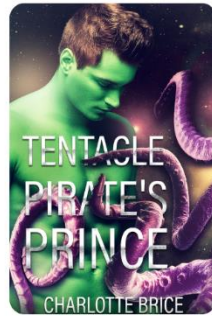


TENTACLE PIRATE'S PRINCE



Chapter One



Ezra

I am the crown prince, the sole heir to my father's impressive throne. Not that I'm saying the chair itself is magnificent or anything, but King of the Tolithian Solar system's twelve colonised planets of mineral mines is a hefty title.

In the large, breezy auditorium of the Royal Palace, my father sits in his royal chair, my mother in hers beside him. This is a private audience with my parents, just us and the four members of the royal guard on duty. My parents, King Hadri and Queen Helenia rule as a proud and traditional couple, not quite as progressive as outsiders might believe. Not when it comes to me, anyway. They sit in their suit and dress of brushed velvet, matching colour and style. The royal clothing co-ordinator does a magnificent job. Even my own clothing was chosen to match with my parents, my own more formal for my public appearance later. Mother looks as perfect as ever, not a dark hair out of place.

Like all who stand before them, I am not gifted a chair to sit as an equal. I just stand formally, the designated distance from the steps to their royal platform. I stand and obey just like the rest of Father's subjects. Being the only child to the royal couple grants me no favour here.

"Today is the day you depart on your trip?" Father speaks with a questioning tone.

"Yes Father," I reply. He knows the damn answer, he planned the trip. I am here as nothing more than a pawn in his royal performance.

“How do you feel?” he questions me further. He doesn’t want my true feelings, just an assurance that I will go along with the script I’ve been dealt.

“I am the crown prince. I do not feel anything. I will simply go and do my duty to the crown and to the Tolithian system.” In reality, I am devastated and crushed inside. They are asking me to do the unthinkable. I knew this day would come since I was a child, but I never dreamt my parents could twist it into something this evil. But I won’t show it. I will stay the prim and proper, emotionless prince I was raised to be.

“Then I bid you both a safe and successful trip.” Father places his hand over Mother’s. It’s the only emotional regard I’ve ever seen him show another person. Just when she leaves him, he will place his hand over hers.

Mother is coming with me, my reluctance at their order means I need someone with me with authority to ensure I follow this through. There are only two people alive who can force me to do something I don’t want to. My parents. Of course, there are hundreds of people strong enough to force me, but none of them would dare try. Not without my father giving the orders.

Mother rises, curtsies before the king and leaves the room in her rich, bold gown. I bow politely before turning and walking away from my father, leaving him alone in the throne room. He isn’t cruel, just void of emotions. How hard would it be to utter the words ‘good luck’ when we’re alone like this?

“Your father is just stressed.” Mother waits for me at the chamber door, my pace just a few steps behind hers. The guards push the large double doors, revealing the long corridor I must now walk.

“I know.” I have learnt to be as cold to them as they are to me. In my twenty-one years, I have never been anything more than an object to mould into a king. My feelings don’t matter.

“You are doing the right thing,” she continues her words of empty encouragement as we walk side by side through the vast corridors of the castle.

“The right thing would be staying quiet about how much I hate this, I assume?”

“I am proud of you, my son, you will be a truly great king.”

By that, I assume she thinks I will still obey them when my parents reach retirement age and hand me the throne. I have heard how my grandfather hoped for the same when he handed the crown to my father, and how disappointed he was when my father ruled his own way. I look forward to the day when I can show them that karma really is a bitch.

I focus my gaze on the door at the far end, hold my head high, tense my jaw, and walk.

Walking is hard work. Servants and guards scurry around, not daring to step foot on the broad gold carpet reserved for Mother and me. As we stride past, they all press against the wall, giving a bow or curtsy. I am not allowed to look at any of them.

We stop our well-rehearsed walk at another set of wide doors, pausing as they are swung open by conveniently placed guards. I keep my eyes dead ahead as the world opens out before me.

Ahead is the large royal balcony, below which are the people responsible for the screaming and cheering. Just opening the doors has them excited. Once the doors are fully opened, the guards resume their rigid visual, and I step forward. Mother matches me step for step and together we reach the balcony rail.

The screams are deafening. The people - our people - are so pleased to catch a glimpse of their royal family. They've waited all morning for this fleeting glance at us, and I'm not even permitted to smile. Just the royal wave. I don't see any of them, but to be fair, I don't look. Schooled as a child, I was directed to keep my eyes on the only green chimney pot. Head up, face still, stare at the green chimney and wave with my right hand.

I wave like my soul isn't about to be sucked from me.

My father rules a solar system of twelve planets, all of them occupied, and contributing to mineral mining. It's something in the rock our planets are made from, when crumbled and separated, it is an exquisite and expensive condiment for dehydrated space food.

These mineral harvests have led to a diverse range of skin colours, each native to a different planet. It's become ingrained in our genes over generations and moving planets doesn't change the colour of our skin. It means the view from my peripheral vision is a sea of colours as people mix from every planet across the solar system. Most visitors have the same green skin as Mother and me, born native to this planet, Kodifol, but each skin tone is represented in the sea of people below us.

