**The Stolen Crown**

It’s Coronation Day for the new king of a bejeweled planet, but his twin brother finds a different way to celebrate when he meets a mysterious woman.

Fireworks lit the night in brilliant blossoms of red and orange and green. The sky over Kaderia glittered as guests from across the galaxy shuttled in, arriving on luxury cruisers or private starships. Today was a celebration. Today was Coronation Day. And Prince Revan, watching from the castle’s ballroom terrace, couldn’t care less.

He nursed his chalice of Julari Red. He hated Julari. It was a tasteless wine that, somehow, sold for a hundred gold per bottle. Still, after three heavy pours, taste hardly mattered. Julari was bold, if not particularly palatable

Revan carefully set the glass down. His entire outfit was stark white, and he couldn’t risk spilling this close to the ceremony. He itched. It was the most expensive fabric on the planet, and it felt like a horse blanket.

“Good evening, sire.”

Revan jumped. “Abed. You startled me.”

“Then my work here is done. I meant to test your awareness. It is, as usual, disappointing.” The automaton gave a sour look. It wasn’t intentional. ABD-11 robotic servants weren’t designed to be aesthetically pleasing. A single v-shaped “eye” created a permanent scowl across their chrome visage.

The prince sighed. “I’m not here to play soldier, Abed. Just to get drunk and celebrate my little brother’s big day.”

“Well, you’ve certainly succeeded in the former.” The automaton stared pointedly at the empty glass. “Is that your second?”

“Third actually. And I’m insulted you think that’s enough to get me drunk. I pride myself on a strong constitution.”

Abed whirred disapprovingly. “Very well, sire. The King wishes an audience.”

“I’ll bet,” Revan snapped. “You know, he’s not the King yet.”

If the robot heard the remark, it gave no indication. Revan stumbled back toward the ballroom, bracing against a cold wind from the north. The guests had already retreated inside. Revan went to join them when he crashed headlong into a woman in a black dress.

They danced off-balance, nearly falling. She caught his shoulder and pulled in close. They held each other, as though preparing to tango. Then they separated, grinning and blushing.

“Oh gods, your highness. I’m so sorry.”

Revan waved off her concerns. “My fault. Really. I wasn’t looking…”

He took her in and electricity walked up his spine. She enchanted him. Her skin had a richness, like coffee with a heavy helping of cream. She wore her black hair wound tight into a bun behind her head, save a single purple lock dangling by her temple. Lacy black ink crawled from her slender neck down her right arm in an intricate tattoo. A grinning skull winked from her toned bicep. Her eyes caught him off guard: golden, speckled with red.

“Your highness?”

Revan realized with horror that he’d been staring. He slinked toward the door. “I should go. Sorry.”

He’d barely made it through the entrance when rough hands fell upon him, dragging him into a cloak room off the main hall. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark.

“Gods damn, Revan. Look at you.”

Revan recognized the bitter face of his twin brother. “Kaden. What a lovely surprise. We never hang out in coat closets anymore.”

The King glared as only a King can. He was almost a perfect reflection. Revan’s twin bore the same steel-gray eyes, the same square jaw, and the same Kaderian nose. From a distance, they could easily pass for one another, though Revan’s rust-colored hair was longer, and Kaden always seemed dour.

*The Crown Prince*. Kaden took that literally, wearing his ceremonial circlet throughout the day. It was a heavy chain of braided gold, laced with precious metals and gems. Still, it paled in comparison to the Royal Helm of the King. Revan’s stomach lurched at the sight of him.

“Couldn’t bother to stay sober?” Kaden paced about the small room, wagging a slender finger in Revan’s face. “This is MY day, Rev. MY moment. I won’t have you ruin it.”

Revan smiled without humor. “I’m sorry to be such a disappointment to you, brother.”

“You can’t disappoint me, Revan. I don’t expect anything.” The King adjusted his suit. Ropes and chords and ribbons decorated the pristine white coat, marking Kaden’s distinguished military career. “I wanted to let you know in person. I’ve chosen Claredon as my Lord Chancellor.”

The floor dropped away. “Claredon? The Mine Lord?” Revan seethed. “Gods! How much did it cost to buy a place in the royal court?”

“Mind your tone.”

“Kaden—”

“There is nothing more to discuss.” Kaden stormed to the door and paused at the threshold. “On the rare occasion we share a room again, you will address me as Your Majesty.”

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At the bar, Revan threw back an extravagantly expensive liquor. This evening required a bit more lubrication.

