps your translator isn't quite up to the task, or perhaps I simply can't pronounce

his name properly. Shordar. An infamous thief who preys upon the nobility of this peaceful Empire, stealing only the finest treasures and selling them to," he turned his gaze back to Strongback, "unscrupulous buyers."

"I would never buy stolen goods," Strongback protested.

"That also isn't true," Liam said, letting his tone harden. "As a certain two-story warehouse with faded blue paint and a mild infestation of rats in the eastern dock region can currently prove."

Strongback's face went carefully neutral, but he said nothing. Liam appreciated the few tidbits of intelligence the diplomatic corps had provided earlier but hoped he wouldn't have to pull out many more – he only had one for each of them. He didn't like bluffing, so he decided to just move forward. Reaching into his belt pouch, he pulled out a purse heavy with coin and tossed it on the table between Strongback and the Theropod.

"I just want information about Shordar. And I'm willing to pay. Then my friend and I will leave you to whatever you were discussing."

He was met with silence.

"Who wants to go first?"

"I know nothing about whom you speak," the Theropod said.

Liam lifted his pistol. His finger pulled back on the trigger and the teacup still in the Theropod's hand shattered. Shards of porcelain and lukewarm liquid spattered over both seated figures.

"Let's all stop lying, please," he said, any trace of a smile gone.

The Theropod lowered, legs visibly flexing.

"Very well," it hissed. "I will tell you nothing about whom you speak."

"Then we'll burn your ship. The pinnace with the four red stripes currently docked at the western end of the public terminal."

That was his last trump card, but he kept his expression stony.

The Theropod barked a laugh. “Do you think that’s worse than what will happen to me if I give you information?”

Liam turned questioning eyes to Strongback. The merchant glowered back in silence.

“So be it.” He turned to Sky. “Come, my friend. We have to burn a ship and a warehouse tonight.”

Still, no-one caved. It was, he realized, time to bluff.

“Gag them,” he ordered. “And shoot them all in the legs. I don’t want anyone raising the alarm until we’re gone.”

“All right!” Strongback interjected, raising his hands in acquiescence. “Yes, I was looking to buy an artifact from Shordar.”

“Where is he?”

“Not here,” the Theropod interrupted. “Far away from this stinking world.”

“But he’s going somewhere. Tell me, and keep that purse of coins.”

“Never.”

“Okay, my friend, let’s get started.” Liam stepped forward, aiming his pistol at Strongback’s thigh. How far could he take this bluff?

“Morassia!” the merchant cried. “He has a house on Morassia where he keeps many of his artifacts.”

The Theropod lunged forward, hissing as his jaws went for Strongback’s throat. Liam’s weapon flicked over and a crack thundered through the room. The Theropod stumbled, collapsing through the table as he clutched at his bleeding leg. Shooting a defenceless prisoner was forbidden. But shooting an alien trying to silence his informant… That was allowed.

Strongback recoiled, then stared in fear at Liam.

“Morassia, you say?” he prompted the merchant.

“Yes, in the town called… something unpronounceable that starts with an R. It’s in the center of the southern continent.”

“How does a Human know that?”

“Because Shordar invited me there, when we met. He wanted to show me all his wares.” Strongback took a long breath. “And I think he wanted to show off a little.”

That sounded like the thief Liam was hunting. Famously arrogant, and rightly so. Morassia was the perfect place for a Theropod interested in Human culture to hide in plain sight.

“Tell me everything you know,” Liam said, “no matter how unpronounceable it is. Leave nothing out.”

*

Amelia was pulling the lustrous black hair of some local girl when the bouncers finally grabbed her. As planned, her fight with Hedge had expanded very quickly as they both threw as many wild punches at random female onlookers as they did each other. This had roused the crowd even more, bringing more combatants into the fray and pitting drunken onlookers against outraged boyfriends. It was pure chaos.

Releasing the woman’s hair she slipped free of one bouncer, spinning around the other and kicking out the back of his knee. He stumbled down, but his iron grip still held her arm.

“Ow!” she cried, letting big tears well in her eyes as she looked up at him pleadingly. “You’re hurting me!”

“Don’t give me that,” he scowled, standing up and lifting her clear into the air as he stepped over a stool and kicked aside discarded cups. This entire end of the tavern was littered with broken furniture and overturned tables. The bouncers were advancing like grubby musketeers in a war zone, breaking up the worst of the fighting and hauling people toward the

doors.

Two others pulled Hedge off a man she'd knocked down to the floor – fighting him or kissing him, Amelia could rarely tell – and ignored her screams of protest as her feet lifted into the air and kicked impotently.

She glared at both of them, then twisted to grin at the bigger one. "Hey, you're cute."

"Shut up," he muttered.

