

Level 40, Sim-deck 25, XXX Space station, XXX Quadrant

Jinx strode down the side of the church, keeping her head down and trying to attract as little attention as possible.

She felt eyes all over her, watching her every move. Scrutinizing her. She did her best to ignore the attention. At least people were talking amongst themselves. Even if it *was* about the strange party who were probably gateAshworthing the event.

Jinx found her way to the front where Bobby was waiting nervously. He turned to look at her. His expression of social discomfort turned to one of shock: like a child who had been caught with its hand in the cookie jar.

Jinx's expression was now blank. She just stared at him in his full wedding outfit, stunned.

"I... Jinx," he said, reaching out to touch her.

She took half a step back. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Bobby composed himself. "Yeah. Erm... This way." He motioned toward a door a few yards back from where she had come and then led her in. It was clearly the groom's dressing room. There were discarded clothing packets and hangers hanging on bits of church furniture. On the dresser, there was a bottle of Kreg Brandy and a few empty glasses. Her eyes clocked them and then turned to interrogate Bobby.

"What the hell, Bobby?" she blurted out, her composure evaporating in an instant.

He looked flustered. "Well, yeah. Would you believe me if I told you that it's not what it looks like?" He scratched the back of his head, pulling his suit into an awkward shape around his torso.

"You mean, it doesn't look like you've been kidnapped, and in order to orchestrate your release, you're having to get married?" she asked, her expression returning to blank.

He looked down at his feet, his hair disheveled now. "Ah. So. Erm, yeah. It's almost exactly what it looks like, then."

Jinx stared at him incredulously. "What the fuck is going on?"

"You've gateAshworthed my wedding!"

"Are you serious?"

“As a bullet in the head,” he said grimly.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Only way out of a tight situation.”

“Come on. We have guns. We can get you out of here.” She grabbed his sleeve and moved back toward the door, reaching for her pistol.

He moved and put his hand against the door, stopping her from opening it. Then he put his other hand on her pistol, stopping her from drawing it. “No,” he said quietly. “The only way I’m leaving here is married.”

Jinx frowned, confused. “We can get you out of here. Easy. We just walk out. We’re docked just down the hall.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. I can’t. It’s not just me.”

Jinx moved her hand from the door knob. “The bride?” she guessed.

He shuffled his feet. “Yeah, Karina,” he confessed. “It’s my fault she’s in this mess. And she needs a fresh slate. This is the only way.”

Jinx retreated into the room so their voices wouldn’t be heard. “What are you talking about? Grab her and we’ll get her out, too.”

His expression was one of a broken man, torn between worlds. “It’s not that simple. If she runs, she’ll never be free. We may as well shoot her now.”

Jinx reached again for the pistol strapped to her leg. “Okay,” she said, starting toward the door.

“No!” He stopped her again. “It’s complicated. And there isn’t time to explain now. But I *do* have to do this.”

Jinx looked at him blankly, processing the options. Her mind came up with five different scenarios of how to extract both him and the bride. Not one of those scenarios explained why he would want to stay and go through with this legally binding ceremony... which *would* be binding, even if it was under duress.

Her mind raced, trying to comprehend what might have happened. “Has someone got something on you?” she tried again.

He shook his head, then stopped. “Well, yes. But not really. Look, it’s complicated. But stay, and I’ll explain everything later.”

Jinx took a deep breath.

Oz? What do I do?

It’s Bobby. You need to trust him.

But he’s... getting married!

Which is his decision.

Can we do a tox screen? Maybe he’s been drugged. What do we need? Blood sample? I can punch him and probably bust his lip—

Jinx, *no!* He’s showing no signs of drugs or doping.

How do you know?

I’m able to track things like heartbeat and pupil dilation and response times just watching him.

“Jinx?” Bobby pressed, his face gaunt and showing signs of fatigue.

“Yeah.” Jinx realized she’d been staring at him while having the Oz conversation. “Anything I can do?”

