

FRANKIE'S JOURNEYS SINGLE

The

GOOD CHAIR



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A FRANKIE STYLES STORY

The Good Chair

Spike's side of the story

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osing Space Station acted like it was something special. Biggest and newest in the system, squatting fat and satisfied at the Lagrange Point between two agricultural planets that kept it fed. Down in the economy ring, it would be humming with vendors and dock workers, the two-story markets beckoning with the scents of sugar and spices and fake meat. Second ring posed as all business, muted colors, vanilla-tinted air, whispered deals when there were sound-dampening rooms right there. Third ring played at luxury, with its color-shifting fashion trends and glam buildings, all ruined by that acid lemony scent.

Luxury should smell quiet, not loud.

Luckily, Systems Analysis sat in the middle ring. Spike padded down one of the side halls, avoiding both the careless swipes of the boxy delivery bots and the grabby hands of screeching toddlers.

Her scraggly gray-striped coat—thick enough to nearly double her actual size but too irregularly patterned for the bots' simple recognition software—made her invisible to automated systems but irresistible to small humans who couldn't tell the difference between a dangerous intelligence operative and a huggable kitty monster. Tall humans considered Spike too grumpy-looking for pets but too small and soft-looking to fear.

She wasn't going to tell them different.

Rosing Station's real power player occupied a suite of offices that looked as unremarkable as its company name. Systems Analysis was a public-private partnership that gathered and analyzed information across Cooperative Space. Just another data-processing company among hundreds.

The only one with the galaxy's only free enhanced cyvlossic on payroll.

It also fielded a network of operatives, rescue specialists, and problem-solvers who made sure bad actors had worse luck and lost people found their way home. The kind of philanthropic venture fund that had been watching promising individuals since university, waiting for the right moment to offer them a different kind of cargo contract.

Spike had to meerkat up to press the palm reader at the back door. It opened onto nice scratchy carpet that smelled like dust and clean forest after rain. Bruce's office was just a couple doors down.

Bruce was an okay human. Paid on time, never asked stupid questions about her "species," and kept his hands to himself, which put him ahead of ninety percent of handlers she could have drawn. Only mildly annoying that he always knew what you were going to report before you said it, sitting there stroking those thick sideburns like some kind of all-knowing furniture salesman who'd accidentally acquired a spy network.

She knew something was wrong before she hit the palm pad on his door.

Lavender. That thick hair conditioner from Silva's uppercity shops that cost more per ounce than real meat. Two years scrambling and she'd learned that smell meant rich people, meant scanners, meant hands that grabbed for "poor lost kitties" to check their chips.

Her fur ridged along her spine before she could stop it. The tracker scar on her shoulder pulled tight, muscle memory from too many years of being owned.

She pressed the palm pad.

Something was in the good visitor chair.

Someone.

Spike's claws slid out. Just half a centimeter, catching on the doorframe's rubber seal. She forced them back in, forced her breathing to even out. Let her eyes adjust from the hallway's happy glow to Bruce's carefully orchestrated cave lighting. Desk lamp positioned to throw dramatic shadows across his face. Window behind him—fake, of course—backlit with something meant to look like Rosing Station's eternal twilight. The amber glow made visitors lean forward to see him better, made Bruce look like he had a halo. All of it theater, down to the angle of his coffee mug.

Sunshine sat in Spike's chair like he was posing for a portrait.

The perfect cyvlossic.

Every hair groomed into submission, tail wrapped around his paws with mathematical precision. The butter-cream coat caught the desk lamp just so—definitely calculated before sitting down. Only two days free from Orr’s compound and he’d already blown a month’s wages on fur care.

Last time Spike had seen him, Sunshine had been her doppelganger, dark-striped and tufted, slouching through shadows like her evil twin. All part of the bait-and-switch scheme to sneak him out of Konrad Orr’s control.

Now those brown-tipped ears were back to their natural elegance, pelt fully fluffed, that sanctimonious expression fully restored. Sitting there judging Spike’s grooming habits with those wide eyes while pretending to be above it all. Same cyvlossic who used to report their every move to Konrad. At least when he’d looked like her, scruffy and real, he’d seemed approachable. Now he was back to being Sunshine—refined, precise, and absolutely convinced that everyone else was doing life wrong.

So what was he doing here?

Sure, SystA would have wanted to debrief him. What a catch—one of the linchpins of Orr Industry’s sketchier operations. Paying for his freedom with information.

But that could have happened anywhere. Conference room, one of the spare offices.

A holding cell.

Instead, Bruce had him installed here like a priceless piece of statuary. “The Pinnacle.”

Begging to be knocked off that pedestal.

Bruce looked up from whatever he was pretending to read. He was a big human, the kind whose feet stayed flat on the floor when he sat in his so-called ergonomic chair. He seemed to take up his whole side of the desk, a massive square of fake mahogany on straight legs. She had to jump straight from floor to desktop if she wanted eye level. Every time, he made that subtle flinch when her claws clicked on the desk’s high-wax surface.

Broad shoulders; hands where you couldn’t see them. The type who sat so still during video calls that she’d sometimes check if the feed had frozen, except for those fingers smoothing those sideburns—tick-tick-tick, every couple of breaths like a grooming compulsion.

