

Christmas Cookies



Karmic Gifts
KIRA STONE

Changeling Press

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Kira Stone

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Kira Stone

Master Negotiator Riley Smith is a man on a mission, not the way he wants to spend the Yuletide holiday. He tries to make the best of it by flirting with Karma Engineer Pax, but the sexy Kar-En seems more interested in Yanar Aht, the mission's top translator, than him.

Yanar knows how to say yes in just about every language in the civilized Romba Galaxy, but he never gets the chance. His harmonic body longs to find the heart-mate who will drive him to sing the Song of Fulfillment, a seeming impossibility on a ship full of humanoids. It definitely puts a sour note in his holiday spirit.

As the ship is on the verge of flying apart, killing the entire crew, Pax must choose between duty and her growing love for these two men. She suspects carrying a cargo load of immature chaos balls would be easier. But Fate has a karmic gift in store for her... if she's brave enough to accept it.

Chapter 1 -- Off Kilter

"You foul offspring of a pigmy goat!"

"You loud-mouthed, unevolved primate!"

Pax hurled herself against the corridor wall as the Karma B-Class ship *Kismet* rocked in a pocket of deep space only it occupied. Over the resulting chaos, she heard another voice shout in triumph, "You unprincipled hind end of a depressed hyena!"

The ship shuddered, warning signals turned the corridor into an Old Earth 1970s disco, and Pax felt another throbbing headache coming on. She took a deep, centering breath, then pressed the button on her service belt that linked her to *Kismet's* intercom system. "Friends, I would be most grateful if you'd assume neutral positions at your earliest convenience. Thank you."

This was the third time she'd had to issue that serious request in as many days. The crew on the karma-driven ship knew the dangers of letting their behavior veer too far outside established parameters, and they usually managed to strike a harmonious balance without much coaching. As Karma Engineer for *Kismet*, it was her responsibility to ensure the vessel maintained an even keel. This trip, she was failing. Something was decidedly off.

Pax squelched her own negative feelings about the mission and stumbled into the Lava Pit, the ship's social center, where the annual Yuletide Festival was underway. Or it was, until everyone had turned statue still as she'd requested -- as much as it was possible on a ship that was rolling beneath their nether regions as if it were a hydrofoil sailing over rocky ground.

Rocky ground. Heh. That's what I'm on, all right.

She took a look around the room, assessing the situation. She spotted Ziang-Liang and Quee by the fireplace. Their bright plumage fanned out to absorb the heat

required to run their avian bodies. The twin looks they wore were slightly embarrassed. A sign of high shame for one of the Dytclis.

"We have caused much discord, have we not, Karma Engineer Pax?" Quee asked softly.

No, she didn't think so. She had a suspicion that the ship's karmic balance had been thrown off by something else entirely. However, Pax knew from bitter experience that it was better to let the pair of avians feel at least partly responsible so they didn't stir up further trouble. "May I ask why you were hurling insults at your friends?"

"As a gift. To show our esteem for them," Ziang-Liang offered.

That was a bit warped even for Dytclis logic. "Would you care to explain further?"

The rainbow-hued creatures exchanged a few clicks and trills that passed for their native language. Then, in Terranese, Quee said, "Old Earth custom. Insults among friends is a way of bonding. Since this is an Old Earth holiday, we wanted to participate in Old Earth customs."

Pax made a mental note to restrict the ship's history links for the birdbrains. With them, a little knowledge could be a dangerous thing.

"Admirable motives." Their ruby tail feathers fanned out in a burst of pride. Before they could get carried away, Pax added, "But deeper investigation of the custom might reveal that it fell out of fashion in the 2820s when Old Earth joined the Greater Galactic Federation. You see, they found it was not wise to chance a negative reaction when they were taking advantage of karma-driven ships."

Clicks and trills and the release of several downy, violet underfeathers followed this statement. When the air cleared, the Dytclis were again in poses of contrition.

"We are most abject in our apologies, Karma Engineer Pax. We will do further research to find a more suitable method of celebrating this Old Earth custom with our new friends," Quee announced.