The tension in Bobby’s jaw seemed to relax a small amount. “Go get some good pictures. And tell those boys to stand down. No shooting today.”

“Fine.” She nodded abruptly and strode out of the room, leaving the door open.

Bobby could tell she was upset.

She felt sore. Rejected. And guilty. Like this was her fault.

I just don’t understand why he would want to do this.

We clearly don’t have all the facts.

But I can’t imagine a world where he would want to be doing this. We’ve never known him to even have a girlfriend. Or a relationship of any kind.

I know. We'll find out, I'm sure. We just need to make sure you get through the ceremony without causing a scene.

What makes you think I'd cause a scene?

Your heartrate is elevated. As are your cortisol levels. The last time I measured anything like this was in the Grimex safehouse when you'd just been rejected by Jon.

I was never rejected by Jon.

Well, technically... maybe not. But that's how your physiology interpreted it.

Well, fuck. Jinx started in another direction.

Where are you going?

Restroom.

No. Keep it together. You need to be out here. We still don't know what's really going on.

The music started.

Get back to your seat. I'll see what I can do about getting your systems back to normal parameters so you can get through this.

Without causing a scene?

Yes. Without causing a scene. That is your mission.

Jinx scowled. Well, if this is a real wedding, at least there will be alcohol soon.

Yes, focus on the positive. Wait! This pew.

Jinx stopped in her tracks and backtracked to her pew. "I'm sorry, would you excuse me?" she asked politely to the Zyhnl-like creature on the end.

She pointed to her party. The person stepped out and allowed her to pass, and the Kreg sitting next to him pressed himself back so she could squeeze past him, too. She shuffled her way along the row, bypassing the guests to end up back with the others.

She plonked herself down next to Jon. "Everything okay?" he asked.

Jinx looked straight ahead. "Apart from feeling completely underdressed and over armed, yes. Oh yeah, and Bobby wants us to trust him and let him go through with this."

"Any explanation?" Jon asked.

She shook her head slightly, looking down at a program she had picked up from the ledge in front of her. "Nope. He said he'll explain later."

"Well, I guess we can only follow his lead. He's probably on an op."

"Let's hope so," Jinx agreed. "Otherwise, this is just too confusing."

Just then, everyone stood up and turned to see the bride coming down the aisle.

Jinx hauled herself to her feet, too, and turned to look, craning her neck. She couldn't see.

Jon saw her struggling to catch a glimpse and turned toward her. "Don't worry, she's not even that pretty," he said, half teasing her, half trying to comfort her.

Jinx looked up at him, locking eyes. She couldn't understand why she hurt so much. But somehow, Jon seemed to know exactly what she was going through. He put his arm around her and pulled her close as he pretended to pay attention to what was going on ahead of them now.

The crowd hushed and the music stopped.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..." a voice boomed through the simulated building.

"Oh, my ancestors!" Rupet hissed past Ashworth to Paul.

Paul looked concerned. "What is it?" His eyes darted nervously around the crowd ahead of him, looking for the threat.

"I love her shawl!" Rupet exclaimed as discreetly as he could.

Paul relaxed, noticing out of the corner of his eye that even Ashworth smirked.

Paul craned his neck to see where Rupet was looking. "Oh, the shimmery one?"

"Yeah."

Paul smiled to himself. Rupert continued to eye the crowd, presumably out of his interest in the fashion more than staying sharp for possible problems.

“Yeah,” Paul continued, sitting down so their conversation would be less conspicuous while everyone else stood and listened to the priest. Rupert did the same. “I hear they’ve started making those shawls with the guts of abbey worms. Apparently, they are only found on exoplanets with enough sulfur in the atmosphere.”

Rupert frowned and looked at Paul now. “How the heck do they harvest them, then?”

“In space suits. And using lots and lots of Teshovians, I heard.”

Someone behind them coughed, trying to get them to be quiet.

“No way!” Rupert exclaimed, glimpsing the angry glare from the people behind and trying to lower his voice even more.