“Leave some for the rest of us.”

Revan glanced up, startled. The woman in the black dress smiled from a few seats down. She held a crystal flute brimming with sparkling wine.

“It is my princely duty to test this meal for quality.” He strained out a smile. “It may be my only job in this court for…well, the rest of my life.”

The woman stared, examining Revan’s face. “Did I offend you? Before?”

“What? No. Of course not.” He slid his empty glass aside. “I’d been summoned. Can’t keep the King waiting, can we?”

She sipped her wine. “It would be rude.”

Revan snickered. “Oh, Heaven forbid. His shriveled heart couldn’t take it.”

Her lips parted, revealing a hint of white teeth. “We haven’t done this properly.” She offered a slender hand. Her skin shimmered in the dim light. Revan stood, grasped her fingers, and bowed his head.

“Prince Revan of Kaderia, fifth of his name, Duke of Helloria, Commander of the Rose Guard.” The titles spilled out automatically, and he immediately regretted it. Then the woman smiled and his heart warmed.

“Malika Alqirsan. Er, the *first* of my name. Protector of this wine.” She drained her glass. “Not a very good protector.” She giggled, a perfect arpeggio of sound. She slid over to the adjacent stool. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, your highness.”

Her perfume rolled over him, tantalizing with notes of jasmine, violet, and strawberries. He inhaled deeply, savoring the bouquet. Then he caught Malika’s gaze and realized he was being weird. “I’m sorry, what is that fragrance?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. I just grabbed whatever was available. I usually don’t go to fancy events like this.”

“I don’t believe that. Someone like you, this can’t be your first coronation.”

“Someone like me?”

Revan’s cheeks flushed red. “I just meant, you know. Wow, it just got hot. I think I’ve had a bit too much.”

Malika batted his shoulder. “I’m sure a big man like you can handle a little liquor.”

“That’s just the problem. I didn’t have a little.”

“Well, maybe you need to walk it off.” She stepped off the seat and strode out on the terrace. “Why don’t you take me around?”

Revan glanced at the ballroom. He heard the music changing tone, from festive to somber. Priests in flowing red robes began their ascent up the grand staircase. The coronation was set to begin. If he left now, he’d miss his cues and embarrass his brother. Revan turned to Malika. “I think that’s a great idea. Let’s leave quickly.”

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They snuck off the main grounds and found their way to the Royal Gardens. Every known species of flower on the continent had a home, growing in perfect bunches at each turn. Hand-sculpted shrubs depicted knights in armor or mighty dragons. Priceless artifacts from the ancient Kingdoms littered the yard, with nary a rope to separate them from careless guests.

Malika leaned into Revan’s shoulder, using him for warmth. “And he just gave it away? When you were promised the position?”

Revan scowled. “Promises don’t mean much in this family. Used to be the elder took the crown. Father felt otherwise.”

She shook her head. “That’s just…unfair. You would have made a great king.”

He smiled weakly. “No, I wouldn’t have. I never took it seriously. Any of this. It never connected.” He gazed at the towering castle. “I think the worst feeling in the world is being completely surrounded and feeling totally alone.”

Malika touched his cheek. “I know exactly what you mean.”

He snapped out of the spell. “Gods, what is coming over me.” He faced her, taking her hands in his. “I’m usually not, well, I can be rather charming.”

“I’d be interested in seeing that side of you.”

“So, I interest you?”

They let that hang in the air. Suddenly, the crowd inside roared with applause. They pulled apart.

Malika glanced toward the castle. “Now I’m not sure I like the idea of him wearing the crown.”

“Want to know a secret?” Revan grinned. “He won’t. Tonight, they use a fake. Too many guests, too few guards. Safer to keep the real crown in the Vault.”

“Really?”

“Prince Revan? Are you there?”

Revan gasped. “Shit, it’s Abed.” He took Malika’s hand. “This way!”

They ran from the servant, hiding behind the shrubs and sculptures until they’d made it to a thick wooden door. It was locked, but Revan produced a key from his pocket.

“There are some perks to being royalty.”

They slipped inside, closing the door behind them. The clanking robot paused on the other side, then stormed off. Revan and Malika shared a sigh of relief. They started down a long, stone corridor. Ornate swords and spears hung from the walls, alongside lanterns.

“Where are we?”

“This is the Vault.” Revan swept his arms in a grand gesture. “This is where we keep the good stuff: jewels, family heirlooms, other shiny junk.”