As the two sped away on webbed feet, she hurriedly called after them, "Try Carols, Christmas in the database. And in all things, exercise moderation."

The karmic balance of the ship adjusted by a few grains, and Pax inwardly sighed. The birdbrains hadn't been responsible for the ship's instability which meant she still had a job to do. Fast. She scanned the room. Most of the ship's thirty-seven crew members were present. The problem had to be within her sight. Somewhere.

It didn't look like much of a party. In neutral positions, no one moved around much for fear of upsetting the delicate balance that stood between them and oblivion. Polite conversation followed around her in an invisible caress. Everything *seemed* just fine, no warning tingles at all. Which meant the problem was personal, not professional. On a shipload of people who were paid well to maintain a calm demeanor in the most trying of circumstances, it'd be easier to find an aluminum filament in an asteroid field than to ferret out the guilty party.

Until she did, the ship would continue to waddle through subspace like an unstable infant, slowing their progress. Too unstable, and the *Kismet* would literally fly apart. They were rapidly approaching that threshold. She had to hurry... and she had to be right.

After activating her comm crystal once more, Pax said, "I am touched by your swift compliance with my wishes. You may now return to normal duty."

As if the crew were made of wax, they melted into motion. Drinks were consumed, smiles were exchanged, and Yuletide blessings were dispensed at will. Pax moved among the crew, looking for the slightest signs of stress. One face in particular kept drawing her attention. That of Riley Smith, chief negotiator and the being who ultimately held responsibility for the success or failure of the mission on Melee 5.

He circulated through the room like a current of low grade energy seeking an outlet. Smooth, from his short ebony hair to the formal dress silks that billowed around his legs in every shade of gray imaginable. A black leather harness criss-crossed his bare chest, with only a small Ying-Yang symbol where they intersected to mark his title and rank. He exuded sex appeal with the same ease as his calm façade. Everyone wanted a chance to bed him, including Pax herself.

Given the opportunity to touch his bare golden skin, Pax knew she'd find it to be thicker and tougher than her own, a throw-back to old Earth genetics that was so rare these days. But Riley was a loner, as those serving under the burden of high command often were. All the more so this trip since he'd suddenly had to leave behind his friends and siblings instead of joining them for the holiday.

He was sexy and confident... and never allowed anyone to get close to him.

Not even Yanar Aht, the mission's linguist and the highest ranking officer onboard under Riley. Pax scanned the room until she found the colorful Shellian. Sapphire blue hair crested over the crown of his head, then flowed down to a frothy white between his shoulders. His skin was peachy-pink and nearly translucent in the ship's lounge. He almost always appeared naked in public since his bio-systems operated on light and sound waves rather than any oral nutrition. A fact which she personally appreciated. The male was downright edible.

He too was a lonely soul this holiday season. Although he'd reached adulthood some time ago, he had yet to find his heart-mate, the one who could harmonize with him in his unique mating song. And so he sang alone, with no one to help him celebrate this special time of the year.

Pax glanced back and forth between the two males as she continued to circulate through the room. Alone and lonely. They deserved better. Perhaps, they even deserved... each other.

The missing piece of the karmic puzzle dropped into place, and the plan to bring them together began to unfold in her mind...

Chapter 2 -- Coming to Terms

Waiting was the hardest part. Pax had gone over her plans at least half a dozen times. Every karmic sensitive bone in her body told her she'd finally found what was needed to solve the ship's instability problems. The only question remaining was how open the males would be to receiving their karmic gift.

Just as she sat down to wait for her guests to arrive, the automatic greeter went off. "Riley Smith, reporting as requested."

And five minutes early too. Good boy. "Come in."

Pax didn't raise the lights as the master negotiator entered. The shadows only enhanced the human's good looks. He still wore his "at rest" uniform of gray silks rather than his off-duty clothes, telling Pax he considered this an obligation rather than personal pleasure. He'd soon learn better.