“Yeah. It’s a big business in the fashion industry. At least, that’s what Paige was telling me.” Paul slouched back in the pew.

“Fascinating.”

“Yeah,” Paul agreed. “And Paige is going to be pissed that she’s missing—”

“Oh, lordy,” Rupert interjected. “Look at those shoes!”

Ashworth and Paul sat up and strained to see around the people gathering in the aisle where Rupert was looking.

“I didn’t know they made such glamorous stuff for Grindock,” Rupert exclaimed.

The tall, scaly Grindock must have overheard them because she turned and glared at them from her seat in a pew three rows in front of them.

Rupert clamped a hand over his mouth. “Oops!”

Paul shook his head. “You and your big mouth.”

Rupert sniggered. “Her and her big feet!” He noticed Ashworth’s chest bouncing as he laughed silently between the two of them. “They must be a special line. Or a knockoff or something.” Rupert sniggered.

Ashworth made a very quiet sound, like the meow of a cat.

Paul giggled and reached across Ashworth to slap Rupert's arm. "Stop already! You're going to get us killed!" He peered between the standing people in front of them to see if he could still see the Grindock. "And I don't know what her species normally looks like, but right now, she looks damn angry."

Rupert sighed. "You're right," Rupert agreed. "But you know, I don't think I've ever been in a room with so many different species. And that's saying something!"

"Yeah, I can believe that, mister free-love." Paul chuckled.

Rupert's smile faded. "You know, there's something else. Something I just can't put my finger on."

"Something wrong?" Ashworth asked.

"Yeah. It's... maybe it's just cause it's a sim. And bizarre circumstances..."

Ashworth spoke even more quietly now, keeping his face straight. "You're not thinking it's your grindle senses tingling?"

Rupert tipped his head from side to side. "Maybe."

Paul leaned back in the pew and then shifted awkwardly. "You know, now that you mention it, I got a funny feeling about all this, too. It's like there is something obvious staring us in the face, but we're not seeing it."

Rupert sighed. "Yeah, I agree," he said, continuing his scan of the crowd around them.

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Joline listened attentively as the priest talked at the congregation. She noticed that on the bride's side, a stocky but older gentleman sat wiping his eyes and sniffing. She guessed he must be the father of the bride. She scanned for a woman of a similar age and noticed there wasn't anyone that fit the bill for the mother.

She became aware of someone behind her and a low whisper. She turned her head to catch, out of the corner of her eye, a rather tall, scaly creature leaning over to her. He looked like he expected an answer.

"I'm sorry?" Joline whispered back, turning a little more to regard him carefully. "Did you..."

He nodded. "Yes," he said, in a guttural-sounding accent. "I was admiring your piece."

Joline glanced down at her chest, then realized he was signaling at the butt of her pistol shoved into her holster under her arm. "Oh!" she mouthed, trying to brighten her face and look social rather than mission-focused. "Thank you!" she mouthed. "Custom," she added, trying to be polite.

The creature looked at her approvingly and then went back to listening to the ceremony.

Joline turned and saw Rupert sniggering quietly to himself on the end.

Ashworth jabbed him gently in the ribs, trying to get him to behave. He looked right and caught Paul's eye. Paul smiled, clearly amused by the pair. Ashworth rolled his eyes and sighed, like it pained him to have to be the only grown up.

Paul deduced that Ashworth was still getting used to the relationship thing, considering that the facial expression was probably the most expression he'd seen out of Ashworth in a social situation... ever.

Rupert was distracted again, now communicating silently with hand gestures with an old dear over on the other side of the aisle. She was pointing at his crotch. Rupert was trying to figure out what she was getting at. And then he realized it was his pockets. He pulled out the grenade that was causing the rather obvious bulge. She turned her finger, asking him to turn it over. He obliged. She squinted and then straightened up and gave him a thumbs-up. He replaced it in his pocket. Then, she whispered loudly across to him. "I use those when I can get my hands on them. Hard to find in stock round here, though."

