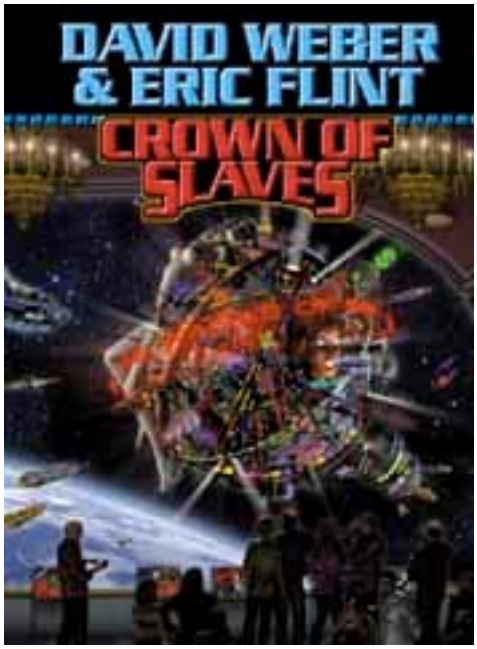
Crown of Slaves

David Weber and Eric Flint



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A Baen Books Original

Baen Publishing Enterprises
P.O. Box 1403
Riverdale, NY 10471
www.baen.com

ISBN: 0-7434-7148-2

Cover art by David Mattingly

First printing, September 2003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Weber, David, 1952-
Crown of slaves / David Weber & Eric Flint.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-7434-7148-2 (hardcover)
1. Life on other planets—Fiction. I. Flint, Eric. II. Title.
PS3573.E217C76 2003
813'.54—dc22
2003014257

Distributed by Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Production by Windhaven Press, Auburn, NH
Printed in the United States of America

To Andre Norton—

Andre, you proved long ago that being a giant
has nothing to do with physical stature. You've been taking giant steps and teaching the art of story-telling for over half a century, and we are among those—
those many—who have been privileged to be your students. It's time we told the teacher thank you.

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PART I:
MANTICORE

Chapter 1

"I'm really nervous, Daddy," whispered Berry, glancing almost furtively at the resplendently uniformed soldiers who seemed to line the entire length of the hallway leading to Queen Elizabeth's private audience chamber.

"No reason to be," gruffed Anton Zilwicki, continuing to advance stolidly toward the great double doors at the end of the hallway. The doors, like much of the furniture in Mount Royal Palace, were made of ferran. Even at the considerable distance, Anton could easily recognize the distinctive grain of the wood, as well as the traditional design which had been carved into it. Ferran was native to the highlands of his home planet of Gryphon, and he'd done quite a bit of work with the stuff in his youth. Most Gryphon highlanders did, at one time or another.

Part of him—the rational, calculating side which was so prominent a feature of his personality—was pleased to see the wood. The wooden doors, and the carvings on them even more so, were a subtle reminder to everyone that the Winton dynasty that they valued their Gryphon highlander subjects as much as Manticorans proper. But Anton couldn't help remembering how much he'd hated working with the stuff as a boy. The root of the word "ferran" was a none-too-subtle indicator of its most outstanding property other than the attractive grain and rich color.

The enormous muscles in Anton's forearms were the product of his weight-lifting regimen as an adult; but, already as a boy, those muscles had been hard and powerful. Ferran could not be worked by weaklings. The stuff was almost as hard as iron, and just as easy to shape with hand tools.

Anton's lips twitched. The same accusation—or its kin, at any rate—had been leveled at him, and quite a bit more often than once. Damn you, Zilwicki! Hard as a rock and just as easy to move!

That very morning, in fact, and by his lover Cathy Montaigne.

"I think Mommy was right," whispered Berry. "You should have worn your uniform."

"They put me on half-pay," he growled. "I'm supposed to wear that silly dress uniform—most uncomfortable thing I own—afterward? Like a poodle sitting up to beg forgiveness?"

Berry's nervous glances at the guards in the hallway were now definitely furtive, especially the glance she cast at the four soldiers following them a few steps behind. Clearly enough, the teenage girl was half-expecting the Queen's Own Regiment to arrest them on the spot for . . .

Whatever fancy legal phrase covered: charged with being the stubborn disrespectful lout Anton Zilwicki and his adopted daughter.

"The Queen didn't put you on the beach," she hissed hastily, as if that disclaimer might possibly establish her own innocence. "That's what Mommy kept saying to you this morning. I heard her. She was pretty loud."

The thing that flashed immediately through Anton's mind was a soft pleasure at Berry's use of the term Mommy to refer to Cathy Montaigne. Technically, of course, she wasn't. Berry and her brother Lars had been adopted by Anton, and since he and Cathy were not married the most that Cathy could officially be called was . . .

Again, his lips twitched. Daddy's girlfriend, maybe. Paramour, if you wanted to be fancy about it. "Anton's squeeze" was the term Cathy herself enjoyed using in proper company. The former Countess of the Tor took a childish pleasure in seeing pained expressions on the faces of polite society.

For Berry and Lars, born and raised in the hell of the Old Quarter on Earth's capital city of Chicago, the legalities were meaningless. Since Anton's daughter Helen had found and rescued them from the catacombs, Berry and Lars had found the first real family they'd ever had. And Anton was glad to see the ease with which that knowledge now came to them.

