

Wicked Wanderer

by Sharon Green

Chapter One

Chayara crouched behind the crate in the ship's storage hold, not quite holding her breath. She'd managed to sneak on board this vessel from the supply and repair station where the ship had docked, taking advantage of the sloppy way they'd guarded their hold after loading their supplies. If the ship needed repairs as well as supplies the wait for it to leave the station could be a long one, but she was trusting to luck that departure would be sooner rather than later. After all, luck had gotten her this far...

And her luck turned bright and shiny again when she felt the sudden throb of engines and heard the clang of ports being closed and locked. The engines would need only a short time of warm up to match the short time the ship had been docked, but that very short amount of docking time suddenly felt odd rather than lucky. Wasn't anyone taking leave on the station, not even the ship's officers? That wasn't the way it usually worked...

"But it's too late to change my mind," Chayara muttered as she sat down on the cold and dirty deck, pulling her pack closer. "Not that I would change my mind even if I could. This was the only ship likely to leave before the next Patrol ship showed up, when everyone on the station would be asked for identity papers. They would have found me no matter where I tried to hide, and that would have been it. At least now I have some kind of chance."

A chance to get as far away from where she'd come from as possible, without anyone knowing what she was doing. She had to find her uncle Leron, a man she hadn't seen in eight years, but a man who was also her father's twin brother so she'd have no trouble recognizing him.

Uncle Leron had given her the name of a planet and its sector when she had seen him last. Finding him on the planet he'd named - not to mention getting to that planet or its station - might be hard, but so far her luck had carried her more than half way. Freighters weren't comfortable to travel on, but they covered large distances and were fairly convenient for a stowaway.

Like this newest freighter she'd found. The supply hold wasn't as gigantically large as the hold for freight, but it had to be kept filled with air because supplies are constantly needed for the crew. And it had a sanitary facility just like the larger hold, there to be used in case of an emergency while crew members were loading or unloading in the area. The sink in the sanfac provided drinking and quick-bath water, and Chayara carried tablets of food concentrate that were actually better for people than ordinary food.

And my occasional stops on stations let me shower and get my clothes cleaned, Chayara thought, also deciding to wait another few minutes before going looking for a place to sleep. So far there had always been something soft in the hold to use as bedding, softer than the metal of the deck at least. But she would not help herself to any of the food in the hold, even if she had started to dream about sitting down to a normal meal. The loss of a small amount of water might get overlooked, but if foodstuffs started to disappear the crew would begin a search...

Thinking about searches, Chayara suddenly realized that she didn't need her hand torch to search for something to sleep on. The lights were still on in the hold, which was definitely unusual. If the loading crew forgot to turn out the lights when they were done, the oversight was always corrected by the bridge crew as soon as the ship was under weigh. This time, though -

"Don't make a single move toward that pack," a cold male voice said from behind Chayara, making her blood turn even colder. "Lace your fingers behind your head and sit perfectly still."

Chayara lost no time in putting her hands behind her head and lacing her fingers together, cursing hard inside her head. This was the first time she'd been found, the only time she'd been found, and she couldn't understand how the luck could have deserted her. It wasn't like ordinary luck, after all...

"You were right, Dron, it is a female," the cold voice said as the man who owned it moved around to where Chayara could see him. He was big and dark, black hair, eyes, and skin, and he held a high intensity stunner that obviously came from the empty holster strapped to his thigh. Stunners were used aboard ships in place of more deadly weapons to keep the hull from being breached by an accidental discharge, but that usually meant ordinary stunners. The high intensity sort had different settings, and the highest had no trouble killing anyone the charge struck...

"Course it's female," a second voice said as the man who owned it also moved into view. "A scanner never lies, leastways not to somebody who can read it. She's also got nothin' in the way of tracers or any other electronics on her. What say we take a short break before bringin' her to the captain, Khar?"

This second man had sallow skin to go with his dark eyes and hair, and he wasn't quite as large as the first. But he also wore a holstered stunner, probably because his hands were busy holding the scanner, and both men wore ordinary shirts, pants, and boots. No ship's uniforms with the ship's name and symbol at their left shoulders, which had also never happened before. Chayara tried to keep her face expressionless as both men stared at her, but her heart had started to pound its way out of her chest and she felt an urgent need to swallow hard.

"If you think the captain won't know we took a ... short break then you're dreaming, Dron," the man called Khar said after a very long moment of staring in silence. "First we hand her over, and if the captain doesn't want her then we can taste her. On your feet, girl, and don't be

dim enough to think you can run. If you do run I won't chase you, I'll shoot you. Now get up."

Chayara got to her feet slowly, trying to figure out what kind of freighter she'd made the mistake of stowing away on. Armed crewmen using a scanner in the supply hold, men who wore no uniforms and talked about raping her instead of locking her up... She had no idea how it was possible for her luck to turn so bad, but there was no arguing that it had. Whether or not good luck would come back was something Chayara wasn't up to thinking about at the moment...

When it became clear that Chayara wasn't going to run, the man Khar holstered his stunner, picked up her pack, and then took Chayara's arm. She was dragged by that arm to and through the airtight door leading into the rest of the ship, then up the corridor outside. Khar's fingers were hurting her arm, but Chayara didn't bother saying so. He wasn't likely to loosen his grip until they got where they were going.

And getting where they were going took a while. The ship was bigger than the average freighter, even bigger than the occasional super freighter. How that could be was another piece of the puzzle that refused to come together for Chayara, most especially since the station designation for this ship had said it was an ordinary freighter. It wasn't supposed to be possible for a ship to broadcast a misleading designation, only this ship obviously had. And that realization began to give Chayara a hint she preferred to ignore. It couldn't be, it simply couldn't be...

But they passed a large number of people as they walked, some clearly on duty, some just lounging around. The ones on duty were armed like the two men escorting Chayara, but the loungers looked no softer and most of them wore knives. There was a sprinkling of women, but most of the crew seemed to be male. Their eyes touched Chayara in the same way Dron's had, predators looking at a snack. Chayara had to work hard to clamp down on the fear she felt, but somehow she managed it. If you show weakness to a predator you're as good as

dead, and Chayara had to stay alive as long as possible.

Khar finally stopped at the door of a cabin and knocked, but made no attempt to walk in until a male voice called out permission to enter. Once he had the permission Khar opened the door and dragged her inside, then gave her a little push toward the man seated behind the desk. The man had red hair down to his broad shoulders, a square, rugged face, and the coldest gray eyes Chayara had ever seen. His stare said he already knew everything about her from just a single glance, and didn't think much of anything he'd found out. Chayara couldn't keep from straightening in anger under that stare, but the look had already been transferred to the man Khar.

"We found her in the supply hold," Khar said, moving to the desk to hand over Chayara's pack. "No tracers of any kind, and nothing in the way of electronics."

"Just what I needed," the man behind the desk growled in a deep voice. "You and Dron go back and finish checking the hold. If you do find a tracer or anything else I want to know about it immediately."

The two men who had brought Chayara to the cabin acknowledged the orders without saying anything else, and a moment later they were gone with the cabin door closed behind them. The man seated at the desk was now examining the contents of Chayara's pack, but with as little as the pack contained the examination didn't take long. Suddenly that cold gray stare was on her again.

"Two changes of clothes, a comb and brush, a hand torch, and a container of food concentrate about two-thirds full," the man stated, part of his stare faintly accusing. "This can't possibly be all you have with you."

"Some people like to travel light," Chayara responded, relieved that her voice held perfectly steady. "If you don't happen to like people who travel light, you can just let me off at the nearest planetary station. I

promise I won't be offended."

"That's really good of you," the man said, but the sarcasm did nothing to warm his stare. "Where did you come from and where did you think you were going?"

"I came from a freighter that put in at that station for repairs, and where I'm going is to the next freighter that won't be docked for weeks," Chayara answered, beginning to find that stare more than uncomfortable. "Do you mind if I sit down in one of those chairs in front of your desk? It's been a while since I had the chance to use a chair."

"Yes, I do mind," the man responded at once before Chayara could do more than start a step toward one of the chairs. "We don't have any stowaway's chairs on board this vessel. The only freighter docked at that station was scheduled to have its repairs finished in no more than another three days. But word was the Patrol would arrive before then to do its customary full sweep of the station and any vessel docked there. The sweep would have located you no matter where you tried to hide, and I'm betting you don't have any papers to show them. If I'm wrong, you can prove it by showing me your papers."

"I'm a free soul who doesn't believe in the custom of using identity papers," Chayara said, folding her arms as she looked at the man with less than friendliness. "There are supposed to be a lot of planetary stations in this sector, so why don't you just throw me into your brig until we reach one of them. After that my beliefs won't be your concern, and your precious chairs will be safe from contamination."

"You'd like me to turn you over to the authorities on the nearest station," the man said, the smallest of smiles curving his lips as he leaned back in his chair. "They'd give you a stern lecture about never stowing away again, and then you'd have a station week to find a job. Until the week was up they'd feed you and give you a place to sleep free of charge, but before the week was up you'd be gone from the station on another freighter. Your doing that would make you someone else's

problem and they'd be able to forget about you, and it would only have cost them the price of a few meals and the use of a hole in the wall room no one would pay for anyway. Station officials like to take the easy way out, but I don't look at the matter in the same way."

Chayara was tempted to ask how he did look at the matter, but it was easy to see he'd spell out his preferences without any encouragement. It wasn't anything like a good thing that the man knew how stations handled stowaways, and that tiny smile he wore was almost more disturbing than his stare...

"I don't like it when people barge onto my ship uninvited," the man said after all traces of that smile disappeared. "This vessel is mine, and as captain I have the last word about what happens on board. It so happens I could use a cabin girl, someone to look after all my needs, but I've gotten along without one until now so don't feel as if you're being forced to take the job. If you're too good to work off your passage, you can always choose to be put out an airlock."

"Out an air - !" Chayara blurted, already rattled by his "job offer." The man had stressed the word "all" when he spoke about his needs, which had to mean he expected to have her in his bed, too. How nice that he wasn't trying to hide his intentions... "You can't mean that threat," Chayara finally managed to say, her mind whirling. "If even one person told the Patrol what you'd done - "

"This ship is the Hawk and I'm Torand Rego," the man said, adding to the chill Chayara already felt. "From the way you just paled it's obvious you've heard my name and my ship's name before, so you now know how likely it is that one of my crew will be telling the Patrol anything. If I tell any of them to put you out an airlock, they'll ask nothing but if you're to be alive or dead at the time. I like to think of myself as a generous man, so my answer will be dead. Have you made your decision yet?"

Torand Rego. Chayara stood with that name ringing in her head, but

why her knees hadn't given way she had no idea. Torand Rego was the second most well-known pirate in this sector of space, and his cutthroat crew aboard the Hawk was notorious. No wonder they'd pretended to be a freighter when they'd docked at the station for supplies, and no wonder they checked the ship with a scanner afterward. The good luck Chayara had known all her life had finally run out, and it couldn't have happened at a worse time.

But this couldn't be the end of the road for her, not when others were depending on her. Chayara put a trembling hand to her head, wishing she could tell Rego to kill her and have done with it, but he'd simply nod and have it done. She'd have to agree to his terms no matter how badly he treated her, but pain had an odd effect on Chayara. It made her mad instead of afraid, and being mad would keep her going until she found a way off this ship...

"Tell me you thought I'd choose to die," Chayara said after taking a deep breath, bringing her gaze back to Rego's. "Go ahead and claim I really had a choice."

"Of course you had a choice," Rego countered as he stood up and moved out from behind his desk, his full attention still on her. "Some women would have chosen to die rather than be 'despoiled,' which would have been nothing more than a foolish waste. This is my office, and my cabin is next door through this hatch. Let's get you started on the first of your duties."

Pressing a switch on the wall next to the hatch made the hatch slide open, and Rego gestured her through the doorway first. Now that the man was standing rather than sitting, Chayara was even more unhappy. Rego was really big in his black pants and boots and turquoise long-sleeved shirt, both taller and wider than the man called Khar, giving her the impression that he could crush her with one hand. Chayara didn't like to be made to feel tiny, most especially since she wasn't, but there wasn't much she could do to change things. Even if she found it possible to ... knock Rego down, say, the effort wasn't

likely to do her any good.

"As you can now see, this cabin could use some tidying," Rego said from behind her, an understatement if Chayara had ever heard one. The place was a mess, not to mention bigger than any other cabin Chayara had ever seen. Clothes were thrown every which way, the bed bolted into the deck looked like the linen hadn't been changed in years, and books were stacked everywhere including on some of the piles of clothing. A disposal bag lay on the floor not far from the bed, but someone had only just started to fill it with the remnants of a dozen unfinished meals in their disposable dishes. The only thing the cabin lacked was piles of animal droppings...

"I expect to be pleasantly surprised when I come back here later," Rego said, the place his voice came from proving he hadn't done more than step through the hatch. "Ship time is mid afternoon, so that should give you some idea of when I'll be back. The clothes cleaner is in that corner to the right, near the door to the head, and the head itself could use some tidying up. Don't try to leave this cabin under any circumstance, not even to come into my office. If you're ever found anywhere but here without my permission, I won't wait to hear any reasons. I'll just assume that you've changed your mind about your choice and act accordingly. Do you understand me?"

"Sure, boss, anything you say," Chayara responded without turning, fighting to keep from grinding her teeth as she stepped over a mound of dirty clothes. If she couldn't get him to change his mind about confining her to the cabin, she might as well just walk out. Becoming a prisoner with no chance of escape would end her efforts as completely as being arrested by the Patrol, and she didn't have all the time in the universe. Any delay in reaching her uncle could cause her to run out of time altogether, and that would mean the end of everything. And come to think of it, she would have to find out where this pirate ship was heading...

Chayara turned to the hatch to see if Rego had any more orders he

wanted to give her, and was startled to see that Rego had disappeared. The fact that the hatch was closed again told her where he'd gone, which meant she could slump for a minute and rub her face with both hands. Not showing a predator fear was hard work, but harder was keeping an awareness of that fear from yourself. But it all still had to be done, just the way digging through that mess all around her had to be done. For a little while at least...

Tor and Rego went back to his desk and sat down, looking at the few items the girl's pack had contained while he tried to figure out why he'd done as he had. The blond and blue-eyed girl his men had found was pretty enough despite her wrinkled gray shirt and pants and lack of makeup, but at another time he would have simply had her knocked out and put off at the first station the Hawk could reach. By the time she woke up he and his people would be long gone, and the authorities might never have found out what ship it was that had brought her.

But instead of doing the smart thing he'd told her who he was, and then he'd forced her into the only decision she could have made. Granted, he'd been feeling a bit surly of late and her unimpressed attitude had annoyed him, not to mention the fact that it was perfectly obvious she'd been traveling for longer than a couple of days. She was either running away from something or running to something, and when she'd refused to tell him which his annoyance had flared up like a nova.

Tor got up from his chair again and went to pour himself another cup of coffee, impatience flooding him just the way it had been doing for weeks now. He and his crew were awaiting word that the leader's major plan was ready to be put into effect, but so far close was as good as it got. The Great Plan, they'd taken to calling it, trying to make a joke out of something that meant so much to all of them. A couple of members of Tor's crew might not be eager to leave the life of a pirate, but he and everyone else wanted nothing more than to go home and find some kind of normal life to lead.

"Assuming there is such a thing as a normal life," Tor muttered as he

added cream and sugar to his coffee. "But what I consider normal, not the twisted definition used by our glorious central government. If we can't get rid of those people we'll be hunted outlaws for the rest of our lives, just the way we are right now."

And maybe that was the reason he'd appropriated the girl, Tor thought as he carried the cup back to his desk. Once their private war was over he'd be able to have a woman of his own, but victory was taking too long in coming. He wanted some of the fruits of victory now, and taking one of their women suited his mood perfectly. The girl had gone pale when he told her who he was, and the fact that she hadn't fainted was something of a surprise. Tor smiled. Later he'd have to see what he could do to change that state of affairs...

Chayara stood in the middle of the cabin and looked around to see that she'd accomplished more than she'd thought. The bed linen and blankets had been the first things to go through the cleaner, and then she'd remade the bed while the first load of dirty clothes was being done. After that she'd used the bed to dump the clean clothes to make room for more in the cleaner, and then had folded the clean stuff before tackling the garbage. One of the cabin walls had drawers all across and half way up, drawers with catches to keep them from flying open if something happened to the ship's artificial gravity. The clean clothes were going into those drawers as soon as they were folded, and the disposal bag was almost full to the top with litter.

"And now it's even possible to see that there's carpeting in here," Chayara muttered, but the observation did very little to distract her from the fact that Torand Rego would soon be back. She'd worked at top speed to keep herself occupied, but the later it got the more her thoughts kept returning to the fact that Rego meant to use her body. She'd hated having to clean up his mess, but what he meant to do later was beginning to make her more than a little afraid.

"But it's also making me mad, and mad is better than afraid any day of the week," she stated, straightening where she stood. "He has no right

to force me into his bed, so he also has no right to complain if things don't go as well as he expects them to. And they won't go well, I can see to that at least."

And her decision was made just in time. The sound of the hatch sliding back made her turn, and there was Rego himself, stepping into the cabin.

"Well, I'm impressed," he said, pressing the switch to close the hatch again before coming more fully into the cabin. "You've actually made this place livable again, so you've earned a reward. Drink this, and then you'll have your reward."

"What is it?" Chayara asked, eyeing the small glass filled with about half an inch of liquid without making any attempt to take it. "That liquid is green, and I don't drink things that are green."

"This is a medication that will kill any odd germs you may have brought aboard," Rego said, a distant amusement in those cold gray eyes. "The men who found you and I have already had our doses, and now it's your turn. If you hate the taste as much as we did, that's only fair. If you don't drink it you can't stay aboard."

And since they weren't near a station, that meant being put out an airlock. Chayara was beginning to hate that threat, even beyond the idea of dying. She wanted to tell Rego to kill her and be damned, but she didn't have that luxury. Instead she took the glass and swallowed the liquid in one gulp, only then finding out how really bad the stuff tasted.

"Good girl," Rego said with a grin, taking back the glass while Chayara shuddered at the awful taste in her mouth. "You can have some water in a few minutes, and that will help. Just as your reward will help. I'm going to let you use my shower."

"And now I shouldn't even contaminate it," Chayara said huskily while

trying to rid her mouth of that horrible taste. "You're being so good to me I'm nearly overwhelmed, but there are a couple of things you still haven't said. Where is this ship heading, and what happens to me when we get there?"

"When we get where we're going you'll be turned loose," Rego said before Chayara could snarl at herself for asking a question she might not like the answer to. "Your expression says you don't quite believe me, but there's no reason you shouldn't. We're headed for the station near the planet Moradan, and you can tell the station authorities anything you like."

Shocked surprise actually made Chayara forget the taste in her mouth for a moment. Ever since she'd left home her biggest worry had been over how she would get to the place her uncle Leron had said he'd be. Eight years ago Moradan had been just another planet, but today it was the home of every pirate who roamed deep space and made life unbearable for the government. The planetary system was so well defended that governmental forces hadn't been able to get through those defenses, and Chayara hadn't known how she would get through even assuming she reached the station. Now Rego had said he was taking her right to where she wanted to go, proving that her luck hadn't deserted her after all...

"Yes, I can see that the station authorities won't care what ship I came on," Chayara said slowly, her head whirling with newly made plans. "About how long will it be before we get there?"

"Just a few days," Rego answered, the words nearly a drawl. "Go ahead and take your shower now, and then we can talk about my reward."

Chayara hated the instant blush she could feel in her cheeks, most especially since Rego couldn't have missed seeing it. Instead of saying anything, though, she hurried to the bathroom and inside. The light came on as soon as she stepped through the doorway, of course, so

she quickly closed the door behind her. There was no way to lock the door, but closing it was better than leaving it open.

"I'm beginning to hate that man," she muttered as she went to the sink and turned on the water. There was no glass to use, but her palm served well enough to get enough water into her mouth to drown the awful taste of that medication.

If Chayara hadn't already cleared the room of dirty clothes and piled books she wouldn't have enjoyed the idea of a shower half as much as she did. But she had cleared the room, so she was able to get out of her rubber-soled shoes and well-worn clothes before stepping into the narrow shower stall. The frosted mock-glass door kept her from seeing out into the room, but that meant no one else would be able to see in. Rego thought he would be enjoying himself with her soon, but she'd already decided not to let that happen. Unless, of course, he enjoyed taking his jollies with a corpse...

The shower water was actually hot, a treat Chayara hadn't had since she left home. Station showers never got hotter than almost warm, and the sanitary facilities in freighter supply holds didn't have showers. As she washed, Chayara thought about food, but not because she was hungry yet. The food concentrate tablets only had to be taken once a day, but now that she wasn't in a hold any longer she might actually get the chance at some real food.

But not if Rego gave her a hard time over the meal. Chayara had lived on tablets for what seemed like months now, even though it had only been a little less than two standard weeks, so a few more days would hardly kill her. She would not give Rego everything he wanted, not if he tried to bribe her and not even if he hurt her. Chances were good that he would hurt her, but that made things better. Getting hurt would make her mad, and mad was still better than nervous...

Chayara had already rinsed the soap from her body and hair when the delicious hot water cut off and the warm blowers came on. The shower

had lasted longer than showers on stations, but even the captain's shower had an automatic cutoff on board a ship. Well, the fact that the blowers blew warm air instead of cold made up for losing the water, so Chayara enjoyed being dried almost as much as she'd enjoyed getting clean.

When even her hair and the bottoms of her feet were dry, Chayara stepped out of the shower stall. She didn't really want to get back into her dirty clothes, but the rest of her things were still in Rego's office and she could hardly ask him to -

Her thoughts stopped dead when she reached for clothes that were no longer where she'd left them. Nothing but empty floor lay outside the shower, which meant that if she went back out to the cabin she would have to go naked. Instant embarrassment heated Chayara's cheeks, and for some reason the embarrassment seemed to be echoed by her body as well. A similar heat appeared inside her and began to spread, just as if she found walking around naked arousing!

"I most certainly do not like that idea!" Chayara snarled softly as she clenched her fists in an attempt to ignore what she felt. "And I'm not going to do anything to encourage that miserable man, so - "

"Well, that's much better," Rego said after opening the door so abruptly that Chayara actually jumped. "You clean up better than I thought you would, not to mention the fact that your clothes didn't tell half the story about what was under them. Now that you're ready you can come out here."

By that time Chayara had used her arms to cover her body, or at least she'd tried to cover herself. The effort turned out to be almost completely ineffective, and Rego's amusement made her want to scream. He'd turned away from the door after graciously giving her permission to walk around naked, but Chayara couldn't just leave matters like that.

"I'm not moving from this room until my clothes are returned!" she shouted at the broad back that had already taken a couple of steps away. "Those clothes were mine so you had no right to touch them! Tell me where you've put them!"

"Your clothes are in the cleaner along with the rest of mine," he answered mildly, only turning part way back to speak to her. "If you don't feel like coming out of the head by yourself, I can always send for a couple of my men to help you. You have one standard minute to decide if that's what you want. After that I'll make the decision for you."

Mortification added to the flames already consuming Chayara's face and body in spite of the fact that Rego had continued on his way. It was bad enough that he had seen her like this; if he ever called his men the embarrassment would kill her. That meant she had to walk out just as she was, and without trying to hide behind her arms. Hiding like a backward child had made her feel so stupid...

Chayara had to swallow hard before she was able to force herself to leave the bathroom. The first few steps weren't too bad, but then she was able to see Rego where he sat in the cabin's only chair. Even though the glimpse was just out of the corner of her eye she could feel the weight of his complete attention, an awareness that didn't simply add to her embarrassment. Her body's arousal increased as if she were enjoying being looked at, and suddenly walking became more of a chore.

"Yes, that's much better," Rego said from the deep, padded chair he sat in, the words almost a murmur. "Come closer to me."

Closer. Chayara wanted nothing more than to pick a direction and just run without ever stopping, but even if she'd been dressed she couldn't have left the cabin and stayed alive. So she moved closer to her captor just as he'd ordered, but not very quickly. And she certainly didn't look directly at him, not when -

"No!" Chayara shouted, trying to fight the big hands that had come to pull her into Rego's lap. He'd waited until she was close enough to grab, probably knowing she would never have gotten into his lap by herself.

"Enough melodramatics," Rego ordered as he held her where he wanted her in spite of her struggles. "Are you a grown woman or a small child?"

Rego's words hit Chayara like a bucket of cold water. She was behaving like a child, and that was even more embarrassing than sitting naked in a strange man's lap. It took a real effort to calm down, but finally Chayara managed it.

"You're right, and I apologize," Chayara made herself say, still not looking at the man. But not looking at Rego didn't help with ignoring his hands, one of which was on her thigh and the other on her back. Her bare thigh and her bare back...

"Apology accepted," Rego answered, and Chayara could almost feel the amusement in him. "I don't think I've ever had a real blonde ... at my disposal before, and a clean one at that. Are you going to do as good a job with me as you did with this cabin?"

"Of course I will," Chayara lied, hating the way she couldn't seem to stop blushing. She was not going to act as if she were a sex-for-pay girl, not for anything imaginable. It didn't matter that she was having trouble sitting still in his lap, the need to squirm starting as soon as she'd felt his hands on her. And now those hands were stroking her, caressing rather than hurting...

"What nice soft skin you have," Rego murmured, his lips coming to her shoulder. "Turn your face toward me."

Chayara meant to turn her head only a small amount, but discovered at once that Rego had decided not to leave the doing to her discretion

alone. His hand left her back to tangle in her hair, and then her face was turned all the way toward him and he was kissing her! Her own hands went to his chest in an effort to push him away, but that was impossible to do. And his lips were so demanding that she actually found herself kissing him back...

The shock of finding herself responding to the man's kiss hit Chayara hard, but not as hard as her response to his other hand between her thighs. Even as she tried frantically to scream and push his hand away, her body flared with such heat that she nearly passed out. She was responding like a sex-for-pay girl, a shame she'd never thought she'd have to face. She actually moaned with what his hand was doing to her, moving at the urging of his fingers and lips and tongue and -

At that point Chayara's thoughts turned blurred, leaving her with nothing but sensations. Rego's lips had left hers to go to her nipples, nipples that had hardened and felt as though sandpaper had been used on them. She felt every touch of his tongue as she did moan, and her body refused to lie still. She squirmed to the urging of the hand between her thighs, a hand that was beginning to drive her insane in spite of the gentleness of the rubbing it did. She was in need, terrible need, and the awful fire grew higher with every passing moment!

