

**An excerpt from**

**Beyond Meridian**

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## Chapter One

The kid should have looked out of place in the bar. Too young for this crowd, too freshly scrubbed, narrow shoulders under a heavy jacket, with wheat blond hair that fell perfectly straight around his face instead of tangling into matted knots. Wide blue eyes regarded Raine from the other side of the table, and while they did make him look ridiculously young, something about them made Raine feel like the guy was looking right through him.

Despite the fact that he should have been a target—fresh meat on Meridian, where someone that pretty would have been stamped with a pleasure-worker tattoo and set up in one of the whorehouses that spacers came to the planet for—nobody bugged this kid. He'd walked through the room and not a single spacer gave him the time of day, until he plunked down on the other side of Raine's table.

Everyone knew this was his table. You didn't bother Rick Raine when he was at his table, with a tall, cool Siennan beer in the center and a deck of old-fashioned cards flipping between his fingers.

"Are you Raine?" the kid asked.

"I don't do business in the bar, kid. Save it for the spaceport."

He barely blinked at Raine's tone, ignoring the implied shove off. "Who said anything about business? Maybe I just want to have a drink."

He liked the kid's spirit. Raine snapped his fingers and drew one of the barmaids toward his table—their table now, he supposed. "Cleo, get this fine young man a drink."

She turned her exotic, dark eyes and ample chest toward the fresh meat.

"What'll you have, doll?"

The kid's lips worked for a moment, and Raine hid his grin behind his mug, glad to have gotten a reaction out of him.

"Meridian brandy," he blurted, as if aware of Raine's mocking. "One for each of us."

"Whose tab, babe?" Cleo turned toward Raine.

“I got it,” the kid interrupted, plunking down a nice-sized chit. Well now, maybe Raine might be swayed into doing business in the bar after all.

“Sure thing, sweets.” Cleo snatched up the chit and disappeared.

Raine set the beer down. “So you came looking for Raine. Who are you, kid, and who sent you?”

He slouched down in his seat, the motion making him look smaller and even younger. “You can call me Karl,” he said, making Raine wonder what he was hiding. “Nobody sent me. Your name came up when I asked around the spaceport. I’m looking for passage.”

“I don’t take human cargo,” Raine snapped. Anyone dropping his name around the port should damn well have told Karl that.

“No, but I heard you could use some crew. I figure I could work to earn my keep.”

Karl seemed to have this all planned out. “Don’t need any crew right now. Besides, you don’t look like you know a spanner from a light drive.”

Karl winked at him. “Oh, you’d be surprised at what I know.”

Raine felt a stirring at those words, which were spoken in a low, raspy tone. If the kid only knew he was playing with fire.

Cleo showed up with their drinks, two short glasses brimming with the dark violet liquid. She dropped them on the table, winking at Raine when he tugged on her skirt. He didn’t miss Karl’s narrowed eyes at that. This was freakin’ Meridian; the kid should know he’d be more likely to see worse than that. Hell, if he’d been at the spaceport, he must’ve seen worse.

“I only take on crew when I need the extra help for the cargo. I’m not shipping anything right now.” Raine picked up his glass and downed the brandy in one go, relishing the burning cold in his belly. Wasn’t the best vintage, but this wasn’t the place you went if you were picky about the brandy.

Frowning, Karl attempted to toss back his own glass and came up sputtering and coughing. He’d probably never even had Meridian brandy before. Raine didn’t hide his laughter this time. “Kid, what the hell are you doing out here?”

“Not a kid,” he protested. “I can pay you.”

“Oh yeah, in what? UPA credit?” He took a guess, because no way was this boy for real. At the silence he nodded. “You just don’t scream border rat to me.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about me.” At that snarl Raine realized the kid had some bite to him. Well, they might be doing some kind of business after all, just not the kind Karl had in mind. Raine liked bed partners with some teeth on ’em. “I can pay you in Confed chits, if that’s what you want.”

“Everybody’s got to go somewhere. Plenty of people take on transfers, into the Confed and the UPA both. I don’t think that’s what you’re looking for, though.”

Karl stared into his glass, swirling the remaining purple liquid. “I need a reliable cruiser and a captain who has plenty of discretion.”

“And somehow you came up with my name?” Raine challenged.

“I’d heard the name Raine was the standard in private cargo transport for over thirty years.” Karl looked him over, since obviously Raine wasn’t that old.

“My father,” he said, leaving it at that. Raine had taken over the family business when his daddy met the wrong end of a laser pistol, nearly ten years ago now. It had been him and his ship since Raine was seventeen. “You could say I’m coasting on his reputation. Where do you need to go, kid? Not that I’m committing to anything, you hear?”

Karl gave him a small, tight smile. Shame, Raine would like to see what a real smile would do to that baby face. “Mendhem. I need passage there and back, with possibly another passenger in tow.”