But pleasure was for a later time. This was a moment for a father's stern instructions. So Anton removed the smile, came to an abrupt halt, and half-glowered at his daughter. He ignored the four soldiers who abruptly found themselves coming to an unexpected halt, almost stumbling into their charges.

"And so what?" he demanded. He made no attempt to keep his basso voice from rumbling down the hallway, although the thickening Gryphon Highlander accent probably made the words unrecognizable by the time they reached the ears of the majordomo standing by the far doorway.

"The monarch stands at the center of things, girl. For that, the Crown gets my allegiance. Unconditional allegiance, too, so long as the dynasty respects the rights of their subjects. But the reverse stands true as well. I do not condemn Her Majesty for the actions of 'her' government, mind. It's a constitutional monarchy, and as things stand at the moment, that would be silly. But she gets no praise for it, either."

He almost laughed, seeing Berry swallowing. To the former urchin of Chicago's underworld, power was power and "the laws" be damned. No laws nor lawmen had prevented her from suffering the horrors she'd lived through. Nor would they have, ever, in the world she'd come from. All that had ended it was the naked violence of Anton's daughter Helen, a young Havenite intelligence officer named Victor Cachan, and a dozen ex-slave killers from the Audubon Ballroom led by Jeremy X.

Yet a father's job is to educate his children, and Anton would no more shirk that duty than any other.

He heard one of the soldiers standing behind him clear his throat in a none-too-polite reminder. The Queen is waiting, you fool!

A splendid opportunity to continue the lesson, he decided. Anton gave the soldier—the sergeant commanding their little four-man escort—his most intimidating stare.

And quite intimidating it was, too. Anton was a short man, but so wide and extravagantly muscled that he looked like something out of a legend of dwarven kings. The blocky head and dark eyes—hard as agates, at times like these—only heightened the effect. The soldiers staring at him would no doubt be wondering if Anton could bend steel bars with his bare hands.

He could, in fact. And the soldiers were probably also suddenly remembering that the grotesquely built man glowering at them had, in younger days, been the Star Kingdom's champion wrestler in his weight class.

All four of them took a half-step back. The sergeant's right hand even twitched ever so slightly toward the sidearm holstered at his side.

Good enough. Anton wasn't actually seeking an incident, after all. He let his eyes slide away from the soldiery and come back to his daughter.

"I'm no damn nobleman, girl. Neither are you. We ask no courtier favors—nor do we bend our knees. They put me on the beach, and the Queen said nothing. So she can live with it as well as they or I can. That's why that uniform is in the closet and will stay there. Understand?"

Berry was still nervous. "Should I, maybe, bow or something?"

Anton rumbled a laugh. "Do you even know how to 'bow'?"

Berry nodded. "Mommy showed me."

Anton's glower was coming back in full force. Hastily, Berry added: "But not the way she does it—or used to do it, anyway, before she became a commoner."

Anton shook his head. "Bowing is for formal occasions, girl. This is an informal audience. Just stand quietly and be polite, that's good enough." He turned and resumed his progress toward the doors leading to the Royal Presence. "Besides, I wouldn't trust you to do it right anyway. Sure as certain not if Cathy showed you how, with all of a noblewoman's flourish and twirls."

His lips twitched again, his good humor returning. "When she's in the mood—not often, I admit—she can make any duchess turn green with envy with that fancy bow of hers."

If nothing else, by the time they reached the doors and a glaring majordomo began swinging them open, Anton's display of highlander contrariness seemed to have relaxed Berry a bit. No doubt she'd reached the conclusion that the royal displeasure soon to descend on her father would be so thoroughly focused on him that she might emerge unscathed.

* * *

In the event, however, the Queen of the Star Kingdom greeted them with a smile so wide it might almost be called a grin. Against Elizabeth's mahogany skin, the white teeth gleamed brightly. From what Anton could determine, the sharp-toothed gape on the face of the Queen's companion Ariel seemed even more cheerful. Anton was no expert on treecats, but he knew they usually reflected the emotions of the human with whom they were bonded. And if that vaguely feline shape lounging casually across the thickly upholstered backrest of the Queen's chair was offended or angry, there was no sign of it.

Despite his contrariness of the moment, Anton could not keep himself from warming toward the Queen. He was still a Crown Loyalist, when all was said and done, even if that once-simple political philosophy had developed a lot of curlicues and embroidery in the years since he'd met Catherine Montaigne. And he approved of this particular monarch, from all that he'd been able to see of her since she came to the throne.

The knowledge was all from a distance, however. He'd never actually met Queen Elizabeth, other than seeing her at a handful of large official gatherings.

He caught a glimpse of the young woman seated next to the Queen making an almost-furtive motion at the small console attached to her own chair. Glancing quickly to the side, Anton spotted a discreetly recessed viewscreen in the near wall of the small chamber. The display was dark now, but he suspected that the Queen and her companion had been observing him as he approached down the hallway—in which case, they would have heard his little exchange with Berry. Every word of it, unless the audio pickups were a lot worse than you'd expect in the palace of the galaxy's most electronically advanced realm.

