

# PRINCE'S MISSION

FREELANCER #2



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## CHAPTER 1



I rested my head on the warm, naked chest of my prince and listened to the thumping of his heart after sex. The smell of him – the smell of *us* – filled the royal bedchamber with a steamy musk which would alert the staff to what we had been doing long after I had sneaked out of Londos House. It was illicit sex, it was exciting. He was the second in line to the Fertillan throne and I was a lowly spaceship captain – it was part of the thrill. But it was also the barrier that kept us apart for long, lonely periods and reduced our relationship to moments snatched in secret.

“I have to go, Stephen,” I said as I drew my index finger across his chest and traced a line through the hairs still damp with sweat.

He clasped my hand. “Don’t go, Cassy,” he said.

“I have to. We have a cargo run.”

“Anywhere interesting?”

“Leontes Station. It’s where Keya and some of the scientists went after the Octavia Research Station was destroyed.”

The mention of it still sent a wave of guilt through my body. The survivors had thanked us for giving them the chance to get out before the station exploded, but the truth was if I hadn’t gone there in the

first place, the station would still exist, intact, spinning in space with scientists living on board and carrying out their work.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Not long. A week, possibly. It’s a return trip. We take them a shipment of supplies and we bring back a shipment of fertiliser.”

“They make fertiliser there?” said Stephen. “I thought it was a research station.”

“Everyone makes fertiliser,” I giggled. “It’s what happens to your food after you’ve eaten it.”

“Ah,” he nodded, as if he should have known. “You’re bringing back their waste. Delightful.”

“It’s not that bad. By the time it gets to us, it’s no more than dry granules. They extract all the water for recycling and what’s left can be used on farms on Fertilla. You should know that, your family runs a farming planet.”

“That’s my brother’s business,” he said. “He won’t tell me what he’s up to, even when I ask.”

“Then you’ll have to take my word for it that it’s a very important cargo of poo and I have to go.” I slipped my hand from his grasp and slid away from his soft, comforting body. But he pulled me back close again with his other hand. His expert fingers clasped my breast and brushed across my nipple, igniting a network of nerves through my body.

“Stay a bit longer, Cassy,” he whispered.

I moaned at his touch as my nipple sat up straight as if begging for more. I sighed at the knowledge that I could not obey what my body wanted. “I can’t be late, Stephen. If I’m not there to load the supplies onto my ship, they might not hire me again.”

Reluctantly, I prised myself away from him and from his bed and stood naked before him. I waited for a moment, enjoying the way he looked at me with raw desire, before I turned away and faced the pile of my clothes on the floor where we had thrown them onto a chair and missed.

The reality of the room where we’d had our illicit sex came into

sharp focus. Back on my ship, my room had a chair moulded into a practical shape from cheap artificial materials, whereas the chair in Stephen's bed chamber was made from real wood varnished to a golden lustre that caught the light. Rifling for my underwear beside it, I became aware of the softness of the carpet under my bare feet. Climbing into my trousers, I estimated the large, ornate room was big enough to fit my own bedroom inside it four times over. Even the bed, with its imposing frame reaching to the ceiling, could sleep a whole family. Stephen, however, seemed to command it, as he lay with the sheets draped casually across his bottom half and watched me fasten the buttons of my shirt.

I sighed again as I stopped myself from clambering back into bed and resting my head on his exposed chest which had made such a sensual pillow only minutes before.

I dropped my gaze and bent down to attend to my boots until a shadow fell across me and I was aware of Stephen's presence. He had put on a robe of lustrous deep blue material that shimmered in the light. He offered his hand, I took it and he pulled me up to standing.

We faced each other and the smell of him again begged me to stay.

"I hate it when you go," he said.

"It's only for a week."

"A week this time, a month last time, who knows how long next time?"

"It's my job."

"I wish it wasn't."

"Your job doesn't make things any easier, Your Highness."

He looked away, uncomfortably. "Don't call me that. The staff call me that."

"If you were an ordinary person, I wouldn't have to sneak in here like some kind of thief."

"If we made our relationship official, my family would have certain expectations of you and you wouldn't like it."

"I don't think your family would like that I'm a lowly, freelan—"

He pulled me close before I could finish and devoured my words

with his lips. I returned the kiss, but he became distracted and pulled away.

There was a mischievousness in his eyes. For once, it wasn't motivated by sex. "Why don't you work for me?" he said.

"In the royal household?" The whole joy of my job was I wasn't tied to any one place. I was absolutely a freelancer, with the emphasis on *free*. "I'm not being your scullery maid, if that's what you're thinking."

"No!" said Stephen. "I could hire you. You're a freelancer for hire, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but you already have your own spaceships and crews of Fertillan Guard."

"I need someone who I can trust who can operate in secret. My brother keeps wormholing off somewhere and I need to know why."

"I'm not spying on your brother!"

"Why not, Cassy? You could report back to me, it would give us an excuse to see each other and I wouldn't have to worry about you going away on long, dangerous missions."

I put my hand to his shoulder and felt its warmth. It was tempting to think I could take a job which would allow me to see him more often, but the last time my boss and my lover had been the same person I had watched him being executed and his body sent to burn in the nearest sun.

"Sharing a bed and business is never a good idea," I said.

"I'll pay a top rate."

"Money and sex are always tempting, Stephen, but..."

"It'll be an honest job for an honest fee," he said. "Like all your other jobs."

"But it won't be like my other jobs," I said, "I thought that was the point."

"Think about it, at least."

I had thought about it already, but I didn't want to leave him on a note of rejection. "Sure," I said. "I'll think about it."

I allowed my hand to fall away from his shoulder and walked

across the plush carpet to the door. As I turned the handle, I considered looking back at him one final time, but our goodbyes had already taken too long and so I stepped through the doorway into the unwelcoming chill of the corridors of the royal household.