"Welcome. Please select an item from the table."

Riley's fingers caressed several before he picked up a length of black silk. "What's this?"

"A blindfold." Pax had a hard time suppressing her amusement. The negotiator was in for the most erotic night of his life, once he got over his initial reserve.

"You want me to wear this?"

Soon you will be wearing nothing but that. "Yes."

"I suppose you have a good reason for this."

"Sir, I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that the stability of this ship and the success of this mission depend on you wearing that blindfold. Now."

From his hesitation, Pax deduced that Riley didn't fully believe her, but the Galactic Training Center had done their usual first rate job of brainwashing when it came to following a Kar-En's instructions. Sure, people had the freedom to refuse, but

they had to have a really compelling reason. Apparently Riley didn't, for he complied with her wishes.

"Now what?" Riley asked as he tied the ends of the silk together behind his head.

"Now," Pax drawled, walking behind him, "we turn on the lights."

Pax donned a pair of spectrum diffuser glasses and adjusted the solar panel to allow in the light from passing stars. Super-bright streaks of white light filled the room and reduced the possibility that random energy from outside sources -- any but the natural luminescence from the objects around them -- would interfere with what was about to happen. It was going to get a little warm but, at least for a few hours, the ship's systems could handle the heat. It was, after all, in its best karmic interest to do so.

"Are we expecting company?"

The negotiator was too smart for his own good, Pax mused. It would be fun to reduce him to a level of primal need, where the only thoughts filling that super-efficient brain were erotic ones.

Pax got to her feet and slipped her arms around Riley's trim waist. Half an inch from his mouth, she said, "You don't think I can satisfy you all by myself?"

Still holding himself rigidly upright, Riley replied, "I saw you speaking with Yanar at the Yuletide celebration. You two looked... cozy."

"He's an attractive male," she said, flicking a nail across his bare nipple. "And species doesn't matter to me when it comes to choosing my sex partners."

"Nor does it matter to me. Mind and soul transcend the body." He sucked in a breath as Pax began nibbling along his jaw line. "I merely wanted to point out that I knew you were expecting another."

And that worries you. Interesting. Pax burrowed her fingers into Riley's thick hair. "He may. He may not. That is his choice. My choice, at the moment, is whether or not I should kiss you. What do you think?"

"I think you're playing with me."

"I think you're right."

Nor did she stop her teasing after that admission. Instead of bringing his head that half inch closer, she swiped Riley's lips with her tongue. The chief negotiator parted them, and Pax sucked the lower one into her mouth, drawing on it until it slipped free.

Riley's hands dropped to Pax's hips and gripped her tightly. "I'm in no mood for games, Pax."

Not yet, but you will be. I promise. "All you have to do is ask for what you want. Is that really so hard?"

"Will you please kiss me?"

"Yes." But Pax didn't move.

After a few seconds, Riley added, "Now?"

"Okay."

The kiss was as flat and uninteresting as the request. Pax tried to keep the grin off her face when Riley growled, and then remembered that Riley was blindfolded so it wasn't necessary to hide.

"Stop your grinning, Kar-En Pax, and kiss me now or I swear to the Cosmic Creator that I'll spend the rest of this voyage teaching the Dytclis the joys of playing practical jokes."

She didn't get the chance to reply, as Riley jerked their bodies together. Pax helped to avoid disaster by meeting Riley's hungry lips. It was still rather painful as their heads collided, but the sting was quickly soothed by Riley's expert kiss.

The man had the smoothest tongue in the world when it came to calming tensions and orchestrating deals. His tongue was no less skilled when it came to the art of seduction. Thrusting gently into Pax's mouth, he took possession of the kiss, driving Pax beyond rational thought.

That's why it took two auditory signals before Pax realized that her other guest had arrived.

Deciding that it wouldn't be a bad thing for the translator to see her panting from Riley's attentions, she answered the door without making any effort to hide the fact that she'd just been thoroughly kissed.