He was not offended by the notion. In his days as a Navy yard dog, he might have been. But Anton's many years since as an intelligence officer—which he still basically was, even if in private practice—had given him a laissé attitude toward surveillance. So long as people respected his privacy, which he defined as his home and hearth, he didn't much care who snooped on him in public places. Whatever his other faults, Anton Zivkov was not a hypocrite, and it wasn't as if he didn't do the same himself.

Besides, it was obvious from her smile the Queen wasn't offended. If anything, she seemed amused. He could sense Berry's relaxation as that knowledge came to her also.

But Anton wasn't paying much attention to Berry. As they continued to advance slowly toward the elaborate chairs which served Elizabeth and her companion as informal thrones, Anton's attention was given to the young woman seated next to the Queen.

At first, he thought he'd never seen the woman before, not even in file imagery or a holograph. As he drew nearer, however, he began connecting her features with those he'd seen in a few images taken when the girl was considerably younger. Soon enough, Anton had deduced her identity.

The age was the final giveaway. Anton was no expert on couture, but it was obvious even to him that the young woman's apparel was extremely expensive. The kind of clothing that would be worn by a noblewoman serving as the Queen's adviser. But this woman was much too young for that. Granted, prolong made gauging age rather difficult, but Anton was sure this woman was almost as young as the teenager she looked to be.

That meant a member of the royal family itself, close kin, and there was only one such who fit the bill. The fact that the girl's complexion was so much paler than the standard Winton skin color just added the icing to the cake.

Ruth Winton, then, the daughter of the Queen's sister-in-law Judith Winton. Ruth had been sired by a Masadan private but adopted by the Queen's younger brother Michael when he married Judith after her escape from captivity. If Anton remembered correctly—and his memory was phenomenal—the girl had been born after Judith's escape, so Michael was the only father Ruth had ever known. She'd be about twenty-three years old now.

Because of the awkwardness of the girl's paternity, she was officially not part of the line of succession to the throne. Other than that, however, she was in effect Queen Elizabeth's niece. Anton wondered what she was doing here, but he gave the matter no more than a fleeting thought. He had no idea what he was doing here, after all, since the Queen's summons had come as a surprise to him. He was quite sure she would discover the answer soon enough.

He and Berry reached a point on the floor which Anton decided marked a proper distance from The Royal Person. He stopped and bowed deeply. Next to him, Berry did a hasty and nervous version of the same.

Hasty, yes—but still far too elaborate for Anton's taste. However much of his rustic

background Anton might have abandoned when he left Gryphon many years earlier, he still retained in full measure a highlander's inherent plebeianism. Kneeling and scraping and kowtowing and fancy flourishes before royalty were aristocratic vices. Anton would give the Crown his loyalty and respect, and that was damn well all.

He must have scowled a bit. The Queen laughed and exclaimed: "Oh, please, Captain Zilwicki! The girl has a splendid bow. Still a bit awkward, perhaps, but I recognize Cathy's touch in it. Can't miss that style, as much trouble as Cathy got me into about it, the time she and I infuriated our trainer by doing what amounted to a ballet instead of an exercise. It was all her idea, of course. Not that I wasn't willing to go along."

Anton had heard about the incident, as it happened. Cathy had mentioned it to him once. Although Cathy rarely spoke of the matter, as she and the Queen had been very close friends before their developing political differences ruptured the relationship. But, even then, there'd been no personal animosity involved. And Anton had not been the only one who'd noticed that, after Cathy's return from exile, there was always an undertone of warmth on those occasions when she and Queen Elizabeth encountered each other.

True, the encounters were still relatively few and far between, because the Queen faced an awkward political situation. While Elizabeth herself shared Cathy's hostility to genetic slavery—as did, for that matter, the government of Manticore itself, on the official record—Cathy's multitude of political enemies never missed an opportunity to hammer at Cathy's well-known if formally denied ties with the Audubon Ballroom. Despite Manticore's position on slavery, the Ballroom remained proscribed in the Star Kingdom as a "terrorist" organization, and its leader Jeremy X was routinely reviled as the galaxy's most ruthless assassin.

That was not how either Cathy or Anton looked at the matter—nor the Queen herself, Anton was pretty sure—but private opinions were one thing, public policy another. Whether or not Elizabeth agreed with the stance taken toward the Ballroom by her government, that was the official stance. So, however friendly might be the personal relations between her and Cathy whenever they "accidentally" encountered each other at social gatherings, the Queen was careful not to give Cathy any formal political recognition. Even though—of this, Anton was positive—no one would be more delighted than Queen Elizabeth to see Cathy displace New Kiev as the leader of the Liberal Party.

Elizabeth laughed again. "The things she got into! One scrape after another. My favorite escapade—the one that got her banned from the Palace for months, my mother was so furious—was the time—"

She broke off abruptly. The grin faded, becoming almost strained, but didn't vanish entirely.

"Yes, I know, Captain Zilwicki. And now she's banned from the Palace again—politically, if not personally—and by my order, not the Queen Mother's. Which, as it happens, is why I asked you here. In a complicated sort of way."

The Queen made a little motion to the major domo. Obviously expecting it, the man and one of the soldiers standing guard brought up two chairs against a wall and positioned them in front of the Queen and her companion.

"Do have a seat, Captain, please. Both of you."