They heaved her out the front door. Beyond, the deep blue twilight that was the closest this planet came to night revealed a crowded street. Moments later, Amelia felt herself being flung through the opening. She landed heavily on the cobbled street, righting herself quickly amidst the groaning, cursing patrons in various states of pain all around her.

The narrow road was busy with people out carousing. A single carriage clattered by, the driver shouting at people to keep clear. On one side of the tavern was a stall selling meat pies, and on the other was a stable. The doors were open and straw spilled out as a servant pushed out a wheelbarrow and dumped her load of dung into an open sewer hole. She glanced at the crowd of drunken louts and dropped the wheelbarrow before running back inside.

Many eyes were on her, Amelia noticed, and she realized that her dress had somehow been torn and hung loosely off her left shoulder. It revealed quite a bit more flesh than she intended, and in this part of town at this time of night, it might give the wrong impression.

Hedge rose to her knees and brushed off her dress. It appeared intact, although her blonde hair was a matted mass with strands dancing in the breeze.

Amelia helped her to her feet but then dodged back as Swift came hurtling through the door.

"And stay out!" yelled the bouncer.

Swift picked himself up, examining his shirt that was torn half open from the collar while he hitched up his trousers.

“Where’s your belt?” Amelia asked.

“I dunno,” he said, looking around at the drunken crowd starting to climb to their feet. “Some woman took it off me.”

What she’d thought were bruises on his face were, she realized as she got closer, lipstick.

“The same one who planted these on you?”

“No, another one.” He looked around. “And where’s my shoe?”

“That was awesome,” Hedge said, wrapping an arm around Amelia’s shoulders. “Is it always this much fun when you guys go on missions ashore?”

“Hey!” a stranger shouted, struggling to his feet and stabbing a finger at Swift. “You were kissing my wife.”

“I don’t think I was,” he said, blinking to clear his head as he backed away.

“He’s mine!” Hedge retorted, moving between them and balling her fists. “You keep your little home-wench away from him!”

His eyes widened in shock and anger.

“Hedgie, no,” Amelia hissed, grabbing her arm and pulling her back. “The distraction’s over.”

“This your belt?” another man said, holding it up to Swift.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, stepping forward to grab it. “Thanks.”

“Get him!”

A mug smashed against Swift’s skull, shattering and sending him toppling forward as his eyes rolled back. Amelia caught him, dragging him backward as a trio of angry men started to close in.

“Don’t know where you pasties come from,” one of them slurred, “but you’re gonna learn some manners.”

*

Liam wandered over to the window of the room, looking down on the bustling street below. He sensed that Strongback had truly told him everything he knew, and the discussion had become much more relaxed, almost amiable, once the positions of power had been properly established. Strongback was a survivor, and so long as there were no embarrassing witnesses he was happy to comply with this mysterious stranger.

“I think we’re done, then,” Liam said, as much to Sky as to Strongback.

She hadn’t moved from where she covered the two prone guards, but her nod confirmed that she’d digested everything Strongback had said. The only question remaining, he knew, was how to silence and detain all these people so that he and Sky had enough time to leave unhindered.

The passage of a carriage in the street below caught his eye, the pedestrian crowds moving to make way as it rumbled up and down the street. If he and Sky could grab one of those, they’d be blocks away in moments. He recalled them passing fairly regularly while he and his team had surveyed the tavern earlier.

The crowd below parted again, but this time it was a pair of pale women – one blonde, one brunette – each with a hand on a wheelbarrow they were frantically pushing. In that wheelbarrow was the unconscious form of a man. Close behind them, a trio of men angrily chased them, a growing crowd of men and women following along behind.

He looked quickly around the room one last time, then pushed open the window. The noise of the crowded street rushed upward as he leaned out, noting the series of iron-grilled gardening ledges under each window stretching away until this building joined another with a flatter roof.

“Out we go,” he ordered, climbing through the window frame and scrambling across the sills until he jumped to the next building. He slid along the rough clay shingles until he could see the street below.

Sky joined him, her expression more curious than anything.

"It seems the distraction is continuing," he said, "and our friends are in trouble."

"What else is new?" she asked. "What's the play?"

*

The wheelbarrow rumbled over the cobbles, Swift's deadweight keeping it grounded as Amelia lowered her handle and Hedge raised hers, turning the whole contraption to the left as they weaved onto a new street. Amelia knew the boat was waiting for them in the docks, but a single glance back proved that they'd never make it, even with their pursuers as drunk as they were. The street widened out into a courtyard, quiet at this time of night, with roads leading off on all four sides.

"The boat is just a few more blocks down there," she gasped, pointing to the right. "You go and get them and come back for us. I'll hold them here."

"How?"

"Trust me."