They reached an open archway leading into a large room. Inside, pedestals displayed gorgeous necklaces and bangles. Golden broaches hung in batches on the wall, pinned into velvet cushions. Malika stepped inside gingerly, at Revan’s urging. Her fingers danced over the precious jewelry, never actually touching anything.

She stopped cold at the end of the oblong room, staring open-mouthed at a large square dais. On top of the display, glowing with an internal light, was the Royal Crown. If anything, it was more beautiful in person. At every step of its creation, only the best material and talent had been allowed to work. Master miners drew out the perfect metals and stones. Master smelters created a flawless base. Master smiths engraved the history of the planet across the brow, while master jewelers set in invaluable stones.

“My mother used to say it was worth more than the planet it represents.”

Malika’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly. Finally, she turned to Revan. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

He swam in her eyes. For a moment, the world outside didn’t exist. Revan felt a peace unlike any time in his life. He smiled genuinely, and the sensation radiated down his body.

“Malika, I need to confess something.”

“Me too.”

He stalled, biting the tip of his tongue. “I know—”

“Wait.” She held a hand to his lips. “Don’t.” Her right hand disappeared behind her back. “Revan, you’re not at all what I expected. I’m very sorry.” Her hand reappeared holding a slim silver knife. “I’m sorry we had to meet like this.”

Revan took a slow step backward, his face still calm. He glanced at the blade, then back to Malika. “I don’t want to fight.”

“Good. I’d win.” Malika reached for the crown. It didn’t move. She tried both hands, straining to lift the golden circle. Nothing.

Revan gently stepped in. “May I?” He set his palm on the pedestal and a chime sounded. Then he lifted the crown easily. “DNA encoding on the mount. Only the King can lift the crown.” He tossed the helm to Malika with a smirk. “Or his identical twin.”

Malika snatched a shawl from one of the clothing displays and wrapped the crown up tight.

“Out of curiosity, what was your plan if I hadn’t been here?”

She shrugged. “I brought explosives.” Malika smiled at the prize. “This will keep my ship fueled for a lifetime.”

“The Drake, right?”

Malika glared. “How—”

“Your tattoo. Took me a minute, I’ll admit. Still, rather brazen of you to assume I wouldn’t recognize the Pirate Queen of the Far Reach.”

Malika stood taller. “If you knew, why take me here?”

Revan frowned. “Kaden doesn’t deserve this. He’s a petulant little child. I just want

to show him that.” He reached for her shoulder and she didn’t stop him. “The crown belongs to

royalty, and who better than a Pirate Queen?”

She caressed his cheek. He seemed sterner, more confident than the drunk from before. They drew close. Something chirped, interrupting the moment. Malika growled and pulled a thin rod from her bracelet.

“What?”

“Hey, Cap. Whatever you just did, about a million alarms went off. Are you done?”

Malika’s eyes widened. As if on cue, the castle shook with a concussive blast. Jewels rattled on their stands, the sound echoing off the stone walls. Malika grabbed Revan’s hand and dragged him back toward the garden. The sound of frightened guests grew louder as they approached the wooden door. She barreled through, letting it swing open behind them.

Outside, the sky was chaos. At first it appeared that the fireworks had gone off a little close to the castle. But each explosion sent a wave of pressure through their chests that nearly knocked them flat. These were anti-air rounds, meant to dissuade invading ships. Malika pointed in the sky toward a glittering spec. Every second, the spec grew larger. In moments, it revealed itself to be a shuttle. The almond-shaped ship wove between explosions, its fragile fins wobbling dangerously.

Malika shouted into her communicator. “I’m in the garden. North side.” She faced Revan. “I had a lovely evening, your highness.”

“Where will you go now?”

“Wherever I want,” she said seductively. “But nowhere for long.”

The shuttle came down hard, flaring its engines at the last moment. The heat scorched the alabaster tiles of the courtyard. Immediately, the side door slid open, revealing a hideous alien creature. It waved a scaly arm at Malika and the Prince.

Malika tossed the crown to the pirate and walked toward her ship. She stopped, spinning around on one heel. She grabbed Revan’s collar and yanked him down to her level. Malika pressed her lips against his and he melted. Her other hand combed through his hair, holding him tight. Then she pushed him away and backed off toward her ship, maintaining eye contact. Malika jumped aboard her shuttle and the engines whined.

Guards swarmed the garden, racing toward the shuttle. The prince saw his brother in the courtyard pointing angrily in his direction. Revan looked at the pirates longingly.

Malika held out a hand to Revan.

“So, you coming?”