Interesting, thought Anton. He was not familiar with royal protocol from personal experience, but he knew a lot about it. Anton knew a lot about most things which bore in any way upon his concerns. He was sure he lacked knowledge of some of the fine points, but the matter of seating

etiquette was fairly straightforward. When one was summoned before the monarch, one normally was either presented with chairs as one came into the room, or one stood throughout the audience. The distinction was rather sharp, and indicated either one's status or one's favor with the monarch, or both.

This half-and-half arrangement, he suspected, was the Queen's way of signaling a half-and-half sort of business. What anyone not encumbered by the necessary burden of royal protocol would have indicated by just saying: "Let's see if we can make a deal."

Anton's sense of humor was far more restrained than that of his lover Cathy Montaigne, but it was by no means absent. So, as he took his seat, he found himself fighting off the impulse to respond with "you shuffle the cards and I'll cut 'em."

As soon as he was seated, Elizabeth gestured toward the young woman sitting next to her. "This is my niece Ruth, as I imagine you've already deduced."

Anton nodded; first at the Queen, to acknowledge her guess, and then at the royal niece.

"You would have rarely seen a picture of her—and none in the last four years—because we've always kept her out of the limelight." A bit stiffly: "That is not, incidentally—whatever the 'faxes may have speculated about—because the House of Winton is in the least bit concerned about Ruth's parentage, much less ashamed of it. In her early years, it was to protect her from possible harm. Her father—her mother's rapist, I should say—along with many of those Masadan fanatics, escaped after Earl White Haven captured the planet following their attack on Grayson. We've been looking for them ever since, but I'm sure you know even better than I, we haven't had much success finding them."

The Queen grimaced, and Zilwicki nodded mentally. A hard, disciplined core of the Masadan version of the Church of Humanity Unchained had managed to go deep underground and stay there. The fact that they were still hidden after over fifteen T-years of Manticoran occupation of the planet said things no intelligence professional really wanted to contemplate. Especially since the plot to assassinate both the Queen and the Protector of Grayson which had come within centimeters of success only four years earlier.

"Who knows what those maniacs might have done?" the Queen continued, confirming that her thoughts matched his own. "That was a long time ago, of course, and we don't worry about it much any longer. But since then—"

Elizabeth cocked her head a bit and gave Anton a wry little smile. "Since then, we've maintained the secrecy at Ruth's own request. She has, as it turns out—it's all a bit shocking, really—has a most-un-Wintonesque desire to do her service in some capacity other than following the usual military or foreign service or religious careers."

Anton gave the girl a careful scrutiny, considering everything he already knew about her, as he chewed on Elizabeth's words.

There'd been some furor, especially among the more reactionary aristocracy, at then-Prince and Heir Michael Winton's choice of a bride. As Heir, he was legally required to marry a commoner if he married at all, but the expectation had been that he would simply wait until his nephew replaced him as Heir, then marry someone of his own station. Certainly no one had ever contemplated the possibility that he would marry a foreign commoner. Particularly not a penniless refugee commoner from someplace like Grayson. And especially not a pregnant commoner who'd escaped her Masadan captors only by committing multiple murders and stealing a starship along the way.

Michael, however, possessed the stubbornness of the House of Winton in full measure. More important even than that, perhaps, he'd enjoyed his sister's full-blooded support. So, whether anyone liked it or not, he'd married Judith and adopted Ruth.

Not without certain special provisions, of course. Michael was no longer Heir or Prince Michael since his nephew Roger had gotten old enough to be declared his mother's Heir, and they'd postponed the formal marriage until after Roger had replaced him. He was now the Duke of Winton-Serisburg, which had made Judith a duchess, although it was only a life title and would not pass to Ruth. Nonetheless, his adoption of Judith's daughter had included the specific proviso that Ruth would not stand in the succession to the Crown of Manticore. The title of "Princess" normally bestowed upon her was simply a courtesy, although Anton strongly suspected that Elizabeth intended to create a title in the girl's own right when the moment seemed ripe.

But whatever the circumstance of her parentage might be, Ruth Winton was a Winton, and the House of Winton, like most capable and intelligent royal dynasties in history, had a long tradition that its young scions went into public service. The normal career course was either the foreign office or the military; in the latter case, with a heavy emphasis upon the Navy, that being Manticore's senior service. Some, those with a calination for it, chose instead a career in the clergy, however. The Star Kingdom had no established church, as such, but the House of Winton were and had always been members of the Second Reformed Catholic Church. Any number of Wintons, over the centuries, had become clergymen. A few had even gone so far as to adopt the celibacy which was optional for Second Reformed Catholic clergy, but more or less expected for those of them who attained the rank of bishop.

A lot of things came together in Anton's mind. "She wants to be a spy—you're right, Your Majesty, it's a bit shocking—and she wants me to train her. Makes sense, that last, even if the rest of it borders on lunacy. No way she could learn the trade properly through official channels. The Naval Academy would choke on the idea, and the Special Intelligence Service would probably have outright apoplexy. You could force them to it, of course, but they'd be so twitchy about security they'd scramble her brains for sure and certain."

The blank look on Queen Elizabeth's face indicated suppressed astonishment. Next to her, young Ruth whispered: "I told you he was the best."