"Welcome, please come in," Pax said as the panel slid back. She held a finger to Yanar's lips so he'd comply without a word. She knew he'd have no problem seeing in the searing white light. His own quarters would be permanently set to such intensity, providing the massive amounts of energy he needed to fuel his unique body.

She took his hand and led him over to where Riley stood. "I believe you know our mission negotiator. He's a bit overdressed for what I have in mind. Would you like to help me rectify that?"

Yanar's violet eyes were big and round, full of questions.

Apparently Riley was full of questions too, and able to demand answers. "You're not going to introduce me?"

"No," Pax said flatly. Though he'd suspected Yanar would be joining them, she wanted to let doubt linger in his mind. "You spend your entire life being in control of your environment and those around you. Today, we're going to change that. At least for a little while. The less you know, the harder it'll be for you to manipulate the situation."

Yanar smirked at that, but then cocked his head as if to ask, "What about me?"

Riley stroked the translucent skin along the Shellian's neck with the backs of her fingers. Leaning toward him so it would be harder for Riley to overhear, she whispered, "You spend so much time talking. Today, you don't have to say a word. Just... feel."

His eyes darkened with desire as he reached for her. She fit just under Yanar's chin. She melted against him and he tilted his head down for a kiss. His lips were the same violet color as his eyes. Pax nibbled the translator's mouth instead of devouring it as she had with Riley. So much of him was delicately sensitive, supremely responsive...

"It seems my presence here is no longer needed," Riley groused in a rare display of emotion. "May I be dismissed?"

"No," Pax said immediately. There were only limited circumstances in which she could pull rank on the master negotiator. Thank the Creator that this qualified as one of them. "Your presence is very much required." She stroked the leather criss-crossing Riley's chest. "And desired."

Yanar circled behind her and began kissing her spine from the neck down. Her brown robe slipped from her shoulders, baring her skin to his gaze. Under the intense white light, her skin would look much like red clay, or what was once known as terra cotta on Old Earth.

"You're supposed to be undressing him, not me," she reminded him gently. He was good at his self-appointed task though. The lips that had repeated so much knowledge were equally adept at bestowing silent praise. With his every touch, he made her nerves hum with pleasure. If it was this good for her, she could only imagine what it would be like for his fated heart-mate, the one who would help him to sing the Song of Fulfillment, a lifetime bond of love.

"I can strip myself, if you permit it," Riley reminded her.

He reached for the straps spanning his muscular chest, but Pax beat him there and slipped them from Riley's shoulders. Riley remained motionless, presumably focusing on his senses other than sight. He did, however, bring one hand forward to rest on Pax's waist and, surprisingly, pressed the other against Yanar's thigh.

Yanar followed Pax's example. The catch holding the gray silks in place frustrated him for a few seconds, but then he worked it free and the material floated to the cabin floor.

A breechcloth made of fine felt cupped Riley's genitals. Pax lightly fingered the material, drawing a groan from the negotiator. "Are you prepared to surrender?"

Chapter 3 -- Finding a Balance

"The situation hardly calls for such extreme --" He gasped as Yanar flicked a thumbnail over his nipple. Pax would have been amused, if not for the fact that one of her own nipples was the subject of the same sweet torture.

Quickly she was stripped of her remaining clothes. Her skin would feel almost like velvet to their touch. Riley's appreciative bass rumble was enhanced by Yanar's melodic hum. Pax realized with a jolt that the translator wasn't speaking, but rather his body had reached the sexual pitch where his fluted ears sang of his pleasure. A good sign. A very good sign indeed.

Quickly she tore the cloth away from Riley's hips. With one hand she stroked the length of his shaft. With the other, she guided Yanar closer. Her fist encompassed his length... he felt slightly warmer than Riley, and perhaps not quite as thick. In her mind, she saw the two of them together. Gold and violet, full and hard, slick with pre-cum. A soft moan escaped her lips.

"Closer," she urged them. She brought their cocks together, rubbing the ultra-sensitive heads against each other in gentle circles.

"I'm not... that is, I don't normally..." Riley tried to be diplomatic but words failed him.

