

The Roundabout Way

By Jack Freeman (16826)

Malfearak sat back in his seat, one arm draped over the backrest as he took a sip from his drink. In a far corner of the bar, a band was playing a soft, rhythmic ballad, though the sound was undercut by the chatter and laughter of tavern-goers. Keelann, a gorgeous red-skinned Zeltron, sat across from him, taking a sip of her own. Her purple locks swayed over her sharp shoulders as she pulled the drink from her lips and swished it around in the glass. She offered him a smile.

"I won't lie, Mal, it's good to see you," she said. Her voice had a warm softness to it that was like taking a bath in a Nubian hot spring. "I didn't expect to hear from you again after..."

She trailed off. He couldn't blame her. Of course she'd expect it to be a touchy subject, and she'd be right, not that he would ever show her. He forced a smile and chuckled as he spoke, "Don't worry about it. It's good to see you too. Since we're being honest, I'd even say I missed you."

It was her turn to chuckle. "Well of course you would."

Chuckles turned to full laughter before he reached across the table and took her hand, giving it a squeeze. She squeezed back.

"Look, I do have ulterior motives," he explained with sudden sobriety.

"I figured as much, Mal, you never could keep a secret from me," she said with no humor lost. "Of course you'd be doing *their* dirty business."

"It's not like that," he said. His humor was certainly lost. "It's actually the other way around. I came here because your affiliation to *her.*"

"Oh?" Her smile didn't leave her face, nor did she let go of his hand, but there was a sudden tension in her grip.

"Word has reached me that she's been having doubts about the, uh, well, my employers," he explained.

"Can you blame her? Your so-called Brotherhood seems to have a gravitational pull of its own. Year after year, it's chaos and mayhem, and we're trying to build something here, something stable."

Malfearak was the one to pull away with a sigh, "I figured the two of you would be of a single mind on the subject."

"We're not as close as you think," Keelann's smile faltered if only slightly.

"She listens to you."

It was her turn to reach across the table to take his hand. There was a definite sadness in her smile now. "I won't sway her mind, if that's what you're suggesting."

"I'd have to sway yours first," he said. He leaned forward, planting a soft kiss atop her hand. The smell of Zeilla perfume crossed with her natural pheromones wafted to his nostrils. He

couldn't help but give into the soothing pull of it. His gray eyes locked on her yellow stare. "All I ask is that you do not sever your ties with us. Not so hastily."

Her eyes fluttered in a manner he knew was manufactured for his benefit. She was working him with all her attributes, Zeltron or otherwise, and he would be a liar if he said it wasn't working. Truth was, he didn't care.

"I'm not an advisor, Mal," she spoke softly, "My friendship with Jacinta isn't about politics."

"Of course not. But a friend is an advisor in its own way," he explained. "Won't you say something, for me?"

"For me?" Her smile was gone, her voice now as sharp as the nails digging into his skin. "Malfearak Asvraal, you have a lot of nerves."

He couldn't tell what hurt more. The tone or the nails. He winced regardless.

She took a deep breath and she sat back, letting go of his hand to grab her drink and throw it back, all pretense of class evaporated in an instant. She placed the goblet down and crossed her arms over her chest. He felt suddenly ashamed, his cheeks warm, all of his instincts urging him to apologize and retreat. He was about to when she shook her head and laughed out loud, a bark of a laugh, the laugh of the pirate queen she had been, not the refined aristocrat Keelaan she played at being nowadays.

"I could never say no to you," she finally admitted. "I'll have a talk with her."

Malfearak puffed his cheeks and blew out his relief, "Here I half-expected you to send me back home in a body bag."

"Hey, the night isn't over," she grinned at him, the fire of passion back in her eyes.

"Since you, uh, can't say no to me," he said, grinning, "How about we find ourselves somewhere a little quieter?"

"The nerve, oh the nerve," she groaned in feigned indignation.

They laughed together as they stumbled out of the bar some time later, his arm around her waist, hers around his shoulder.

"Oh, how I missed you," he cooed.