Anton plowed on. "It's still a crazy idea. Mind you, Your Majesty—meaning no disrespect—the dynasty could use a close member who was proficient at the spying business. Not so much for its own sake as to enable you to detect the trash and garbage which is probably all the so-called 'intelligence' you're getting, after four years of Hanh Ridge's regime. From either ONI or the SIS. Meaning no disrespect. To Your Majesty, that is."

He paused briefly; then: "But that still leaves the matter of security. Not so much of a problem here on Manticore, true, but my work takes me off-planet as often as not. And sometimes to places I wouldn't want to take an alley mutt, much less a princess. A few days from now, in fact—"

Elizabeth interrupted him. "I know about your upcoming trip, Captain. In point of fact, that trip is what sparked this little meeting."

Again, Anton's mind raced; and, again, many things fell into place. At times like this, people who didn't know him found his thought processes almost superhumanly quick. In reality, Anton thought he was a rather slow thinker, with nothing like the quicksilver mind of his lover Cathy. But he was so methodical and thorough about the way he considered everything ahead of time,

that once the final key facts started coming in he was able to make sense out of complexity in a way that few people could. The Queen's summons the day before had been completely unexpected, and Anton had reacted the way he always did at such times—by spending hours chewing on all the possible variables which might be involved.

He couldn't keep a little grin from showing. "Decided to stick your thumb in High Ridge's eye, eh? Good for you, Your Majesty." Out of the corner of his eye he saw the majordomo and both of the officers in the room glaring at him. A bit belatedly, he realized it was probably a breach of royal protocol for a commoner to congratulate the Queen on her Machiavellian cunning.

Um. Probably a severe breach, in fact. But Anton found he didn't care much, and saw no reason not to widen it.

"An excellent move, if you want my opinion, and on at least three fronts. Remind everyone that the Wintons despise slavery, and Solarian-style neocolonialism just about as much; help counteract some unfavorable publicity about the Star Kingdom in the minds of Solarian commoners—who number in the untold trillions, though people seem to forget that—and give Montaigne a subtle boost in her election campaign without either officially endorsing her or even—oh, yes, it's shrewd; good for you, Your Majesty—having to officially rescind her banning from the royal presence and the House of Lords."

The next words came rumbling like a freight train. "Not to mention that sticking a thumb in High Ridge's eye is an act of grace in its own right. Not sure about the fine points of Second Reformed theology, but in my creed that alone 'ud get you ushered into Heaven."

He cleared his throat. "Meaning no disrespect to Your Majesty."

For a moment, the room was frozen. Both the Queen and her niece were sitting rigid, staring at him. The majordomo appeared to be on the verge of apoplexy, and the two officers likewise. For their part, the soldiers standing guard seemed to be considering the likelihood they'd shortly be carrying out an arrest on the spot. Next to him, Anton's daughter Berry was obviously torn between the urge to hide under her chair and flee the room outright.

And then Elizabeth burst into laughter. Not some genteel thing, either, but the kind of raucous hilarity more appropriate to a vaudeville theater than a royal palace.

"God, you're good!" she exclaimed, when the laughter subsided. "It took me two solid days to hammer the same notions into the heads of my—ah—inner circle." She gave her niece's forearm an affectionate little squeeze. "Except Ruth, of course."

Mention of Ruth brought Anton's mind to bear on that variable, and it took him no more than two or three seconds to figure out the rest of it. In broad outline, at least. The thing that had puzzled him the most about the Queen's summons was her reason for requesting Berry's presence as well.

"It's probably not a good idea, Your Majesty," he said abruptly. "The part involving your niece and Berry, I mean. I admit the notion has a certain charm, being about as antique a maneuver as there is in the books. Still—"

Forcing himself to remember that he was addressing his monarch, Anton managed to keep a scowl from showing on his face. "Charming or not, and whether it'd work or not—and meaning no disrespect to Your Majesty—there's no way I'm going to agree to it. I was a father before I was an intelligence officer, and I've never had any trouble keeping my priorities straight."

Again, the majordomo and the officers goggled. But Elizabeth simply gave Anton a

long and considering look. "No, that you haven't," she said. "Someday you'll have to tell me all the details of what happened in Chicago, but I know enough about the affair to understand the heart of it. Two swine gave you a choice between being a father and having a career, and you shoved the choice right down their throats."

It was not, Anton reflected, normally considered appropriate for a monarch to refer to her ambassador to the most powerful star nation in the galaxy and to one of her more senior admirals as "swine." Not that Elizabeth herself seemed concerned by the thought.

"Did you hesitate at all?" she asked.

"Not for a second." He moved his massive shoulders in a little shrug. "Being a beachcomber's not so bad, when you get down to it."

"Good. I believe I can trust a man who isn't afraid of being on the beach when he has to."

Again, he shrugged. This time, as if shifting a load. "Be that as it may, Your Majesty, I'm still not going to agree to it. It might not be all that dangerous—probably wouldn't, in fact—but it's still my daughter we're talking about here. And—"

He got no further. Anton had forgotten that Berry had a quick brain of her own. She might not have Anton's habit of systematically examining every situation, but she too had wondered why she'd been specifically included in the summons.

"Oh, that's crap!" She flushed. "Uh, sorry, Daddy—and really sorry, Your Majesty. I mean about the bad language."

