

Last Call on Eldora Station

Isobo Kelly

Katie flopped onto the bar stool and scowled down at the shifting hologram decorating the bar's counter top. A Tancan whiskey appeared under her nose. She would have smiled if she'd had the energy. "Thanks, Nick."

She dropped her head back on her shoulders to look into the bartender's eyes. Purple eyes. Stunning against his pale skin and black hair. She raised the glass in a silent salute then downed the whiskey in one gulp, squeezing her eyes shut against the sting in her throat. When the sting subsided and warmth settled in her belly, she opened her eyes and sighed.

"Tough day?" Nick's slow, sympathetic grin added to the glow in her gut. He took the empty glass from her lax fingers. "Want another?"

She shook her head. "The commander wants me back on duty in an hour."

Nick's easy grin dissolved into a scowl. "You've been on duty for the last twenty hours."

Katie raised her eyebrows surprised he knew her schedule. "Don't remind me. I'm so beat my eyes won't stay open. But he wants the main power grid re-routed through another alternate series after that last station-wide failure. Seems to think if we re-route enough systems we'll solve the problems." She shook her head in disgust then rolled her neck trying to work out a kink. "We're not 'fixing' anything.

Just putting a bandage on it, hoping for the best. Damn station's falling to bits, and Commander Whitney's too cheap to requisition the parts we need to fix things."

Nick picked up a glass and started drying it with an ever-present towel. She loved the quaint habit. He didn't have to hand-dry anything. That's what the drying tubes were for. But he insisted that being a publican on a space station didn't make him any less a proper publican and publican's dried glasses while talking to their clientele. She relaxed as she watched him, soothed by his habit as much as he was.

He set the glass down with a click. "You could probably use a cup of coffee."

She watched him move off down the bar, continued watching him as he poured her coffee and brought it back to her. Watching Nick was becoming a hobby, the only hobby she had time for these days. But it was a nice past time. He looked almost as good walking away as he looked walking back to her.

"You know what really gets to me?" He pressed his palms into the bar, leaning toward her as he spoke. She sipped at the hot, black coffee and shook her head, fascinated by the genuine anger in his eyes. "The fact that there're civilians aboard this station. It's supposed to be a home to people, a mini-society. And Commander Whitney plays with it like it's a toy, heedless of the consequences if it breaks."

She set her mug back on the bar. "He's proud of his efficiency record. If he comes in under budget again this quarter, he gets a promotion and a hefty financial reward."

"It's nothing but greed. And it's dangerous." He slammed his fist onto the counter top, making her mug jump. The small handful of people in the pub looked up from their drinks. Nick grimaced and went back to polishing a perfectly dry glass. "Sorry. Commander Whitney irritates me. Use to be just because he pushed you so hard, but now..." He trailed off, turning his full attention to the rag and glass in his hands.

Her stomach danced. She didn't realize she had enough energy to feel giddy. "The commander irritates you because of the way he pushes me?"

Nick shrugged, kept his attention on the glass. His face screwed up into a perplexed expression, like he wasn't sure why he'd said what he had. Katie felt her tired face muscles inch close to a smile. She studied him quietly, sipping her coffee. He wasn't exactly handsome. His features were too blunt and wide for handsome. But his easy smile gave him a charm that captivated, and his eyes could melt comet ice. She wasn't the only woman on Eldora Station to notice. Even some of her engineering crew had commented on Nick the bartender.

She frowned. "You know, after nearly nine standard months of coming here and spilling my guts to you, I still don't know your last name." In fact, she'd never heard anyone refer to him by a last name.

His easy grin returned when he looked up, making her pulse kick. "It's The Bartender," he said. "I thought you knew that."

She rolled her eyes and took another gulp of coffee, trying to ignore his husky chuckle. She'd never been brave enough to make a pass at Nick. Every other woman she knew that had tried had been very politely and charmingly refused. Some said he was married, others claimed he was gay. Katie couldn't say if either explanation was true because she was afraid to ask.

Nick always had a sympathetic ear, listened to her bitch and moan about her work. They'd developed an easy relationship, almost a friendship, except they both avoided any topic too personal. Asking his last name was the closest she'd ever gotten. He obviously wasn't prepared to share and deepen the

friendship.