Mendhem. He might as well have said Tanvir, the goddamn capital of the Confederation. Mendhem was controlled by one of the most infamous warriors in the Confed military, General Purohit. Raine tended to avoid the place, which was too strictly controlled for the kind of cargo he dealt with. “You’d be lucky to find anyone to take you near there.”

Karl all but crumpled in front of him. What the hell was so important?

“Look.” Karl seemed to collect himself after a moment. “Maybe we can help each other out. If I can get you cargo to transport, would you consider taking me on?”

Raine gave him one of his best smirks. “Oh, kid, I’d take you on for free.”

Karl made a face. "You know what I mean."

"Loosen up, man. You need to find yourself a sense of humor if you're going to end up as part of my crew."

"That's a yes then?"

"That's a yes only if you can get me cargo to transport," Raine told him. Before he could second-guess himself, he continued. "I run a business, not a damn charity ship. When you find something, come find me in berth 52, south side of the port."

"I will." Karl's words were like a promise.

Raine chased the taste of the brandy with the remains of his beer, wondering which one of them was biting off more than they could chew.

Karl left the bar with hope burning in his gut for the first time since he had landed on Meridian. Nothing had gone as planned from the moment he stepped off the military transport that had taken him from Earth to the outer edge of the United Planetary Alliance, the UPA. He'd expected civilian cruisers to be unreliable, but wasn't prepared for the hazards of traveling into the border. One emergency landing into a battle zone due to engine failure had Karl wondering if he would live to see Meridian, never mind make it to the heart of the Confederation of Free Planets.

He shouldn't have been so surprised. There was a war going on, and it had been raging his entire life. Karl couldn't imagine what the universe would be like if the UPA and Confed weren't at each other's throats. Without the war, Sam wouldn't be trapped on Mendhem, so deep undercover that no one could trace her. But hell, if it hadn't been for the war, he might never have met Sam in the first place. And without Sam, he might have been trapped on this hellhole of a planet, with a pleasure-worker tattoo stamped on his lower back, making payment for the debts his mother had left at her death.

Karl had never wanted to come back here. He wanted this place to fade away with the memory of his childhood, growing up in one of the many brothels that catered to the spacers. The place had changed, he had thought when he had stepped out of his transport and into the city for the first time, the acrid smell of

ship fuel still in his nostrils. It didn't seem as grand, as bright and shiny and large, as it had to his twelve-year-old self. Meridian was smoky, the old bronze-colored towers and bridges seemed caked with dirt and age, traffic filled the air, shuttles fighting for right of way.

Weariness dogged his steps, and Karl could not get the captain out of his mind. Raine was arrogant, too certain of his own attractiveness, and damned if the man wasn't attractive—long dark hair and nebula blue eyes, strong chin, mouth made for smiling. Karl knew better than to trust that. He'd seen too much ugliness cloaked in beauty, but Raine was his best hope of getting deep into the Confed without being tracked. He only had to figure how to get out again, with Sam in tow.

First, he needed to arrange for some cargo.

As he made his way from the shuttle stop through the streets, Karl kept his head down, blending in with the crowd, the locals who lived down here instead of the tourists looking for a good time. He headed for one of the pleasure salons, hoping he was right about the owner. He'd done his research before leaving Earth. Surely it had to be her, unique name, right age. She must have gotten enough to pay off her contract and start her own house.

Still, when he walked into the salon, a startling ray of light in the dark and dirty city, Karl wasn't quite sure. Sweet perfume hit his nose, nearly covering the scent of sex and musk. Bright, colorful pillows filled the lobby, with a variety of pleasure workers lounging on them, as much ornamentation as the crystal chandelier or the metallic mosaic on the walls. There were pretty girls in sheer dresses, tall young men in nothing more than loose pants hanging low on their hips, and still others who seemed somewhere in between genders. They turned their attention on him, and Karl had to refrain from smiling. It reminded him too much of home.

"Can we help you, sir?" an older woman asked, no less attractive than any of the younger workers splayed around the room.

"I'm not looking for company," he said first, not wanting to disappoint anyone. "I need to speak with the owner. Madam Nikala."

The woman blinked. "That isn't necessary, sir. I can help you with whatever

you need.”

“Please. Tell her it’s Karl. Althea’s Karl.”

At that she nodded and disappeared through a heavy curtain that hung at the back of the room. He tucked his hands in his pockets, his duffel bag cutting into his shoulder, but he couldn’t put it down, not yet. Karl tried to ignore the others watching, wondering who he was. He probably didn’t look wealthy enough to afford this salon. Nikala had done well for herself.