"Yes, I think you will do a good job for me, a very good job," Rego murmured, and then he stood up with Chayara held in his arms. He carried her to the bed and put her down, then began to get out of his clothes. Chayara could do nothing but writhe with her eyes and fists closed tight, silently begging him to hurry. She would die if she had to wait much longer, she would die!

But she didn't die, even though it seemed like forever before Rego came to take her in his arms again. This time there were no clothes to keep their bodies apart, and he took another kiss while his hands explored every inch of her. Chayara whimpered while he took his time, but finally he moved between her knees and raised her up. The feel of him between her thighs almost made her scream, but as he plunged

inside her his presence made her throat close up. She'd never known that sex would feel like this, and then even blurred thoughts disappeared as he began to stroke her hard for a time that was unending...

Tor withdrew from the girl and let himself fall to the bed beside her, complete satisfaction covering him. He'd known the girl would try to hold herself back from him, so he'd avoided the problem before it began. That "medication" had been no such thing, not unless you considered the most effective aphrodisiac ever made as medication. The girl had responded to him with everything in her, and now she lay with her eyes closed, probably basking in the glow of utter pleasure and trying to catch her breath just the way he was doing. He was certain she'd had just as good a time as he'd had, and their good time wasn't yet over. The "green glow" would continue to affect her for some time, making life fun for him for a change.

A silent laugh escaped Tor, a laugh that added to his enjoyment. By the time they got to Moradan the girl would probably be in love with him, but it wasn't likely to do her any good. She was certainly one of their women, and he'd never saddle himself with one of them. But stealing from them, now that was another story altogether...

Chayara lay where Rego had left her, too ashamed to even open her eyes. Everything she'd felt earlier was now gone, but that wasn't the blessing it should have been. She was now free to think again, which meant hating herself with every fiber of her being. She'd always intended to have sex at some time, but she'd never found anyone she really wanted to take to bed. Now that the choice had been taken from her, she couldn't deny that her luck had kept her from trying it sooner. Now that she knew what kind of woman she was, she simply wished she was dead.

She'd been told that some women couldn't help themselves and their reactions to men, that those women had to act according to their natures just like everyone else. They had to act like sluts with men

because that's what they were supposed to do, follow their natures without reservation. Chayara had always had private doubts about what she'd been told, believing that those women called sluts really did have the choice, but she'd been shown the hard way just how wrong she was.

You couldn't even resist a man you dislike, she told herself bitterly, the pain of that admission so great that she wasn't even able to cry. You always thought of yourself as a real woman rather than a slut, but now you know what a lie that is. You've shamed yourself more than even a pirate like Torand Rego could accomplish, and there's only one way out. As soon as you find your uncle you have to die. Only a few more days of living with the unbearable shame of it all, and then -

Chapter Two

Torand Rego whistled as he headed for the bridge, in such a good mood that even the early hour of the ship's day didn't bother him. He'd had the girl twice more after the first time, the "green glow" giving her no choice but to respond to him. She was even more awkward than he'd expected one of their women to be, almost as if she were completely unused to being with a man, but that was all right. Awkward was better than the nothing he'd been getting...

"Morning Captain," Decker said, glancing up from her board when she heard his steps. "The jump went fine, and now we're almost to the point where we can intercept that special freighter. Taking her cargo on our way home will turn every one of our sister ships rabid with envy."

"Rabid with envy is good when it's someone else doing the envying," Tor answered with a grin, then he took a second look at the rapidly changing figures to one side of Decker's screen. "That's not a normal trajectory, Decker. Why are we coming at the freighter ... sideways?"

"Sideways is a good description of what's happening, Captain," Decker answered, her expression now odd. "Why it's happening, though, is

something I can't tell you. We seem to have come out of the jump kind of ... lopsided, but even on this trajectory we'll be in striking range in about an hour."

Tor was about to tell Decker to stay on course then when Henson began to curse where he sat at his own board.

"You'd better come take a look at this, Captain," Henson called, most of his attention on the keys he pressed. "Unless I'm drunk, and it's too early for that, we're heading into an ambush."

Tor lost no time striding over to Henson's board, where the computer was answering questions put to it about the observations it had made.

"The computer added a mention of 'shadows' of the freighter when I queried for data," Henson said over his shoulder to Tor while he continued to work. "The position of those shadows says the freighter has an escort that's running dark, and the size of the shadows suggests that the escort is composed of Mawlers. Six of them, in a loose ring around the freighter, about fifteen minutes or less away from the bait. If we'd come at them from any other angle..."

"We never would have seen the escort," Tor finished when Henson just let his words trail off, staring at Henson's screen and the data it showed. "We could probably best two Mawlers at once, but six... When the government sets a trap, it always has to make absolutely sure. Can we take out the Mawlers one at a time?"

"We might be able to get two that way and maybe even three, but that would still leave us outgunned," Henson said, disgust clear in his voice. "Even if we managed to blow the third apart before the others reached us... And if we didn't get through the third's screens fast enough it would be four to one."

"When even the best case scenario leaves you hanging by your stones, you play it smart and back off," Tor decided aloud after no more than a

moment. "Bringing home the contents of that freighter would have felt good, but I'd rather get home without the freighter's goods than with them but with us in pieces the size of meteorites. Decker, get us out of here."

"Aye, Captain," Decker acknowledged with a sigh, hating the decision as much as Tor and Henson but too smart to argue it. "Veering off on a heading that will take us straight home after one more jump."

The other members of the on-duty bridge crew were either grumbling or cursing under their breath, but Tor knew it wasn't because they were running away. Everyone had been looking forward to their share of the prize, and now they would have to do without it. Well, that was better than losing everything they already had along with their lives - which would have been the better outcome. If the Hawk had been captured rather than destroyed, they all would have shared in what came afterward whether they wanted to or not.

After using the PA system to tell everyone to stand down, there was no longer a reason for Tor to be on the bridge. His crew didn't need him standing over their heads to do their job right, so he went back to his office, ordered the breakfast he'd thought he'd been having after the attack, then sat back in his chair to wait for it to be brought. Wait for the two breakfasts to be brought. Even if there wasn't going to be an early-morning fight, he still had his new cabin girl to take his interest.

Tor grinned as he folded his hands behind his head at the thought of what he would find in his cabin. If the girl woke up and stretched lazily then tried to coax him back to bed, he'd let her sit down to breakfast with him before they did go back to bed. But if she tried to scream accusations at him or got wild in any other unacceptable way, he'd happily use the opportunity to have even more fun.

First he'd pulled her out of bed by the hair, then tie her wrists together in front of her. She'd certainly be squawking in outrage or disturbance by then, but her noise would increase when he pulled her into the head

with him and forced her face down on the deck. Putting one foot on her hair would keep her where he wanted her while he used both hands to ready her punishment, and then he would give her the enema and cap it with the cork.

She would certainly be shrieking by then so he would pull her to her feet and demand quiet, possibly with a hard smack to her well-filled bottom. Once she'd stopped the nonsense he would explain her situation, and she would hear what he had to say with those very blue eyes wide and those soft lips trembling as the rest of that nicely rounded body squirmed in extreme discomfort.

You'll kneel on the floor near me while I eat my breakfast, he would tell her, his tone letting her know that there would be no argument. After I finish eating you'll let me know - without words - how much you want me to take you back to bed. If you're persuasive enough I'll do it, and if you please me enough I'll let you take out that cork when I'm finished with you. If you're not persuasive enough or you don't please me enough... Well, you're the one who'll find out what a really extensive delay in removing that cork feels like. Think about that while I'm eating.

And then he would put her to her knees in his cabin where he could look at her while he ate. She'd find it impossible to stop squirming where she knelt, and she might even find it impossible to keep from making small noises of distress as the almost-hot water worked on her insides. He would take his time with the meal, of course, making her watch him enjoy chewing and swallowing without the help of a food concentrate tablet to dull her own appetite. By the time he was finished eating she would be more than ready to crawl to him and coax his interest, and her eagerness to be free of that cork would improve her performance in a very pleasant way.

And after he let her use the head, he would still make her ask nicely before he let her eat her by-then cold breakfast. Tor laughed softly at the picture he'd drawn, now hoping the girl did give him a hard time. He really did need an excuse for treating her that way... Or did he? Wasn't

it his right as captain to treat a stowaway in any way he cared to? He'd have to think about that point if she didn't provide the excuse herself -

"Come in," Tor called when the knock on his door said the food was probably being delivered. The door opened to prove that his guess was right, and it was Willo who carried in the tray with a big grin.

"Two breakfasts, Captain Tor, just like you ordered," Willo said in his raspy voice. "Glad to see you lookin' happier, Captain Tor. Hope you and the lady enjoy the food."

"Thank you, Willo," Tor answered with his own grin as he got to his feet. "Just put the tray down, and I'll take it from here."

Willo bobbed around a little before putting the tray down, having no idea how ... out of place he looked. The man was even bigger than Tor himself and had once been one of Tor's fiercest fighters - until he took a head wound during a fight. They'd gotten him back to the Hawk and he'd survived the wound, but he'd never been the same. Willo was now the permanent cook's helper in the galley and was delighted with the job. The old Willo would have hated doing such menial chores, but the new Willo...

Once the big man was gone from Tor's office, Tor picked up the tray and used his elbow to open the hatch into his cabin. He had to use his elbow again to close the hatch on the other side before being able to put the tray down on a shelf, but as soon as he could Tor turned to look at the bed. He'd left the girl asleep, but hearing him come in must surely have wakened her -

"The bed's empty," Tor muttered with brows raised, not having considered this possibility. "Where could she have gone that - "

He cut off the stupid question, knowing there was only one place the girl could be. Since he'd made sure to take her clothes with him when he left the cabin, she had to be in the head. She'd been so embarrassed

about walking around naked in front of him that there was no chance she'd left the cabin that way. The door to the head was open instead of closed the way she'd done it before showering, but that was probably because she hadn't expected him to be back so soon. When he appeared in the doorway, he'd probably get the outraged screaming he was hoping for.

Tor's grin was wide when he reached the head, but one step inside banished all thoughts of amusement. The girl wasn't relieving herself and she wasn't in the shower. She lay on the floor next to the lefthand wall, curled up into a ball with the front of her facing the wall. She also seemed to be trembling slightly, but when Tor strode over and bent to put a hand on her shoulder she didn't seem to notice.

"Girl, are you all right?" Tor asked, shaking her gently. "Talk to me and tell me what's wrong."

He expected to get at least some response, but there was absolutely nothing. She wasn't simply ignoring him, she didn't even know he was there. Confusion whirled Tor about as he hurried back into the cabin proper to use the intercom to call for his medic. Jerman had been a real doctor before she ran afoul of the government's endless list of do's and don't's, and she'd find out what was wrong.

Jerman wasted no time reaching his cabin, her dark eyes as serious as ever, her dark hair swirling with her hurry. She'd also brought two of her corpsmen with a litter, but she left them outside the cabin while she strode into the head with Tor following. Jerman went right to where the girl lay and knelt, then touched the girl here and there while she spoke softly. When she got no more of a response than Tor had gotten, she turned her head to glare up at him.

"All right, tell me what you did to her," Jerman ordered in a flat voice, her dark stare cold and hard. "If you leave anything out I might not be able to bring her back."

"All I did was bed her," Tor answered, more bewildered than he cared to admit. "She was nervous at first, but she ended up responding to me when the Green Glow gave her no choice. She responded every time, and when I left a little while ago she was still sleeping."

"Green Glow," Jerman muttered as she got to her feet. "I really despise that stuff, but I've never heard of it causing a bad reaction in any woman. There's got to be another reason for her withdrawal, and this isn't the place to find out what it is. Do you have a blanket or something to wrap her in? Having her carried to sickbay as she is won't help anything at all."

Tor had noticed the spare blanket clean and folded on the shelf near where he'd put the tray, so he went and got it and brought it back to Jerman. The girl obviously hadn't known where to put the blanket once it was clean, so she'd left it on the shelf. Now it was being used for her benefit, but she wasn't conscious enough to appreciate the irony.

Once Jerman had the girl wrapped in the blanket, she asked Tor to call in the men in the corridor. They came in and gently put the curled up girl on the litter, then they carried the girl out with Jerman walking next to the litter. Tor followed behind the procession to sickbay, but had to wait out in the sitting area. Jerman not only refused to let him in the private examining room, she also threw out her corpsmen once the girl had been put on a bunk.

Tor sat down on one of the very uncomfortable chairs in the waiting area, making sure his expression didn't show how disturbed he was. Having fun with a female stowaway was one thing, but causing her to retreat into unconsciousness was a different matter entirely. He wanted to protest again that he hadn't done anything to the girl, nothing that wasn't perfectly normal, nothing like what he'd been daydreaming about, but he wouldn't have been able to speak the words even if there had been someone around to speak them to. He was the only one who'd had access to the girl, so he was responsible even beyond his being responsible for everything that happened on the Hawk.

The wait wasn't a short one, and if Tor had had anything of an appetite left he would have gone back to his cabin for his ice-cold breakfast. Instead he just sat and waited, and at long last Jerman came out of the room. She closed the door behind herself, then came to stare down at him where he still sat sprawled in the chair.

"I shouldn't ask this question, but I really need to know," Jerman said, her dark eyes refusing to leave his face. "I have to find out if I've been mistaken all this time about the kind of man you are. Didn't you know she was a virgin, or didn't you care?"

"She was a what?" Tor nearly yelped as he shot to his feet. "No, you have to be wrong, Jerman. Not only didn't she say a word about being untouched, she wasn't still ... untouched. I may not have much experience with virgins, but I do know I would have noticed if I was her first."

"You only would have noticed with a girl who hadn't done a lot of heavy physical exercise during her life." This time Jerman responded soothingly with a sigh, touching his arm to urge him back into the chair and then taking a chair of her own. "I can see now that you didn't know, but that's not going to be of much help. I had to drug her to get her out of fetal position and use some numbing salve, and I can only hope she doesn't go back into the retreat once she wakes up. Where did she come from, and what did you intend to do with her once you'd ... finished your association with her?"

"She was a stowaway in our supply hold," Tor answered, wishing his head would stop spinning. "When I told her she'd be ... seeing to my needs, she hardly blinked. She asked where the ship was heading, and when I told her it was the Moradan station and I'd turn her loose there she seemed ... pleased. Why didn't she tell me she'd never been with a man before?"

"Maybe she was embarrassed to admit that she had no experience with

sex," Jerman answered with another sigh. "Or maybe she thought she would still have no choice even if she did say something, so she didn't bother. Did you give her a choice?"

Sure, Tor thought, not quite able to say the words out loud. I gave her the choice of having sex with me or being put out an airlock. Covered myself with glory with that one, yes I did.

"Look, Tor, why don't you go back to your office and I'll call you when she wakes up," Jerman said once it became obvious that he wasn't going to be answering her last question. "If she doesn't go fetal again I can even have her taken back to your cabin - "

"No, I don't want her back in my cabin," Tor said at once as he got to his feet again. "I'll send her clothes and other possessions over and she can stay here until we reach Moradan station, and then you can see her off the ship. Call me only if she doesn't come out of it."

And with that Tor left, wondering if he'd ever be able to touch any girl but a professional again...

Chayara opened her eyes to strange surroundings, and the ... floating kind of mood she was in didn't let her look at those surroundings very critically. The room was very small with nothing but the bunk she lay on and a single chair in it, and nothing seemed familiar. After a moment it came to her that this was more a cabin than a room, which had to mean she was still on a ship. Still on a ship? Oh, yes, the ship was the Hawk...

Memory began to return slowly then, and even the floating mood didn't quite keep the sense of self-hatred from Chayara. She'd awakened in the pirate's bed, and when she'd realized just how low and sleazy he'd shown her she was she couldn't bear the memories. She'd left the bed with the intention of trying to scrub away some of the shame in the shower, and that was when she'd discovered how painful walking was.

Every step had screamed out how vile she was, how she'd begged for something she'd wanted to refuse the man altogether, and by the time she'd reached the bathroom she couldn't bear the inner pain any longer. Pain had always gotten Chayara mad before, but this pain, both the outer and the inner, had just made her want to hide. She'd never be able to face her family again after what she'd discovered about herself, and it had come to her that if she hid well enough she wouldn't have to face them.

"I should have remembered that hiding doesn't solve anything," Chayara murmured, staring up at the metal above the bunk she lay on. "When you hide there's always the chance that someone will find you, so why waste the time? Once I reach Uncle Leron and tell him what's happened at home, I can go to a place no one will ever be able to find me. Yes, that's a much better idea."

Chayara fell back into a doze then, and the disturbance she'd felt was gone. The dreams she had were pleasant ones, and when she woke up feeling much more alert she was able to look at the woman seated in the chair knowing none of her sense of shame was showing. The woman was small and dark with sharp, penetrating eyes, and the clothes she wore under the white coat said she was part of the Hawk's crew.

"How are you feeling?" the woman asked as soon as she saw that Chayara was fully awake. "You look better than you did."

"I'm fine," Chayara answered, making sure that the sheet over her didn't slip down when she moved to sitting. "Are those my things on the shelf behind you? Odd that I didn't notice them before."

"I only brought them in a little while ago," the woman responded, still studying Chayara intently. "Look, about what happened to you - "

"I'd really rather not talk about that," Chayara said at once, feeling a flash of that inner pain. Remembering what she'd done was bad

enough; Chayara knew that if she had to discuss her shame with another woman who obviously didn't have the same problem... It was hard to know whether ridicule or pity would hurt more...

"All right, then we won't talk about it now," the woman agreed, a hint of disappointment behind the concession. "When you discover that you do want to talk, just let me know. Right now I'd like you to eat something that isn't concentrate. Your body needs to start getting back to normal."

Chayara shrugged to show that she wasn't going to argue, but only to forestall the objections the woman would have come up with if Chayara had said she wasn't hungry. Whatever meal was brought to her would mostly be wasted, but there was no need to say that out loud.

"Wait," Chayara said, stopping the woman who had left the chair and was already at the door. "I was told that we were going to Moradan station. Can you tell me how long it will be before we get there?"

"Another day and a half," the woman answered, an odd expression flitting across her face. "You'll be staying here during that time, and then you can leave the ship."

"Good," Chayara said, relieved that the time wouldn't be longer. It had come to her that she'd be able to call Uncle Leron from the station no matter where he was on the planet, and then her chore would be done. After that she would be free to do what she had to, and she was really looking forward to the time.

The woman came back fairly quickly with the food she wanted Chayara to eat, but Chayara was already dressed. She'd gotten into her clothes as soon as the woman was gone, wanting to make sure that her bodily reactions didn't betray her if a man happened to show up. The dark woman put the tray down on Chayara's bunk and showed her where the tiny bathroom was before leaving, but that was the last pleasant exchange they had.

Each time the woman found that Chayara had barely touched the food she'd been given, she tried to talk Chayara into eating "just a little more." Then she tried to tell Chayara that if they "talked some," Chayara would want to eat more. Going to the small bathroom and staying in there until the woman left ended the attempts on Chayara's terms, but if the trip had been any longer...

Chayara was already showered and wearing clean clothes with the rest of her possessions packed when the woman came to escort her off the ship. This time the woman didn't bother to check the tray she'd brought a short time earlier, but that didn't mean the woman had nothing to say.

"Whether or not you want to admit it, you're going to need help getting over what you went through," the woman said softly as they walked through the ship. "We'll be docked here at the station for a while, so if you send word to me I'll join you on the station and we can talk. Just ask for Jerman."

"Sure," Chayara said, refraining from demanding how someone was supposed to "get over" finding out that they were a slut. She'd always been taught that you can't fight the nature you were born with, and for her that meant she'd have to start living and acting like a slut in front of everyone. Luckily, though, that was a fate she would be spared.

"I do need to ask a different question, though, because curiosity is driving me crazy," the woman Jerman went on in a louder voice. "How did you stand having nothing to do all that time you stowed away on freighters? I know you've been traveling for a while, so the time can't have been short. There's a limit to how much sleeping any one person can do, and you don't strike me as someone who can just sit around staring into space for so long."

"Before I left home I had a couple of hundred books folded into my mind," Chayara answered after only a brief hesitation, seeing no reason not to tell the truth. "Any time I get bored I just 'open' one of the books and read, and then I'm not bored any longer. The list is mostly texts,

but there's also some fiction thrown in."

"You were able to afford that? How?" the woman asked, her startled expression showing she knew how expensive it was to have books folded into your mind, but Chayara was saved the trouble of having to put her off or lie. They'd reached the doubly opened airlock with its ramp that gave access to the station, so Chayara got a better grip on her pack.

"I know I haven't thanked you until now for your help, but that wasn't because I'm not grateful," she said as she edged her way into the airlock. "I do appreciate what you did for me, but I really need to get onto the station now. If I find I need to talk I'll definitely get in touch."

Adding that last about talking did a fair job of keeping the dark woman silent while Chayara made her way down the ramp. There were no ramp guards, not even sloppy ones, which meant Chayara could hurry away from the ship in the direction of the customs areas. There seemed to be a lot of people in the station docking area, so many that the vast area actually seemed almost crowded. Chayara passed any number of clusters of men talking, and she heard the same name being mentioned again and again.

"... Falk wait much longer," one man was insisting to the others in his group. "He said we're moving soon no matter what."

"Bornal Falk won't let anything push him into moving too soon," another man countered. "He may be coming up to the station, but that doesn't mean..."

Chayara made no effort to stop and listen, not when it was Bornal Falk they were talking about. Falk was the leader of all the pirates, the only man who had a bigger price on his head than Torand Rego, and listening to discussions concerning the man probably would not be very healthy. Especially since she was a stranger on the station. Better to just go and do what she'd come here for, and trust to her luck that she

would not get embroiled in anything that would delay -

Catching sight of a group of men out of the corner of her eye who seemed to be heading in the same direction made Chayara slow just a little to keep out of their way. She also turned her head to get a good look at the group to make sure they were heading for the customs offices, and what was supposed to be a glance became a stare. Three men were talking to a fourth all at the same time, but the man being talked to seemed to have his attention on other things. He looked in the direction he was walking rather than at any of the men with him, and for that reason saw Chayara just as she saw him. The man's eyes widened in the same way that Chayara's did, and then the man laughed aloud.

"Of course that was what I was waiting for!" he said in the midst of the laughter, lengthening his stride. "You are Chayara rather than your twin Eilinna, aren't you?"

"Yes, Uncle Leron, I'm Chayara," she answered, relief letting her smile at the man she'd thought was somewhere on the planet. Then she remembered why she'd come and the smile faded again. "I'm afraid I've come to ask for the help you promised before you left home. The new planetary governor has arrested my father."

"They've arrested Halin?" her uncle said incredulously with all traces of amusement gone. "I can't imagine my brother ever breaking any kind of law, let alone one that would get him arrested."

"He didn't break any law, he just refused to cooperate with the governor's order," Chayara replied, then she lowered her voice. "It seems the governor resents how successful our family is, so she set a large number of people to the job of investigating us. One of her people found that our genetic maps don't quite match that of the average citizen, so she's decided that our genetic makeup lets us take unfair advantage of everyone else. With that in mind she's ruled that my brothers and sister and I have to marry men and women of her choice, which she's sure will negate our 'unfair' advantage."

"And since you and your siblings are legally required to marry whomever your father chooses as your spouse, she tried to get your father to approve her choices." Chayara could see the anger in her uncle's eyes as well as hear it in his voice. "Her choices have to be complete zeroes, so your father refused to approve them. How long has he been under arrest?"

"More than two weeks now," Chayara said, the reminder bringing her a good deal of disturbance. "They have to be 'reeducating' him, and I don't know how long he can hold out against that kind of treatment."

"Don't worry, child, they aren't hurting him," Uncle Leron said, putting a big hand to her shoulder. "Our marvelous and superior government doesn't believe in torture, at least not in the way their predecessors did. They'll plague him with constant propaganda, but if I know my brother he has enough folded books in his mind to let him ignore their nonsense until we can free him. Which I mean to do as soon as I take care of one other chore first. I'll be back with you in a minute."

Chayara watched her uncle turn and go back to the men he'd been walking with, men who had been frowning at the way he'd ignored them. Now, after her uncle spoke only a few soft words, the three men were suddenly all smiles. Chayara had no idea how her uncle would free his twin brother, but she'd never gone wrong trusting her uncle to do just as he said he would. And that meant Chayara had completed the task she'd set out to do...

Looking around brought Chayara something of a surprise. Just to the right of the customs offices was the beginning of a long line of storage areas. Sometimes freighters couldn't wait until there was a transfer shuttle available to take the goods they'd brought down to the planet. If that happened they put the goods into a storage area until the consignee of the freight arranged for the goods to be transported down to the world. Delivering the goods into a storage area was perfectly acceptable to the consignees because the storage areas were protected

with strong, locked doors and disintegration fields. And now Chayara could see that the areas closest to the customs offices glowed red with the warning of active fields...

No one noticed when Chayara began to stroll toward the storage areas, not even her uncle. Uncle Leron seemed to be giving the other men orders now, and their attention was only for him. Other men and women in the crowds were drifting toward the small group composed of her uncle and the three men, and only an occasional glance came Chayara's way. Her luck was protecting her the way it usually did, which meant no one stopped her when she pushed into the light exclusion field set up five feet from the storage areas. The exclusion field was there to make sure no one accidentally blundered into the disintegration fields, but it didn't keep out anyone who deliberately pushed through.

Chayara looked at the angry red of the deadly field protecting the storage area, smiled, then walked right into the redness. A flash of terrible pain came and then nothing-

Chapter Three

Torand Rego strode toward the airlock that had been opened to the station as soon as the Hawk had sealed into her berth. By rights he should have been much more excited by the news a friend had called with, but the last day and a half hadn't been easy on him. He may have started out with the decision to put the female stowaway completely out of his thoughts, but the situation hadn't worked out like that. No matter what the girl had or hadn't told him, he couldn't get past feeling that he'd deliberately brutalized an innocent.

"Tor, you have to stop beating yourself up," Jerman had said the third time he'd checked on the girl's condition, the medic's tone sharp. "If you'd thrown the girl to the crew you'd have reason to feel this guilty, but all you did was take her to your own bed. Isn't there some kind of law that says female stowaways on a pirate ship are required to share

the captain's bed?"

"That's not funny," Tor had replied with a growl. "I knew I should have had you drug her and then let her sleep until we got to the station, but instead I forced her to sleep with me. How funny would you consider the situation if it was you I forced into my bed?"

"It was me when I first came aboard," Jerman reminded him, her tone going dry. "You refused to take no for an answer, and afterward I was glad. For a brutal, heartless pirate captain you're kind of considerate in bed, not to mention more talented than the norm. And once I'd shared your bed I stopped cringing every time one of the men in the crew looked at me. I was able to look back as I wondered how those men would measure up to you, an attitude that made life aboard this ship a lot more pleasant for me. Just the way you knew it would."