She sighed. Probably for the best. She couldn't stay on Eldora much longer. Not with the way Commander Whitney was riding her. It would be a stupid time to start an affair. Even if Nick had any interest in one—which wasn't likely given his track record with the other women on station.

But Nick's comment kept ringing in her head. He got irritated with Whitney because of the way Whitney treated her. The idea that Nick cared even that much warmed her.

She set her empty mug on the bar and stood, rolling her neck until vertebrae cracked. "I should try to sleep," she mumbled, not eager to leave. The pensive look on Nick's face sparked her curiosity. "Hey, 're you all right? I don't think I've ever seen you serious for this long."

He blinked, focused on her. "If it's discovered the way Whitney's running Eldora, the patching work you've done instead of repairs, it'll affect your career?"

Her brows rose in surprise. Hmm... Maybe he was prepared to talk about personal things. She eased back onto the stool. "Probably ruin my career with the Corporation."

"Even though you're just following orders?"

"If it comes out what a mess this station is while I'm still chief engineer, Whitney will put the blame on me and my career will be over."

The glass in his hand cracked. Her eyes widened. He set the broken glass aside and leaned across the bar, bringing his face close to hers. "Why don't you report him? Why don't you go over his head, save your own reputation?"

She sighed. "It's complicated, Nick. I came into this post with a black mark on my record for insubordination. Whitney knows it and uses it. I don't have any proof to bring to the Board because he guarantees there is none. It'd be his word against mine, and he's the one with the sparkling record. All I can do is keep this station running and hope he doesn't get us all killed. If I tow the line, he may even grant my transfer request." She mumbled the last sentence, her gaze focused on the bar and her clenched fists.

The sudden weight of Nick's warm palm covering her fist made her shudder. "Transfer? When, where?"

"I requested it a month ago. I don't even care where so long as it's away from Whitney." When his hand retreated, she felt unaccountably bereft.

"I didn't realize."

Something in his voice made her look up, meet his gaze.

His mouth quirked up at one corner, and he spread his hands, palms up. "It's just... I'd miss you. A lot." His hands dropped to his side, but his gaze stayed locked with hers. "Place wouldn't be the same without you."

Her heart lurched. She was hearing him wrong, reading things into the soft, husky tone of his voice and the intent look in his eyes. He'd never hinted she was any more to him than a good customer and maybe a friend.

“I...” Her voice was too quiet. She cleared her throat. “I’d miss you a lot too, Nick. But if I don’t get out from under Whitney’s command, I can kiss my career with the Corporation good-bye.”

“Why not quit? You’re smart, talented, inventive.” He grinned, a slow sexy grin that made her stomach bunch. “Quit.”

“And do what?” She almost laughed. “There aren’t a lot of chief engineer posts outside of the Corporation’s interests.”

“Work for me. I could always use the talents of a top rate engineer.”

This time she did laugh. “Nick, I could hardly do more for your pub on Eldora as one of your employees than I can do as chief engineer.”

“Not on this station.” His hands clamped over hers, the intensity in his eyes stole her breath. “I own hundreds of pubs on hundreds of stations, resorts and depots. We could go to whichever one struck your fancy, anywhere in the galaxy.”

Her gaze narrowed. Her heart pounded. Could he feel her pulse where he covered her hands? “We?” She held her breath, afraid to hear his explanation.

His gaze softened, his grin returned. “Yeah, ‘we.’”

“Why?”

Before he could answer the angry shrill of warning claxons sounded throughout the station. With a curse, Katie launched herself from the barstool and raced toward the nearest console in the corridor outside the pub. She slapped the communications link, waited for her second to answer. When he did she shouted above the noise, “What the hell’s going on?”

“We’ve got negative readings in grids 8, 10 and 19, complete failure in both the main and auxiliary power couplings and the grav is about to...”

Before he could finish, Katie felt a stomach-churning lurch and her feet lifted off the floor. She scrambled for a frantic moment to catch hold of the emergency grips lining the station’s walls. They were designed to look decorative and innocuous, but they came in damned handy if the station’s gravity suddenly cut out. Wails, shouts, screams and curses fought for dominance with the still blaring bells.

“I’m on my way,” Katie shouted into the comm. “Cut off that damned claxon. Stabilize the grav. Try by-passing the secondary fission unit and routing grav power through the emergency environmental systems.” Katie paused, a lurch of nausea closing her throat. Their air! “The environmental systems? Are they still secure?”