“Spike! Perfect timing.” Bruce’s voice rolled out like expensive oil—too smooth, too practiced. Every word calibrated, that broadcaster’s baritone pitched exactly right to trigger trust responses in human brains. It made Spike’s whiskers itch worse than a white noise generator. At least the generator was honest about being manipulative. “Sunshine and I were just discussing his qualifications.”

What?

“Finally, we’ll have comparative data on enhanced cyvlossic operational patterns.” Bruce tilted his head toward Sunshine.

There it was. Eight years she’d been Bruce’s definition of “enhanced cyvlossic capabilities.” The only data point.

Now there’d be comparison charts.

She’d see about that.

Spike padded in, let the door hiss shut with its little pneumatic sigh. The bad chair—the one that wobbled on its uneven leg, that sat so low she’d have to look up at both of them—waited like a deliberate insult. That public-transit-grade polyester that pilled and caught claws, the foam underneath compressed to nothing from years of various human butts.

Not sitting in that deathtrap while his Highness played king of the mountain.

“Spike’s extraction was remarkably professional,” Sunshine said. His voice so arch that Spike had to force her ears not to flatten. “Such grace under pressure.”

Instead of answering, Spike jumped onto the corner of Bruce’s desk. She had to bunch her muscles just right—cyvlossics weren’t built for vertical leaps like some cats. They were built for endurance, for processing data, for surviving.

Papers crinkled—real paper, who still used paper?—crunching under her weight. Bruce’s eye twitched—the left one, always the left—but he didn’t say anything. Never did anymore. They’d had that discussion eighteen months ago. She’d won.

Or had she? Here was Sunshine, in her chair, getting the welcome Spike had never gotten. Bruce’s fingers started their journey toward his sideburns—tick-tick-tick—then stopped. Caught himself. Even Bruce was performing for the golden boy.

Spike’s claws flexed against the papers, tiny perforations marking her territory. She drew them back in.

Control. She had control.

“Modesty,” Bruce said, somehow making her refusal to defend herself sound noble. “One of her many qualities. Though your report was quite thorough, Spike.”

Sunshine’s whiskers twitched. Just once. Embarrassment or amusement, hard to parse under all that careful grooming. His ears forward, alert but not aggressive. Practiced. Everything about him was practiced.

Getting him out had been messy. Hours of preparation, a ruined dress, and fertilizer bombs in the gardening shed. But the Regency of Yore gala had been the perfect cover—hundreds of guests in bizarre

costumes, screeching violin music that everyone knew Sunshine couldn't resist, and enough chaos to hide a cyvlossic swap. Spike had spent hours getting transformed into Sunshine's double for the ruse.

It hadn't taken.

Bruce stroked his right sideburn. His tell for 'this should be entertaining.' The left meant he was actually thinking. Both hands meant trouble.

"Sunshine is considering joining our organization," he said.

Now Spike's ears did flatten.

Claim-jumper.

Squatter.

"Such talent shouldn't go to waste," Bruce continued, fingers leaving his sideburns to tap the desk. "Strategic operations analyst. Pre- and post-operation analysis. Desk work, naturally. Central District focus." The tapping stopped. "Completely separate from field operations."

The words hung there. Separate. Desk work. Different territory entirely.

But still here. Still in her space. Still being compared.

"Just keep Orr away from me," Sunshine said. His voice had lost some of that arch tone, gone quieter.

Spike knew that feeling. That specific desperation when every door had closed except one. When you'd take any offer, accept any terms, just for a chance at something that wasn't a cage.

She'd had two years of it. Living in maintenance ducts and storage rooms, eating nutrient paste stolen from emergency kits, jumping at every footstep because this time it might be someone with a scanner.

Every kind hand a threat. Every offered scrap of food potentially baited with a chip scanner. "Help" meant capture and capture meant collar and collar meant Orr. She'd learned to ghost through ventilation shafts, to fool security bots, to hack into any system on station and not get caught.

Even Systems Analysis..

Six years ago, she'd accidentally saved their asset's life during a botched SystA rescue. Bruce had offered her a job instead of a reward. He'd held to his bargain even after finding out who she was. Whose she was.

Sunshine had been free for two days.

Bruce shuffled papers on his desk—actual paper contracts because he was just that dramatic. "Of course, we'd need to ensure smooth integration. Team dynamics are crucial for what we do."

Translation: Spike had veto power. Bruce might run the place, but he knew better than to force partners who

couldn't work together. Bad for business, worse for survival rates.

"I'd stay out of the way," Sunshine said quickly. Too quickly. The first fissure in his flawless composure. "Different shifts, if necessary. Whatever works."

Spike studied him. Really studied him, past the exacting grooming and orchestrated positioning. His breathing had gone shallow. His claws kept extending and retracting, tiny clicks against the chair fabric. The kind of nervous tics Orr would have punished.

Twelve cyvlossics left in the whole system. Spike knew because she tracked every one. Had to.

Eight years since the last 'training accident.' Because Sunshine had played the game, worn the collar, purred for the monster who owned them.