"You weren't a virgin when you came aboard," Tor had pointed out, still feeling lousy in spite of what she'd said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

Jerman had promised to call him if she needed something he could provide, but she hadn't called. He'd stopped at sickbay on his way to the airlock, but no one had been there. Hopefully that meant the girl was safely off the ship already, and when he saw Jerman coming back from the opened lock the hope became more of a certainty.

"Before you ask, she's already gone," Jerman said with one hand raised in front of her as she stopped. "She thanked me for helping her, and promised to call me if she needed to talk. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for the call."

"So she's still refusing to talk about what made her withdraw like that," Tor said with a sigh. "All we can hope is that she'll find someone else to talk to, someone who isn't from our ship. I seriously doubt if she's hanging around the ramp outside, but I'll give her another minute before I go out myself."

"I have the feeling you're going out right now for a reason," Jerman said, studying him with her head to one side. "What have you heard?"

"I heard that Falk is due on the station at any time," Tor answered, heavier excitement beginning to stir in him. "Falk never comes up here for no reason, and he's been holding off on the attack against our beloved government because he's supposed to be waiting for something. If what he's waiting for is here or about to arrive we might be finally getting to the attack."

"I hate the idea of how many people will be hurt or killed, but we have to have a new central government before all the worlds begin to stagnate," Jerman said with a sigh. "The policies that have been forced down our throats aren't making the worlds safer and more pleasant places to live, they're causing people to be stuffed into boxes the same size and shape whether those people fit or not. And requiring people to use Extreme Tact instead of telling the plain truth... If something stinks, the smell doesn't stop if you say the something is 'less than optimally aromatic.'"

"Who are you trying to convince?" Tor asked with a wry smile. "I was declared a 'deliberate misfit' while you still believed a doctor couldn't be kept from tending anyone who needed her. When their 'equality code' demanded that you treat a poor person with a cold before you tended someone with a bank account who was in horrible pain, you walked away just as I did. A lot of good people have been declared outlaw because they disagreed with one stupid policy or another, but now we have the chance to get our lives back. And I'm willing to risk that life in order to make it happen. I'll see you later."

Jerman nodded as he moved past her, and then the medic was gone from Tor's thoughts. He and his crew had been waiting so long for Falk to say that the right time had come, but if Falk still insisted on delaying there was nothing anyone could do. People had learned years earlier that if Falk said not to do something you were a fool if you didn't listen.

Listening to Falk brought success, ignoring him brought failure. Why that was no one knew, but everyone was rabidly happy that Falk was on their side.

It was only a small surprise to Tor to find that the docking area was so crowded. Just about every ship in their pirate fleet was near or at the station, the other captains and crews hoping like Tor and his people that the time had finally come. After stepping off the ramp Tor began to stroll through the crowd, looking for a sign that Falk had already reached the station himself. Falk had used Tor and his ship more often than any of the others for special assignments, so Tor had very high hopes for his ship's role in the attack.

Tor spotted Falk talking to some of the men he used to pass on his orders and immediately headed for them. He'd almost reached the small group when there was a . . . sharp crashing sound that dragged everyone's attention to the storage areas just past the customs offices. Falk cried out and instantly began to run in that direction, so Tor lost no time in following. He had no idea what could have happened, but when he reached the place Falk was heading right behind the older man and ahead of everyone else who had come running, he got a nasty shock of his own. The blond stowaway was lying unmoving on the deck, and Falk bent to her with more than just simple concern.

"One of you get your medic out here!" Falk yelled with less control than Tor had ever seen in the man, and then he spotted Tor. "No, cancel that! Tor! You get your medic out here and tell her to run!"

Tor grabbed the comlink from his belt and put in an emergency call to Jerman, then returned his attention to Falk. The older man was holding the unconscious blonde's hand and stroking it, his expression showing such agony that Tor couldn't keep silent.

"Falk, what's going on?" he asked, and the muttering all around them in the crowd died down. "Do you know that girl? What happened to her?"

"This girl is my niece, Chayara, and it turns out that she's the one I've been waiting for," Falk answered in a pain-filled voice without looking up. "I knew something else was needed before we could launch our attack, and as soon as I saw her I realized that she was what was needed. As to what happened to her, I have no idea. She's so close to where the disintegration field on this storage area was that it's a miracle there's anything left of her. If she dies, how can I ever face my brother with the news? Assuming he and I both survive to face each other again..."

Falk fell silent again, but Tor felt more as if he'd been struck dumb. The blond stowaway was Falk's niece, and she was what Falk had been waiting for? It hadn't occurred to Tor sooner, but he'd never asked the girl's name. He hadn't cared what her name was before she went withdrawn, and afterward he was glad he hadn't asked. Keeping her nameless made the whole situation less real, and he'd needed that help to cope with what he'd done.

Now Tor knew himself for the absolute fool that he was. If only he'd made the girl tell him her name... Everyone who knew about Tor and Rego knew that his ship was the Hawk, but almost no one knew that Bernal Falk's ship was called the Chayara. If he'd heard the name he would have kept his hands off the girl and treated her like a porcelain doll...

"Falk, you won't believe what happened!" Risson, one of Falk's lieutenants, called out as he forced his way through the crowd just as Jerman arrived with her medical bag. Falk stood up to give Jerman access to the girl - to his niece - then turned to Risson.

"You'd be surprised what I can believe, Risson," Falk said with an oddly twisted smile. "You found out what caused that noise we heard?"

"That noise was the main field generators shorting out," Risson answered with an odd shake of his head. "The chief engineer tells me he never saw anything like it, not here and not anywhere. The

disintegration field generator went first, kicking the exclusion field generator off-line right after it. The whole system is down until it can be repaired."

"That second short is probably what knocked this girl unconscious," Jerman said, glancing up from her patient. "If the disintegration field generator hadn't shorted out first there would be nothing left of her beyond a few floating dust motes. Talk about lucky..."

"Then it really is meant to be," Falk said cryptically as his face creased into a delighted smile. "Doctor Jerman, is it safe to move my niece into the private conference room in the office? It's only a short distance from here."

"She may have a headache when she wakes up, but other than that she's unharmed," Jerman said as she got to her feet. "Putting her someplace comfortable would be a good idea."

"Excellent," Falk said, then he turned to Tor. "Captain, would you do me the favor of carrying my niece inside? I'd like your medic to attend her until she wakes up, and you and I have something to discuss."

Tor knew that Falk couldn't be talking about the something-to-discuss that he knew about, but Falk had to be told what had happened at some time. Tor would have preferred to put off the telling for months if not years, but he'd learned when it was possible to run and when he had no choice but to stand his ground. So he nodded to acknowledge Falk's request, then went to one knee next to the girl before picking her up in his arms. She weighed so little for such a big bundle of potential trouble...

Falk led the way and opened doors, Jerman followed him carrying the girl's pack as well as her own medical bag, and Tor came last with the girl. Jerman had glanced at Tor just before the procession started, but she hadn't said anything. She must have been able to see Tor's decision to tell all in his face, but she hadn't shown a reaction of her own. But

whether or not Jerman approved of his decision made no difference to Tor. He knew what had to be done and he meant to do it.

The conference room Falk had mentioned was only a short distance inside the office door on the left. Tor followed Falk and Jerman inside to put the girl on the couch Falk gestured to, and then it was time to come clean. The only problem was, Tor didn't quite know how to begin...

"I'm about to tell you something that must not become general knowledge," Falk said after closing the door they'd all come through, stealing a march on Tor. "My personal detector tells me there aren't any spying devices intruding on our conversation, so let's sit down and get to it."

Falk led the way to a cluster of deeply upholstered chairs that had a coffee-server table in the middle of the grouping. He called up a cup of coffee for himself while Tor and Jerman chose chairs to sit in, then he sat back in his own chair with the cup.

"Please, help yourselves to the coffee," Falk said when Tor and Jerman just sat there. "This story could take a while."

"Falk, there's something I have to talk about too," Tor said without reaching for the buttons the way Jerman had already done. "It's about your niece, and the fact that she got to this station on my ship."

"Absolutely incredible," Falk said, and that strangely delighted smile was on his face again. "When I saw her I hoped that her talent would be as strong as we needed it to be, but apparently the talent is even stronger than I imagined. What are the chances that Chayara would arrive here on the very ship she'll be on when we start the attack?"

"What?" Tor found himself saying in that state of shock that was becoming much too familiar. "What are you talking about?"

"I feel as if I've been drinking something other than coffee," Falk said with a laugh after sipping from his cup. "I'm drunk with delight, so it's no wonder you can't follow what I'm saying. To begin at the beginning, our family, my niece's and mine, has certain ... talents that have been reinforced over the generations. My talent is knowing what has to be done to accomplish any particular aim, and my niece's talent is luck. Chayara isn't just lucky every now and then. She's lucky all the time, and her good luck spreads to her surroundings as well."

"Do you mean her presence caused the generators to short out?" Jerman asked incredulously while the memory of a just-avoided trap involving a freighter guarded by six Mawlers ghosted through Tor's mind. "How can that be possible?"

"It became possible when she needed something like that to save her life," Falk answered, obviously still amused. "When I left home eight years ago I told her where I'd be if the family needed me, and recently her father, my twin brother, was arrested by the new planetary governor. I don't need to go into why he was arrested, but the incident caused Chayara to come looking for me just when I most needed her. I hadn't realized that she was what I needed and was waiting for until I saw her, and then everything fell into place."

"What did you mean when you said the girl would be on our ship for the attack?" Jerman said after a moment, probably when it became obvious to her that Tor was still too ... stunned to speak coherently. "You can't seriously mean to put a girl like her in the middle of danger like that."

"But that's the whole point," Falk countered with a small laugh. "The attack plan calls for a single ship to get through the defenses of the planet the government uses as its seat and then land, the objective being to take over the controls of those defenses. Once the planet's defenses start to attack the heavy line of patrolling guard ships, the rest of our fleet can get into action. Chayara has to be in the center of the effort, to make sure it doesn't fail. I'd long since decided that the Hawk would be

the single ship, and afterward, when we've won, you can also take Chayara home and help to get her father released."

"Falk, there's something you don't yet know about and it makes all the difference," Tor said, finally able to get the heavy words spoken. "Your niece made her way here by stowing away on freighters, and she stowed away on Hawk thinking we were a freighter too. When two of my crew found her they brought her to me, and I - "

"And he told me what ship I was really on," a voice interrupted before Tor could get the rest of his confession voiced. "Until then I couldn't figure out how to get to this station, but being on a pirate ship solved the problem. And of course I'll help you make your plan work. Once the government is no longer in charge, that woman won't be able to call herself the governor any longer and they'll have to let my father go."

Tor had turned at the first of the words while Falk and Jerman simply looked up, and they'd all seen the girl sitting on the couch she'd formerly been lying on. Her glance to Tor said she wasn't going to let him tell Falk what he'd done, but Tor had no idea why. All he knew was that he owed the girl, so if she wanted him to keep quiet he would. But only until he could get her alone to ask a few questions...

"Chayara, my dear, I'm so glad that you seem unhurt," Uncle Leron said as he rose to come over to the couch Chayara sat on. "If you're feeling up to it I'd like you to join us over there. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love a cup of coffee," Chayara answered as she let her uncle take her hand to help her off the couch. She'd been conscious for a while before sitting up and speaking, so even the slight dizziness she'd felt at first was gone. And after hearing what had been said she also knew what had to be done now.

"Let me check her before you give her a stimulant," the woman doctor, Jerman, said as Chayara's uncle urged her into the chair nearest his.

Jerman had gotten out of her own chair to come over, so Chayara simply let the woman look her over without making a fuss. In only a couple of minutes Jerman grudgingly admitted that Chayara seemed fine, so Chayara was able to tell her uncle how she liked her coffee fixed. When the table produced her cup Chayara took it, then sat back to sip quietly while the other three people went back to discussing the upcoming attack.

Listening with only one ear let Chayara realize again how bothered she'd been to find out she wasn't dead. She'd been certain her luck would let her die when she needed to, but now she realized that more was involved than her own needs. Rego had called her uncle "Falk," which meant that Leron Croft was Bernal Falk, ultimate leader of these people who were called pirates.

And Bernal Falk needed Chayara's luck to make his plan work, a plan that would end with freeing her father. She couldn't refuse to help out, but there was something else she now knew she couldn't refuse to do. No one can deny their nature for long, she'd been told, and everything she'd seen and learned confirmed that idea. If she was going to live she had to stop denying her true nature, no matter how shameful she now considered that nature. She had to start being true to herself, and also make an effort to be the best it was possible for her to be...

"... so we'll all coordinate by shifting to station time," her uncle was saying when Chayara began to pay full attention again. "It's late 'morning' here, which will give us enough time to spread the word and get everyone ready to move tomorrow. The sooner we do this the better."

"Agreed," Rego said as he stood, Jerman and Chayara's uncle doing the same. "We'll get moving right now and start spreading the word, which will give you time to get reacquainted with your niece."

"I'd love to spend time with Chayara, but I'm afraid that won't be possible right now," her uncle said, his smile filled with sadness as he

offered her a hand out of the chair. "Coordinating the effort will take all of my attention, so Chayara would end up ignored and bored if she stayed with me. Since she'll be traveling with you on your ship, Tor, best would be if you take her back there right now. You don't mind going back to the Hawk now, do you, Chayara? I'm sure Tor will find some way to amuse you."

"Oh, I know he will," Chayara said with a faint smile for Rego as she stood. "I don't mind going back to the Hawk at all, uncle Leron. We can spend some time getting to know each other again once the attack is a success."

"Bornal Falk" agreed wholeheartedly, but Torand Rego didn't seem as happy with the arrangement. His expression was really peculiar before he and Jerman accompanied Chayara out of the conference room, and they all maintained an awkward silence until they were aboard Rego's ship again. Chayara expected to be taken back to Rego's cabin, and was surprised when she was shown to another cabin almost as large as Rego's. Jerman went in a different direction once they were aboard, so it was only Rego and Chayara in the new cabin when Rego closed the door and turned to Chayara.

"All right, I have a few questions for you," Rego said, apparently fighting to keep his voice even. "Why didn't you let me tell your uncle what I did to you, and why didn't you refuse when he said you had to come back here? Your time on board here wasn't so pleasant that you have a reason for wanting to come back."

"No, my time on board here wasn't pleasant," Chayara conceded, sitting in a chair after tossing her pack onto the bunk. "It's never pleasant when you find out that your nature is something other than what you've believed it was, and that was what upset me so badly before. Now I've come to realize that I can't fight my true nature, but have to accept it and live accordingly. It doesn't make sense to start accepting my nature elsewhere when I'll be aboard this ship for the attack, so I'll be doing my accepting here."

"What are you talking about?" Rego demanded, his expression showing pure confusion. "What true nature, and what kind of accepting do you expect to do?"

"Please don't pretend you don't know," Chayara said with a smile for the way he seemed to be trying to protect her from the truth. "Thanks to you I now know I'm what's usually called a slut, a sex-for-pay girl. You showed me that I can't control my desire when a man touches me, and I'm really very grateful for having been shown the truth. It never pays to deny what you really are, you know."

For some reason Rego stared at her with his mouth open for a very long while, just as if someone had hit him hard in the head, and then that gaping mouth snapped shut.

"Girl, Chayara, you're entirely mistaken," he said then, an intensity to the words. "Didn't Jerman tell you what really happened? You responded to me the way you did because I gave you an aphrodisiac. It's called Green Glow and that's why you acted the way you did."

Chayara raised her brows, wondering why Rego was still trying to lie to her. And what he'd said was a lie, easily disproved by logic. Then she realized why Rego was acting the way he was and a wry smile curved her lips. He obviously admired her uncle quite a lot, and was therefore trying to keep his leader from being shamed.

"I'd love to believe that it was an aphrodisiac that made me act the way I did, but I'm afraid the excuse just doesn't wash," Chayara said, trying to be gentle. "If I'd refused to share your bed or had made a screaming, crying fuss, giving me something to make me more . . . amenable would have made sense. But I didn't refuse you or make a fuss, so you would have had no reason to give me something like that. So . . . Am I supposed to start practicing my new place in life with you, or do I first make my way through your crew? Once I'm able to do some research I won't have to ask silly questions that like any longer."

Rego had stared at her again for a moment, his expression having turned appalled, but now he stood and rubbed his closed eyes with one hand. It was hard to tell if the man looked more weary or more pained, and then his eyes were suddenly open again.

"So you think you want to be a slut, do you?" he growled, annoyance and anger mixed in those cold grey eyes. "I think I can come up with something to change your mind. I'll be right back."

And with that he slammed out of the cabin, apparently on his way to get something. Chayara felt really sorry for the man; knowing he was the one who had taught her the truth about her nature must be agonizing for him now that he also knew who she was. She probably would have done better saying nothing of the whole truth, but it was too late now to change her mind. And if he refused to answer her question about where she was to start, she'd have to make the choice herself. Maybe beginning with those two men who had found her in the supply hold would be best. There was no doubt about their being interested, so...

Chayara spent the next few minutes thinking about what might be the best way to approach those men, but her experience in this area was completely lacking. Then she realized that a ship like this must have books, so she could either read them or have them folded into her mind for future reference. Then she'd be able to refer to -

"Okay, now you'll see what kind of an idea you have," Rego said as he barged into the cabin again without knocking. "Lie down on the bunk and put this on."

He gestured with the thing he held, and it took a moment for Chayara to recognize a Dreamer with cartridge already in place. Her parents hadn't approved of Dreamers so she'd never used one, but things had changed drastically from when she'd been at home. If Rego had found something that would make learning her new place in life easier, she would be an idiot if she refused the help. With that in mind she took the

Dreamer as she stood up, then carried it to the bunk and lay down. Once she was comfortable she put the Dreamer on her head, and Rego came over to press the proper stud. Then -

Nikki sat outside the office of the school's Assistant Head, having been sent there by the old bat who had been teaching her last class. The old bat claimed she didn't like Nikki's attitude and had sent her to Mr. Harden for punishment, but Nikki had another kind of time in mind. Mr. Harden was tall, broad, and handsome, with red hair and grey eyes, and Nikki had looked forward to being alone with him since the first time she'd seen him. He was the only good thing about this dumb school she was being forced to attend, so she had no intention of missing out.

Crossing her legs gave Nikki a better view of the knee socks and "sensible" shoes that went so well with the rest of the stupid school uniform she was forced to wear. A pleated, dark red skirt that came down to her knees, a white blouse that buttoned up to her throat, and a narrow blue tie that was probably supposed to choke her to the point of submitting to all their stupid rules. Well, Nikki wasn't going to submit to them, not now and not ever. She hated this school and first chance she got she would be gone, back to where there were men rather than nothing but other girls and old bats doing the teaching. She would -

"Nikki Egan?" a male voice said, causing Nikki to look toward the now-open office door. "It's your turn now, Nikki, so come inside."

The gorgeous Mr. Harden was the one making the offer, so Nikki rose gracefully to her feet and went into the office. As she passed Mr. Harden she made sure to tickle the bulge in the front of his pants, just to let him know exactly where they both stood. It had been much too long since Nikki had last had a man, and she wasn't about to miss this opportunity.

"I was told you don't understand anything about propriety, and obviously it's the truth," Mr. Harden said as he closed the door, anger

in his tone. "Do you have any idea what you're offering when you do something like that?"

"I know exactly what I'm offering, and also what I expect to get," Nikki purred, waiting for the man to move closer to her before she stepped forward and put both hands to his chest. When she slid her hands up to his shoulders she was then able to rub her body against his, both actions immediately heating her blood. "If you aren't a fool you'll accept the offer without wasting any more time. And don't be afraid that I'll tell anyone because I won't. The last thing I want is for the other girls to come for the goodies and make me wait in line next time."

Nikki laughed softly at her little joke, but Mr. Harden didn't join her laughter. The man was definitely interested, something she could tell easily with her body pressed against his, but the way he looked down at her was more calculating than heated. Then he showed a very small smile.

"Actually, you'll be able to tell anyone anything you like," Mr. Harden murmured, his hands coming up to her arms. Then he forced Nikki away from him, but didn't let her go completely. His right hand stayed wrapped around her left arm, and then she was being pulled toward a chair that stood almost in the middle of the room. When they reached the chair Mr. Harden sat down, and a moment later Nikki was arranged face down across his knees.

"What do you think you're doing?" Nikki demanded as she struggled uselessly to stand up again. "Since you obviously are a fool, I have no intention of wasting my time with - Hey!"

The stupid man had pulled Nikki's skirt up to her waist and then had tugged her panties down, which didn't let her kick as hard as she'd been doing. Then Nikki yelled and twisted hard from the streak of pain she'd suddenly felt across her bottom. Looking over her shoulder she was just able to see the leather strap in Mr. Harden's hand before he forced her straight again.

"You really shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Nikki," the miserable man said as he hit her again with that strap, refusing to let her protect herself with her hand. "Your time in here with me won't be a waste, not when you're bright enough to learn the lesson. From now on you won't take liberties in your classes and you won't take liberties with me. You'll learn to be a good girl, or the lesson will be repeated as often as necessary."

He hadn't stopped strapping her as he spoke, and finally Nikki had to howl out the pain being given to her bottom. Every time that strap came down Nikki writhed and kicked, but none of that did any good. Even the first stroke had hurt, but the following strokes made it worse and worse and WORSE. Her bottom was being warmed well beyond anything that had ever been done to her, and Nikki couldn't stop howling and screaming. She could hear the strap coming down as well as feel it, and the sound made it that much worse.

Nikki was crying hard by the time the strapping was over. She'd tried to apologize, tried to swear that she'd be good from now on, but none of that had stopped the strapping. The miserable man had continued on until her seat was one wide and blazing mass of pain, and she couldn't stop writhing even after the strapping stopped. She expected to be allowed to stand up then to dance with the ache, but that didn't happen. Mr. Harden put one arm around her waist and then stood up himself, carrying her easily to the armchair that stood to one side of the office. He draped Nikki over one of the chair's arms, and his hand came to the middle of her back when she tried to move from where she'd been put.

"If you move from there without permission, the only place you'll go is back to that other chair and another strapping," Mr. Harden said, his tone telling Nikki he wasn't joking or just threatening. "If that's what you want, I won't refuse you."

His hand left Nikki's back then, but Nikki made no effort to move in

any way. She was crying so hard she just couldn't stop, and the thought of getting another strapping on top of the first was appalling. She lay with her head toward the chair's seat, a thickly padded seat that she would have considered comfortable-looking before her time with the strap. Now the last thing she wanted was to sit down, not even on something as soft as that seat. If she ever had to -

"Oh, no!" Nikki cried when Mr. Harden suddenly thrust himself into her. He'd separated her thighs with his hands, and he was deep inside before she had a chance to stop him.

"But isn't this what you offered me earlier?" the man asked mildly as she squirmed wildly at the touch of his stomach to her aching bottom. "I'm allowed to accept offers like this from girls who aren't virgins as long as I use a condom, and I am using one. I asked if you knew what you were offering and you insisted that you did, so you can't complain now that you didn't. Once I'm through and I send you back to class, you'll have more than one thing to think about, won't you?"

Wailing and mewling and howling were all Nikki was now capable of, but the horror of her position had become even more intense. He was going to send her back to class like this, to sit on a hard wooden seat without so much as a cushion to protect her tender bottom? That was cruel, horrible, and if all the doors and windows hadn't been locked Nikki would have run away the instant everyone's back was turned...

But she couldn't run away, and suddenly, in spite of the ache in her bottom, the new kind of stroking Mr. Harden was giving her began taking her to a level she'd never reached before. Her body was responding with such strength and force that Nikki was overwhelmed, able to do nothing but revel in the new, intense sensations. She exploded in orgasm again and again, and there, toward the end before all thought abandoned her, she began to wonder how soon she would be able to get herself sent back to Mr. Harden again...

Torand Rego saw the light flash on the Dreamer to say that the

sequence had ended, so he removed the device from Chayara's head. The girl blinked at him to show she was back from the dream, but she quickly closed her eyes again to show that she also couldn't look at him. Tor knew that the Dreamer would use him as the male character in the dream, and that was exactly what he'd wanted. Getting a hard strapping and then being forced to the use of the man who gave you the strapping wasn't a pleasant experience designed to make a girl want more of the same. Since that was what Tor had been after when he'd borrowed the Dreamer and cartridge from one of his female crew members, he left the girl Chayara to her unpleasant memories and quietly walked out of the cabin.

"And that should be that," Tor murmured in satisfaction as he moved along the corridor to return the Dreamer. It was impossible to know where the girl had gotten her crazy ideas from, but now those ideas were killed for good. Falk would have blamed him for whatever the girl did, and even though Tor was to blame he had no interest in dying. Falk's niece was fairly attractive, but as one of Tor's own she was completely off limits now. Off limits to him, and definitely to his crew.

All he would have needed was to be chased by a girl he couldn't touch while his ship was in the midst of trying to take down the government. But now there was no longer a chance of that, so Tor whistled as he walked and enjoyed the feelings of extreme relief...

Chayara came back to herself to find that Rego had removed the Dreamer from her head. She was so deeply into the dream she'd just experienced that she couldn't say a word. She closed her eyes to enjoy the afterglow more fully, and a moment later she heard the door close as Rego left. Which was a shame, because she'd really wanted to turn at least the last part of the dream into reality. He'd been so good...!

"Well, there's always later or tomorrow," Chayara murmured as she finally stretched hard, a wide smile curving her lips. "And I'm definitely going to be starting with him ... as soon as I decide whether or not to change my name to Nikki.

Chapter Four

The next day and a half were more frustrating than Chayara had expected but were also educational. For the rest of the first day Rego was mostly out of the ship, meeting with others of the pirates and probably doing more attack planning. Chayara's food was brought to her cabin on a tray, a meal that was a late lunch because they'd shifted over to station time. Chayara ate most of the meal, but was too impatient to finish it completely even though the food was fairly good. She couldn't very well start to entice Rego when he wasn't on the ship...

So instead of sitting around doing nothing Chayara used her cabin terminal to access the ship's library. Using the word "slut" got her nothing but a "no results" screen, but a moment's thought substituted the word "sex." There were quite a few entries under that heading, along with a cross-reference to "erotica." Chayara had never done this particular kind of research before, but that only related to the topics. Research in general was one of her strong suits...