“Affirmative, Chief. For the moment.” She could empathize with the disgust in her second’s voice. “But the external stabilizers are failing. Our position’s already degraded by .09 meters.”

Katie cursed again, her fingers digging into the grip as she tried to keep from floating away. “I’ll be down as fast as I can. McCormick out!”

“I won’t have this kind of mayhem tomorrow, Chief McCormick,” Whitney growled at her. “I’m expecting some very important people, and I won’t have the station falling to pieces while they’re here. This disaster is on your head. I told you to have those systems rerouted. If you hadn’t been slacking off, wasting time with your bartender friend,” he sneered the word, “we wouldn’t be standing here having this conversation.”

Katie held her tongue with more will power than she thought she possessed. They weren’t actually having a conversation at any rate. Whitney was doing all the talking. It had taken her four hours to get Eldora’s systems stabilized and get the station back to its proper spatial position. She’d been so tired she nearly fell asleep walking back to her room. Then the call had come to report to the Commander and she knew sleep was a distant memory. Given the state of her nerves, she felt it safest to keep silent unless asked a direct question. Otherwise, insubordination would be the least of her offenses.

“I can’t emphasize enough how important these people are, Chief. You can kiss your sorry career good-bye if there’s so much as a flickering of the lighting systems. You understand me?”

“Yes, sir.” The words were hard to force past her clenched teeth.

“Good. Now get out of my sight.”

She turned sharply and left his office, her back stiff until she was out of sight of his assistant and several meters down the corridor. Then her body loosened. Despite an undercurrent of anger, she was too drained to work up much real emotion. She needed sleep. She needed a break. She needed off this bloody station.

She thought about Nick’s offer again, not for the first time in the last five hours. It was a shock to realize he was more than just “the Bartender”. He owned pubs around the known galaxy. That probably made him wealthier than she could imagine. Yet he stayed on this deteriorating space heap, serving drinks and listening to her complaints. It said a lot about the man that he worked his own bar and took time to care for his customers. It was the most personal thing he’d ever admitted to her.

And he’d offered to take her away from here, anywhere she wanted to go. The idea baffled and alarmed her because she liked it so much. Even if all he was offering was another job on another station, she was tempted. If there were more to the offer, she’d be a fool to turn him down. Especially when she wanted more from him than just a job.

But she’d worked damned hard to get this post with the Corporation. After the accusations of insubordination from her first year as a technician, she’d had to work even harder to keep her job. A lot of energy had gone in to attaining the position of Chief Engineer. Could she sacrifice all that because Whitney was an ass? Would it mean he’d won if she gave up and left the Corporation?

She hated the idea of Whitney beating her. Hated it almost as much as she hated the man. If there were some way to save her reputation, what there was of her career, she’d jump at it just to make sure Whitney didn’t win.

Her tired brain circled the thought as she decoded the lock on her door and stumbled into the cool darkness of her small living room. What would it take to save her reputation? Proof that Whitney committed fraud with the station finances and endangered the station’s populace through neglect would

be good.

Without activating the lights, she shuffled back to her bedroom. Proof of fraud and neglect were probably out of the question as Whitney was very good with his records. She passed her bathroom, paused briefly to consider a hot shower and discarded the idea, along with her work boots, when she caught sight of her bed. She'd probably drown if she tried to take a shower now anyway. She tripped over her jumpsuit as she stepped out of it and fell forward onto her bunk. The stiff mattress had never felt so good. She sighed and closed her eyes.

As she eased down into darkness, she remembered the VIPs Commander Whitney had been going on about. She woke up enough to frown, blink. There weren't any VIPs registered on the arrivals manifest for tomorrow. She'd checked it yesterday morning hoping a courier from the Corporation was due in. She wanted to give a copy of her transfer request directly to the courier and bypass Whitney since he'd been ignoring the request for a month. No such luck. No Corporation ship was due for four days. There were a few private ships in dock and a couple due in the day after tomorrow. There were absolutely no ships due in, from anywhere, tomorrow. It was unusual enough that she'd noticed and remembered.

She sat up in bed, staring at the wall, her mind racing. It wasn't normal for a ship to arrive without being on the manifest. Especially a ship expected by the Commander. Could have been a mistake, she reminded herself taking a deep breath. Whitney would never just hand her something incriminating. He was too careful. He probably didn't expect her to check the arrivals manifest, but someone would notice a ship arriving unannounced.