"Shh!" Several people all at once turned around and shushed her.

She glared in the direction of one of them and stared down the back of his head before looking back at Rupert for moral support. Rupert tried to suppress his smile and pretended to be listening to the priest again.

He hadn't been quiet for more than thirty seconds before he leaned over to Ashworth next to him. "Paige and Maya are going to be pissed they missed the chance to dress up," he whispered as quietly as he could.

Ashworth nodded without taking his eyes from the front.

"And being bride's maids!" Ashworth added. "Yeah. That's huge. Bobby's in for it... if he survives this."

He was quiet for a moment.

"You think there is a reception afterward?" Rupert hissed again.

Ashworth shrugged.

“Okay, I’ll shut up and let you watch Bobby’s fake wedding in a fake church.”

Ashworth turned and locked eyes with Rupert. “You think it’s fake?” he asked in a really low voice, his lips moving as much as a ventriloquist’s.

Rupert shrugged. “He goes missing, and then we find him getting hitched to some chick we’ve never heard of? It’s either a ruse or an escape plan.”

Ashworth reacted with his eyes before turning back to the front. “Ironic escape plan,” he mused.

Rupert was quiet again for about ten seconds. “You saying that marriage is a prison? Or a hostage situation?”

Ashworth almost inceptively sighed with frustration. “No. I wasn’t saying that. I was talking about this situation.”

He could tell Rupert was extrapolating to his views in general. He gently inched his foot closer to Rupert and shifted closer to make arm to arm contact.

Rupert relaxed, feeling suddenly reassured.

The service had been going for a good half hour. The priest had talked about the nature of love and the commitment that the happy couple were making to each other.

Jinx felt like her brain was going to implode.

“So, if anyone here has any reason why these two people should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now, or forever hold your peace.”

Jinx felt a wave of adrenaline hit her.

I could...

Don’t even think about it.

She raised her eyes to look up at the front and noticed that there was a lot of attention in her direction. It took her another moment to realize that the entire team was looking directly at her.

And the people all around her were looking to her and her team, as if that was why they were here.

Well, she thought, it is exactly why we're here.

Don't.

Jinx glanced over at the others. Jon, Joline, Ashworth, Paul, and Rupert. Every single one of them looked at her expectantly.

Was her silence letting the team down?

Should she be fighting for Bobby, even though he had told her not to?

"What?" she hissed at them angrily.

"Nothing," Rupert whispered, snapping his eyes back to the front like a soldier. All the others did the same.

The priest was looking in their direction, too. Jinx felt her face flush. Then, she saw Bobby turn around to glare at her.

She felt mortified. Like she just wanted the ground to open up and swallow her down every deck and into empty space.

She caught her breath and looked down, studying her fingernails as hard as she could, waiting for the burning gazes to turn their attention away from her. She felt her whole body overheat.

Glancing up to see if the ceremony was continuing, she saw that the priest was still looking at her, as if giving her one last opportunity to not have to hold her peace for all eternity.

The bodies in the church shifted impatiently, some straining to see what they were all waiting for.

Her heart throbbed. She felt helpless and tearful. But she knew she couldn't react. She made eye contact with the priest and waved her hand as if to say she was waving her right.

Her last chance to understand what was going on.

The priest seemed to shrug, as if to say, "Don't say I didn't give you a chance." And then he continued.

Jinx felt a piece of herself die. A part of her would never accept that this was real. No matter how long this farce went on for. But maybe that was what she had to learn. To accept a reality, even when she knew in her bones that there was something wrong with it.

And maybe there ultimately was nothing wrong with it. People made bad decisions all the time. And they went on living and breathing in some instances. There was always the next thing. The next chapter. And so it would be with Bobby. Even if she didn't know what that looked like.

Even if it meant him leaving the team and her never seeing him again. At least it had been his decision, and she was in no way going against his wishes.

At least she had that.

A single tear trickled down her face before she discreetly knocked it away with the back of her finger.