The rest of the ship's day disappeared behind a lot of scan reading, and even the arrival of her evening meal didn't distract Chayara completely. She ate the meal while sitting in front of her terminal reading, and before she knew it she found herself deep in the middle of ship's night. There were still volumes she hadn't gotten to, but weariness told her they would have to wait until she got some sleep. Scan reading let you get through a book really fast, but the practice was also tiring.

Chayara woke up to find that the ship was already on its way. The hum of the engines was more than familiar, and only a few minutes after she was dressed her breakfast was brought. She ate with a smile of anticipation on her face, but it wasn't more reading she was anticipating. Rego had to be back aboard the ship even though he hadn't yet returned when she'd gone to bed. The man was hardly likely to have let himself be left on the station, so tracking him down should be easy.

And tracking Rego down was easy, but it still didn't do Chayara much good. The computer located him on the bridge, and no one was allowed on the bridge but duty personnel. That annoyed Chayara, but with reading still left to be done she didn't do more than grumble. And it might even be best if she finished the reading before she went after Rego. So far she'd read a lot about the sex act itself and the way men seduced women, but almost nothing about the way women seduced men.

Lunch was taken in front of the terminal, but a short while later Chayara ran out of what to read. She'd gone through the entire list of offerings the computer had been able to come up with, and hadn't gotten much in the way of encouragement. Most of the female characters in the books had had the men coming after them, and the few who had done it the other way around were usually minor characters and were usually rebuffed by the men. But sitting around thinking wasn't producing any results and Rego was still on the bridge, so Chayara went for a walk around the ship to see if anything of an idea came to her.

Strolling around showed Chayara that most of the crew now seemed to know who she was. People nodded to her with strange expressions on their faces, and one or two even smiled pleasantly at her. She heard the name "Falk" murmured once or twice after she passed a couple of people, so Rego must have told his crew that she was Bormal Falk's niece. She wondered what else Rego had told his people, then dismissed the point. "Falk" had asked Rego not to say anything about Chayara's luck, so chances were excellent that he hadn't. Besides, what difference would it make if he had said something?

Nothing in the way of an idea about attracting Rego came to Chayara as she walked, and then she arrived at a gathering area to find a number of men and a couple of women in it. One of the men, sitting alone, was that very attractive black man named Khar, one of the two men who had found her in the supply hold. The idea that came at sight of the man suggested that it might be a good idea to practice on

someone before she tried again to entice Rego, so she walked up to Khar.

"Mr. Khar, how nice to see you again," she said with a smile when the man looked up at her. "Would you like to come back to my cabin with me? The bed is really comfortable, so we can - "

Chayara's words broke off when the man jumped to his feet and ran out of the area. He looked the next thing to terrified, as if she'd suggested that he be the subject of her experiment in torture instead of sex. And the other men in the area were following Khar's example and also leaving hurriedly. Every face she saw looked frightened to one extent or another, and Chayara couldn't understand what was happening.

"Now, that was funny," a woman's voice said, and Chayara looked around to see the woman who was in a chair not far from the one Khar had been using. She was a large woman, tall and fairly broad, but not in the least fat. She had black hair worn long in a braid and blue eyes, and she was really pretty.

"What was funny?" Chayara asked her. "Do you have any idea why he ran off like that? Or why the other men followed him?"

"I know exactly why he ran off like that," the woman said, some of the amusement fading from her face and eyes. "I also know that the others followed him because you didn't keep your voice down and they were afraid you would approach one of them next. I'm Lanni, by the way."

"I'm Chayara," Chayara said, still not understanding. "I'm also confused. When Khar found me, he and the man with him were talking about having sex with me if Rego didn't want me. Why would the man run when I was trying to offer him something he wanted?"

"Don't you realize the entire crew now knows that you're Falk's niece?" Lanni asked, and there seemed to be more ... interest in the woman's

blue eyes. "That alone would chase away most of the men, but the bald and public way you propositioned Khar... Even if he happened to be privately interested, he's not about to put his neck on the chopping block right out where everyone can see and hear it."

"He would be ... putting his neck on the chopping block because I'm Falk's niece?" Chayara asked, now even more confused. "What difference does it make whose niece I am? I wasn't offering Khar sex with my uncle, after all... And making the offer in private didn't seem to work with Rego yesterday, so what am I doing wrong? If I don't find out I'll never get Rego back into my bed."

"Why don't we get a couple of cups of coffee and take them to my cabin?" Lanni said as she stood up. "We can talk more privately there, and I think it's fairly obvious that the rest of this conversation will go over better in private. What do you say?"

Chayara thought for a moment, then nodded her agreement to the suggestion. She really had nothing better to do with her time, and it was just possible that Lanni would be of some real help. Lanni didn't look like she might be a slut, but it was possible she knew about what sluts were supposed to do. They both filled large mugs with coffee, then took their drinks to one of the cabins not far from the gathering area. The cabin was somewhat smaller than Chayara's, and Lanni gestured that Chayara was to take the chair while she herself sat on the bunk.

"Now, then, let's start with the fact that you're Falk's niece," Lanni said once they were both settled. "You have to understand that Falk is our supreme leader, the man who's going to make it possible for us to have normal lives. Men are always interested in bedding a girl as pretty as you, Chayara, but the fact that you're in a position to complain to your uncle if they do something wrong tends to ... dampen their interest. Can you see that much?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Chayara answered with a sigh. "My father is just as important in his own way, and it's just come to me that that has to be

the reason so many young men on our world stopped coming after me when they found out whose daughter I was. I wasn't interested in them at the time, but now... Does Rego look at it in the same way, do you think?"

"I would say that Tor's position is worse," Lanni answered after sipping at her coffee, now studying Chayara closely. "Tor seems to be Falk's favorite captain, which is why people have been known to fight for a chance to become part of this crew. We very much want to be the ones to put Falk's plans into action, just to make sure that what's done is done right. If Tor took you to his bed and Falk found out and didn't like the idea... We may be on the way to the final showdown, but until we reach Utopia, our target, it's still possible to give our job to another ship."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Chayara pointed out at once. "To begin with, I've already been in ... Tor's bed and didn't even let him tell my uncle. I really want Tor again, but he got mad when I told him so. Can he have lost interest this quickly?"

"He got mad?" Lanni said, her eyebrows high. "That doesn't sound like disinterest, so let me think for a minute."

Chayara watched the woman sip coffee while she thought, sipping her own coffee while she waited. Losing a man's interest was a theme used in some of the books she'd read, but it didn't usually happen to women who were actively offering sex. So what could be the problem...?

"I have a theory that might actually be true," Lanni said after a while, bringing her attention back to Chayara. "Tor didn't know who you were when you were first found aboard this ship, that I know for a fact. You say you stopped him from telling Falk that he'd had you, which probably means he feels guilty about it. He's really close to Falk, so he must be feeling guilty. When men get to feeling guilty they sometimes make dumb promises to themselves, like swearing never to touch the girl again. That could be why he refused you."

"You've got to be kidding," Chayara stated, having trouble deciding whether to be outraged or appalled. "I knew men were odd, but this...! How am I supposed to make him change his mind?"

"Well, baldly inviting him into your bed won't do the trick," Lanni said, and she seemed to be amused again. "Tor is at least as stubborn as most men, and he tends to like keeping his word. But he doesn't believe in mixing with his female crew, so unless we stop for a while at one of the larger stations he mostly leads a celibate life. That's probably why he took advantage of having a female stowaway on board. But a man who's sleeping alone is a fairly easy target, as long as the woman involved knows enough to be subtle."

"What do you mean by 'subtle?'" Chayara asked, almost feeling as if she were in a classroom. "Am I supposed to talk about the weather while dragging him to my cabin? Or maybe I can blindfold him and tell him we're actually playing a children's game. When I tie his wrists to the bed he might get suspicious, but - "

"If that's your idea of subtle we have a lot of work ahead of us," Lanni interrupted with a laugh. "What you have to do is make the ... event his idea rather than yours. Don't you know that most men prefer to be the one who does the chasing? If you chase them instead they often take the aggression as a turnoff. What you want to do is build a fire under Tor, a fire that will melt his stubbornness and make him forget about any promises he might have made himself. But please don't ask about where to find the wood."

Chayara closed her mouth again, feeling a bit of warmth in her cheeks. She hadn't been about to ask about wood, she'd been about to say something about setting a fire in a space ship. Only now did it come to her that Lanni had been speaking metaphorically, but she suddenly had an important question.

"I know you didn't mean a real fire, but we'll talk about the other kind

in a minute," Chayara said, taking her turn at studying the other woman. "Right now I'd like to know why you're being so helpful. We don't know each other and you seem to be Tor's friend. Most people would support whatever stance a friend had taken."

"Most people would try to do what was best for their friend," Lanni corrected, no hesitation at all before the words. "If they think the stance he's taken might be wrong, they try to find out if they ought to make him change his mind. And since we're into asking open questions, let me ask you one. If you're all that interested in Tor, why were you trying to get Khar into your bed just a few minutes ago?"

"I have no experience at this kind of thing, so I thought it would help if I practiced," Chayara said, just telling the truth. "You have to practice to be good at everything else, so why would it be different with sex?"

"I . . . don't think I'll try to answer that question," Lanni said, and her amusement had returned. "Let's just say that I'm fairly certain Tor would prefer it if you did your practicing with him, so let's find out how much you know about building inner fires. I'm guessing the answer would be 'not much.'"

Chayara shrugged to show that that was the answer, and Lanni nodded.

"Okay, then let's go over a few of the basics," Lanni said, settling down a bit more comfortably. "If you want a man to become very aware of you, you do certain things designed to catch his attention. For instance, you wear a certain kind of clothing, do your makeup carefully, fix your hair in an attractive way, try to act charming and friendly . . . We're going to have a problem, aren't we."

The last of Lanni's words weren't a question, but Chayara nodded wryly anyway after glancing down at her gray shirt and pants.

"These are the only clothes I have, I brought nothing in the way of makeup, and I've never done anything particularly fancy with my hair,"

Chayara confirmed. "Just to add to those drawbacks, I know that 'charming' seems to take a talent I don't have. And now that we're getting down to details, I'm not even sure if I'm much good at 'friendly.' Do you think I ought to try to borrow clothes and makeup?"

"No, borrowing things won't work," Lanni said, looking a lot less depressed than Chayara was beginning to feel. "If we're going to sneak up on Tor, we don't want to give him warning by waving sexy clothes and deliberate makeup. Our watchword has to be 'subtle,' so we're going to have to go with actions rather than props. We're going to have to teach you to be charming, and it really won't hurt nearly as much as you obviously expect it to."

By now Lanni was actually grinning to show her amusement, but in all honesty Chayara couldn't blame her. She'd made a face over the idea of learning "charm," and Lanni had found the face-making funny. It would have helped if Chayara could also have found something to laugh at...

"Stop worrying," Lanni said, her grin having changed to a smile of comfort. "If you look at it right, what you're about to do will be fun. And with so many people watching, Tor won't be able to run. He'll have to stand his ground while you work on him."

"There are going to be people watching?" Chayara said, having been picturing her efforts as being made in private. "But that will just make things harder... And where will we be that people will be watching?"

"Tor usually joins the off-duty crew in the mess hall for the evening meal," Lanni answered, still looking and sounding completely comfortable. "It won't be out of place if you join everyone too, but you'll have to wait until Tor sits down before you show yourself. You want him in a position where his leaving then will look like running away. He won't want a big part of his crew to see him run away, so chances are good that he'll stay where he is."

"Chances are good," Chayara echoed, definitely not very happy. "If this was a battle plan we'd probably end up getting cut to pieces."

Lanni laughed at that and then went on to say things that were meant to be reassuring, but Chayara still wasn't completely convinced. She'd always considered being straightforward the best way to handle matters, but right now she felt out of her depth. All she could do was try to get Torand Rego into her bed Lanni's way, but if that didn't work then she'd just have to fall back on being straightforward...

* * *

When Lanni Eckson finally closed her cabin door behind her departing guest, she felt as if she'd been run hard and put up wet, as the saying went. She ran both hands through her dark hair as she walked back to her bunk, then let herself collapse bonelessly. The girl obviously intended to follow Lanni's suggestions, which was all that kept Lanni from calling Tor and telling him what was going on. As Tor's second in command, Lanni's job was to protect her captain and handle everything that didn't absolutely require his personal attention, but this business with the girl was stretching the point.

"Even though Tor does need to become involved with her again," Lanni muttered with her eyes closed. "Walking around under a ton of guilt isn't good for anyone, but least of all for the captain of a ship with a mission like ours. Not to mention the fact that he's the one responsible for the girl's present attitude. If he's her real target, the crew shouldn't have to be panicked because he's put himself out of reach."

Lanni's lips curved into a smile again when she remembered how all those rough, dangerous men had run away after the girl had spoken just a few words to them. Under other circumstances the girl would have had to hand out numbers, but right now every man on board was afraid of the idea of offending Falk. Which made it the girl's lucky day...

All amusement left Lanni as she thought about the girl Chayara again.

Right now the girl seemed to be operating on a crush of sorts, and it remained to be seen if anything worthwhile grew out of the attitude. Tor had been her first, Lanni knew, and some girls thought that the first man to have them had to involve true love. If something serious developed between them, then they'd both have a chance at happiness. But if nothing did develop...

"At least now she won't strip naked and throw herself at his feet," Lanni murmured, a sigh behind the words. "I have saved Tor that much, and he might even be grateful if he finds out. The girl promised not to mention my involvement, but there's no knowing how long she'll keep the promise. Long enough to get through this mission, I hope. Since there's no guarantee we'll survive the mission, I won't waste time worrying about Tor finding things out. I just wish I didn't have to be on the bridge during evening mess. This will be one scenario that needs to be seen to be completely appreciated..."

Lanni's smile returned, and this time she couldn't quite make it go away again.

* * *

Chayara strolled into the room called the crew's mess hall, trying to feel as confident and casual as she supposedly looked. She was firmly committed to trying Lanni's idea even though she wasn't certain how good an idea it actually was. The books Chayara had read did seem to show that men were easily taken over by women who were charming and confident, but Chayara had never practiced the art of charm before. That was what Lanni had called charm, an art form that could be learned just like any other art form, and practice would make the performer better.

And actually performing will tell me if I have any natural aptitude for the art, Chayara thought. She looked around casually as she walked, pretending to be checking for a place to sit down for the meal, but just sitting anywhere wasn't part of the plan. Keeping on the move was part

of the plan, and when she suddenly "found" herself in front of the table where Torand Rego sat she pretended to be surprised.

"Oh, Captain Rego, I hadn't expected to find you here," Chayara said, the lie sounding as smooth as she'd wanted it to. "I'm tired of eating all alone in my cabin, so I thought I'd come to where there are other people. You don't mind, I hope?"

"No, I don't mind," Rego answered after a short hesitation, his own words sounding more grudging than true. "I can understand your not wanting to be alone, especially after all the solitary traveling you did."

"Thank you, Captain, I was hoping you would understand," Chayara said as she sat next to him at the small table. "I would also enjoy a bit of conversation, but you're the only one I really know in here. So how long will it be before we reach Utopia?"

Chayara's question silenced Rego's protest over the way she'd sat down without being invited, distracting Rego the way she'd hoped the question would do. She still wore her gray shirt and pants, but she'd taken off her bra, had unbuttoned the shirt to a point just short of the sleazy mark, and had tucked the shirt into her pants. It was much easier to see the shape of her body now, and she'd even brushed out her hair and now wore it loose. Lanni had said that men liked long hair on a woman, especially if the hair was worn loose. The way Rego kept glancing at her seemed to confirm the advice all the way around, so Chayara began to feel a small bit better.

"We should be at Utopia in a couple of days," Rego finally said, happily choosing to answer the question rather than order her away from his table. "It's a three-jump trip, the final jump taking us practically into their laps. The government has it arranged that way so no one can sneak up on them."

"An arrangement we'll use against them when the rest of our fleet suddenly appears in their midst," Chayara said with a nod, smiling her

thanks to the crewman who put a cup of coffee in front of her.

"Knowing what our assignment is, seeing the rest of that was easy."

"You have a good eye, just like Falk," Rego said with a faint smile, then the smile disappeared. "I - haven't had a chance to apologize to you for what I did, but now would be a good time. I don't know what made me take advantage of you instead of just having you drugged and put off at the first station we came to, but - "

"Please, Captain Rego, all that's behind us now," Chayara interrupted, touching one of his curled fists gently as she smiled. "I'd like to think that you did what you did because you found me irresistible, so won't you let me keep my illusions? The time wasn't all that terrible, you know, and I wasn't joking about being willing to do the same again. But you don't want to hear that, so let's find something else to talk about."

Chayara took her hand back and paid attention to fixing the coffee she'd been given, aware of the odd expressions moving across Rego's face. The most effective way to make someone think about what you want them to is to tell them not to think about it, a ploy Chayara had been familiar with even before she realized she was a slut. And simply announcing her sluttiness was also a mistake, a fact that was now obvious as well. Actions speak louder than words, and action was what Chayara wanted in place of words.

"Yes, of course we can talk about something else," Rego said, sounding as if he were fighting his way out of a drugged sleep. "I took you to my bed because you're irresistible, an outlook that isn't far from the truth. You are a very attractive young woman, and I'm glad - So what else can we talk about?"

The look in Rego's gray eyes was the next thing to desperate, and the expression now on his broad, handsome face was almost pleading. Chayara saw all that in a casual glance, which made her smile when she looked up at him.

"Why don't we talk about the weather?" she suggested, mostly to provide a reason for her smile. "It was a really nice day today, but I think it might rain tomorrow."

"It's been so long since I lived on a planet, what you just said sounds almost alien," Rego answered, a sad smile coming out to match hers. "I used to enjoy changes in the weather, and I'd be willing to trade everything I've made as a pirate if I could experience thunderstorms again. And the brightening afterwards. If I live through this revolution I'll probably settle down and never leave my chosen planet again."

"I never stopped to think about what had to be given up if you spent most of your time on board a ship," Chayara said, her second touch to his hand more in commiseration than to entice. "The couple of weeks I spent traveling weren't all that bad, not when I knew I'd be going home after I delivered my message to Uncle Leron, but you and the rest of your crew... No wonder you're so desperate to have the plans work right."

"Desperate is too mild a word," Rego said with a wry twist to his smile, then he gestured to the crewman approaching. "Here's our food, so let's get on with the meal."

Chayara would have preferred to get on with seducing the man, but it wasn't smart trying to compete with food. A hungry man isn't always easy to distract, one of those books had said, so there was no sense in wasting the time and effort making the attempt. Not to mention the fact that Rego seemed to be eager for anything that would end their "conversation." Well, there was always after dinner...

The food wasn't bad at all, and as Chayara ate she thought about how things would go once the food was finished. She hadn't let Rego's apology go on for very long, not when it reminded him about what he felt guilty over, but just having spoken the words he did must have made him feel somewhat better. Removing some of Rego's guilt had been one of Lanni's suggestions, and it seemed to have worked.

Just as Lanni's rules for being charming seemed to be working. Charm consists of smiling pleasantly, never speaking a harsh word, and adding gentle touches every now and then to make the situation more intimate, Lanni had said. Add being physically attractive to the mix, and you have the recipe for seduction at your fingertips. Rego's reactions did suggest he was very aware of her and felt physically attracted, so half the battle had to be considered won. Now, Chayara thought, if the second half of the battle only goes as well as the first...

Nothing was said by either of them while the food was being swallowed, but Chayara didn't find the silence uncomfortable and Rego didn't seem to either. He looked more pensive than disturbed, Chayara was pleased to see, and when he finally pushed away his plate he picked up his coffee cup. She hadn't been able to eat quite as much as he so she was already finished and holding her coffee cup, a smile all ready to be sent in his direction. She was just waiting for him to look directly at her again, but he didn't look at her at all until he swallowed down the last of his coffee.

"That was a good meal, and the company made it even better," Rego said then, his own smile more ... general than Chayara cared for. "Thank you for joining me, and I hope you have a pleasant night."

And with that he got up and left the table, striding out of the room without looking back. Chayara sat frozen in place, not yet able to believe that he'd just up and walked out, but the truth was impossible to doubt for long. He hadn't just been joking, he'd actually walked away and left her flat!

Chayara finished her own coffee in fuming silence, trying to decide what to do next. She'd put herself right under Rego's nose, and not only hadn't he done anything interesting he'd ended up running away. And she'd been trying so hard to -

Wait a minute, Chayara thought, her cup frozen on its way to her lips. If

he wasn't having trouble resisting me, why did he run? And he did run, making sure not to look back at what he was running from. He must have left because we weren't alone, but I can fix that.

Finishing the last of her coffee, Chayara put down the cup and then left the table herself. She'd spent part of the previous day and a half learning her way around the ship, so she had very little trouble getting to Rego's cabin. When she got there she signaled at the door, but there was no answer. She signaled a second time, and when there was still no answer she opened the door and went inside. The cabin was empty, but it was possible to hear the sound of the shower through the open door of the bathroom.

Smiling to herself, Chayara closed the cabin door behind her then went to the bed before starting to get out of her clothes. This cabin was certainly private enough to suit anyone's taste, and it was time to add to the decibel level of her actions. When Rego found her naked in his bed, he'd get the message without needing an interpreter.

By the time the shower noise cut off, Chayara was lying comfortably and, hopefully, seductively, on the bed. She still wasn't quite sure what the man would consider seductive, so she simply lounged on her side facing the bathroom door. Rego ought to see her almost as soon as he came out of the bathroom, and then the real action would start.

When Rego did appear, Chayara smiled to see that he was as naked as she. His body was really beautiful, hard and wide and trim and muscled, but it was also mostly relaxed. He was actually three steps into the room before he noticed her, and then he stopped dead to stare in what looked like disbelief. Chayara's smile widened when his body showed that it, at least, appreciated her efforts at seduction, but then Rego stopped being shocked.

"What in hell are you doing in my bed?" he demanded, his hands curled to fists as he took another step to close the distance between them.

"Answer me, girl! What are you doing here?"

"I'm not doing anything at the moment, but if you'll come over here and join me we can change that," Chayara answered, making sure her voice was low and her tone coaxing. "You could pretend I'm not here, of course, but it would be so much nicer if you didn't."

"So it would be nicer with me closer, would it?" he growled, anger replacing his previous disturbance. "I like that idea, so let's make things nicer."

Chayara was delighted to hear that he was going to come to her where she lay, but it wasn't eagerness for her that he showed as he approached. He stalked over to the bed still showing that anger, reached down to take her by both arms, and pulled her to her feet. A moment later he was sitting down, pulling her across his lap as he sat.

"What are you doing?" Chayara demanded, finding that he was holding her too tightly for her to pull free. "This isn't the way you did it last time!"

"But you wanted me to forget about last time, so I have," Rego answered, pulling her right arm back to hold it in an unbreakable grip at her waist. "This is a new beginning for us, and I know you'll enjoy it just as much as I mean to."

Chayara was about to ask what he was talking about when his hand came down hard on her seat. She was so surprised that the words she'd meant to speak disappeared, and then Rego's hand reached her bottom again. This second smack hurt worse than the first one had, but she didn't have much time for comparison. His hand kept hitting her bottom over and over, forcing sounds and words of protest from her, but nothing she said seemed to reach him. He just kept smacking her seat hard, and even though he wasn't using a strap the way he had in the dream she'd viewed, that didn't mean his effort didn't hurt.

It wasn't long before Chayara was crying, but that didn't stop the spanking either. She'd never been spanked before, not even as a child,

which meant she hadn't known how lucky she was to have missed the experience. Rego's wide, hard hand just kept smacking away at her bottom for much too long a time, and when the spanking was finally over it took a moment for her to realize it.

"If I ever find you in my cabin like this again, a spanking is the least of what you can expect," the man growled from above her while she sobbed from the large burning ache her seat had been turned into. "Do you understand what I just told you?"

Chayara wasn't able to speak, so she nodded her head hard in answer. She didn't want Rego to think she was defying him, otherwise he might start to spank her again.

"You'd better understand," he said, the growl still in his voice as he finally released her arm and moved her off his lap. "Now get back into your clothes while I try to decide if I'm being too easy on you. By rights I ought to throw you out of here naked and make you run back to your cabin showing everyone your pretty red behind. If you aren't dressed in thirty seconds that's exactly what I'll do."

Chayara was so appalled at that idea that she moved three times faster than her aching bottom wanted her to. She threw on her shirt and thrust herself into her pants, wincing over how much the thin material hurt her poor, abused bottom. She was given enough time to close two of the buttons on her shirt, but then Rego thrust her shoes at her, took her by the arm, and all but dragged her to the cabin door. A moment later she was out in the corridor, barefoot, hurting, and horribly embarrassed. Rather than stopping to put her shoes on, she ignored the iciness of the metal deck and ran back to her own cabin.

Dropping her shoes and locking her cabin door took only a moment, and then she ran to her bed, threw herself face down, and began to cry. Her earlier crying had been due to the spanking, but the pain making her cry now was much more intense. She'd hated the idea of being a slut, but once she accepted her true nature she'd wanted to be the best

slut possible. Now...

Now all she could do was admit her failure. Not only wasn't she a superior slut, she wasn't even an ordinarily good one. None of the men she'd tried to attract wanted anything to do with her, and that included Rego himself. She'd always been taught that she had to be true to her nature, but she'd never dreamed that her real nature was that of a failure. The pain of having to accept that truth was intense, but there was nothing she could do but accept it.

Forcing herself to her feet again, Chayara rid herself of her clothing before returning to the bed. That spanking had hurt and by rights Rego should have soothed her afterward with the use of his body, but he hadn't made the least effort to do so. She'd mistaken his physical reaction to her nakedness for true desire, but how could anyone feel desire for a complete failure?

"I wish I could go home right now," she whispered as the tears started again, but of course she couldn't. She had to help her uncle Leron and his people, and then they in turn would help her father. But once she did get home she would buy a small house and hide in it for the rest of her life. It would have been easier if she could still think about killing herself, but she didn't have to try it twice to understand that suicide would never work. All she could do was keep on living, no matter how painful life became.

Painful and lonely, especially lonely...

Chapter Five

Torand Rego sat in the chair in his cabin, knowing it was almost time for him to go to the bridge, but his mind refused to stop running through his large collection of muddied thoughts. Muddied and struggling thoughts, skewed and fighting, and unfortunately he was the one the thoughts were fighting against.

It had been nearly two days since he'd seen Falk's niece, but he couldn't make himself stop thinking about her. Every time he looked at his bunk - or even glanced in that direction - he could still see her lying there, naked and smiling and waiting for him to join her. It still frightened him how close he'd come to doing just that, to lying down next to her and taking her in his arms. After his first shock at having her join him at his table at evening mess, he'd actually enjoyed her presence beside him. But he'd enjoyed her presence too much, so he'd left as quickly as he could manage it. Falk's niece wasn't for the likes of him, he knew, but when he came out of the head and saw her on his bunk...