She launched out of bed, scrambling for her clothes. A renewing rush of adrenaline pumped through her blood. It couldn't be so easy. She stuffed herself into her suit and boots and headed out. The manifest was accessible from only a handful of computers to prevent tampering. One of those computers was in the Travel and Trade sector. With luck, her friend Jess was working her usual morning shift. She'd be able to get another glimpse of the manifest and verify no ship was due. Then, she'd ask around at the docking bays. If that didn't turn up anything, she'd check with a friend in Medical, to see if it was one of their "secret" ships. Could be someone incognito from the Corporation. How could she find out? And if not that, then what else could it be?

Too many possibilities. All of them without basis in fact. She needed information. Something was strange about the whole situation and if it helped her get one up on Whitney, she was going to ferret it out.

Katie stared at the screen. "That ship was not on the manifest yesterday morning, Jess. I know it."

Jess shrugged, a gesture that made silver hair ripple along her long arms. "I believe you. But it's there now. Probably some glitch in the system. They happen here a lot." She bit her full bottom lip when Katie scowled up at her from her perch in front of the view screen.

There were moments when Jess forgot what Katie did. She tried not to take it personally when the Talmarian complained about the sorry state of the station. According to Jess, everything run by the Corporation was below adequate anyway. But Katie still felt stung by the unintentional rebuke.

"Sorry," Jess offered.

“Don’t. I understand. The place is a mess. Everyone knows it. And most blame me for it.”

“Not true. A lot of people know Whitney’s tied your hands.”

Katie shrugged, a noncommittal gesture for a comment she didn’t believe. “Anyway, I suppose this answers my question.” Suddenly exhausted again, she rubbed at her eyes and slouched back in the seat. She could be sleeping now.

She opened her eyes and stared up at Jess. The Talmari’s pink triple eye blinked down at her, sympathetic and patient. Silver hair rippled over her shoulders when she shifted positions.

Katie sighed, grasping at one last straw. Maybe if she knew who the VIPs were... “Can you check the passenger list? I know that’s not a Corporation coded ship. But can you see who’s traveling in on it?”

“I can try. Get up.”

Katie vacated the seat to Jess’s longer form then stood over her shoulder as she worked. The Talmari’s four three-fingered hands danced over the console, executing functions faster than Katie could follow.

“Strange.”

“What?” Katie leaned closer, trying to decipher the scroll of data.

“Well, see this,” she pointed at the screen, “this is the number for a ship that docked here three weeks ago. That ship was heading for the Gavarh system. The trip there and back takes two months. Unless something went very wrong, they’re not due back for another five standard weeks. But there’s nothing here to indicate that this ship’s coming in damaged or in need of repairs. If it were the ship headed for the Gavarh system, repairs would be the only reason they’d be due back here so soon. Now, see this?” She pointed at another set of codes with a lower arm, looking up to make sure Katie was following.

Katie nodded, her excitement building again.

“This is the registration code for a Bakendom Trader’s ship. But the ship due in is an E class, X500.”

“E class? That’s too small for a Trader ship.”

“Exactly. And none of the Bakendom Traders would be caught dead in a ship that small even for personal use.”

“So you’re telling me you have codes for this ship that don’t fit? Is this the kind of thing someone like you would notice right away? Is it so obvious a mistake it has to be a glitch?”

“Unless someone went looking, maybe to check up on a discrepancy at some point in the future, no one would ever look at these two codes and the ship specs at the same time. I only pulled them all up at once to look for a back way into the passenger list. They’re in different sections of the manifest and concern different departments, most of which don’t bother talking to one another.”

“Bureaucracy,” Katie snorted. “So what does all this mean?”

“It means that someone’s gone to a great deal of trouble to disguise the real identity of this ship. I’d be willing to bet the specs for the ship, the make and class, are correct. The crowd in the docking bay

would pitch a fit if those were wrong. They've got things so finely balanced down there you'd think it was a biological system and not an over grown parking lot." Jess chuckled. Her laugh always reminded Katie of a bell choir.

"So, this was done by someone who knew how the system worked?"

"Probably."

"Someone that understood the bureaucracy?"

"Yup."