There was no trace now of the girl's earlier nervousness. "But it's still cra—uh, nonsense. It's my life, Daddy, even if I am only seventeen—but I didn't get prolong as early as Ruth—uh, Princess Ruth—did, so I actually probably even look a bit older than she does, if anything, and who'd know the difference anyway, because you never let anybody get a public image of me either, on account of you're a professional paranoi—uh, very extremely cautious."

For a moment, Anton thought she might actually stick her tongue out at him. She'd done it before, now and then. But Berry managed to recall her circumstances, drew herself up as graciously as a seventeen year old could, and ended with a little sniff.

"I think I'd make a splendid double for the Princess. It'd be exciting for me, that's for sure, and it'd allow her to get out in the world for once."

She and Ruth exchanged admiring smiles. Anton looked to the Queen for help, but Elizabeth was practically smirking.

His shoulders slumped. "Damn," he growled.

Chapter 2

Berry was far less pleased with the situation the next day, when she had to return to Mount Royal Palace in order to present herself to the royal clinic.

* * *

Anton had insisted from the beginning, and had finally convinced Elizabeth, that the Queen's original idea of having Berry serve as Ruth's double was unworkable. Or, more precisely, would only work for a short time and would likely result in very negative political repercussions.

"You just can't pull it off, in this day and age," he'd argued. "All someone has to do is get a scrap of DNA from either one of the girls to expose the switch, and sooner or later someone will manage that. With modern technology, you can manage it from traces of sweat left on a doorknob. Yes, sure, Berry was born on Earth so her DNA will be as much of a mélange as any human's in the galaxy. But Ruth's of Grayson and Manpower stock, and that genetic variation has far too many distinct traits not to be spotted easily."

The Queen frowned. "I thought you'd agreed, Captain?"

He shook his head. "You're thinking not directly. You don't need an actual double, Your Majesty. All you need is misdirection. At no point—ever—will you or I or anyone else directly involved in the affair ever come right out and say 'this girl is Ruth Winton and that one is Berry Zilwicki.' All you need to do is announce that Ruth Winton will be accompanying Captain Anton Zilwicki and Professor W.E.B. Du Havel on their voyage to pay the Anti-Slavery League's respects to the family and associates of the martyr Hieronymus Stein. She'll be coming along to pay the personal respects of the House of Winton. That's somewhere along the line—but not in a communiqué from the dynasty—we'll drop a casual mention that Captain Zilwicki's daughter Berry will be coming along also."

He gave the girls each a glance. "We dress Berry in the fanciest clothing we can find, and have Ruth wear the sloppy teenage stuff Berry usually wears when she's not trying to impress royalty. I'd call it rags except it costs me twice as much to buy the stuff as good clothing would." He ignored his daughter's little chorus of protest. "Then, let slip the word before we leave—just in time to let the paparazzi show up—Berry will walk beside me as we pass through the gates into the boarding area, dressed like a princess, with the royal guards acting as if they were protecting her. Ruth will tag along behind, looking nonchalant."

Elizabeth's face cleared. "Ah. I see. We don't tell them—anyone—that Berry is Ruth and vice versa. We just let them jump to that conclusion on their own."

"Exactly. That'll serve the purpose from the security angle. But it also allows you to slide off

the hook later when the confusion eventually gets cleared up—which it will, don't doubt it for a moment—and people start throwing around accusations that the Crown of Manticore was engaging in duplicity. You just shrug your shoulders and say it isn't your fault if the newsies couldn't get their story straight."

The Queen shook her head. "I agree with your logic, Captain, but you're missing the real political problem. Charges of being shrewd and cunning and sneaky, the Crown of Manticore can live with. Frankly, I'd bathe in it. The charge that would really hurt is that we were willing to risk the life of a commoner to protect royalty. That's the one thing I can't afford, now of all times. More than ever, these days, the strength of the Crown rests on the allegiance of the commonalty."

Anton bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the truth of her remark.

"I'm curious, Captain," Elizabeth continued. "Yes, your variant will let me slip off the hook when the time comes. But the fact remains that both of us know that we are in fact using a commoner to protect a princess. Doesn't that bother you? I'd think it would, coming from Gryphon. Some of the Manticore Crown Loyalists would undoubtedly do it cheerfully, but you highlanders are a . . . cantankerous lot."

Anton grinned. "Are we not, indeed? The reason it doesn't bother me, Your Majesty, is because my daughter insisted on it." He gave Ruth another glance. The girl had been sired upon her mother by a husband who viewed his wives as chattel. "I said I was a father, not a stinking Masadan patriarch. Be damned to the rest of it."

Ruth's cheeks seemed to glow a bit, although her expression remained still. Anton hadn't made the remark for any ulterior purpose, but he realized in that moment that he'd cemented his position as one of the princess' heroes, and his heart sank slightly. Another man might have taken pleasure at the thought of acquiring favor from royalty. But Anton Zilwicki—"Daddy Dour," his daughter Helen sometimes called him—saw only the problems and complications involved.

And to think I used to have such a simple life. An unattached widower and an obscure intelligence officer in the RMN, that's all. Now look at me! My lover's the most notorious political figure in the Star Kingdom, and now I've added royal intrigue to the brew!