"It wasn't really her I was mad at, but she was the one I took my anger out on," Tor muttered, not very happy with himself for having done that. "Not being able to touch her made me a little crazy, but maybe what I did was for the best after all. If she had some kind of crush on me, the crush is now dead."

As dead and ended as the girl's attempts to be near him. She'd been appalled at the idea of being made to run naked through the ship with her seat still red from the spanking she'd gotten, and she'd put her clothes on so fast it had looked like magic was involved. He was the one who'd thrown her out of his cabin then, but she'd made no effort to stay in spite of that. Tor hadn't seen her since then, and he wasn't the only one. She'd kept to her cabin for the last two days, and the only one who had seen her was whoever brought her meals.

"And not only didn't she talk to the crewman with her food, she didn't even acknowledge his existence," Tor muttered, leaning forward to cover his face with his hands. "Jerman tried to visit with her yesterday, but the girl refused to say a word to her. Jerman's doctor instincts came alive when she found out how little the girl was eating, but she ran into a blank wall again when it came to reaching through to the girl. Now Jerman wants me to talk to the girl, but how can I? Even if I manage to keep my hands off the girl, I'm probably the last one she wants to see."

The last one she wants to see. That arrangement would have been perfect if not for the heavy regret Tor felt every time he thought of it. The girl had had some foolish idea about acting like what she called a slut, and if it had been anyone but that girl he would have had some fun indulging her fantasy. With this particular girl, though, indulging her fantasy would have been more than fun, and when the time ended the pain would have been unbearable. Tor had thrown the girl out in an effort to avoid that kind of pain, but somehow it had found him anyway...

"Captain to the bridge, please," Tor suddenly heard over the ship-wide speaker, a polite summons, but a summons nonetheless. "Captain to the bridge, please."

A glance at the clock showed Tor that he'd taken a little too long with his thoughts, so he got to his feet and left his cabin. In a little while it would be time for them to make the third and last jump to Utopia, the jump that would put them in the middle of the government's heaviest protection. If the guarding forces accepted the Hawk as the freighter she pretended to be, they wouldn't be stopped. But if anyone at all got suspicious...

"The rest of our fleet is forming up, Captain," Henson said from where he sat in front of his board when Tor walked onto the bridge. "As soon as they're all in position we'll be able to make the last jump."

"The full assault group is already gathered, Tor," Lanni, his second in command, reported. "If we aren't destroyed as soon as we appear - or when we try to land - we'll be ready to try to force our way into the control facility. Considering how well guarded and sealed that facility is I don't know how successful we'll be, but we'll still try."

"How about Falk's niece?" Tor was forced to ask, trying to concentrate on nothing but the upcoming battle. "According to the plan, she's supposed to be part of the assault force. Is she gathered with the others?"

"She's ready to go, but she's waiting in her cabin rather than with the assault force," Lanni responded, eyeing Tor in an odd way. "When I spoke to her she sounded really ... distant. Do you have any idea what's bothering her, Tor?"

"No," Tor answered shortly, making it clear that all discussion about the girl was over. Lanni accepted the unvoiced order, but silence didn't change the odd expression on her face or the way she looked at him. Well, let her look. As long as she didn't say anything Tor knew he would be saved from saying anything ... awkward himself.

It took a while for the entire fleet to get into position, but once the last ship was where it was supposed to be Falk broadcast the time check from the Chayara to all the rest of the fleet. Tor and his people would have three hours before the rest of the fleet made the last jump, three hours to reach the planet, land, force their way into the control facility, and start taking out guard ships. If the crew of the Hawk didn't make it through, the rest of the fleet would be destroyed as soon as it appeared.

But everyone had had enough of being on the run, of being outlaws because of the opinions of one small group of people. If the plan didn't work then everyone would die, which most considered preferable to living without hope. The idea of dying didn't bother Tor, but if he had to die he wanted his death to count for something. He just had to live long enough to take over the control facility and cut down on the opposition the others would face. After that it didn't matter what happened to him.

As soon as Decker sent an acknowledgment of the time check from her board, Tor gave the order for the final jump. The tension on the bridge was thick enough to smother an entire herd of elephants, but everyone made it through the jump alive. How long they would stay that way was another story, but...

"Right on schedule, Tramp," Tor heard from the comm board, a transmission from one of the guard ships. "You're already cleared for

approach so just take her on in."

"Taking her in," Decker acknowledged, then she turned to Tor once she'd closed the communications line. "I don't believe that, Captain! How can we be right on time if they weren't supposed to know we were coming?"

"Falk said he was trying to arrange for our supposed freighter to be put on the arrivals list, and it looks like he succeeded," Tor said with a good deal of the relief he felt. "It doesn't usually seem like it, but apparently we've got supporters in more places than we know. You don't have to be a fighter to recognize a big mistake when it's made, and our loving government's mistakes just keep adding up. Falk said he was sure we had non-fighters ready to back us up with a little more than crossed fingers, and I'd say he was right again."

Happy murmurs came from all over the bridge, and Tor moved through them to reach his command chair. They still had a way to go before they reached Utopia itself, and then he and Lanni would join the assault group. Until then there was always the chance they would be needed on the bridge to make any emergency decisions...

But there weren't any emergency decisions needed. The Hawk reached the planet Utopia in a bit more than an hour, when they asked for and got clearance to land. Most ships never landed on a planet, not when freight and passengers could be off-loaded more easily onto a station, but every now and then special cargoes and passengers were taken to the planet of destination itself. Falk's hidden helpers must have been really busy, Tor realized after they were given clearance without hesitation. At the very least he'd expected to be questioned about his cargo, but no one had asked a thing...

"What do they all think we're carrying?" Lanni asked once the comm line was closed again. She sat at a board of her own, but simply watched while the bridge crew performed the necessary functions. "I mean, it would have to be something top secret for them to give us

landing clearance so easily, wouldn't it? They didn't even ask if our cargo was still fresh, or intact, or alive, or whatever."

"I don't know what they think we have, but whatever it is they'll forget about it once we land," Tor answered. "We aren't going to put the ship down where they expect us to, after all, and as soon as we veer off and land near the control facility the secret will be out. If we all live through the rest of this, we can ask Falk about our 'cargo' later."

Lanni smiled faintly and nodded her agreement, her expression showing that she, like Tor, didn't care if she survived as long as they completed their part of the plan. She would enjoy going back to a normal life as much as he would, Tor knew, but making the normal life possible was the important part, not the living of it. If they didn't survive to enjoy the fruits of their victory, at least everyone else would.

"We've started down," Decker reported, giving all her attention to what was on her board. "Since it won't be long before we reach our point of debarkation, all those going ashore ought to be with the landing group."

"You're right, Decker, so the con is yours," Tor responded, standing up just as Lanni did the same. "Tell Falk's niece to meet us at the airlock, please."

"Will do," Decker answered, and then Tor and Lanni were off the bridge and on their way to where the assault group waited. Inertialess flight made moving around easy even during a landing. If anything ever happened to the inertialess drive they and everyone else would be plastered all over the inside hull of the ship, but that's why they had a backup drive. If both drives went they'd probably be dead too fast to know what happened, so the possibility wasn't worth worrying about. Not when they had so much else of a more pressing nature to worry about...

As soon as they reached the assault group, Tor and Lanni donned their gear. Armor consisted of a light-seeming coverall that took less than a

minute to get into but felt heavier than it looked. That was because the coverall was made of a very dense material that would protect the wearer from most small projectiles, most flamers, and most light explosives. Light disrupters would shake up you and the armor a bit, but heavy disrupters would tear a body apart without damaging the armor. The sleeves ended in skin-tight gloves that didn't interfere with the operation of a weapon and the bottom of the coverall covered shoes or boots as well as feet. A helmet that covered the entire head attached to the collar, but the helmet didn't have to be put on until they were ready to leave the ship.

"They've just assigned us a berth, Captain," Decker said over the comm next to the airlock. "Less than five minutes before we change course, and then about a minute to landing."

"Acknowledged," Tor said after pressing the switch on the comm. "Give us a countdown for the last minute before the airlock is opened."

"Will do," Decker said while Tor turned to get his helmet. Tor felt the urge to stop dead when he saw the girl Chayara just about into her coverall, but staring would have been stupid if not suicidal. He needed all his attention to be on the task at hand, and once they were all in their helmets the job should be easier. He hoped...

Five minutes either drags or flies by, depending on what you're doing and what you're waiting for, but this time the minutes managed to both drag and fly. Tor was in the midst of wondering if Decker had forgotten about the countdown when it suddenly began.

"One minute to open airlock," Decker's voice came over the general intercom. "Fifty-seven ... fifty-six ... fifty-five..."

There was a general shifting in place as the assault group readied itself, and Tor felt more excitement in the air than anxiety. They'd all been waiting so long for this moment, the time when they'd try their best to depose the most repressive government the human race had ever had

to fight against. History had brought forth conquerors and tyrants in fairly large numbers, but the worst of them acted not in an effort to terrorize but in an effort to do "right." More horrors are committed in the name of good than in the name of evil. Someone delighting in being evil is a joke; someone delighting in being good is a nightmare.

Lanni handed Tor his rifle for the preliminary long distance work that would be necessary, both of them already wearing their hand weapons in holsters. A glance showed Tor that the girl Chayara also wore a hand weapon, but she hadn't been given a rifle and that was good. Tor didn't want the girl getting involved in the fighting, not unless her life depended on defense, and the rest of the group had strict instructions to guard the girl's life with their own. Guarding the girl would be guarding their luck, but for Tor the effort would be much more - even though he refused to think about what the much more entailed...

"Twenty-six ... twenty-five ... twenty-four..." Decker's voice said over the intercom, making Tor wish he could hurry the count in some way. It was nice to know exactly how much more time they had to wait, but dragging the thing out second by second became nerve-wracking. And the ship hadn't entered the control facility's exclusion field yet, otherwise they would have felt the shock -

"Nineteen - I don't believe it!" Decker said suddenly, no longer sounding mechanical. "Attention assault group! As soon as we entered the facility's exclusion field, our presence seemed to cause an explosion of sorts! All the guards stationed around the building have gone down, and the ones in sight aren't moving! There are some heavy equipment vehicles around as well, but I can't tell about their personnel. Watch yourselves going out... Seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... go!"

Tor hadn't felt it when the ship grounded, but the opening of the airlock was impossible to miss. They were using a large freight airlock, and Decker's controls allowed both inner and outer doors to open at once as a ramp extended. Tor ran through the airlock and jumped onto the

ramp with his rifle held at the ready, every sense he had alert for the smallest movement as he rode the ramp most of the way to the ground. Lanni and the rest of the assault group were right behind him, but Tor had grabbed point and meant to keep it.

The heavy equipment vehicles were closer to the ship than the unmoving bodies on the ground, but instead of protecting the people inside them the vehicles had apparently acted as transmitters rather than insulation. The crews inside the vehicles were very dead, as opposed to the troops scattered across the ground. The ground troops seemed to be no more than unconscious, just the way Chayara had been when her talent had blown the exclusion and disintegration fields on Moradan's station. . .

"Decker, close the airlock again and keep it closed until you hear from me," Tor said at once into his helmet mike while he headed for the building they'd come to take. "Most of these guards are unconscious, and we don't want them deciding to tour our ship once they wake up. Assault group, attention. We now need to find a way inside the building before these sleepers come awake. Once inside we won't have to worry about them any longer."

A handful of the members of the assault group had already started for the building housing the control facility, and at Tor's orders the rest of the group did the same. Tor himself was almost there, his attention on the building's main entrance, when a voice sent his attention in another direction.

"This small door is unlocked," the girl Chayara announced from where she stood to Tor's right, an open door right in front of her. Three members of the group were behind her, but even as Tor headed in that direction two of the group members moved in front of the girl - where they should have been all along. Tor wanted to ream them for letting the girl be the one to find the open door, a door that could have had any number of guards behind it, but now wasn't the time. Later, though. . .

The small door led into a room that had chairs and drink dispensers, not to mention a number of guards on the floor. It was most probably a break room for the outside guards, but it also had a large double doorway that led into the facility. Both the outer door and the double doors could be locked securely, so once all of Tor's people were inside he had the unconscious guards dragged outside and then ordered both doors locked. The longer it took anyone to break in, the longer he and his people would have to destroy the ships guarding the planet.

Tor sent a couple of his people to make sure all other doors into the building were locked, then he led the rest on a search for the main control room. They were actually attacked by guardsmen on the way, men and women who seemed to have been protected from the field backlash to a certain degree by their body armor, but only the first attack came as a surprise. Almost everyone dived for cover even as they brought up their rifles, but one lone figure didn't do the same. That figure used its hand weapon to drop the attacker, and then strolled forward to inspect its handiwork.

To say Tor was furious was the understatement of the century. The lone figure was the girl Chayara, of course, and she had no business shooting attackers. Not to mention being without her guards...

"Are you people asleep or dead?" Tor demanded once he'd voice-coded a private message to the three who were supposed to be guarding the girl. "Why was she standing there alone shooting when she should have been behind the three of you?"

"Captain, it wasn't our fault!" Armin, one of the three men, said for all of them, his voice unsteady. "One minute we were all around the girl, and the next she'd stepped out ahead of us and we were being shot at. We all grabbed for her before taking cover, but somehow she just ... slid out of our grips. I swear I don't know what could have happened!"

"Whatever it was, don't let it happen again," Tor ordered, not about to waste time debating what was and wasn't possible. Could it have been

the girl's luck that let her be in just the right position to stop the first attack? If she'd been pulled back she wouldn't have been in that position, so it hadn't proved possible to pull her back. No, Tor didn't want to think about things like that, but no matter the reason for the girl's being risked, he still refused to let something like that happen again.

"Nice shooting, Chayara," Tor said once he'd voice-coded a message to the girl alone. "You did a good job, but shooting isn't the reason you're with us. I want you to stay behind your guards from now on and let them do whatever is necessary to keep all of you safe."

"You're wasting time and effort keeping me guarded, Captain Rego," the girl responded, a distant bitterness to the words. "My luck won't let me be killed, and you should know that. I may be a failure at everything else in life, but even I can pull a trigger and hit a target the size of a man or woman. The rest of you need to be careful, but I don't."

"That's a pretty theory, but I hope you'll excuse me if I don't buy it," Tor growled, close to appalled by such a deadly outlook. "Just because your luck has kept you alive until now doesn't mean you can't be hurt or killed. You get yourself back to your guards and stay behind them, or once this is all over you'll wish you'd been killed. Do you understand me?"

"Sure I do, Captain," the girl responded, even more bitterness in her voice now. "If I'm hurt or killed you'll have to tell my uncle about it, and you really don't want to do that. Well, I'm recording our conversation, so if you turn out to be right you'll be able to prove that I disobeyed your orders. Now you can relax. Off."

Her last word cut the connection, leaving Tor ready to ream out dead air. He didn't know what was wrong with the girl, but he also didn't have the time now to find out. If they all lived through the invasion, though...

Tor doubled the girl's guard before continuing on into the building, and

it was a good thing he did. The next attack was three guardsmen strong, and the circle around the girl was among the first to be shot at. No one was killed, not when the guards were using solid projectiles in their guns, but all those members of the group who were hit were knocked down. Even if nothing like ribs or arm or leg bones happened to be broken, the ones hit would be badly bruised.

Lanni came out of cover to throw a shock grenade into the area where the three guardsmen had attacked from, and as soon as the grenade went off the assault group was able to continue on. The three guards had been stunned by the explosion, and removing their helmets let some of Tor's people stun the three more thoroughly. The fewer dead bodies their attack produced the better off they would be, Falk had said, so when they had the choice they stunned rather than killed. The next attack by two guards didn't give them the choice, but the assault group still moved on.

And then they turned the last corner to find the control area right ahead of them. The sketch of the facility that Falk had gotten somewhere had been fairly accurate, and there weren't even any guards standing in front of the security door. The entire wall, including that door, was made of reonate, a clear material that let you see into an area you couldn't force your way into with anything less than a nuclear explosion. Everyone in sight in the area seemed to be unconscious, which meant that even if one of Falk's silent supporters wanted to let them in it was no longer possible.

"Now what?" Lanni asked as they all stood and stared at the wall and door. "If we can't get in there we've just been wasting our time."

"Getting through that door shouldn't be too hard," Tor heard the girl Chayara say before he was forced to admit that he didn't know what they would do now. "That lock has to have the usual fail-safe, so all we have to do is use it."

And with that the girl stepped over to the lock's keypad, hit the clear

button, inputted five zeroes and a five, then hit the clear button again. There was a loud click, and then the airlock-type door went to full open.

"How did you do that?" Lanni demanded of the girl, pure delight in her tone. "I've never even heard about fail-safe codes."

"It's one of the best kept secrets the lock makers have," the girl answered, her own voice as dismissive as it had been earlier. "Learning locks and what can and can't be done with them has been my hobby for years, but it actually took me a month and a half to work out this particular fail-safe. Of course, I had a set of specifications to work from, which made finding the answer that much easier."

"Sure, using the specs was the next thing to cheating," Lanni said, her tone full of sarcasm. "If I'd worked on the problem myself, with or without the specs, I could have solved the code like in ... never. I knew I liked you, Chayara, I just never knew how much."

Lanni was chuckling by now, but Tor noticed that the girl didn't join Lanni's amusement. But his people were pouring into the control area, so Tor voice-coded a connection to Lanni while he waited to bring up the rear.

"Lanni, have the girl close the door again once we're all inside, and then stick with her," he said. "Try to make sure she doesn't do anything reckless while the rest of us are destroying guard ships."

"Will do, Tor," Lanni acknowledged, but she sounded as if she wanted to say something else entirely. Whatever it was, she'd undoubtedly realized that this wasn't the time.

Once inside the control area, Tor had the unconscious workers moved to a small break room with three guards standing over them. Some of Tor's people had been inspecting the equipment while the unconscious bodies were cleared away, and then those people began to hand out

orders and explanations. They were the ones who were the experts in weapons technology, so Tor simply stepped aside and let them do their job. It wasn't long before every board in the room had someone sitting in front of it, and after a moment Romman, the leader of the experts, turned to Tor.

"We're all set, Captain," Romman said, her voice sounding more excited than was usual with her. "We can open fire at any time."

"Then make the time right now," Tor answered. "We only have a little more than an hour to prepare the way for our fleet, so let's not waste any of those minutes."

"Right you are, Captain," Romman acknowledged, then she sat down at her own board. "Programming in the first firing sequence right now... All sectors commence firing."

Tor heard nothing, of course, but the sections of wall above the equipment had a wrap-around view of ship deployment. Tor had thought the view was a painting of some kind, but when one ship after another of the hundreds shown began to explode and disappear thanks to the giant orbital guns, Tor realized he was looking at a screen. Dozens of ships went up like the sitting ducks they were, and then the surviving ships began to move.

"Programming in the second firing sequence," Romman said, her voice now filled with satisfaction. "All sectors commence firing."

More dozens of ships disappeared from the display, and Tor might have been upset by the extreme loss of life except for the fact that everyone aboard those ships was a volunteer and a staunch supporter of their repressive government. No man or woman who wasn't provably loyal had a chance at being part of the crew of a guard ship, a job that had become one of the most sought-after sinecures. All you had to do aboard a guard ship circling Utopia was sit around and relax, and the pay vouchers just kept coming in and piling up. That was

probably why the vast majority of the ships hadn't yet moved; their crews were too busy taking it easy.

Less than half the original number of ships was left when Tor heard a sound like a balloon popping. He turned to see what had caused the sound, and just stood staring at the insides of one of the instrument banks that were now all outsides. A small column of smoke rose from one part of the insides sitting on the floor, and the helmeted figure standing second closest to the mess half turned in his direction.

"Chayara thought it might be a good idea to take all that apart," Lanni said, the words faint and the least bit unsteady. "Our helmets keep anyone from gassing us, she said, but there was a good chance someone had installed a different kind of fail-safe. Looks like she was right."

To say the least. Tor examined the place the exploded charge had come from, seeing what looked just like a very large bomb. If the primer charge hadn't been removed in time, there would have been nothing left of him and his people but smears on what was left of the walls and instruments. The figure standing closest to the mess was the girl, of course, and she stood staring at him with her arms crossed. She didn't say a word and her face was hidden by her helmet, but if she wasn't staring at him defiantly then Tor had never seen the gesture. Anger flared briefly in Tor's mind, anger that had to be swallowed down, but Tor didn't like the taste. As soon as that invasion was over...

As soon as that invasion was over, Tor intended to have a long talk with the girl. He would start out by getting them both out of their protective gear once they found someplace private, then he would put her over his knee again. Taking down her pants and underwear would start his enjoyment, and then he would have a nice, round seat to take his anger out on. She would struggle, of course, and maybe even yell and call him nasty names, but the first swat of his hand would change the tone of the yelling.

Tor felt a lot of pleasure as he pictured himself smacking that arrogant backside over and over until the girl was howling and her seat was a bright red. Even if his hand started to hurt from giving her the spanking, he would still keep it up until she garbled out some kind of apology between the howls. After that he would give her only a few more smacks, possibly ten or a dozen, and then he would force her back to her feet and make her tell him what the trouble was. If she refused to answer she would find herself on her way back across his knees, and she'd have to take another ten or a dozen smacks before he'd be willing to listen again.

Yes, Tor thought as he turned back to the wall array and its picture of exploding ships. Since we owe her our lives in more than one way, I'll do anything I have to in order to find out what's troubling her. But I won't comfort her afterward, I won't... I won't...!

Chapter Six

Three quarters of the guard ships were gone before anyone tried to contact them. There was only a short time before the fleet was due to jump in, but Tor still walked over to the board with the face of an older woman on its screen. The woman was lovely despite no longer being young, and the handsome man next to her had gray at his temples. They both wore the same expression, gentle sadness, the look one would expect to see on the face of a disappointed god and goddess.

"Was there something you wanted?" Tor asked mildly without removing his helmet. "If so, please get to it as quickly as possible. I'm rather busy right now."

"What are you children doing?" the woman asked, her gentle sadness increasing. "We've never meant you any harm, but you're causing untold harm! Please, just sit down and talk to us about what's bothering you. I promise we'll listen to everything you have to say. And please remove those helmets, all of you, so I can see the people I'm speaking to."

"You want us to remove our helmets," Tor echoed, letting a bit of amusement enter his voice. "Blowing us up didn't work, so now you're trying to talk us into exposing ourselves to being gassed. Just how stupid do you think we are?"

"Young man, we really don't want to hurt you," the man said while the woman fought to retain that look of sadness. "Our lives obviously mean nothing to you, but yours mean a great deal to us. If we're going to negotiate there must be trust between us, and we're willing to show our own trust by having our guards put down their weapons. Once that's done you'll feel better about removing your helmets, won't you?"

"Try to understand what I'm saying," Tor said, speaking slowly to the now-smiling man. "I don't trust your bosses even as far as I could throw them, so there won't be any negotiations. You and the people you work for are all through with ruining everything you touch, so you might as well give it up. You've lost, so the least you can do is bow out gracefully."

"If anyone will be bowing out, it's you!" another voice snarled, and suddenly the two people were pushed aside by a woman. This second woman was all stern expression with fanaticism peering out of her dull eyes, and the tight-lipped man who moved into viewing range with her looked as soft as a mound of jelly. He pouted rather than frowned, and the rest of the group who pushed in behind the first two were obviously pettishly outraged.

"Your behavior is completely unacceptable and it will stop right now!" the woman went on, her voice rasping like a file on flesh. "The Associated Worlds are all becoming Utopias because of our efforts, and we're not about to let you ruin what we've done. You'll put down your weapons and surrender to the guards outside that room, and you'll do it this minute! You can't stay in there forever, and the longer you do stay the harder it will go with you. Do as I say NOW!"

"But we can't leave here now," Tor protested, annoyed enough that he spoke mildly just to pass on the annoyance. "We haven't quite finished picking off your guard ships, and that's still our job even though the rest of our people are already here. You've got almost nothing in the way of ground troops, no more than a bunch of personal guards who have no real experience with combat. If you don't want to throw away the lives of those guards you'd better surrender as quickly as possible. You've already lost, so it just makes sense for you to surrender - "

Tor cut off his comments when the screen went blank, showing that the opposition had gone away in a huff. The two actors they used to make public announcements, the first man and woman, were supposed to have talked Tor and his people into being stupid. When that didn't work the actual heads of the government had tried bullying, and when that didn't work either they'd retreated in an effort to regroup. Not that that was likely to do them much good either. . .

By the time the rest of the fleet reached them, Tor's people had destroyed almost all of the ships arrayed around Utopia. Two ships of the fleet had taken over mopping up the handful of survivors who'd managed to run away, but everyone else had landed on Utopia. When the guards who had gathered out in the hall put down their weapons and raised their hands, Tor knew he and his men were being relieved.

As soon as the guards were shackled and taken away, Tor had the girl open the room's door so the newcomers could take over. Romman made sure that the relieving crew knew how to use the equipment and the girl taught them about the fail-safe code, and then the assault group was finally able to leave the room. There would be ships coming in from other locations that would try to attack the fleet, and that's why the control facility still had to be manned.

When Tor got back to the Hawk, he found that Falk had left orders for the Hawk to join the other ships where they were. Cloud Nine was the name of the very large group of buildings that made up the governmental offices and apartments, and the complex had to be taken

over before anyone in the fleet could even start to relax.

"All right, get us over there," Tor said to Henson after Decker gave him the message. Tor carried his helmet and had been looking forward to getting out of the body armor - and having a discussion with a very stubborn girl - but duty came first. The girl in question was summoned right along with Tor and his people, so maybe the chance for that talk would come sooner than he expected.

When the Hawk put down near the other ships and Tor led his people outside, he discovered that the final push hadn't yet started. Falk and his lieutenants and bodyguards stood around beside the Chayara with the other assault groups near their own ships, and when Tor appeared Falk brightened.

"Ah, you're here," Falk said, and he looked happy to be stating the obvious. "You all did a wonderful job with the control facility, and now we need your help with the end stroke. I'd like most if not all of the current governmental heads in custody before we announce a change in personnel."

"And once we've taken over, one of the first things we'll be doing is moving the control facility to a place under the governmental buildings," Risson, one of Falk's lieutenants, said with a grim smile. "That's where the facility should have been all along, but our wonderful leaders were afraid to have a prime target sitting under their precious backsides. They - "

"I think we'll have plenty of time to get into that later, Risson," Falk said, interrupting what promised to be a long lecture on improper behavior. "Right now we have a complex waiting to be taken over, and the effort has waited much too long already. Chayara, my dear, I'll be happier if you put on that helmet instead of just carrying it."