"Someone who could've added the entry sometime in the last day."

"Had to. There's too many strange things about this ship to assume it wasn't registered earlier because of a glitch."

"And can you trace the person or even the console where this ship was added?"

Jess's growing grin drooped. "Sorry hon, I don't have the power at this terminal to trace the source of the entries on the manifest. A lot of them are coming in from deep space through subspace communications links to be sorted out in the main processing grid. Only one station has access to the grid. They're very protective of their domain in Processing."

"Would someone have to access main processing to insert this ship or could they just imitate a subspace message and have it sorted through the system like any other ship?" Her hope for valid proof against Whitney was waning. To know the ship wasn't there yesterday and was there today, and to prove Whitney was linked to the change were very different things.

"To have it added in at the last minute like this without it calling up flags in Processing? Whoever did this probably bypassed them all together." Jess's triple eye sparkled. The smooth white skin on her forehead creased when she raised her single silver brow. "I bet that'd really piss them off if they found out."

"Would it piss them off enough to trace the entry?"

Jess pursed her lips, a grin quirking one corner of her mouth. "They might."

Katie grinned. She leaned over and kissed Jess on the top her silver-haired head. "Thanks!"

Katie was jogging toward Processing, her mind ticking over ways of getting them to help her, when Nick stepped into her path. With no time to stop herself, she slammed into him. They careened back up against the corridor wall, forcing a grunt from him and a gasp from her. When she regained her balance, she found herself secured against his chest, her body pressed up against the full length of him. It felt entirely too good. By the way he shifted his hands, settling them flat against her lower back to hold her in place, he seemed to think so too.

"Sorry." She tried to look him in the eyes but ended up concentrating on his cheek. A very nice cheek,

she thought then shook herself. She was supposed to be doing something. What was it? She'd never noticed how good he smelled before, so good it made her toes curl.

"What's the rush?"

Despite the distraction of his husky tone, his question reminded her of her original mission. "I'm on my way to Processing. I've got to ask them something about a ship in the arrivals manifest."

His amazing purple eyes narrowed. "What ship? And why are you checking on it?"

She debated for all of a second before spilling her guts-spilling her guts to Nick had become a habit. He took in her story quietly, his face unreadable. When she mentioned the hiding Whitney had given her for the last station failure, his hands tightened at her back. The movement reminded her she was standing in Nick the Bartender's arms in the middle of a public corridor. The only reason no one had passed them already was because it was very early in the morning. She eased back from him reluctantly and finished her story.

When she told him about wanting to provoke Processing into helping her, he shook his head. "You can provoke Processing later." He took hold of her hand and pulled her down the corridor toward a residential area of the station.

"Where are we going?" She tried hard not to notice how nice his hand felt.

"My flat."

She balked, staring up at him.

"I've got equipment there that can by-pass most of the checks on this station. I can get you your information a lot faster and cleaner than Processing, and I can do it without alerting Whitney."

He started walking again, fast. She felt like she should protest, or ask questions or something. But she wanted the information fast enough that she was prepared to trust Nick.

In fact, she'd trust him even if she didn't want the information fast. The revelation staggered her, literally. He caught her, pulled her on without pausing. She hurried to keep up and pushed her realization to the back of her mind for later analysis. Now was not the time to wonder why she already trusted Nick.

His apartment was no different from any of the others in this part of the station-modest three room units with a nice view of space beyond a large window in the living room. She was surprised he wasn't living in one of the flasher flats in the outer hub. She would have braved asking him a private question to satisfy her curiosity if he hadn't led her directly to his bedroom.

She froze in the doorway, letting him continue on without her. She looked around, swallowing down her sudden rush of nerves. For some reason, she'd never thought of Nick's bedroom. She was used to thinking of him behind the bar.

The room was simple, masculine, subtle in its color and decoration. It suited him, she decided. And it smelled of him. The scent made her heart thumped hard in her chest.

She was still standing in the door staring as he pulled a small comp-system from a disguised wall panel. She followed into the room to stand near where he sat on the bed, watched in curious fascination as his

fingers flew over the console, tapping in commands. He just kept surprising her. She was so busy being impressed with his skill, she forgot what he was doing until he shouted his success.

“It was that easy?”

“With the right equipment.” He shifted from his spot on the bed and motioned her to sit so she could see what he’d found. She tried not to think about being alone with Nick in his bedroom as she eased onto the mattress beside him.