"Trust me."

Yanar leaned over to nibble her neck. Breath whistled through his lungs, sounding like the tinkling of chimes. Riley's breathing also grew ragged and soon he was thrusting through her fist. She used both hands to squeeze their erections together, stroking the hot, hard columns of male flesh.

Dew moistened her feminine folds as each man dedicated himself to one of her breasts. Her hands cupped their balls. Riley's so heavy and near perfect in symmetry, Yanar's were smoother and not quite round, like imperfect pearls.

"I want to be inside you," Riley said roughly.

That hadn't been part of her plans. Sure, she found both males attractive. Who wouldn't? On both a physical and emotional level, they exemplified the best of their species. Otherwise, they never would have been chosen to be part of a Kar-En crew. But this night was supposed to be about their karma, not hers. Her job was to bring balance between them. To join with them would mean, in a very tangible way, that this business had become personal. Intimately personal. Given *Kismet's* instability problems, she couldn't risk pushing the ship over into complete chaos.

"You're stalling," Riley said softly. "Why?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

As if sensing the imminent peril about to befall it, the ship shuddered. Sensors clamored in warning. Pax didn't need them to tell her the situation was reaching a critical point. Deep in her heart she felt the schism. These two men *had* to merge, and forge the beginning bonds of love, to grasp firmly the opportunity that the Cosmic Creator was putting in their hands.

But Pax no longer knew where she fit in the equation. To leave them now tore at every karmic thread in her body. If she stayed, how could she be sure it was in the mission's best interest and not merely caving to her own selfish desires?

"*Kismet* trembles with your uncertainty, Kar-En," Riley pointed out. Even blind the man remained keenly observant. "If my opinion has any sway at all, I say you belong here, with us."

Yanar touched Pax's face to get her attention, and slowly nodded. His large violet eyes radiated desire.

The forces of good and bad played tug-of-war with her soul until finally, with a cry of surrender, Pax gave herself up to them.

"We need more room," Riley said.

"The bed?"

At his nod, Yanar and Pax led Riley, still blindfolded, toward the king-sized mattress on the raised platform. Riley pushed himself around until he was comfortably arranged in the middle, then held out his hand. "Come here, Pax."

She let him tug her forward and straddled his hips. Then she teased him by dragging her wet folds over his cock. Yanar tilted her head back and kissed her deeply. She felt Riley's arm sweep over her thigh as he reached for Yanar's thick shaft. He brought a dollop of pre-come to her nipple and spread it over the tight bud. Yanar abandoned her lips to draw Riley's wet finger into his mouth and suck it clean.

Riley stroked the outer ridge of Yanar's shell-like ear. The Shellian's rapturous gasp sent a shiver down her spine.

"You... you know how to..." Yanar's voice dropped to a melodic growl. "Play me."

"Instinct more than experience," Riley admitted.

Pax felt her heart shudder in her breast. These two men understood each other, knew each other on some deep primal level. They belonged together.

And for this one night, they also belonged to her.

"Fill me, please," Pax begged them. Taking them into her body would only symbolize how they had already been taken into her heart.

"As you wish..." Riley used his free hand to position his cock.

Without further prompting, Pax lowered herself upon it. She forced herself to take him slowly. She resisted even when his fingers clawed at her hips, trying to drag her down. Yanar's heat pressed against her back and his hands came up to cup her nipples.

Riley gritted his teeth, but apparently he could no longer hold himself back. His hips thrust up, burying himself to the hilt inside her. In slow motion, he withdrew his erection until only the head of his cock remained inside her. And then he thrust home in one sharp jerk of his hips.

Pax rocked from the force of his deep thrusts. Only Yanar's presence at her back kept her from falling over. Her head spun from the sheer pleasure of feeling his long hard cock stretching her wide.