And hated every second of it, judging by the tension in his shoulders.

"Not safe out there," Spike said. First words since she'd entered. They came out rough, of course, thanks to the banged-up voicebox she refused to get replaced.

Sunshine's posture finally cracked. Just for a second—shoulders dropping, tail going limp against the fabric. "No. It's not."

The environmental unit's hum shifted, cycling into its hourly ventilation check. The sound made both

cyvlossics' ears twitch—different directions, same instinct.

Bruce was watching them both now. Waiting. Not pushing. Smart.

Spike thought about territories. About boundaries. About the careful distance she'd maintained from everyone until Frankie. Sunshine didn't want her space—he wanted his own. Different corner of the same shelter.

"Different departments," Spike said. Not a question.

"Completely," Bruce said immediately. "You'd rarely even cross paths."

Sunshine shifted in his chair, and for the first time since she'd walked in, he looked uncertain. The movement was small—weight redistribution, tail curl loosening—but it changed everything about his silhouette. Made him look smaller. Younger.

Like he'd looked that night at the gala, when they'd been swapping him out. When freedom had been just a possibility, not yet real. She'd seen it then, just for a moment—who he might have been without Orr's collar. Who he still might be, given the chance.

The same chance she'd been given.

"I understand if—" Sunshine started.

“Spike?” Bruce’s voice was softer now, the calculated smoothness cracking just enough to let something real through.

The words sat in her throat like a hairball.

What would Frankie do? She was up in the Spear’s galley, probably scrolling through possible shipping contracts by now. Sweet, ridiculous Frankie. Who complained about Spike’s shedding but still let her sleep on her feet. Who’d risked everything on that Orr extraction job just because someone needed rescue.

Frankie would hire Sunshine in a heartbeat. Would probably offer him the good cushion and half her lunch. Because Frankie didn’t understand that kindness could be another kind of collar.

But Spike did.

And so did Sunshine.

Except Spike had been terrified of being caught back then, scrambling through those two years.

Sunshine was terrified of being free.

Spike went absolutely still. The kind of stillness that reminded everyone in the room that cyvlossics were, at their core, predators. She stared at Sunshine. Not at Bruce—Bruce didn’t matter right now. Just Sunshine.

Let him squirm. Let him know what he was really getting into. This wasn’t Orr’s compound with its regular

meals and grooming schedules and knowing exactly where you belonged.

The environmental system cycled, filters wheezing. Bruce's hand started toward his sideburns, stopped, dropped to the desk.

Still Spike stared.

Sunshine's breathing got shallow. His claws extended just enough to catch the chair fabric again. The good chair creaked under him. Even the furniture was protesting this arrangement.

"Perhaps," Bruce started, then stopped when neither cyvlossic looked at him. He cleared his throat. "I imagine we could arrange complementary but independent assignments."

Spike finally blinked.

Once.

Slow.

Not acceptance. Just... non-refusal.

There was a difference.

"Great!" Bruce leaned forward, hands rising enthusiastically. "HR can process the agreements today. You'll work with the Strategic Sectors team—northeast wing. Spike's never even been over there. Medical will want samples—blood, fur, the usual. Do you have any

allergies we should know about? Dietary restrictions? Strong feelings about fluorescent lighting?"

"Thank you," Sunshine said. Not to Bruce.

Spike's step hitched as she headed for the door. Just barely—a microsecond of weight redistribution that anyone else would have missed. Her fur wanted to ridge along her spine, that uncomfortable crawl of being seen.

Being understood.

She kept walking. Four more steps to the door.

"Spike." Bruce's voice, deceptively casual. "Before you go. You haven't filed yesterday's report yet."

She stopped but didn't turn. Ears swiveled back to catch whatever came next.

"Sunshine's going to need those details. For his strategic analysis. Full debrief. Every glorious, grimy detail." The smile was audible in his voice. "Consider it his orientation."

Behind her, Sunshine made a sound that might have been an imminent hairball. Good. Let him know what he was really signing up for.

Three more steps. Two. One.

The door whispered open. The hallway's fluorescents felt like salvation after Bruce's theatrical cave.

“Oh, Spike?” Bruce called, just as the door started to close. Because Bruce always needed the last word. “Tell Frankie the glimmerantin bean contract is absolutely off the table. I don’t care if it’s quadruple rate. The fumigation costs alone—”

The door sealed shut, cutting him off. Small mercies.

Spike padded down the corridor, past the three “Tech Repair - Authorized Personnel Only” signs that fooled absolutely no one who mattered.

Time to get back to the Spear. To Frankie.

She had the Spear. Where the only chair that mattered was the one with the orange cushions that had molded to her shape, that smelled like her and engine oil and Frankie’s terrible coffee and nobody else. Where she was still the only enhanced cyvlossic who’d ever set foot.

Where Sunshine and his reports and his immaculate grooming would never reach.

Home.

Continue the adventure

Book 3: Frankie Takes a Dive. When guests start dying in mysterious accidents at an exclusive underwater resort, Frankie and Spike go undercover to save the next victim. books2read.com/frankie-takes-a-dive

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