When she walked into the room it was like going back in time ten years. Nikala had changed of course, grown older, but nothing could change the beauty of her smoky dark eyes, nor the way her black hair hung past her waist, gleaming under the lights of the salon. He remembered those hands, strong and warm as they sheltered him from a beating, from their mistress’s wrath. Most of all, he remembered that sad, gentle smile as she stroked his hair.

“It can’t be.” She gasped at the sight of him. “All the gods, boy, what are you doing here?”

“It’s complicated,” he told her. “I need a bit of help.”

She took him inside the salon, past the glitter and opulent rooms to her own living quarters, making him sit in her worn but comfortable couch, and calling for a girl named Shilvi to bring them food and drink. It was a relief, after his time spent transferring from ship to ship, to just be able to sit and relax, and eat something that wasn’t space rations.

Nikala sat across from him, pulling a length of hair over her shoulder and braiding it absently, as she’d so often done during his childhood.

“You have her eyes,” she marveled, reaching out with her hand then letting it drop before actually touching him. Nikala looked away, as if she couldn’t bear to meet his gaze.

He bowed his head for a moment, trying to picture in his mind the mother he had lost long ago. “Sometimes I barely remember her.”

She shook her head. “What are you doing here? You got out, Janis got you out.”

He smiled tightly. “Her name was really Sam. And yes, she got me out, took

me to her own home, gave me everything I could want.”

“So why have you come back?”

“Because she needs me now.”

“You owe me more than that, child.”

Karl let his head drop. She was right, he did, but telling her too much would put Nikala and her entire salon in danger. As long as he operated in secret, they were safe. “I’ll tell you what I can,” he said finally.

Nikala nodded; she expected nothing more. “Shilvi, prepare the tea, please. Something restful. I think we all could use a decent night’s sleep.”

Karl watched as the girl moved to the kitchenette, setting an old-fashioned teakettle to boil. He smiled. Nikala had always hated the machine-made tea they’d been forced to drink at Rachel’s. She complained she needed to see the water boiling. Shilvi moved with precise grace, the long fabric of her clothing not hampering her in the slightest as she prepared the cups. She was young, too young, he thought, wondering how she’d come to this life.

Speaking of that. “How did you get to own your own place?” Karl had been curious about that since seeing Nikala’s name on the roster of salon owners.

“How do things usually come to pass here? On the misfortune of others.” She frowned but brightened when Shilvi placed a tray of steaming cups on the end table. Nikala took one and stared down into its depths, as if the rising steam spoke to her. “You remember Madam Rachel? Of course you do.”

Karl didn’t interrupt her train of thought; he merely took his own cup and sat back down, waiting to hear the end of the tale. The rich aroma tickled his nose, the flavor so much stronger than anything he’d tasted in years. It teased at his mind, bringing back memories long forgotten.

“It was almost five years after you and Janis left us. They arrested Rachel for passing information to the Confederation. When she was convicted, they dissolved her property, splitting the funds among all of her workers. I had already begun saving for my own salon, so I purchased a little hovel near the spaceport. It was surprisingly successful.” Nikala sipped her tea carefully.

“I don’t think there is anything surprising about it.” Karl grinned at her. He



sobered. “What happened to Rachel?” He didn’t know the Meridian penalty for treason, and while the planet had a mostly amicable relationship with the Confederation, any show of favoritism to either side would ruin whatever bit of credible neutrality Meridian had left.

“No one knows. I’ve heard everything from her being executed, to her being sold as a slave.”

Karl’s blood ran cold at her words, and he knew it must have shown on his face from the way Nikala paused in mid-sip. He’d forgotten how easily someone could be made a slave, this close to the Confed, where they depended on slavery to survive. At least Meridian workers could eventually buy their way out of their contracts.

“What is it? You’ve gone pale.” Nikala set her teacup down and reached out with one hand to cover his knee.

“It’s Sam—Janis,” he revised, in case she had forgotten. He braced himself for the half-truth he was about to tell. “She’s been sold into slavery. It’s why I’ve come, to get her free.” Karl did not mention that Sam had willingly gone, let herself be sold as an agent of the UPA. He didn’t know the specifics of her mission, only that she had missed her return rendezvous. The less Nikala knew, the better. At least he could offer her some explanation.

“You’ve set yourself an almost impossible task.” Nikala shook her head. “How will you find her?”

“I found a ship,” Karl said. “A spacer named Raine. He’s willing to take me on if I can find him cargo.”

“Cargo?” Nikala glanced over at Shilvi, who gave her a wide-eyed look in return.

“I suppose he doesn’t want to lose money on transporting me.” Karl frowned. “It shouldn’t be hard to find someone who has something to haul.”

“Not hard at all.” Nikala gave him a smile. “I can help you.”

“Are you sure? If anyone should find out...”

“Karl, child, Janis...Sam was my friend too. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