"My turn," Yanar said, pressing her down to lie against Riley's chest. He poised the head of his cock against her sphincter. His natural lubricant, warmed to a body temperature slightly higher than her own, eased his advance as he worked his way into her back passage. Pax had to concentrate on relaxing her muscles to allow him to slip past the tight ring of muscle. Riley's cock throbbed in her cunt. She felt stretched and suddenly worried that she might not be able to take both of them at once.

Yanar ran his hands over her back to relax the tense muscles. "Good, so good."

Riley thumbed her nipples, twisting the sensitive nubs between his fingers to distract her. "There will be no pain here, only pleasure."

Her body stretched to accommodate Yanar's length. Riley's hips rocked in a shallow rhythm which seemed to give Yanar the extra room he needed to sink in the last few inches. The pitch of his song changed, becoming more complex and yet clearer.

Pax couldn't remain still. She wanted to feel those thick rods sliding inside her, against each other. She wanted the men to thrust into her with wild abandon. Riley used his hands at her hips to force her down onto his rigid shaft. Yanar countered by pushing her forward as he drilled into her. Faster and faster they moved, until it was one continuous, blissful motion.

"Yes, yes," she murmured.

Karmic bliss rippled around her in pure white ribbons of energy. Nothing had ever felt so right, which, given her Kar-En experience, was certainly saying something. That was Pax's last rational thought for a while, for in the next moment Yanar's sexual melody hit a note that vibrated against her skin in a most erotic caress.

"That's it, Yanar. Sing for us," Riley encouraged.

How the human had the breath to speak was beyond Pax. She felt full, so full of passion and need that she knew she couldn't contain it much longer. Every nerve ending in her body pulsed with the ebb and flow of Yanar's musical vibrations. Riley

was the rock she clung to, grinding down on his cock as Yanar fucked her ass. The three of them traded kisses and caresses until the ball of lust in her belly finally burst into a searing, primal climax.

"Oh, heavenly bodies. Yes, yes!" Riley ground out as her internal muscles milked his throbbing cock. Ramming his cock into her in a wild frenzy, he came with a release that bathed her core with jet after jet of hot semen.

Yanar tumbled into the orgasmic abyss after them. His body produced a wave of sound so clear and deep and true that it resonated directly to *Kismet's* heart. His seed filled Pax's ass, triggering another sexual shock wave through her.

Gasping for air, she collapsed against Riley's broad chest. Yanar rolled to his side. Though his Shellian biology didn't require the same kind of respiration as a humanoid, his chest rose and fell as though he'd been running. Riley's spent cock slipped from her channel as he settled her between them.

No one spoke, no one needed to. Lost in their own lazy contentment, sleep overtook them.

* * *

Pax woke some time later. How much time was uncertain, except that the ship had reverted the room's lighting back to normal nighttime ambiance. Once she removed her protective lenses, she saw both males still slept, although it seemed Riley had lost his blindfold. She crawled out from between them, noticing how they immediately reached for each other to fill the void left by her absence.

They were so beautiful together. Riley's golden skin against Yanar's pink glow. Blue hair tangled with black on the pillows. Their faces looked peaceful, and Pax knew they would be very happy together.

Too bad she couldn't say the same for herself.

But there was no place for her here now. She had brought them together and put the ship back in balance. Her job was done.

Afraid that she'd manufacture reasons to stay if she waited until they woke to leave, she quickly rinsed her body under the sonic shower and then dressed in her

uniform. With one last look at the handsome couple, she resolutely turned her back on them and walked out the door.

Chapter 4 -- Holiday Spirit

After a few hours of smooth sailing, the ship again shuddered and rolled in its isolated pocket of space. Pax was ready to scream. What in the nine rings of Saturn was the problem?

The Lava Lounge still bore the ravages of the previous night's Yuletide celebration, or so it seemed upon first glance. But as she waded through the wads of paper, what appeared to be anti-grav holly boughs and the plates of half eaten treats like gingerbread men and plum pudding, she found the pair of Dytclis sitting in a badly constructed sleigh, talking in low but animated tones as they examined an old-fashioned snow globe.

"Gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed yourselves during this Yuletide holiday," Pax said, trying to hide a smile.