Hedge, to her credit, didn't hesitate, letting Amelia take both handles of the wheelbarrow and then dashed off toward the docks. Looking back, Amelia saw their pursuers pause in confusion for a moment. Then, after a quick, drunken debate, two of them went after Hedge and the third followed her. Perfect.

She scanned the courtyard, spotting an open gate that led into what looked like a private garden with an awning over it. With a surge of energy she pushed the wheelbarrow through the gate, slamming it shut behind her. She had enough time to park the unconscious Swift and stand in front of him before the gate burst open and a panting, red-faced, jealous drunk stumbled through.

"That's far enough," she said firmly.

"Your man," he gasped, "kissed my wife."

“There was a lot of confusion in that room,” she said, keeping her voice calm. “I’m sure it was a mistake.”

She could take him if she needed to, but ideally this evening could end without real violence.

He looked past her, eyeing up Swift’s limp form. “No mistake. He’s the only bald pasty I’ve ever seen. Don’t even know why she wanted to kiss him.”

“What?” she said, seeing an angle. “You don’t think pale skin is attractive?”

She took a step toward him, brushing her torn dress to reveal a bit more of her shoulder, and just hint of the curve of her breast. His eyes were automatically drawn down, his drunken thoughts swirling.

“If it was a kiss that caused all this fuss,” she said with a smile, “maybe another kiss can put it to rest.”

His eyes took on a dangerous gleam. “It’d need to be more than a kiss. A lot more.”

She kept her smile seductive, but inwardly she sighed. Any good man could be jealous, but no good man would cheat on his wife. This idiot had just revealed his true character.

“So,” she said, “you want to see what’s under my skirts?”

“For a start.”

She reached down and grabbed her hem, slowly lifting it up with one hand as she reached beneath and gripped the concealed dagger with the other.

“That’s close enough,” boomed a new, deep voice from above.

The man’s eyes jerked upward, then widened as he backed away. Amelia stole a glance over her shoulder.

Liam stood on the roof of the building, pistol out and pointed at the man. She let her hands go loose, ignoring the dagger and letting her dress fall back to her feet. The drunk ran off,

and after a moment Liam lowered himself to the awning, slid along the smooth surface and dropped down beside her.

"I had him right where I wanted him," she said with a scowl.

He glanced at Swift, then gave her a wink. "You're welcome, darling."

"Did you get the info we needed?"

"I did. We need to get back to the ship and on our way, before the info goes cold." He took both handles of the wheelbarrow and leaned it toward the street. "What happened to Mason?"

"Too many admirers," she said, holding open the gate and then shutting it behind.

"I knew that would catch up to him one day."

"A problem you both have, no doubt."

She smacked him on the butt, spotting the ship's boat as it soared into the courtyard and settled down in the center. Hedge and Sky were both already aboard, she saw. Her plan had worked.

They reached the boat. Sky climbed out with the bowsman, Able Rating Hunter, to load Swift through the transparent canopy and onto one of the benches. Sky gave him a quick exam.

"Still breathing," she reported to the boat coxn, Master Rating Faith, "no blood. He's just going to sleep it off."

"I'll be happy to join him," Hedge said, rolling her shoulders and wincing. "I'm beat."

Sky frowned as she stepped out of the boat, eyes automatically scanning the deserted courtyard for threats before she sized up Amelia. "You okay, Petty Officer Virtue?"

"Fine. Just some bruises and bloody knuckles."

"You're lucky," she said quietly, glancing back to where Hedge sat in the boat. "And

now Hedge is going to tell everyone on board that all our missions are just good, clean fun."

"I'll take lucky and good, clean fun any time, Chief."

"Just next time," Sky muttered, flicking a loose corner of Amelia's torn dress, "try to come up with a plan that doesn't involve you and your team taking half their clothes off."

She didn't argue – there was no point in arguing with the ship's assaulter, who had more experience than all of them put together. But who also, Amelia knew, only had one style. One brutal, effective style. After all this time together, she'd hoped that Sky might appreciate her more flexible approach to missions.

"I think Petty Officer Virtue performed brilliantly," Liam declared.

Sky gave him the ghost of a look. "Yes, sir."

The assaulter gave Amelia another once-over, then climbed into the boat.

"You know," she said, turning back to Liam, "I really was fine. You should have focused on completing the mission and getting that info transmitted to the ship."

"You're much more important to me than any mission," he said, turning fully to her.

The look in his eyes spoke the truth of his words. She both loved him and hated him for it.

"Well, I'm fine. And you got your info, thanks to my plan."

"Your plan? I'm the one who figured out that Strongback was meeting a Theropod contact of Shordar's."

"And I'm the one who ensured you had the chance to speak with him."

He gave her a strange smile, then nodded. "I suppose so."

"So next time," she said with a smile, gesturing for him to precede her into the boat, "let me execute my plan the way I want."

He regarded her for a moment, his smile softening.

“Very well.”