"Certainly, Uncle Leron, as soon as we get moving," the girl answered, showing a faint smile. "We couldn't take the helmets off in the facility,

so now I'm enjoying breathing freely while I still can."

"Of course," Falk agreed with his own smile, then turned to give orders to his people. Tor forced himself not to stare at the girl over the way she'd responded. Her words had sounded as if she were being completely reasonable and rational, but Tor would have bet there was still something disturbing her quite a lot.

Falk got everything moving quickly, so it wasn't long before their people were on the way into the end building on the left. Some of their forces had been left behind, arranged outside the buildings in what amounted to snipers' positions, which ought to keep their targets from sneaking away - and keep their targets' guards from flanking the attacking forces.

There were ambushes and attacks almost from the very beginning of the advance, but Tor could tell that the guards making the effort had little or no experience with what they were trying to do. Each section of building was cleared before they moved on to the next, and the clearing really consisted of making sure there was no one being left behind their backs. A number of people were found, servants and assistants and the like, and they were all fitted with wrist and ankle restraints before being left for later retrieval.

Tor couldn't help but notice that some of the areas of the buildings were trapped, but for one reason or another most of the traps failed to work. Faulty wiring, inferior materials having been used, mistakes in set-up, or amateurish mishandling all contributed to the ease with which the attacking forces moved through the buildings. Tor knew it was the girl's "luck" that was making the advance so easy, and that was why Falk had waited for her arrival before beginning.

Using the girl's talent was the smart thing to do, of course, and Tor was glad he didn't have to fight for his life every step of the way. But somewhere deep inside him, on some odd level, Tor was beginning to resent the way the girl was being used. She was being treated more like

an object than a human being, and that could be what was bothering her. If so, Tor didn't blame her for showing some attitude. In her place he would have done worse, and later, when they talked, he would have to tell her so.

Taking out the various pockets of guards was more time-consuming than difficult, but they eventually reached the place the government's leaders were holed up. The area was protected by a disintegration field, but this time it wasn't necessary for the girl's talent to wreck the field. The generator seemed to be powered by a cable that actually ran outside the field of destruction instead of having a separate power source on the inside, a circumstance Tor couldn't quite bring himself to believe.

"It might not be a good idea to go rushing inside those rooms when the field goes down," Tor said to Falk while they waited for some of their people to cut through the power cable. "That cable could well be a set-up to make us believe there's no separate power source, and as soon as we step into what we think is a dead field it just comes alive again."

"Under other circumstances I would agree with you, but in this place I'm afraid I don't," Falk said, amusement to be heard in his voice even though Tor couldn't see his face behind his helmet. "Having a separate power source inside a field is dangerous, because if the power source isn't shielded exactly right the disintegration field becomes a solid circle instead of a ring around a center. The inner power source then turns to dust motes along with everything else, but that doesn't matter when there isn't anything left for the field to guard."

"So ... you just make sure your power source is shielded properly," Tor said slowly, trying to understand Falk's point. "I don't see why there would be a problem in doing it that way."

"The problem comes in when you're too afraid of the field to believe that any shielding is absolutely safe," Falk answered, and the

amusement in his voice had changed to weariness. "That's the main problem these wonderful leaders of ours has, operating from fear rather than any other stance. If you're afraid that someone will laugh at you for being short, or fat, or anything else that makes you different, you outlaw ridiculing instead of learning how to put down those doing the laughing. The intention is to feel safe without ever having to do anything to change the situation that's causing your fear."

"But how can you ever feel safe if you aren't willing and able to protect yourself against what comes?" Tor asked, a point he'd always had trouble understanding. "If you're nothing but a walking target for bullies and fools, you end up with nothing but fear in your life."

"Not if you partner with people who aren't afraid to do the necessary," Falk returned, the hardness of determination now in his voice. "It's what might be called the 'natural order of things,' to have fighters doing the fighting while the non-fighters do the building. The trouble starts when the non-fighters decide to get rid of the fighters because fighters are 'troublemakers' and 'dangerous to have around.' That's what this government did, and now their fear causes them to make mistake after mistake - Ah, the field is down."

And the field was down, so Tor joined everyone else in entering the group of offices after the advance troops broke down the doors. These offices were larger than the ones in other parts of the buildings, and the room in the very middle held a table large enough for all twenty-five head members of the government. Tor had expected there to be at least some guard personnel in the room in addition to the twenty-five people huddled against the back wall, but there wasn't even one single guard.

"Just as I suspected," Falk said to the group of huddlers as he led his own people forward. "You were afraid you might get caught in a fire-fight if you had guardsmen in here with you, so you chose what you considered the more prudent action and sent all the guards away."

"Leaders are supposed to be prudent," the snappish woman Tor had spoken to earlier said from her place in the middle of the group without moving forward. "You people are breaking the law being here, so you'll put down your weapons this minute and surrender to us. Your trial will be absolutely fair, and - "

"Stop playing the fool," Falk interrupted, and now he sounded annoyed. "Only your kind will obey all laws simply because they are laws, making no effort to think about whether or not the laws are just or even make sense. The new government will be more intelligent about what it does, and it will be run by the best men and women we can find."

"Now you're playing the fool," one of the men near the woman blustered, also without leaving the huddled group. "All men and women are created equal, so talking about the best is - "

"Stop!" Falk demanded, his hand held up toward the speaker. "When one man or woman can be born with a level nine intelligence and the next with a level sixteen, it's ludicrous to claim that everyone is born equal. What you want to aim for is giving everyone an equal chance to make something great of themselves, not waste everyone's time with nonsensical claims. Chain those idiots up, and then we'll finish clearing these buildings."

There was a lot of whimpering and crying and even wild demands when Falk's people began to obey his orders, but no one paid any attention. Once the job was done a strong guard force was left with the prisoners, and the rest of the invaders went through the remaining buildings. There were still a few guards left on the loose, but they surrendered rather than attacking so the entire complex was quickly taken over. When the job was done, Falk drew Tor to one side and took off his helmet.

"That feels much better," Falk said with a smile as Tor removed his own helmet. "Now that we've taken over the government the real job

can be started on, but that's for tomorrow and the days after. It's also for the rest of us, since you have a job of your own to see to. You do remember that you'll be taking my niece home and helping to free her father?"

"Yes, that's right," Tor said with a frown, only now remembering he'd been told about this before. "Did you want us to leave right away, or wait a short while until we're certain there won't be any more resistance?"

"There's going to be a certain amount of resistance everywhere until we can replace planetary appointees with our own people," Falk answered. "Our fleet is large enough that we ought to be able to do that all at once, before anyone really understands what's happened here. I'll be sending the Raven along with your Hawk to my niece's planet, so you'll have backup just the way everyone else will. And there's one more point... "

"Yes?" Tor said, wondering why Falk looked so odd. The man seemed almost diffident...

"Tor, I'd like you to take over as governor of my home world," Falk said, and even through the instant shock Tor felt he thought that this wasn't what had made Falk hesitant. "I know how much you've been yearning for a normal life, and being a planetary governor just might suit you. You'd keep Hawk as your personal transportation, of course, and if you decide you don't like being a governor after all we'll find you something else to do once a replacement is arranged. Are you willing to agree to that?"

"Willing? Yes, of course I'm willing." Tor was so stunned that he could barely get the words out, but he wasn't about to just stand here like an idiot while the chance of a lifetime went by. "I think you know I'll do my best, but if my best isn't good enough I'll step aside for someone else. You have my word on that."

"I expected nothing less," Falk said with a smile as he gently clapped Tor on the shoulder. "And as soon as everything settles down, you and my niece can be married."

This time the world seemed to stop dead for Tor, all the rest of what he'd been told instantly taking a back seat to this new arrangement. It took a moment for Tor to notice that Falk studied him carefully, but then he shook his head.

"I . . . don't think that part of it will work out," Tor said, groping for the proper words. "There are things you don't know about, Falk, and even beyond that there's your brother. If he has to approve your niece's husband, I seriously doubt if I'm someone he'll approve of."

"But he's already given you his approval," Falk countered, his words gentle rather than argumentative. "I sent a copy of your gene mapping to him as soon as I had it myself, and he agreed that you were the perfect choice for Chayara. Your strengths compliment hers as well as reinforce certain talents, and I'm of the opinion that her luck agrees with the choice. If it didn't, it would never have been your ship that she stowed away on."

Falk was clearly waiting for Tor to say something else, but Tor was too busy fighting the urge to let his jaw hit the floor to be capable of words. With everything else that had happened and been discussed, his mind whirled around and around with the thought that he no longer had to keep his hands off the girl. If she was going to be his wife. . . . But there was still the matter of what was bothering the girl, and Tor knew he had to get to the bottom of the problem before he could relax.

"As I said, there are things involving Chayara and me that you don't know about," Tor finally managed to get out. "If she and I can get the problems worked out on the trip back to her world, I'll be delighted to marry her. But I won't take an unwilling bride even if everyone else around us is willing."

"That's fair enough," Falk agreed, his smile wide and no longer full of anxiety as he clapped Tor's shoulder again. "Let's just make sure our people have everything well in hand here, and then you and your people and the Raven's crew can leave."

It was another couple of hours before the dust settled and food and drink were made available for Tor's group, courtesy of some of Falk's people. It had been a lot of hours since Tor and his group had had anything to eat or drink, longer than any of the others had had to do without, so none of them was shy about accepting the courtesy. Finally, though, Tor was able to take his people back to their ship.

The girl - no, Chayara; he didn't have to distance himself from her any longer - hadn't made any real attempt to avoid him, but she hadn't gone out of her way to be near him either. Once on board the Hawk she disappeared, probably to go back to her cabin. Tor went to his own cabin to get out of his body armor, shower and change clothes, and pass on a few orders. He put Lanni in charge of coordinating with the Raven and getting them off Utopia and on their way, and then he went looking for the woman he'd been told was meant to be his. Tor rang at her cabin door, firmly refusing to let himself think that he might have imagined Falk's approval of him as a nephew-in-law, ready when the door was abruptly opened.

"We'll be taking off for your home world in just a little while, so we have to talk," Tor said to a Chayara who looked like she was about to close the door in his face. "Rather than asking you to come to my cabin, I've come to yours."

"That was very generous of you, Captain," she said after a brief hesitation, then stepped aside to let him walk in. "I'll appreciate it, though, if you ask whatever questions you have as quickly as possible and then leave. I'm tired and I'd like to get some rest."

By then Tor was inside with the door closed behind him, so he turned to look at Chayara. She was a tall girl with lovely blue eyes and long

blond hair that looked better when it was loose, and even with no expression on her face she was pretty. Whatever had been bothering her still seemed to be doing a job on her, so Tor didn't try to beat around the bush.

"My first question might also be the last," Tor said, very aware of the way she'd turned from him and now stood staring at a wall as far away as the cabin allowed her to be. "You seem really . . . unhappy, and I'd like to know if I have anything to do with your feeling like that. If so, I want to talk about it."

"Your involvement is only tangential, Captain," she answered with the same kind of hesitation she'd shown before allowing him to come inside. "You may have been the one to show me what a failure I am, but my being a failure is no one's fault but mine. I doubt if anyone is ever thrilled with the idea of being useless, so you now know the source of my unhappiness. If that's all there is - "

"No, wait, that's not all," Tor interrupted, confusion giving him the urge to shake his head hard. "How can you say that I showed you what a failure you are when I don't remember doing any such thing? All I can remember is how well you did during our part of the attack. If that's your idea of being a failure I'd hate to think what your criteria for success might be."

"What I did during the attack was nothing more than my luck and training," she said, shaking her head to dismiss his contention without turning around. "What I'm talking about is what happened here, on the ship, between the two of us. I tried to do my best at being a slut, but nothing worked the way it should have. That proves what a failure I am, and now I have to live with the knowledge that I'll never even be decent as a slut, never mind superior. I can't blame you for the eagerness you showed in getting me out of your life, and now I'd like to be alone."

Tor just stood and stared at the girl, distantly wondering if one shock

after another eventually made you immune to being shocked. He had a feeling he'd better hope that was true, or else get used to standing around with his mouth hanging open.

"Listen to me, Chayara, you've got it all wrong," Tor finally managed to say. "I wasn't ... 'eager to get you out of my life,' I was trying to behave properly with someone who wasn't just a passing stranger. When I saw you lying naked on my bunk I wanted nothing more than to join you there, but at the time you - were part of my crew, that's it, you were part of my crew. It's a firm rule of mine that I don't mess around with my female crew members, so seeing you like that got me angry. I should have realized that you might not know the rule, but sometimes anger doesn't let you think clearly. But you're not a member of my crew any longer."

Tor had almost blurted out that Chayara had been forbidden to him then but no longer was, but he'd realized just in time that that was the worst thing he could say. If she found out now about the proposed marriage, she'd think he was showing interest only because she was Falk's niece. He had to bring her out of her dark mood first, at the same time hopefully doing something about that "slut" business. He still didn't really understand what she was talking about there, but for the moment he should be able to just slide past the point...

"If that comment about me not being part of your crew any longer is supposed to make me feel better, I appreciate the effort," Chayara said after another of those hesitations, still not turning back to him. "You seem to be hinting that you find me attractive, but you really don't have to bother with being kind. I'll be out from under foot soon, so - "

"I'm not just trying to be kind," Tor interrupted as he moved toward her to put his hands gently on her shoulders. "I do find you attractive, just as I did when I first took you to my bed. I had no idea who you were at the time, and from my point of view that was a good thing. If I'd known I didn't have an ordinary stowaway in my cabin I wouldn't have been able to enjoy myself so much."

Tor let his hands caress down her arms as he spoke, and then he used one of those hands to move her hair aside so he could kiss her neck. She'd all but flinched when he'd first touched her, but now the stiffness of her posture seemed to be melting some. He let his lips enjoy touching her skin for a minute or so, and then he turned her to face him. He saw at once that her eyes were closed, and that was just the response he'd wanted.

So he briefly touched her lips with his before picking her up in his arms and carrying her to the bunk. She clutched at him when he lifted her off the floor, but she made no effort to open her eyes. Once he put her down he began to undress her, kissing and caressing as he went. Her shirt came off first and then her bra, and her nipples were already hard even before he began to kiss and lick them. She made no effort to stop whatever he happened to be doing to her, and by the time the rest of her clothing was gone her body had begun to move in the way that said she was becoming very much aroused.

But Tor wanted her to be more than just a little aroused, so he got rid of his own clothing while he continued to kiss and lick her body. He could tell that she'd showered after getting back to the cabin, the clean, faint smell of soap adding to his own arousal. When he parted her thighs and used his lips and tongue on her most intimate softness she cried out, then spent her time moaning as she clutched the blanket under her with both hands. She still hadn't touched him in any way and that was disappointing, but then he remembered she was practically still a virgin. She didn't know what she was expected to do, but she would learn.

Chayara was whimpering by the time Tor moved over her. The moisture flowing out of her said there would be no pain when he entered her, and there didn't seem to be. Her body had welcomed his when he carefully thrust inside her, and then he gathered her in his arms and began to stroke her slowly. Her hands clutched at his arms as she mewled and writhed, silently urging him on, and that was all the

encouragement Tor needed. He lost himself to pleasure then, but knew well enough that Chayara was feeling the same.

It took a while before Tor could no longer hold off climax, and by then Chayara was all but limp under him. Her body had exploded again and again, so when he moved himself to lie beside her he didn't have to wonder if she'd enjoyed herself. The bunk was larger than average but still smaller than his own, which meant he had to lie on his side while he gulped in air. It was only a minute or so before he had his breathing under control again, so he reached out to stroke the soft and beautiful body of the woman who had given him so much pleasure. Started to reach out -

But stopped when he saw the tears streaming down Chayara's face. Her eyes were closed again, just as they'd been so much of the time, and rather than looking satisfied she looked miserable. Tor wanted to gather her into his arms and hold her close, but first he had to find out what was bothering her now.

"Chayara, what's wrong?" he asked, finding it impossible not to stroke her face. "Didn't you enjoy that as much as I did?"

"Yes, I did enjoy it, and that's just the trouble," she answered in a whisper after what was becoming her usual hesitation. "I've just had it proven to me again what a slut I am, and it isn't possible to forget that I'm a failure at being a slut. I didn't know it was possible to hate yourself this much, but I'm certainly learning."

Tor's first urge was to explain that Chayara's reactions to him were completely natural and had nothing to do with whether or not she was a slut, but he closed his mouth again without speaking the words. He'd told her the truth about the Green Glow and she hadn't believed him, so there was no reason to expect that she'd believe him now. It was ludicrous to think that lying to his future wife might make her feel better, but if she refused to hear the truth there was no other option. And Tor had just gotten a crazy idea, one that would hopefully make Chayara a

lot more willing to listen to reason.

"Now, see, that's where you're completely wrong," Tor said, fighting to keep his tone light. "You're not a failure at being a slut, you're just inexperienced. It takes a lot of practice and hard work before a girl can claim to be a successful slut, so hating yourself just because you don't have that experience is foolish."

"But ... how am I supposed to get that experience?" she asked after a shorter hesitation, actually opening her eyes to look at him. "I tried to get some of the crew to come to my bed, but they all ran away. That was supposedly because they know who my uncle is, but it was probably because they knew what a failure I am. You need experience to stop being a failure, but when you're a failure you can't get that experience. Obviously I'm trapped, so - "

"No, you're not trapped at all," Tor interrupted, flatly refusing to let himself get wild over what she'd said. Only a complete innocent would have admitted that she'd tried to get who-knows how many crewmen into her bed, and she hadn't just admitted the fact. She'd told it to the man currently in her bed, a man who'd said he was interested in her, so maybe his crazy plan would turn out to be the best idea after all...

"You aren't trapped because what you need to gain your experience is proper training," Tor went on. "Not everyone can supply that training, but it so happens that I can. If you really want me to. Slut training isn't easy, and more girls drop out of the training than stay to finish it. If you do drop out, you're just proving you're not a slut after all."

"But since I know I am a slut, I have to be able to finish the training," Chayara said, tears no longer running down her face. "What kind of thing is involved in the training?"

"You'll have to wait to get the details, but one thing I can tell you," Tor responded, careful to look soberly serious. "If at any point your efforts don't please me, I won't hesitate to punish you. Refusing the punishment

will be like refusing the training, so you'd better decide right now if you really do want to start. Not starting will be the same as dropping out, which means you'll never mention being a slut again - or try to act like one."

"But I am a slut, so I have to take the training," she said, finally sitting up and turning to look at him more fully. "Do you want to start right now?"

"No, I'll have to make some preparations first," Tor said, making sure none of his amusement showed through. "And we'll also move you to my cabin, where we'll have a bit more room - and privacy. The training is intense, and during the training you probably won't want anyone to see you."

Chayara nodded before beginning to get out of bed to reclaim her clothing, but Tor just lay where he was as he watched her. The next couple of days ought to be more than a little interesting and possibly some fun, but only for him. Chayara wasn't likely to enjoy any part of the time, and as soon as she dropped out of the "training" he'd be able to tell her about her mistaken assumptions. She'd be more than ready to listen to him by then, and afterward they could start to enjoy each other the way engaged couples were supposed to.

But until then...

Chapter Seven

It didn't take Chayara long to get her few possessions together, and then she just sat down to wait for Rego to come back for her. He had those "preparations" to make, he'd said, and then he'd be able to move her into his cabin.

Back into his cabin. When Chayara thought those words she felt a tingle inside her, another sure sign that she was a slut. She should have

hated the idea of moving back in with Rego, just as she should have hated what he'd so recently done to her. But she hadn't hated the sex with him, she'd loved it, and that told the whole story. While growing up she'd been told more than once that nice girls didn't spend their time thinking about men and sex, only sluts did. Back then she hadn't known she was a slut, of course, especially when she'd found no interest in any of the boys and then men around her.

But she'd found Rego incredibly attractive almost from the beginning, which had certainly helped to bring out the sluttiness in her. At first it was surprising that her uncle Leron hadn't seen it on her, but her uncle didn't really know her that well. Her parents and brothers and sister did know her, though, and they were certain to understand just what she'd become as soon as they saw her. Which meant that as soon as her father was free she would have to disappear, to keep the truth from hurting the people she loved.

"But at least I'll be trained by then," she murmured, pushing away the urge to start crying again. "The training will help me to get experience, and once I'm experienced I should at least be adequate as a slut. I'd like to think I'll be superior, but I know now that I'm not superior at everything..."

And that was a truth that had been a really hard blow. Chayara had always been smart and capable, always able to do easily what others had to struggle to even begin to accomplish. That ability had fooled her into thinking she would be superior at everything in life, but now -

"Come in," she said to the ringing at her door, and that door opened to show that Rego had returned.

"Okay, we can get you moved in now," Rego said, just standing in the doorway. "I've put together everything I'll need, and we'll start your training right after dinner. We'll spend the time until then getting to know each other a little better."

"Will the training be more effective if we know each other better?" Chayara asked as she picked up her pack and stood. "Is that why we're waiting to get started?"

"Knowing you better will help the training, but that's not why I want to spend time with you," Rego said, stepping back to let Chayara walk out of the cabin. "I happen to be interested in you as a person, and I'd like to find out more about the person you are. Don't you care anything about what kind of person I am?"

Chayara was about to deny any curiosity, but then she realized she would be lying if she said that.

"Well, I guess I do want to know a little about you," she grudgingly, looking up at him where he walked beside her. "Did you always want to be a pirate, or was that a choice that came later in life?"

"Being a pirate wasn't a choice, it was a necessity," Rego answered, his faint smile showing a touch of bitterness. "I grew up expecting to do all kinds of wonderful things in life, the way I breezed through school work making me certain I wasn't wrong. But the way I breezed through school work also made some people jealous, and one day three other boys decided to 'teach me a lesson in humility.' They put on masks and then attacked me, expecting to beat me to pulp and then run away."

"But it didn't happen like that," Chayara said, knowing that for a fact as she continued to watch his face. "What did happen?"

"What happened was that I did the pulping," he answered, his expression now carefully neutral. "There may have been three of them, but none of them had the first idea about how to fight. No one had taught me to fight either and I didn't understand at the time why I was able to do such a better job at it, but that didn't seem to matter. I beat up all three of them and pulled their masks off, and then the police came. I explained that I'd been attacked and the police believed me because there were witnesses - but I was arrested with the three

anyway."

"Because fighting of any and all kind is against the law," Chayara said with a sigh. "Didn't the judge accept your apology when you went to trial?"

"I didn't apologize, I asked a question," Rego said, his gaze off in the distance the way it had been for a couple of minutes. "I asked how it could possibly be against the law to defend myself. I wasn't the one who had started the fight, after all, so how could it be wrong to keep myself from getting hurt? The judge went into a long lecture about how all violence was wrong, and if I'd been raised properly I would have run away from the attackers instead of trying to defend myself.

"He also gave my parents a long list of what they had to do to punish me for breaking the law, and my parents were so embarrassed they refused to talk to me or even look at me. When we got home they stripped my room of everything including the furniture and replaced it all with a lumpy cot. I wasn't to be allowed anything in the room but my school books, and my parents' attitude made it clear that even they weren't happy about my not having gotten beaten up. If I'd ended up in the hospital or dead I would have had everyone's sympathy, but being perfectly all right just wasn't acceptable."

By now Chayara was sorry she'd asked the question, but changing the subject wasn't an option.

"I spent one sleepless night on that cot, hearing again and again what my father had said before he walked out of the room and closed the door," Rego continued. "My father told me he doubted he would ever be proud of me again, but he still expected me to work on the apology I was expected to give the judge the next time I was called into court. The apology would do nothing to stop the punishment, mind, but I would still be required to show remorse for the terrible thing I'd done.

"Two hours before dawn I packed one change of clothes and some

toiletries and left the house, stopping only to withdraw the money I'd been saving for college. I'd always found jobs to do that paid me rather well, so I had a tidy sum saved. Neither my parents nor the court had frozen the account because running away from home was unthinkable to them. I did some stowing away of my own until I reached a station far enough away from home that I could pay for passage to Moradan station without anyone being on the lookout for me. That was where I met your uncle, and he adopted me just about on the spot. I spent four years learning and working on board various ships, and then I was given the Hawk to command. I've had the Hawk almost two years, and that brings us to now."

"It certainly does," Chayara said with a sigh, stopping with him outside his cabin but no longer looking directly at him. "I was attacked once too, but I'd been taught how to handle the matter to keep from being arrested. I pretended to be hysterical and let the hysteria make me 'strike out blindly,' but I knew exactly what I was doing even though reaching my attacker looked like nothing but luck. When the police came I was huddled against a wall with my arms over my head, and the first touch to my arm sent me back into 'hysterics.' That told everyone I wasn't responsible for what I'd done, which was break up the fool who'd tried to attack me. But girls can get away with things like that when men can't, I think. You probably wouldn't have done the same even if you'd known."

"No, you're right, I wouldn't have done the same," he answered, and a glance showed that he was actually smiling. "Let's get your things put away in my cabin, and then we can talk some more."

Chayara followed him into the cabin, then put her possessions into the empty drawer he showed her. Since that took no more than about a minute, they next went to the ship's dining room - mess hall, it was called - and sat at a table and talked over cups of coffee. There were only a couple of other people in the room, none of them close by, so their privacy wasn't interrupted.

By the time they got hungry enough to eat, Chayara had learned a bit more about Rego and had shared a couple of her own experiences. The man seemed to be yearning for what most people considered a normal life, a life where he was a productive member of society and wasn't constantly running away from the law. As soon as he settled into that life he would certainly find her presence embarrassing, which meant it was a lucky thing she had no intentions of staying with him. Sluts weren't a welcome presence in normal lives, a fact she didn't need to be told.

But he was going to make an effort to train her, a decision that confused her at first. Then it came to her that Rego was feeling gratitude to her uncle and to her for helping to bring down the old government. He'd been able to see that she was floundering on her own, and that was probably why he'd agreed to help. He was a very attractive man, both physically and on the inside, and the slutty part of Chayara made her very aware of him where he sat next to her. But that was as far as she meant to allow herself to go with the man. She'd never be able to share his dream of a normal life, so there was no sense in wishing she could.

Finishing the food she'd been served became something of a chore for Chayara, but she gritted her mental teeth and did her best. The effort seemed to be enough, though, because Rego made no comment about the small amount of leftovers on her plate. He joined her in having one last cup of coffee, and then it was time for them to go back to his cabin.