"Silent Night," Ziang-Liang admonished. "All is calm, all is bright!"

Quee held the globe out so that Pax could see the tiny scene inside. All the snow had settled to the bottom and the Dytclis seemed to prefer it that way. "It Comes Upon a Midnight Clear."

"It *came*," Pax corrected gently. And apparently the holiday had come in a major way for these two. Several brightly decorated boxes still unopened lay beneath the detritus of those they had already enjoyed. Everyone on the ship must have contributed to making their first Yuletide celebration a great success. That alone should have gone a long way to balance out *Kismet's* karmic levels.

And yet they were once again lumbering drunkenly through space. Getting Riley and Yanar together had bought her some extra time, but at this rate it would take a cosmic standard year to reach Melee 5... if they got there at all.

Ziang-Liang extracted a miniature crèche from somewhere and set it into Pax's hand. "What Child is This?"

"It's Baby Jesus," Pax replied, her mind on much weightier questions.

The pair frowned, and she realized she'd made a mistake. She scrambled to figure out what she'd done wrong, and the clues slowly sank into her brain one by one. The halls had been decked by boughs of holly. The night was calm, silent and bright. Jingle bells had been attached to the front of the makeshift sleigh. It seemed the Dytclis had taken her advice and looked up old Earth Christmas carols, and then found a way to symbolize them. She had a devilish desire to ask what they did for "Here Comes Santa Claus," but then she spotted a red suit under one of the lounge tables which bore a few suspicious stains and decided she was better off not knowing.

"Mary's Child," Pax said, finally coming up with a song title that would restore their holiday spirit.

They nodded and clicked approvingly. But as much fun -- and thus good karma - - as the Dytclis had generated, the ship still wobbled like a water droplet in zero gravity. She had no doubt after their rather spectacular bout of sex that Riley and Yanar were going to be very happy together. So if they weren't the problem... and the Dytclis weren't kicking up negative karma... what else was going on? Stress fractures were beginning to appear on *Kismet's* outer hull. Time was growing short and she had no idea what other situation could be so catastrophically out of balance.

"All I Want for Christmas Is..."

Quee's question brought her back to the present, and Pax replied with the first thing that popped into her head. "Joy to the World."

But how to achieve that? Pax thought back to last night, when the ship had sailed so smoothly that they'd nearly made up for all their lost time. The ship's karmic balance had been fully restored, if only temporarily. What had changed since then?

I have... The truth hit her so hard she sank to the floor in a stunned heap. She'd changed. Loving those two men had been indescribably right. Leaving them had been

the hardest sacrifice she'd ever had to make as a Kar-En. Maybe that hadn't been the right choice after all. Maybe she deserved to be part of their happiness...

At the very least, she had to face them again and find out.

Just as she started to rise, Quee plopped something on her head. "We Three Kings!"

Pax laughed. The Dytclis was so excited, his tail feathers were waving about. "Very good, gentlemen. I see you've really gotten the Yuletide spirit. But now, I must be going so that 'I'll Be Home for Christmas'."

"We Wish You a Merry Christmas," they chorused together as Pax left them to their holiday festivities.

With each step she took toward her cabin, she felt more and more certain that she was on the right track again. Her certainty wavered, however, when she opened the door to her quarters in the karmic heart of the ship and found Riley bound to the floor with energy chains like a virgin sacrifice awaiting the dragon. Yanar stood over him, a feather in his hand poised to tickle the negotiator's balls.

Oops.

She started to back out quietly, her thoughts churning like a solar storm on the sun's surface.

"Pax!" Riley cried out, halting her in her tracks.

"My apologies for interrupting," she murmured past the tightness in her throat.

"Interrupting? Not at all. In fact, your timely arrival has saved me from a rather... unique negotiating session."

Yanar smiled slyly, twisting the feather between his fingers. "He wanted to hunt you down and drag you back to our bed. I had to remind him that you must choose to be here, as you did last night, or having you with us means nothing."