* * *

"There's one other thing we could do to enhance the chances of keeping the switch unnoticed for as long as possible," he added. He studied the two girls for a moment. "Assuming that they're willing to do it, of course—and, meaning no offense, Your Majesty, that you're willing to pay for it."

Queen Elizabeth chuckled. "A nanotech transformation? You're certainly free with the royal purse, Captain Zilwicki!"

Anton made no reply beyond a thin smile. That seemed like a better response than Sure, it'll cost a small fortune—but for you, that's pocket change.

Elizabeth studied the two girls herself. She seemed a bit uncertain, although Anton was quite sure the hesitation was not because of the expense involved. Biosculpt would have been cheaper, but biosculpt was—literally—only skin deep, and they needed more than that in this case. Although Berry and Ruth were very similar physically, aside from Berry's dark brown hair and Ruth's golden blond, they weren't quite the same height. And while neither of them would ever be called stocky, Ruth was noticeably finer-boned than Berry. It wasn't anything which would be hugely apparent to a casual observer, but it would show up instantly if anyone decided to run a side-by-side comparison of their HD images.

Unless, of course, the differences were reversed before the HD cameras ever saw them.

There were drawbacks to that approach, however, and Elizabeth was clearly aware of them. Even leaving aside the fact that doing the procedures in the short time they had available would be uncomfortable at the very least, nanotech body transformations were unsettling in the best of circumstances. Although the changes were easily reversible, it was still disturbing to most people to have their bodies start changing shape on them. All the more so, when the two people involved were very young women, their physical aging retarded by decades, who were still getting accustomed to the bodies they had.

"It's your decision, Ruth—and yours too, of course, Berry," said the Queen. "I warn you, it won't be any fun."

"Sure we'll do it!" the princess piped up immediately.

* * *

Berry herself, noticing that Ruth Winton's expression didn't look nearly as confident as the words themselves, had hesitated a moment. She knew very little about nanotech, especially as applied to human physiology. But the look of utter appeal the princess gave her settled the issue.

" 'Course we will," she'd agreed, trying her best for a tone of confidence. And hoping that her own expression wasn't as transparent as Ruth's.

* * *

To Berry's relief, the "clinic" proved to be a fully equipped and up-to-date mini-hospital. Not entirely to her relief, the doctor who appeared upon her arrival to take charge of her proved to be a very friendly but disquietingly youthful person. Judging from appearance, Berry wouldn't have thought the woman was old enough to have graduated from medical school yet.

To her complete chagrin, the doctor lacked almost basic rudiments of a proper bedside manner.

"Is this going to hurt?" she asked nervously, following the doctor down a corridor which seemed excessively sterile and undecorated.

"Probably," Dr. Schwartz replied breezily. She gave Berry a smile that was less sympathetic than Berry thought it could have been. "What do you expect? A full nanotech body transformation in four days!" Dr. Schwartz shook her head, as if bemused by the folly of it all. "We're adding almost a full centimeter to your height, you know. And reducing the Princess' the same amount."

The smile was definitely not as sympathetic as it should have been, Berry thought crossly. Especially when she heard the doctor's next words.

"There's bound to be a fair amount of discomfort when we start taking your bones apart and putting them back together again," Schwartz said. "Soft tissue changes aren't that bad, but bone alterations are an entirely different matter. I'll imagine you'll spend a lot of the time sleeping."

Five seconds later, Dr. Schwartz ushered Berry into a deceptively unremarkable looking private hospital room.

Ruth already occupied one of the room's two beds. She looked a little calmer than Berry felt, but not very much, and Berry felt obscurely comforted as she recognized the other girl's matching nervousness.

"All right, now, Ms. Zilwicki," Dr. Schwartz said briskly. "If you'll just climb into your gown and hop into bed, we can get started with the workup."

"Uh, just how much is this going to hurt?" Berry asked as she began to obey. It was, she admitted to herself, a bit late to be asking that particular question, but Dr. Schwartz didn't seem to mind.

"As I already said," the doctor told her, "there's always a degree of discomfort involved with bone modifications. Of course, I realize that doctors tend to make patients a bit nervous when we throw around words like 'discomfort,' but you really shouldn't look at it that way. Pain is one of the body's most effective ways to communicate with us."

"If it's all the same to you," Berry said, "I'd just as soon not be communicated with that way anymore than I have to."

"I'll second that," Ruth put in from her bed.

"Well, we'll do what we can to minimize it, of course," Dr. Schwartz assured both of them. "Actually, the procedure itself isn't particularly difficult. The trick in something like this is in properly programming the nannies, and since we have complete access to both of your medical records, that was fairly straightforward this time. I remember once, when we were doing a rush job for the SIS, and we didn't have access to the med file of the fellow we were supposed to be matching our agent to. Now that was a challenge. But in this case though—"

She made an airy, dismissive gesture, then frowned at Berry, who obviously wasn't getting out of her own clothes and into the waiting gown rapidly enough to suit her. Berry took the hint, and the doctor nodded in obvious satisfaction as she quickened her pace.

"In this instance, we had all the information we needed, of course," Schwartz continued. "It's the time factor that's the problem. As soon as we've completed the final workups on both of you, we'll fine-tune the nannies' programming and inject them. After that," she said with what Berry privately thought was appalling cheerfulness, "the nannies will start taking you apart and putting you back together again. If we had a couple of weeks to work with, it probably wouldn't feel much worse than, say, a moderately severe case of the flu. In the time frame that we have, I'm afraid it's going to be a bit more taxing than that."