It would be an incredible experience to walk with them, amongst them. But, alas, I live the privileged life of a prince where such joys are denied. No one is allowed within three metres of me without passing the rigorous checks required.

Chapter Two



Jighor

In the cramped and dirty spaceship, Cororus, it is hard to keep my medical station clean to the standard I was trained to maintain. It requires regular wiping down of surfaces and instruments, a task that keeps me amply busy from day to day. From the medical bed bolted to the centre of the room, my many tentacle arms can reach every corner of the room. It makes cleaning a smooth and effortless process I find soothing and relaxing. I need to relax today but nothing is working to soothe my reservations.

I tidy my compact workspace hurriedly with an awkward anxiety to my movements. My tentacles whip out in every direction as they sort medical equipment into their pre-designated places. I'm so nervous about the captain's plans for today.

Of all the men aboard the small pirate ship, I am the only crewman with medical training. That's my value to this crew, not running around on raids and robberies. I wait here and put them back together again after. I do a pretty good job of it too, considering I'm not in a hospital but a tiny, cramped space on a crappy pirate ship.

How did I end up here? Living day to day as a criminal after prestigious medical school. Frankly, people are put off by the tentacles. My reflection in the instrument tray halts me. I'm a space octopus, for the lack of a better word. My head, I am told, is similar to an Earth octopus. The captain, and majority of the crew are from the native species, though I doubt any have ever set foot on their home world. Under my octopus head, I have a membrane skirt hanging down to protect the majority of my smaller tendrils, but six fat tentacles hold me perfectly still on a moving spaceship.

I wouldn't know if I am a prime specimen of my kind, we're so rare, even I haven't seen another. My species are hermaphrodite, we have both genders contained within us, so I only need to meet one of my kind, without worrying about meeting the right gender as so many of my companions here do. Other than the captain, they all identify as male, probably the main reason why I do. They all complain about the lack of females, and let's face it, no one would try making advances against the captain even if she was a looker. It explains how the ship ends up trying to sell our wares on the poor planet of Grelstin, instead of more profitable locations. Grelstin is a

planet trading in sex workers. Not that I ever partake in their offerings. I find the womanly body of a human quite weird and unappealing.

The captain used to be a pretty young woman when we first met. But life as a pirate is hard and without the luxuries of a legal occupation, we all have to live with what we can steal. So far, we have failed to ever steal toothpaste. Apparently, this next mission will steal something that could change our lives forever.

I have no idea why the captain needs me to go along with them for this mission, but I have never seen her so excited about a raid. Ok, that isn't true, there was one mission about five years ago where we - but I digress. She hasn't been this happy in five years. Her happiness should increase my own, but it only brings out my anxiety. She is planning a big heist and she won't tell me all the details.

"Jighor?" The voice of the captain calls my name as she enters without knocking. "What do you know about the Tolithian?"

"Not much. They are humanoid, as you are. Mineral miners, over the solar system, producing beautiful food supplements, which leech into their skin."

"Indeed, I do believe their skin is a rainbow of colour."

"I believe each of the species is one colour, but as a species, they represent a rainbow of diversity." I wonder what her plan has to do with a remote species of mineral miners.

I often wondered if minerals are something that is safe to be mined as food? It crosses my mind that I have no idea how the delicious flavours are made. But the doubts leave my mind once I taste the improvement they bring to my rations. One thing I am certain of, is that I wouldn't have survived twenty long years on this ship without them to bring my otherwise bland meals to life.

"How dangerous is this mission, captain?" I am all but never required to join the raiding party on missions, but I have been especially requested for today's raid. That is what has me such a bundle of nerves.

"For us?" She replies, dismissing my concerns with a shrug. "I'm not taking you with us because I think we'll get hurt. I'm taking you because I don't want our prize to get hurt."

Her words give me relief but no comfort as she implies our target is a living being, probably Tolithian, given her current interest in them.

"Are you sure this is a wise mission for us, Carla?" We live in a dilapidated tin can. Everything in the ship is getting old, even the crew.

"This mission could set up our retirement. We could finally stop all this and find a place...somewhere. Remember our dreams? When you joined the crew, I said it would only be for a few years, and now look at us."

I remember the dream well. Her dream. We would make a bit of money and use it to set ourselves up somewhere. She'd be the face of the business, arranging cheap medical assistance to those who could pay, and I'd perform the operations. Once word of my skill got out, no one would care what I look like. Sometimes she indulges me. We land the ship from time to time and open the doors to a few injured souls while the guys buy and sell what they need, but it's never enough.

I zone her voice out as my tentacles continue their task of tidying. She has always promised me the world. That's how I got roped into all this in the first place. I was unable to get a job because my looks freaked people out. But Carla was kind to me, she saw through my purple tentacles, and found the being behind.

Then she lured me onto her ship, and I've never left. I suppose no one gets to live the life they dreamt as a child, but sometimes I regret not trying harder. I could have practiced medicine in a place that truly appreciated my superior skills.

I'm tired of being here. I'm tired of being lonely. But what chance do I have? Who would want someone like me? I know the answer - no one. And that is why I'll be a slave to this ship until the day I die.

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