"Okay, it's after dinner and now we can start your training," Rego said after closing his cabin door behind the two of them. "Thinking about how you acted the last time you came to my cabin made me understand more clearly that you don't know the little things a slut is expected to do. I borrowed the Dreamer and another dream cartridge for you to start with, and this time I want you to pay close attention to what the girl does and how she does it. That includes the way she moves her body, what she does with her hands, and even what expressions she shows. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try my best," Chayara answered, silently sneering at herself for being disappointed that Rego wasn't going to take her to bed right away. The disappointment showed just how big a slut she really was, as if she'd needed any more proof...

"Good," Rego said with a smile, and then he gestured to his bed. "If you'll lie down on my bunk I'll get the Dreamer."

Chayara went to the bed and lay down as she'd been asked to do, and a moment later Rego was there with the Dreamer. He fitted it to her head as he'd done the last time, and then -

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Nikki Egan smiled to herself as she strolled toward Mr. Harden's office. A week ago she'd made the mistake of letting herself be sent to Mr. Harden in the middle of the day, a mistake she'd more than paid for when he'd sent her back to her classes. The strapping he'd given her had turned her entire bottom very tender and aching, and the old hag of a teacher who had sent her to be punished had made her stand in a corner while every girl in the room snickered or laughed outright.

But there had only been a few minutes left to that class, and Nikki hadn't known how lucky she'd been to be put in a corner until her next teacher made her sit at her usual desk. She'd almost howled when the hard wooden seat came in contact with her tender bottom, and she'd instantly jumped to her feet again.

"No, Ms. Egan, you won't be permitted to spend your time in this class standing up," Ms. Lansing, her teacher, had said while the other girls laughed at Nikki again. "Your behavior in my class has never been so perfect - or even ordinarily acceptable - that you deserve consideration now. If you don't take your seat as the other girls have done, I'll have to send you back to Mr. Harden for another session of discipline. After which, of course, you'll be sent back here where you'll have to sit down

anyway. Do you really want that?"

Nikki wouldn't have minded having more sex with Mr. Harden, but the thought of his using that strap on her again after the first session was one she couldn't bear. So she'd had to force herself to sit down, and even sitting as gingerly as possible hadn't helped. It was all she'd been able to do to keep herself from making small sounds to show how much it hurt to sit on that wooden seat, but somehow she'd managed. And she'd forced herself not to think about the incredible sex she'd had with Mr. Harden to keep herself from squirming. Squirming made sitting hurt even more...

But that had been a week ago, and this time she'd been careful not to do anything to get herself sent to Mr. Harden until the school day was almost over. She'd spent most of the week dreaming about the best sex she'd ever had, and now she was ready to have the same again. Without needing to worry about going back to class afterwards...

No one else waited on the bench outside Mr. Harden's office, so Nikki sat down with her impatience hopefully well concealed. If anyone came by she didn't want them to know that she couldn't wait to be called into Mr. Harden's office, or those prigs would probably find a different way to punish her. That was another reason she'd waited a week, talking herself into understanding that waiting a short while was better than having nothing to look forward to. As long as they all thought it really was punishment she was being given, no one would look for something else to do.

Just before the wait became totally unbearable, the door to the office opened and Mr. Harden stepped out. He looked somewhat surprised to see Nikki, and then he shook his head.

"I was hoping you'd learned your lesson last week, Nikki, but it looks like you didn't," Mr. Harden said as she stood up. "Most girls try to avoid a second session with me, but some are harder to reach than others. Let's see what we can do to make you uninterested in a third

session."

"I have a better idea," Nikki murmured as she walked past him into the office, touching him intimately again as she passed. "Why don't we see what we can do to make you unbend a little. You were wonderful last week, at the end there, at least, so let's forget about the first part and go directly to the second."

Nikki had been walking in a way that's usually described as an open invitation, keeping her arms back so Mr. Harden would have no trouble seeing her body under the uniform. She also smiled while he closed the door, then went back to him and pressed her body against his.

"Put your arms around me, Mr. Harden," she murmured as she leaned up in an effort to reach his lips. With her body right against his she could tell that he was already interested, and she wanted to run her hands through that long, dark red hair. "Since I don't have to go back to class, we can spend as much time together as we please."

"I can see that you are being a little more careful than you were last week," Mr. Harden answered, looking down at her with those gorgeous gray eyes but not putting his arms around her and not letting her kiss him. "Or at least you think you're being more careful. Let's see if we can't teach you something about the best laid plans."

Nikki didn't like that response, and she liked it even less when he pulled her arms off him where she held him around the waist and began to drag her along with him.

"Why can't you be reasonable and just let us enjoy each other?" she demanded as he took her toward one of the office's closed doors. "What have you got against having fun?"

"I haven't got anything against having fun," the man said as he opened the door and pulled her through the doorway. "I just prefer to have fun

my way rather than someone else's. You'll let me know if you enjoy the time as much as I do, won't you?"

Rather than answer, Nikki looked around at where she'd been taken. The room was a fairly large bathroom, and there was another door in the wall opposite the one they'd come through. Mr. Harden stopped to lock the door they'd come through and then put the key, which had been in the lock, into his pocket. He obviously wanted privacy, which immediately made Nikki feel better. It looked like he wasn't going to be stuffy after all.

"Would you like me to take my clothes off now, or would you rather take them off?" Nikki asked in as sultry a voice as she could manage as she watched Mr. Harden walk to the sink. "Some men just want the clothes gone, and others want to do the undressing themselves. And then, of course, there are those who don't care whether you're dressed or not. I had the feeling you might be one of that kind."

"Actually, I'm a different kind altogether," Mr. Harden said as he messed around at the sink while running the water. "A combination man, you might say, so don't do anything at all with your clothes. When I'm ready I'll take care of the necessary."

"Why are you getting ready at the sink instead of finding us a bed to use?" Nikki asked, finally wondering what he could be doing. "I really don't understand how a man as gorgeous as you can be so strange. Any other man in your place would be all over me by now - "

Nikki's words broke off when Mr. Harden turned away from the sink, letting her see what he'd been messing with. She gaped at what could only be a smaller version of standard enema paraphernalia, and then she broke and ran for the door. She pulled frantically at the doorknob three or four times before she remembered that the door had been locked, and by then it was too late to try the other door. Mr. Harden had followed her and now took her by the arm again.

"Don't worry, Nikki, I intend to be all over you, just not in the way you expected," Mr. Harden said as he dragged her back toward the sink.

"During the school day I don't have time to use this particular procedure, but as you pointed out the school day is now over. That means I can take as much time with you as I like."

Nikki yelled and struggled as hard as she could, but that didn't keep her from being dragged to the commode where it stood next to the sink. Mr. Harden sat down on the closed commode seat and pulled her across his lap, and the next thing she knew her skirt was pulled up and her panties were being pulled down. Knowing she would be visiting Mr. Harden she'd put on her prettiest black satin panties, but he pulled them down to her knees as if they were nothing but plain white cotton.

"I don't know if you've ever had an enema before, but if you have you'll find this time different," Mr. Harden said, ignoring her yelling and struggles. "You were sent to me to be punished, not to be cleaned out, so we'll emphasize the first of that rather than the second."

Nikki had no idea what he was talking about, but before she could ask a screech was forced out of her when the end of the apparatus was inserted between her nether cheeks. An instant later there was warm water being forced into her bottom, and that made her screech even louder. If someone came in to see what was being done to her she would have been horribly embarrassed, but she still would have used the opportunity to escape. Only no one came or even knocked on the door, and then that thing was withdrawn from her bottom - only to be replaced with something else!

"No, now, the cork isn't going to be coming out of you yet," Mr. Harden said when she fought to reach the thing he'd put in her bottom and take it out again. "Just how quickly the cork is removed depends on you, meaning, of course, on your behavior. You'll be allowed to stand up again in another minute or two, but first you need to be given another part of your punishment."

Nikki was too frantic over the way she was already beginning to feel the presence of the warm water inside her - not to mention the cork in her bottom - to know what the man was talking about. But a moment later she didn't have to wonder any longer. Something hit her bottom hard enough to make her howl and jump, and Mr. Harden chuckled.

"This wooden ruler is more thin and flexible than thick, but it usually does the job," he said as another hard stroke reached Nikki's seat. "You won't be getting the whole spanking right now, just part of it, and you'll find out why in a little while."

All Nikki could do was howl every time the ruler struck her bottom, but after the seventh or eighth stroke the spanking stopped. Nikki's seat hurt, of course, but not nearly as badly as it had the first time Mr. Harden had spanked her, and a moment later he'd pulled her panties back up and her skirt back down and then put her on her feet.

"No, you won't be touching yourself in any way, so stop trying to pull away from me," Mr. Harden said as he stood, keeping her from freeing her wrists from his hands. "We'll be going on to the next phase of your punishment, but if you don't stop behaving badly you'll get more of a taste of the ruler before we do move on. Do you want more of a spanking right now? Whatever else you get now will be an addition to what's waiting for you, not just an advance payment."

"No, I don't want more now," Nikki forced herself to say as she also forced herself to stop fighting. "But you don't understand how terrible I feel! That water, and that cork, not to mention how my bottom aches! Please, Mr. Harden, please let me - "

"No, Nikki, no matter what it is you want to do, you won't be doing it," Mr. Harden interrupted before Nikki could finish begging. "The cork will stay in you until you ask properly to have it removed, and until then there's a place for you to wait. Right this way."

He took her arm and headed for the second door out of the bathroom,

and Nikki made small squeaking noises from being made to walk. She felt absolutely horrible, but it was perfectly clear that the miserable man wasn't yet through with her.

The second door led into a large bedroom, obviously what was his bedroom. A double bed stood against the wall to the left with a small desk straight ahead, but that was all Nikki had a chance to see. She was taken to the right by the hand on her arm, where a wooden stool stood in front of the wall.

"This is where you'll spend your waiting time," Mr. Harden said, gesturing to the stool. "You're to look nowhere but the wall straight ahead of you, and you're not to speak until you're ready to say what I want to hear."

The stool looked terrible enough, but Mr. Harden quickly made the situation even worse. He reached around to pull up Nikki's skirt again, yanked down her panties, then lifted her onto the stool after making sure her skirt was out of the way. She would be sitting on her bare bottom on the stool, and there weren't even any rungs she could put her feet against to help ease the position!

Nikki was too busy gasping and mewling to say anything at all, not to mention ask questions. Sitting on the hard stool didn't hurt as much as sitting at her desk had the week before, but the wooden seat against her bottom made her remember every stroke of that hard ruler. And sitting like that made sure the cork between her nether cheeks would have no chance to come out...

"I'm sure you're wondering what I'll be waiting to hear, so I'll tell you," Mr. Harden said as Nikki fought not to squirm where she sat. "You were a very naughty girl today, so I'll be waiting to hear you admit that and ask me to give you a really hard spanking in punishment. The cork won't come out of you until you've had that spanking, or at least it had better not. If the cork does come out you'll find more and hotter water being put into you after your wrists are tied, and then you'll be made to

wait a length of time I decide is proper after you're given a larger taste of the ruler. I'm a very patient man, so you really don't want to wait anything like that long."

Nikki was totally appalled, shock keeping her quiet so long that Mr. Harden moved away from her. She could hear him walking to that desk and sitting down behind it, but she didn't dare turn to see him do it. She was supposed to ask to be spanked because she'd been naughty? Just as if she were a small child instead of a grown woman? She couldn't do that, she just couldn't, and not only because she didn't want to be spanked again. The humiliation would be killing awful. . .

But it didn't take very long before the true state of affairs forced itself through to Nikki's attention. The water put into Nikki was doing its work, and slowly but surely the need to relieve herself increased. The squirming she'd managed to stop started again, and this time she couldn't make it stop. She needed to use the bathroom very badly, and there was nothing on the plain, blank wall in front of her to distract her from the need. She had to go, but before she could she'd have to -

Trying to tough it out proved to be another bad idea. The longer Nikki waited the worse she felt, but how could she ask to be spanked? Her bottom still hurt from the few strokes she'd already been given, but -

"Please, Mr. Harden, I was very naughty today," Nikki suddenly found herself saying desperately. "I've earned a good spanking, and I'd like you to give it to me now."

"And I certainly will, Nikki, as soon as I finish what I'm doing," Mr. Harden answered, words that widened Nikki's eyes. "Just be patient and I'll be right with you."

Nikki couldn't believe that she'd have to wait even longer, but the point was quickly proven. Her squirming had increased to the point where the stool began to squeak in protest before Mr. Harden appeared beside her, and then she was lifted down from the stool. It was then she

noticed that Mr. Harden had brought a chair with him, and a moment later he was seated in the chair with Nikki draped over his lap again.

"Being a naughty girl isn't the fun some people think it is," Mr. Harden said as he raised Nikki's skirt again. "It's actually no fun at all for the girl, a truth some girls take a while to learn. If you don't get the message this time, I'll have to get really creative when you're sent to my office again."

Nikki found it impossible to make herself ask what he meant by "really creative," and then all extraneous thoughts were gone with the first stroke of that ruler. The stroke hurt more this time because Nikki's bottom was starting out tender, but howling and yowling and screaming and kicking did nothing to stop the spanking. Each stroke reached her seat as hard as or harder than the last, again and again and again until the tears ran down Nikki's face in a stream. She also had no choice about the kicking even though she would have preferred to stay absolutely still, the water inside her making the preference more of a need. But she couldn't hold still, and that increased the need to the point of near insanity.

At first Nikki didn't know it when the spanking was over. Her bottom hurt so much she thought she would never stop crying, and then she was suddenly back on her feet. Her panties were still down and just above her knees, but she was made to walk like that all the way to the bathroom with a big hand on her arm making it happen. Walking was horrible for more than one reason, and then her arm was let go.

"I'll leave you to relieve yourself in privacy," Mr. Harden said above her sobbing. "You still have a small lecture coming, so when you're through come back into the next room."

Nikki was already in the midst of opening the commode seat and raising her skirt so she could crouch over the device before removing that cork. Once she did remove the cork everything came out of her in a stream, bringing relief that was exquisite in spite of her not being able

to sit down on the seat. An unmeasured time passed like that before Nikki was able to think about anything else, and then there was only one thing for her to think about.

Mr. Harden wanted her to come back into his bedroom, supposedly for a lecture. But was lecturing her all he meant to do? Her body was now desperate for a different kind of relief, but she didn't know if she would get it. She would have to go back into that room not knowing, and that was the worst punishment yet. Would he give her the sex she needed? Would he...?

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When Tor saw that the dream was over, he gently removed the Dreamer from Chayara's head while she lay with her eyes closed. He'd found out too late that he'd used the wrong dream the first time, but this time he'd hopefully done better. He needed to show the girl that there was every reason not to be a slut, and then she might actually listen to reason. He didn't really want to do to her the kind of things that had been done in the dream, but he couldn't refuse to give her whatever kind of help she required to come back to reality. Simply making love to her would be his first choice, but he couldn't do that if she kept taking the lovemaking in the wrong way.

So his only question now was, what would be her reaction when she came out of the dream? Would she be ready to hear the truth, or would she still need some convincing...?

CHAPTER 8

Chayara lay with her eyes closed, still held by the remnants of the Dream. The experience had been almost unbelievable, combining as it did extreme discomfort, the pain of punishment, and desire. The discomfort and pain had faded away to nothing but a memory, but the desire was still with her at least as strongly as in the Dream. She wanted Mr. Harden - Rego - even more now, and since there no longer seemed to be something keeping him away from her there

should be no reason she couldn't have him.

"That was ... different," Chayara finally managed to say as she opened her eyes to see Rego where he stood, and then she smiled and put her arms up to him. "Why don't you come closer and I'll show you how I feel about it."

"Now that your training has started, it doesn't matter how you feel about things," Rego said, his expression almost grim as he made no effort to accept her suggestion. "Stand up and get out of your clothes."

Chayara tried not to hesitate before doing as he'd said, but she'd learned there was a big difference between being naked with a man and being naked in front of him while he was still dressed. But then it occurred to her that seeing her naked might encourage Rego to do the same himself, so she got up from the bed and kicked her shoes off while opening her shirt, and once she'd dropped the shirt and removed her bra she quickly got rid of her pants.

"Good," Rego said in much too clinical a way once she stood naked in front of him. "Now show me how you've learned to walk."

It took a moment for Chayara to bring back memory of the way Nikki had moved, but then she had it. She used Nikki's gliding stroll to take her a few feet beyond Rego, turned, then strolled back to him.

"How was that?" she asked, letting her right hand touch him intimately in the same way Nikki had touched Mr. Harden. "Did I do it right?"

"Not quite," Rego answered dryly, taking her wrist and moving her hand away from him. "All I told you to do was walk, so I'm going to take that touch you gave me as a mistake. And if you'll remember, I told you that mistakes would be punished."

And with that he put his hand to the place between her thighs, touching her as intimately as she'd touched him. Chayara gasped and

immediately stepped back from the touch that made her feel even worse than she'd been feeling, and Rego's expression turned harder just as quickly.

"Are you refusing punishment?" he asked, making no effort to come after her. "If you are, then the training is over."

"No, I'm sorry, I acted without thinking," Chayara said at once. She didn't want to be touched like that, not when she had no idea when she'd be given relief, but she also knew she had to have whatever training Rego could give her.

"Then come back here," Rego said, not the least sign of compassion in those gray eyes. "Moving away was a second mistake, so your punishment will have to be doubled."

Chayara moaned on the inside before moving back to where she'd been, but as soon as Rego's hand returned to its former place between her thighs she had to fight to keep from moaning on the outside. Rather than give her pain he stroked her gently and teasingly, and although she squirmed where she stood she had to accept without protest everything she was being given. After no more than a minute she was desperate to either move away again or throw herself on the man, but she wasn't allowed to do either thing.

"One of the first rules you want to learn is that as a slut your desires and feelings mean nothing," Rego murmured as he continued to stroke her female softness. "The major aim of your life is to attract a man to your bed, so you have to be willing to do anything to achieve that aim. It's the man's desires and feelings you have to concern yourself with, always putting them ahead of your own."

When Rego stopped touching her, Chayara nodded unsteadily to show she'd heard what he'd said. Speaking was beyond her at the moment, but she learned that gasping wasn't also excluded. When his hand returned to the same place between her thighs she couldn't hold back

the gasp, but all Rego did was smile.

"That was just the first punishment, and now you get the second," he said, his fingers nearly making her gurgle and choke. "As we continue on, mistakes will be punished more and more harshly. You'd be wise to bear that fact firmly in mind."

Chayara nodded even more spasmodically while she felt as though she were about to melt into a pool of liquid. Her nipples were so tight and hard that the feeling was almost painful, but then she suddenly realized that this particular punishment was about to solve her most urgent problem. Her breathing had increased to panting and a moan did manage to escape her, and she was just on the edge of sliding down that most wonderful of hills when Rego took his hand away for the second time.

All Chayara wanted to do was scream and demand that he not stop now, but somehow she kept the words and reaction on the inside along with the urge toward pitiful tears. He'd told her very clearly that her desires and feelings meant nothing, only his, and if she wanted the training she needed so desperately she had to do everything possible to go along with that rule.

"Now I want you to practice that walk," Rego said, the words somehow making their way through the ... cloud of need surrounding Chayara. "Walk all around the cabin, and keep walking until I tell you to stop."

Chayara nodded again and turned away from him, needing to concentrate to remember how that walk was supposed to be done. Once she had the memory again Chayara began to do as she'd been told, walking to the cabin wall and then turning to walk back. When she turned she saw that Rego had moved to the bed and had stretched himself out on his side as he watched her, those gray eyes apparently paying the closest attention to every move she made. She would have given anything if she could have joined him on the bed, but she wasn't

given permission to do that so she had no choice but to continue walking.

And continue walking, and continue walking. The time dragged on longer and longer as Chayara covered just about every inch of the cabin in her meandering path, and still Rego said nothing about stopping. If those gray eyes hadn't been watching her every move Chayara would have been tempted to think that Rego had fallen asleep, but being stared at like that made the idea impossible. So Chayara just had to keep going, horribly aware of the way she was being looked at with nothing besides looking happening. Was he trying to make her drop from exhaustion...?

"All right, that's enough," Rego said suddenly, the words Chayara had been living for. "I expected you to make the usual amateur's mistake and stop moving properly when you got tired, but you haven't done that. Now we can ... move on to something else."

Now that she knew the reason behind the very long hike she'd been forced to take, Chayara was tempted to tell Rego that he'd behaved foolishly. If there was one thing her previous training had taught her, it was to continue an effort just the way it was started. If you went from clear thinking to sloppy thinking during a project you failed, and Chayara had never liked the idea of failing. Now that she had failed at something she liked the idea even less...

"It's time that you showed me how well you can dance," Rego said from where he lay, startling Chayara. "The dance should be even more of an invitation than your walk was, an invitation to me to do as I like with you. Go ahead and start."

"But ... I've never danced before, not in any way," Chayara protested from where she'd been stopped, about four feet away from the bed. "I have no idea how you're supposed to do something like that."

"You're supposed to move your body slowly and suggestively," Rego

said after a brief hesitation, apparently knowing that Chayara wasn't refusing, only asking for instruction. "You sway a little, moving your feet a small amount... Wait a moment, and I'll find some music for you to dance to."

Rego left the bed to walk to one of the drawers holding his personal possessions, then he went back to lie down again. He now held a palm player, a two inch square that usually contained various music selections, and after a moment of studying the projected list of songs he chose one. The music was an instrumental, something slow and almost dreamy that Chayara didn't recognize, which probably meant it was new rather than a classic. And there was a tone of sorts to the music, one that seemed to call to her to move in a certain way...

But Chayara didn't know what that certain way was supposed to be, so she found herself shifting from foot to foot as if the floor were too hot to stand on. She couldn't quite believe that the movement was sensual and inviting, and after a minute Rego showed that he agreed with her.

"You're not doing it right, which tells me you need more than music for encouragement," Rego said after turning off the song. "Let's see if we can find you that encouragement."

After putting the palm player aside, Rego left the bed again and walked over to a shelf that contained a closed white box. Chayara had seen the box while walking around the cabin and had wondered what might be in it, but even before Rego opened the box Chayara realized that she wasn't curious after all. She suddenly had the definite feeling that she'd be much happier if she never found out about the contents of the white box, but obviously that decision wasn't shared by Rego.

"This should help you to figure out the proper movements," Rego said as he reclosed the box before turning away from it with something in his hand. "Come with me and we'll get it into position."

Into position? Chayara's thoughts asked the question, but her mouth knew better than to do the same. Asking would probably make whatever was done to her much worse, so she kept silent as she followed Rego closer to the bed.

"This will be something of an extension of the first rule I taught you," Rego said as he turned to look at her. "You're required to accept whatever is done to you, without protest and without trying to escape or make it stop. Do you understand that clearly and thoroughly?"

Chayara nodded nervously, knowing better than to trust her voice. Whatever he had in mind, it was perfectly clear that she would not enjoy the effort...

"Good," he said, now sitting down on the end of the bed. "Put yourself face down across my lap."

That wasn't anything like what Chayara wanted to do, but she really had no choice at all. Stretching out over Rego's legs reminded her much too strongly of the time he'd spanked her, but spanking wasn't what he had in mind this time. She heard a sound like a wrapper being opened, and then she had to fight to keep from jumping up off Rego's lap.

"That's right, tensing your muscles makes it much worse for you," Rego soothed while Chayara gasped at what had been put into her bottom. "I couldn't find the kind of equipment you saw in that Dream, but this suppository serves the same purpose as warm water. The cork will make sure you don't have an unpleasant accident, and now you can stand up again."

Chayara tried to move very slowly in getting off Rego's lap, but even so the thing put into her made her want to whimper. The suppository wasn't beginning to work on her yet, but she knew it was only a matter of time. Even so, the insertion along with the cork holding it in her made her arousal incredibly worse.

"Now let's see if your dancing has improved," Rego said, picking up the palm player he'd earlier put down. "Don't try to hold back on the movement your body wants to make, just match it to the beat of the music."

The movement her body wanted to make... Chayara wanted to jump up and down squeaking, but that wasn't what Rego wanted and it was his wants that counted. The music started over, and Chayara had the idea that she might ease the feel of the insertion by moving her body some so she tried it. She ended up moving all of her body, from her shoulders to her knees, trying to make the suppository stop driving her crazy, but nothing worked. And then Chayara realized that her previous thought was wrong. It was the suppository that was starting to work...

"Yes, that's definitely better," Rego said from where he lay stretched out again, his gray eyes moving over every inch of her body. "You're showing me how much in need you are, but you aren't yet offering that need to me. But be subtle in offering yourself, otherwise you might turn me off."

Chayara didn't really know what Rego meant, but his addendum told her that holding her hands out to him would probably be the wrong thing to do. She was squirming and all but hopping where she stood, writhing around standing up instead of lying down, and if that didn't tell him what she wanted him to know she had no idea what would. Then she found herself leaning toward him just a little, her chest stuck out to better display her rock-hard nipples, but that caused him to turn the music off again.

"Sticking your tits in my face isn't my idea of being subtle," Rego said, heavy disapproval in his voice. "You've just earned another punishment, and not the same as the last one. Find something suitable for me to use, and then ask me to spank you with it."

Chayara was appalled, but she still had no choice but to do as she'd been told. She looked around the cabin and what it held, trying to find

something that wouldn't make the time too awful, but her luck had obviously deserted her completely. Everything she saw looked terribly hard, all but the leather belt that lay coiled on a shelf as if waiting to be used. None of it would be easy to take, but the belt seemed a bit easier than the various kinds of wooden things like hairbrushes and rulers and paddles...

"This," Chayara muttered, going to the belt and snatching it up before going back to Rego. Desperation was beginning to get a really good hold on her now, but she couldn't let it make her make another mistake. "I'd ... like you to spank me with this."

"And so I will," Rego answered after sitting up, then he took the belt from her trembling hands and gestured to his lap. "I think you know the proper position required of you."

Chayara put herself across his knees again, fighting the very strong reluctance she felt. She couldn't seem to stop herself from squirming and twisting, and he hadn't even started the punishment yet. She expected the man to hold her down the way he had the first time, but instead she felt the first stinging smack of the belt across her bottom. When the second stroke came Chayara finally understood that Rego wasn't going to hold her down. She was being told she had to lie here and take the spanking on her own, without any kind of help from him!

Except for the way he was applying that belt to her bottom. Chayara gurgled and kicked as she held to Rego's pants leg with desperate fists, the sting from the belt hitting her bottom growing slowly more painful. But that wasn't all the belt was doing, not when it made her tense her inner muscles against each stroke. She now needed relief in much more than a single way, and it quickly became impossible to decide which need was worse.