She shrugged.

"As I said, I expect you'll both spend quite a lot of time sleeping over the next few days. A nanny transformation does tend to use up a lot of your energy. We'll provide some meds against the discomfort, but we're going to have to be able to monitor your responses to the modifications, and we can't afford to blur those with anything really potent. That's especially true when we're making the changes so rapidly. So I'm afraid that any time you spend sleeping is unlikely to be among your fondest memories."

She smiled again, with that same maddening kind of sympathy, and Berry sighed glumly. This had all seemed so much simpler when she blithely volunteered for it.

She finished buttoning the gown, then paused. It wasn't really hesitation. She told herself that quite firmly. But it was something uncomfortably akin to it, and an amazing number of butterflies seemed to be hovering in the vicinity of her midsection.

"Ah, you're ready, I see! Good!" Dr. Schwartz approved, smiling more cheerfully than ever, and Berry's butterfly population expanded exponentially. "In that case, let's get started, shall we?"

* * *

The next few days were considerably more miserable than the doctor's breezy assurances would have led an unsuspecting soul to believe. But it wasn't really that bad—nowhere near as bad as some of Berry's experiences had been. Besides, that same life experience had made Berry

about as suspecting a soul, in a friendly and benign sort of way, as anyone she knew.

Well . . . except Princess Ruth.

Berry got to know the Manticoran royal family well during those days since they'd nothing else to do but talk whenever they weren't sleeping. And while Berry soon came to the conclusion that Ruth was a woman she was going to like—a lot, in fact—she also found the contrast between their two personalities more than a little amusing.

Some of the differences were obvious—Berry tended to be quiet, Ruth exuberant. But an even deeper difference, if not an immediately obvious one, was their different outlook on life. True, Berry's life had left precious little in the way of childlike innocence, but she still tended to take a cheery view of the universe and its inhabitants. Ruth, on the other hand . . .

"Paranoid" was not the right term, Berry finally decided. The connotations of that word involved fear, worry, fretfulness—whereas the princess had about as sanguine a temperament as possible. But if the expression "optimistic paranoiac" hadn't been a ridiculous oxymoron, it would have described Ruth fairly well. She seemed to take it for granted that half the human race was up to no good, even if the knowledge didn't particularly worry her much—because she was just as certain that she'd be able to deal with the sorry lighters if they tried to mess around with her.

"How in the world did the Queen manage to keep a lid on you for twenty-three years?" Berry finally asked.

Ruth grinned. "I was her accomplice. I figured out by the time I was six that I'd be better off staying out of the limelight." She stuck out her tongue. "Not to mention bleah—that it saved me about a million hours of tedious sitting still and trying to look properly princessy—that means 'about as bright as a donkey'—at official royal events."

"Is that why all the details of your mother's escape were kept out of the public eye for so long?"

"Oh, no." Ruth shook her head firmly. Ruth's gestures were usually done firmly—when they weren't done vehemently. "Don't blame me for that idiocy! If they'd asked my opinion—they didn't, I was only a few years old, but they should have—I would have told them to shout it from the rooftops. As it was, the truth didn't become public knowledge until after Yeltsin's Star had joined the Manticoran Alliance, at which point the Manticoran public reacted by making my mother a national hero. Ha! The same thing would have happened right from the start, even before the treaty was signed! You can be damn sure that releasing the naked, unvarnished truth about the brutality with which Masada treated its women would have made the choice of an alliance with Grayson rather than Masada a no-brainer."

She scowled fiercely. "Which, of course, is exactly why the cretins didn't do it. 'Reasons of state.' Ha! The Foreign Office made up its mind once and for all to pursue the relationship with Grayson, the bureaucrats told each other, but they had to keep their options open'—there's another weasel phrase for you—with the benighted barbarians who ran Masada! So of course the entire episode had to be swept under the rug."

Berry chuckled. "My father says that 'reasons of state' has been used to cover more sheer stupidity than any other pious phrase in existence. And whenever Mommy—uh, that's Cathy Montaigne—tries to get him to do something he doesn't want to, he immediately says he wants to keep his options open."

"And what does she say?"

"Oh, she tells him he's being a weasel again. And always tries to get me and—if she's home

from the Academy—Helen to agree with her."

Berry added piously: "I always do, of course. Daddy can weasel with the best of 'em. Helen usually tries to claim the Academy Code of Honor prevents her from taking a stance, whereupon Mommy immediately accuses her of being a weasel."

Now, Berry looked positively saintly. "And, of course, I always agree with her again."

Ruth was eyeing her oddly. "Hey, look," Berry said defensively, "the truth's the truth."

She realized, then, that she'd misunderstood the meaning of the Princess' scrutiny.

"We're going to be friends," Ruth said abruptly. "Close friends."

It was said firmly, even vehemently. But Berry didn't miss the depths of loneliness and uncertainty that lurked beneath the words. This, she was now certain, was not a woman who'd known very much in the way of close friendship in her life.

Berry smiled. "Of course we are."

She meant it, too. Berry was good at making friends. Especially close ones.

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