Smart man. "Kismet gave me a precious gift... one night with the two of you. I didn't dare ask for more."

"And yet you came back to us," Yanar pointed out.

"I came back to see if... if..." She couldn't say it. It went against all of her training. She was there to serve the karmic best interest of others. Her own needs were secondary. As badly as she wanted to believe she belonged with these two special men, she couldn't allow herself to be clouded by her desires. Or theirs. She had to be sure.

"To see if you belonged to us?" Yanar supplied.

Riley said the word that released his chains and he got to his feet in one smooth movement. "How can we prove it to you?"

"The ship..." Why was it so hard to talk to them now? She took a deep, centering breath. "There are fewer instability issues when we're together than when we're apart. But one night isn't sufficient evidence to make a decision that will affect the lives of the entire crew."

Riley nodded. "What you want is proof, and I think I know how to get it. Yanar, take Pax with you into the hall. Wait a minute and then let her return to me. Wait another few moments, then follow her. You understand?"

Yanar might, but Pax didn't see how this was going to settle the matter. However, not having a better idea, she followed the translator out. The ship shuddered as she passed through the door. Her stomach tightened. She'd been wrong then...

When he nudged her, she went back inside, stepping carefully as the ship continued to bounce around erratically in its private pocket of space. Riley greeted her with a smile. She couldn't return it. She'd allowed herself to hope that she was meant to be with Riley and Yanar, and now she was paying the price.

Riley put his arms around her and hugged her to his chest. For just a moment, she let herself relax into his arms.

A minute later, Yanar joined them. He embraced them both, and for a long breath they didn't move, didn't talk. Warmth crept into the cabin and Pax couldn't suppress the love she had for these two men. She clung to them, sure that leaving them again would leave a lasting scar on her heart. But if that was her karmic fate...

"Better?" Riley asked, still wearing that sexy-as-hell smile.

Pax nodded, but said, "I don't see what you've managed to prove though."

"You know when you leave us, the ship becomes unstable. What the extremely clever negotiator just demonstrated is that being alone with either of us doesn't help. The three of us belong together. Only then is the ship balanced."

The truth of that statement registered at the same time she noticed how smoothly *Kismet* moved through subspace now. Just as it had while they were together last night. The resulting surge of emotion wrung a cry from her throat.

"Do you believe us now?" Riley asked her.

"Yes." She peppered his face with kisses. "Yes."

Yanar snuggled up against her side. "Hey, I want some of that lovin'."

Riley and Pax attacked him ferociously with kisses until he stumbled backward. Laughing, they all tumbled onto the bed. Yanar snuggled up against her back while Riley rested his arm over them both. Hands roamed over bare skin until it was hard to tell who was touching who. She felt surrounded, and more at peace than she ever thought possible.

Suddenly, Pax chuckled.

"What?" Riley asked her.

She'd been thinking of the Dytclis and their holiday spirit. "Anyone up for a round of 'O Come, All Ye Faithful'?"

Yanar and Riley exchanged concerned glances and Pax laughed again. "Never mind. I'll explain later."

As her lovers kissed every inch of her skin, Pax made a mental note to tell the bird-like duo that sometimes the best gifts were karmic ones, where one was guaranteed to get exactly what he or she deserve. But that could wait until later. Much later.

Kira Stone

Kira Stone lives in a warm, many-chambered cave tucked away in the Scottish Highlands. A small band of ever-changing heroes keeps her company. As they relax in front of a roaring fire, devils dance and angels sing her bawdy songs. Faerie folk often stop in for a cup of mulled wine and to listen to her spin a yarn or two. And when daylight turns to dusk, together they somehow find a way to keep the cold, uncaring world at bay for another night...

Okay, maybe not. LOL. When Kira isn't living in a fantasy world, she's writing about one from her ordinary house in Ohio with a few feline companions (who don't sing nearly as well as the angels do). Is it any wonder she prefers the cave? You can check out Kira's website at <http://www.kirastonebooks.com>, or join her Yahoo! group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kirastonebooks>.