“I traced the login point of the ship’s entry. It was rerouted through a few channels, including a subspace relay. But it’s linked, eventually, to Commander Whitney’s secured console. The console isn’t directly connected to any other console in the station so I doubt even Processing would have been able to trace it.”

“So how’d you manage it and how do you know all this?” Her gaze narrowed.

He shifted, moved the small console back to his lap and stared at it for a minute. “The ship coming in is owned by a group of illegal goods traders. The Katwani. They buy and sell stolen parts and equipment. Not as bad as some pirates, but bad enough to leave a hole in the Corporation’s pockets.”

“Pirates? How can you tell? They’d hardly register a proper ship’s log.”

“Whitney has a private file where he records authentic data and it’s connection to the data he concocts for the official files. As his console isn’t supposed to be accessible from the station, he wasn’t worried about the files being hacked.”

“So how could you hack them?”

He shrugged. “The right equipment. I rigged his console with a mole-chip a few months ago, so I could gain access. He and his assistant gave me a great chance to get into his office when they were... distracted by other matters. I broke in and inserted the chip. Gives me full access.”

She took a deep breath, wondering if she really wanted to hear the whole story. “Go on.”

“The Board has been trying to track the Katwani for years now, with very little success. The pirates use some of the stolen technology they trade in to good effect. For nearly two standard years, a particular member of the Board has suspected Whitney of trafficking with the pirates. She tried to bribe, cajole and then threaten me to spy on him because of my position here at Eldora.” He shot her a sideways grin. “She didn’t have much chance of success. I have too many interests outside the Corporation’s holdings to worry about threats, and her bribes and cajoling were ... uninteresting.”

She raised an eyebrow, knowing for sure she didn’t want to hear about the woman’s attempts to bribe and cajole him.

He shrugged. “I was going to leave Eldora, get out of the situation all together to get her off my back. Then things changed. I agreed to do what I could, but I wasn’t going to stick my neck out. After awhile, I changed my mind about that too. I watched what Whitney was doing, and I wanted to bring him down. So I arranged for some equipment to be transferred to me here and-“

“Hold on,” she interrupted, holding up a hand to stall his story. “What changed? Why was it so important that you personally bring the Commander down? He leaves you and your pub alone.”

“But he wasn’t leaving you alone.” He looked up, caught her gaze and held it.

Katie felt her breath draining away. He looked as vulnerable as she’d ever seen him. “You did all this because of me?”

He nodded, a half grin ticking up one side of his mouth.

“Why?”

He sighed, reached up with one hand to cup her cheek. “Because, Katie McCormick, I’ve been in love with you since the moment I saw you walked onto this station. I’d do anything to make sure you were happy.”

Her throat dried, her hands trembled. “Why didn’t you...?” She couldn’t speak around the lump in her throat, a lump she thought might be her heart.

“I was afraid to say anything and risk ruining the friendship I needed so badly. You coming into the pub every day, exhausted and out of sorts, griping about your work and Commander Whitney. Those moments were the highlight of my days on this forsaken station. You’re the only reason I didn’t leave.”

He set aside the hand console and turned to her. His hands smoothed over her shoulders as he studied her face. “I need you to know, I didn’t offer you a job yesterday just because of how I feel about you. You’re a damned good engineer, Katie, and I’d be a stupid businessman if I passed up the opportunity to hire you away from the Corporation. I’ll understand if you can’t return my feelings. Don’t feel you have to-“

“Nick,” she interrupted, framing his face with her hands, “shut up.” Then she kissed him. Energy rushed through her tired body when he kissed her back.

She pulled back with a sigh, studied his expression, sank into the emotions filling his gorgeous eyes. “Can I ask a personal question?”

He grinned, nodded.

“What the hell is your last name?”

He rolled his eyes. “Montague.”

“Montague? That sounds very...”

“Stuffy?”

She chuckled. “Maybe a little.”

“I prefer just Nick. Or The Bartender.”

“I’m not calling you The Bartender.”

“I don’t care what you call me, so long as you kiss me again.”

She obliged without hesitation. Smiling against his mouth, she murmured, “So after we destroy Whitney’s career, when will I start my new job?”

Nick’s answering laugh warmed her to her toes.

THE END