And then the spanking came to an abrupt end. It hadn't gone on for long, not nearly as long as what Nikki had been given in the Dream, but that wasn't to say Chayara's bottom didn't ache. The stinging ache was

definitely there, but not nearly strong enough to distract her from urges that were growing more and more ... urgent -

"Oh, no!" Chayara exclaimed as she jumped, the touch of Rego's hand to her intimate parts causing both words and action. No, please don't, not again! she wanted to add in a wail, but locking her jaw closed forced the words to stay inside her. Rego was stroking her gently again, causing her to writhe and squirm even harder, and that, in turn, was making the insertion and cork much worse.

"Oh, yes," Rego said with a chuckle, thrusting his finger inside her only far enough to drive her mad. "Do you disagree with me?"

"N-no, of course n-not," Chayara stuttered, her eyes closed tight against what was being done to her. "I'm yours t-to do with as you please, I know, b-but I was ... startled."

"Letting your startlement make you say the wrong thing is a mistake," Rego murmured as he continued to explore her with his finger. "Under other circumstances I would correct the mistake immediately, but right now I have something else to occupy my thoughts. Stand up."

It took a moment for Chayara to unlock her fists from the man's pants leg, but she finally managed it and stood. This time standing up was worse than the last because Rego hadn't taken his hand away from where he touched her. His finger remained inside her, and all she wanted to do was impale herself on it - right after taking that cork out and getting rid of the suppository...

"Let's see how this works," Rego said, standing up after finally removing his finger. He also took Chayara by the arm to lead her toward the side of the cabin, which meant Chayara didn't know what he was referring to. When he hit the switch that let them walk into his office, Chayara was appalled again.

Please don't take me in there, Chayara wanted to beg as Rego made

sure she didn't hang back. This isn't like being in your cabin because someone could come in here at any time!

But she didn't say the words, mostly because they would have done no good, and Rego did indeed take her into the office. A few feet away from the open doorway was a small table that stood in front of Rego's desk, a table that held nothing at the moment.

"This is where a tray is sometimes put to help cure my hunger," Rego said as he pulled her around with the table behind her. "Right now I have hunger of a different kind, but the table still might do the same job. Lock your hands behind my neck and don't let go."

When Rego bent a little, Chayara clasped her hands together behind his neck. She was beginning to get an idea about what he meant to do, so she was able to keep from saying "Oh, no!" aloud again when he lifted her and sat her on the table. But that didn't mean she refrained from wailing in the privacy of her own mind when her bottom touched the wood of the table. The spanking she'd gotten with that belt made sitting painful, but the presence of that cork and that insertion made it all a good deal worse.

And then Rego's pants were down and he was preparing to enter her. Chayara mewled at the touch of his rod to her privates, the mewling cut off a moment later when Rego's hand at the back of her head forced her to kiss him. She didn't mind kissing him, she wanted to kiss him, but then he entered her fully and all she wanted to do was howl! The insertion and cork made him feel twice the size he really was, and then he began to stroke her deep. Chayara kicked and writhed and choked and struggled, but the kiss kept her from saying anything at all.

It wasn't long before all speech was beyond her, along with rational thought and voluntary movement. The experience was unbelievable to her shocked mind, but it had to be believed because it couldn't be escaped. And then she didn't want to escape, not when she'd never felt anything like what she was now being given. Chayara tried to lose

herself to relief, but that other need was too strong and quickly growing stronger. The insertion distracted her and kept her from enjoying herself with complete abandon, and then she suddenly realized that Rego was done and in the midst of withdrawing.

"I needed that," he said with a chuckle, gently pulling her hands away from the back of his neck so that he might stand straight and fix his pants. "But you didn't get as much out of it as I did, did you?"

"N-no," Chayara admitted, wishing desperately that she might get off the table. But he hadn't told her she could get off, so she had to sit with her palms flat to the wood, trying to lift her bottom clear of contact.

"And that, of course, doesn't matter," Rego said while closing his pants, then he leaned down to brush her lips with his. "If you didn't enjoy yourself as much as I did, it doesn't matter in the least because you don't matter... Did I say you could lean on your hands instead of sitting flat?"

"Y-you didn't say I couldn't," Chayara forced herself to point out even as she raised her hands again. She was dying to get off that table and into the bathroom, but she knew she wasn't permitted to say so.

"That's very true," Rego allowed with a faint smile. "And now that you know I don't want you to use your hands, you've stopped doing it. That shows what a good girl you are, but I'm afraid the effort won't save you from being punished. I was going to let you use the head once I was through with you, but now you'll just have to wait."

Chayara closed her eyes and ground her teeth together to keep from asking how long she would have to wait. That wooden table was hard against her tender bottom, and the cork made sitting even worse than the spanking did. All Chayara wanted to do was whimper from the need to relieve herself, but even that might get her punishment increased. For that reason she sat silent and squirming, but couldn't hold back a gasp when Rego's hand came to touch her again.

"That's right, keep the kicking to a minimum," Rego said while Chayara choked trying not to gurgle out her distress. "Just standing around waiting gets boring, so I'm simply amusing myself until your punishment is over. You don't mind, I hope?"

Chayara wouldn't have said anything even if speaking hadn't been completely beyond her. What she did and didn't mind was beside the point, a truth Rego was teaching her very, very well.

It felt like an hour before Rego's hand left Chayara and the man told her she could go and use the "head." She slid off the table as fast as she could, hobbled to the door leading to his cabin, then half galloped to the bathroom. Chayara could barely walk, but she somehow made it to the commode and down on the seat, then reached back to remove the cork. As soon as the horrible thing was out of her a torrent followed, and that torrent went on for a while. Sitting on the commode seat was as painful as sitting on the table had been, but Chayara lacked the strength to crouch above the seat.

When she finally came out of the bathroom, Chayara found that Rego was waiting for her. He lay naked on the bed rather than clothed, and seeing that his arousal had returned added fuel to the fire that hadn't been allowed to go out completely.

"I think it's time you learned how to serve the man you need in another way," Rego said when he saw her, making no effort to sit up. "Come over here and I'll tell you what to do."

A large part of Chayara wanted nothing more than to collapse to the bed and rest if not sleep, but rather than say so she crossed the cabin to the bed and climbed onto it in accordance with Rego's gesture. The man's directions, she was told, when properly applied, would bring interest to the man Chayara needed, so she set about learning the new technique.

When, a few minutes later, Rego gasped and pulled her away from his increased "interest," Chayara thought that the lesson was over. Instead she was thrown to her back and then Rego was inside her, easing her body as he eased his own. The time was incredibly pleasurable but also incredibly intense, and when it was finally over Chayara was asleep before she knew it.

CHAPTER 9

"Okay, sweetheart, time to get up," Chayara heard, and when she opened her eyes she saw Rego's face above her. "Our breakfast has been delivered next door, and while you're waking up the rest of the way I'll go and get it."

He leaned closer to touch her lips with his before moving away, leaving Chayara with a smile as she stretched her well-satisfied body before sitting up. That was when she remembered what had gone on the night before, which meant the smile disappeared even more quickly than it had come.

But Rego was already heading out of the cabin, so asking him about the change would have to wait. Instead of waiting herself, Chayara took the opportunity to use the bathroom. When she came out Rego had the tray with their food on the foot of the bed, and he turned away from the bed to smile ruefully at her.

"I usually eat at the desk in my office, so there's nothing in here for even one person to take a meal at, not to mention two," he said. "We'd probably be better off having our meals in the mess hall, but I think we both need this private break from the training sessions. Come and share the meal with me, Chayara."

Chayara hesitated only an instant before going to his outstretched hand and letting it take her own, but the effort wasn't easy. She now knew why Rego was being so nice to her: they were taking a "break" from the training, but for her the time was harder than the training had been.

She knew what she had ahead of her, the kind of treatment the training was preparing her for. This other treatment, the niceness, would be saved for someone who wasn't a slut, and wasn't likely to ever be offered to her again. That made accepting the niceness now rather painful, but protesting would have been useless. Instead she simply joined Rego for the meal, and didn't say a word.

"You haven't eaten all that much," Rego said when she finally pushed away her plate, his tone more disturbed than disapproving. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm feeling fine," she answered without quite looking at him, lying only a little. "Isn't it time for us to get back to the training?"

"If you like," he answered after something of a hesitation. "I'll get rid of these dishes and this tray, and then we can start the training again. Would you like to finish your coffee first?"

Chayara emptied her cup in a single swallow instead of answering in words, so now there was nothing left to keep the breakfast time going. Rego also stayed silent as she put the cup on the tray with the rest of the dishes, and then he took the tray back to that table in his office. The quiet was very restful - until it ended with Rego's return.

"All right, girl, stand up so I can look at you," Rego said, his tone as hard as it had been the night before. "And I'd better like what I see."

Chayara lost no time in leaving the bed and standing herself in the middle of the cabin, trying hard to make her body look sexy and desirable. Rego was fully dressed while she was still completely naked, but for some reason she hadn't noticed that sooner...

"Not bad," Rego said from where he now sat alone on the bed. "But not bad isn't the same as good, so don't start to congratulate yourself. Do something to show me how much of a slut you really are."

Chayara brought back memory of how the insertion had made her feel last night, then used the memory to cause her body to move. She writhed and wriggled and flaunted herself and her supposed need, a need that had, for some inexplicable reason, now disappeared. She didn't really want Rego at the moment, so she had to make herself pretend.

"Better, but still not the best it could be," Rego gruded after a moment of watching her closely. "I'm not convinced that you really want to please me, so I think we need to make you a bit more eager. I skipped a punishment you earned yesterday and left it for today, so let's get it taken care of right now. Pick something out for me to punish you with."

Chayara had managed to forget that Rego had postponed a punishment, and now that she'd been reminded - in the worst way possible - she was far from happy. But she still had no choice but to go along with what she'd been told to do, so she began to look around the cabin. The belt she'd chosen the night before was nowhere to be seen, so that option was out. It would have to be one of the wooden items, then...

What to choose suddenly became very unimportant, so Chayara went and got the paddle, then carried it back to Rego. Putting herself across his knees after handing him the paddle wasn't easy, but staying face down over his lap became harder once the punishment started. Chayara gasped at the feel of the first stroke of the paddle against her bottom, but the second swat made her want to do more than gasp. That paddle hurt, and Rego didn't seem to be holding back at all.

By the time the twelfth swat came down on Chayara's bottom she was holding tight to Rego's pants leg and was just short of howling. Her seat ached terribly from the constant smack-smack-smack of the paddle against her bottom, and she didn't know how much longer she'd be able to keep from standing up again and running away.

But then she discovered that the spanking was over when Rego pulled

her hands free of his pants leg, all but threw her to her feet, then got up to pick her up in his arms. A moment later he was striding around the bed to reach a place where he could throw her into the still-wrinkled linen, pause to open his pants, then force himself between her raised legs. Chayara was using her feet to get her tender bottom out of contact with the bed, and then she had something else to take her attention.

Rego lost no time in presenting his arousal to her womanhood, and a heartbeat later he was thrusting inside her. Chayara cried out in protest, knowing that sex right now would be painful, but Rego ignored the protest and just began to stroke her. The time was just as painful as Chayara had expected it to be, but after only moments her body responded to save her even more pain. It wasn't as long as it could have been before Rego found release, but he didn't withdraw as quickly as Chayara would have liked.

"You didn't seem to enjoy that as much as you did last night," Rego said once his breathing had become more regular, those gray eyes looking down at her. "Last night we shared the pleasure, but no man has to share anything with a slut. Being treated like this is the only thing a slut can expect, but if this is what you want I won't refuse you. I have work that's waiting for my attention, so I'll be gone for a few hours. Why don't you spend the time thinking."

Only then did he withdraw and leave the bed, also leaving a very disturbed Chayara. She heard Rego fix his clothes and then walk out of the cabin, which let her turn to her stomach to do the thinking he'd suggested.

So he wasn't serious about being willing to "train" me, she thought, bitterness so strong inside her that she could taste it. His aim was to get me to "change my mind," having no idea that the choice wasn't mine to make. I knew he didn't want a slut hanging around him, but he's wrong to think I can be anything else. Moving into this cabin was a mistake, but it's a mistake that can be fixed.

Even though fixing the mistake would take her away from a man she'd started to want to be with. There was more to Rego than his good looks and attractive body, but he was also a man who wanted a normal life. It wasn't possible for anyone to have a normal life with a slut around, so she had to walk away from Rego and stay away no matter what. As soon as the pain in her bottom eased a little she would shower and dress and go back to her own cabin, from now on keeping away from Rego as much as possible.

But even before any of that she'd have to stop crying...

* * *

Torand Rego lost no time in leaving his cabin, utterly relieved to have the excuse of work to escape an intolerable situation. Punishing a woman who deserved that punishment wasn't hard at all, but finding excuses to hurt a woman he really cared for wasn't the same. It was wonderful taking Chayara in his arms and making love to her, but hurting her and all but raping her the way he'd just done made him sick to his stomach. His great idea wasn't working as well as he'd thought it would, and all he could do was hope - pray! - that she changed her mind after she did the thinking he'd left her to do.

"Tor, what's wrong?" he heard, and then Jerman, his medic, had stopped to study him with a frown on her face. "You look like you've lost a fight instead of having won one."

"The battles you face in life aren't always big and out in plain view," Tor answered, hearing the weariness in his voice. "And sometimes the small, private fights are harder to survive."

"I think you need to talk to someone," Jerman decided abruptly. "As your medical officer, I prescribe a cup of coffee and a time of conversation, both of which you can get in my infirmary. Come on, it won't hurt as much as you're obviously expecting it to."

Tor had been hesitating over discussing his problem with anyone, but he suddenly realized that Jerman was right. He did need someone to act as his sounding board, not to mention being a source of ideas in case his own went the wrong way. So he nodded to show that he'd surrendered, and then he followed Jerman back to her infirmary.

"Okay, we're completely alone here," she said once he took a seat and they both had cups of coffee in front of them. "Now tell me what's wrong."

"It's that ... slut business Chayara is so involved with," Tor said, finding the words hard to speak in spite of his earlier resolve. "I don't know why she refuses to see reason, but when she told me she was a failure at being a slut I - volunteered to train her."

"I didn't realize she was still so deeply involved with that," Jerman said, her frown having returned. "I can guess that your plan was to show her how unpleasant being a slut might be, but something seems to have gone wrong. What was it that didn't go right?"

"I spent hours last night humiliating and punishing her, but this morning she insisted on going right back to the 'training,'" Tor answered, toying with his cup as he avoided Jerman's gaze. "It isn't as if she enjoyed what I did to her because I know she didn't, and she especially disliked what I did this morning. I know I should keep pressing my advantage, only I've discovered that I - can't."

"Because you care for her too much to want to hurt and humiliate her," Jerman said, and Tor could almost hear her nod. "What does Falk think about your attraction to his niece?"

"I still can't believe it, but Falk wants me to marry his niece," Tor said, finally looking up at Jerman's face. "Falk and his brother, who's Chayara's father, both saw my gene mapping and both think I'm the perfect choice for the girl. I told Falk I'd be glad to marry Chayara -

assuming the girl wants me to - but so far she hasn't shown anything like my own feelings. And how can she develop anything real in the way of feelings for me if I go on with that abysmal 'training'?"

"Tor, have you tried telling her she isn't what she imagines she is?" Jerman asked, her dark eyes looking troubled. "When I told her about the Green Glow she refused to believe me, insisting that 'logic' didn't support my claim."

"Then that makes two of us who weren't believed," Tor said, tossing away the idea of having Jerman visit the girl. "Maybe a big part of my problem is that I don't really know what being a slut is supposed to be about. I know that the girls in my school back home used the term for any girl who was more attractive to the boys than they were, usually a girl who sort of oozed sex. Do you know anything more about it?"

"Yes, it so happens I do," Jerman answered after taking a sip of her coffee. "While I was growing up I was constantly warned against wearing certain clothes and acting in certain ways so that people would not consider me a 'slut.' I think most girls are told the same, and some go out of their way to act 'slutty' just to be contrary. But there's another, more serious reason that some girls act in that way, and I think you need to see the results of the clinical studies. Tell me if you think Chayara fits the profile."

Tor didn't know what to expect, but once Jerman sat him down in front of her monitor after calling up the information she'd mentioned, he certainly did find out. The reality behind the situation was thankfully masked by large words and clinical attitudes, which was all that let Tor finish reading the entire study.

"I never knew that," he said when he'd finally finished, looking at Jerman bleakly. "I'd love to be able to argue the researchers' conclusions, but unfortunately I can't. And no, Chayara doesn't fit the profile in any way at all."

"I was fairly certain she didn't," Jerman said, a bit of relief showing through her own bleakness. "Do you think the article will do a better job of convincing Chayara of the truth than our own efforts accomplished?"

"At this point I have no idea," Tor answered honestly. "I can hope she sees the point, but we won't know whether she does or not until after we try. But I can't think of anything better to do, so let's try right now."

Jerman had finished her coffee while Tor did all that reading, so he was the only one who had a cup to drain before they left the infirmary. The walk to Tor's cabin didn't take very long, but when he opened the door and went in he found a surprise.

"I don't see her," Jerman remarked when she followed Tor into the cabin. "Is she in the head do you think?"

"She's gone, and it's not a matter of just thinking," Tor said, staring at the emptied drawer he'd given to Chayara to use. "If that means she's given up the idea of being trained I couldn't be happier, but why don't I feel happier?"

"Maybe you're not happier because her giving up on the training doesn't mean she's given up the rest of her ideas," Jerman said, going straight to the heart of the matter as usual. "The smartest thing right now would be to find her and ask."

Tor nodded, then led the way to the most logical place for Chayara to be: her old cabin. The cabin door was locked, and signaling at the door brought nothing in the way of a response.

"She doesn't seem interested in talking to anyone right now," Jerman observed after the third time Tor pressed the signal. "It might be a good idea if we left her alone until later, when she'll hopefully be feeling more like socializing."

"I suppose you're right," Tor grudging, forcing himself to swallow down worry and unease. "Pressing her now might make things worse instead of better, so I'll wait. I just hope she doesn't make me wait too long."

Jerman patted his arm to show her approval of his words and actions, and then they separated. Jerman probably went back to the infirmary - or back to whatever she'd been in the middle of when she'd first run into Tor - and he went to the bridge. He was hoping to find some kind of distraction that would give him something other than Chayara to think about, but no such luck. Everything was going smoothly both here aboard the Hawk and aboard her sister ship Raven, so there was nothing for Tor to do.

Instead of staying on the bridge and getting in the duty watch's way, Tor went back to his office. The ordinary chores involved with running a ship were always around and needing to be done, but Tor discovered that he'd arranged things too efficiently. It took only a little more than an hour to get all caught up, and then he was right back to where he'd been earlier: needing something to distract him.

"But I've already waited," he realized aloud, actually surprising himself. "Chayara may already be feeling better, so why don't I send her a message saying I want to see her? That's not the same as pounding on her door, so she ought to respond."

Ignoring the fact that he'd signaled at her door rather than pounded, Tor composed a short message and sent it to Chayara's computer. He knew the computer would signal for her attention when the message arrived, so he sat and fretted until his own computer signaled a response. The fact that she'd responded so quickly put a smile on Tor's face, but reading that response erased the smile just as fast.

"'Rego,'" her answer read. "'I appreciate your efforts to help me out, but those efforts are no longer necessary. I'll be continuing alone from now on, so I'll also appreciate your not contacting me again. As soon as my father and my world are freed you and I will be going our

separate ways, which means it will be best if we begin the separation right now. Chayara."

Tor immediately sent another message asking to speak to her face to face, but minute after minute went by and there was no response. All he got was an automatic notice that his message hadn't been accepted and opened by the computer it had been sent to, which meant another door had been closed in his face.

Thinking seriously about taking heavy equipment to the girl's cabin door and breaking the door down showed Tor that he was too far over the edge. He'd told Falk that he refused to take an unwilling bride, and insisting that the girl speak to him when she so obviously didn't want to would be almost as bad. He had an important job that needed doing, and once it was over he could ask the girl's father to intercede with her to allow him a last talk with her. Until then anything he did in an effort to regain her attention would be out and out dishonorable, and he liked to think he was a better person than that.

But even though he still had one last try ahead of him, he couldn't quite make himself think of the girl as anything but "the girl." Thinking of her by name as he'd started to do would just be too painful to stand if the last time he spoke to her turned out to be the last time...

* * *

The trip to Evron, Falk's home world, took another couple of days, during which time Tor worked very hard to keep busy. At some point Jerman sent him a message saying that the girl had refused to see her as well, and Tor had told Jerman not to press the matter. The girl wasn't eating well but she was eating, and neither of them wanted to agitate the girl so much that she stopped eating entirely.

When the Hawk and Raven entered Evron's system, they received a "welcome" message from Evron's station, relayed from the planet. That message surprised Tor until he noticed that the welcome was

addressed to the "newest governmental representatives." Falk had obviously paved the way for the two former pirate ships by designating them official ships of the government which, at the moment, they actually were. The message had been able to travel much faster than any ship, so instead of being fired on by the planet's patrol ships, they were being welcomed.

And that told Tor what would be in the sealed envelope of instructions that Falk had sent to him before the Hawk and the Raven left Utopia. He'd been ordered not to open the envelope until he reached Evron, and when he saw the impressive credentials naming him the new governor of the planet - and the letter recalling the current governor - it was clear that Falk knew him even better than he'd thought.

Tor had been much happier with the thought of another fight than with the thought of simply walking in and taking over. He still didn't know if he could handle the job of planetary governor, and despite his resolve to give it his best shot he remained less than completely confident. But the job had to be done, so he had Henson send word to the Raven that they would be landing at the private port of the governor's mansion.

Once both ships were on the ground Tor led his "landing party" out to meet the same from the Raven, then both groups headed for the mansion. Talla Fain, captain of the Raven, grinned as she quietly congratulated Tor on his new position while they walked. Apparently Talla had been told what Tor hadn't, and her landing party wasn't dressed for a fight any more than Tor's was.

"Welcome, sir and madam," a stuffy-looking official said when he met them just inside the mansion's entrance lobby, his smile carved out of smugness. "The governor is in a meeting at the moment, but as soon as she's free she'll give you a tour of the mansion and a report on the progress she's made since she took office. The wait shouldn't be more than an hour or so, and refreshments will, of course, be - "

"Our mission here is a bit more important than to simply take a tour,"

Talla interrupted to say in a hard voice. She was a big woman, bigger even than Tor's second Lanni, her red hair and green eyes telling anyone who looked at her that trying her temper would not be a very wise thing to do. "You will take us to the governor at once, without any further comments about waits or refreshments."

"I beg your pardon!" the stuffy official said with obvious outrage, drawing himself up to his full height. He was just a touch larger than Talla, but that fact seemed to impress him more than it did her. "It happens to be against the law to address someone in a tone like that, just the way the same thing is against the law on Utopia. If you thought you were coming to some boondocks planet, allow me to assure you - "

"Instead of assuring us, I suggest you do as the lady said," Tor interrupted to state, his tone no warmer than Talla's had been. "Show us to the room where the governor is having her meeting and do it right now."

"Well!" the official exclaimed, clearly insulted now as well as outraged. "Don't think for a moment that I won't tell the governor exactly how you spoke to me! She detests this kind of behavior even more than I do, so we'll just see where your visit is spent, now won't we."

With those words the man turned and walked off toward a hall leading to the back of the mansion, his nose in the air and his sense of satisfaction-to-come as clear as if he wore a sign that read, "Just you wait!" Tor exchanged a bland look with Talla, their own version of "Just you wait." Tor would obviously have a lot of housecleaning to do as soon as he took over, and the stuffy official - who hadn't even introduced himself by name - would be among the first to go.

The hall they were led into took them past a series of rooms that had long tables with chairs arranged around both sides, but the doors to those rooms stood open. They walked to the end of the hall where two men in fancy uniforms stood to either side of the double doors, and their guide stopped between the two supposed guardsmen.

"This is where the governor is at the moment, but she's obviously left orders not to be disturbed," the man said with a clear smirk. "Now that you've wasted your time and mine, the room where you'll wait for the governor isn't far from here. I'll take you to the room, and when the governor is through with her meeting I'll have a word with her - "

Tor's store of patience with nonsense of this kind wasn't large to begin with; that the official felt perfectly safe with only two men in uniform near him was clear, as most citizens would never argue with someone in a uniform. This was the kind of thing Falk meant to put an end to, and Tor was delighted to be able to help with his own effort.

"Place all three of them under arrest," Tor said to Talla in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone, his tone now bored. "We'll see to their disposition as soon as we take care of their superior."

The two guards, who'd had smug looks of their own, joined the official in immediate protest when some of Talla's people stepped forward with drawn stunners to pull the three away from the doors. Ignoring all those protests wasn't hard at all, and when Talla moved ahead to throw open the doors for Tor he was ready. He strode into the room as if he owned it, a circumstance that would actually be true in just a few minutes.

"What's the meaning of this intrusion?" a woman demanded as she shot to her feet, her expression pure glare. "Who are you people, and how dare you come into this room without my permission?"

The woman was on the small side, handsome rather than pretty, and apparently nearing her middle years. Her dark hair was worn short in a stylish cut and her suit looked to be cream-colored silk. The six other people in the room, a mix of male and female, looked just as outraged as the woman, but none of them left their chairs.

"Our abrupt entrance is due to the official business we have, so our

arrival isn't an intrusion," Tor answered mildly after a short pause, now walking toward the woman. "Are you Governor Hania Roblin?"

"Of course I am," the small woman answered, now frowning rather than glaring. "If you're the new officials sent by Utopia to be familiarized with my methods and achievements, you're supposed to be waiting for me in a guest room - "

"We are from Utopia, but familiarization isn't the reason we're here," Tor interrupted, knowing that the woman was about to dismiss them all. "Whatever the purpose of this meeting was, allowing it to continue would just be a waste of everyone's time. Hania Roblin, you're hereby relieved of the post of governor of this world, and according to the orders of the new governor you're to be held until such time as you can be made accountable for your actions as governor. You're now ordered to show us to the place where those of your sort are incarcerated."

"What nonsense is this?" the woman demanded while two of the people at the table stood up looking shocked. "I was appointed governor by the heads of our government on Utopia, and only they can dismiss me - which isn't going to happen. I -"

"You think it won't happen because you're related to three of those heads you just mentioned?" Talla said with a small laugh. "I hate to be the one to bring even more bad news, but your relatives aren't in power any longer any more than you'll be. That piece of paper being held out to you now by the new governor is your official notice that you're out of a job, so take it and let's get you put away where you can't cause any more harm."

Tor felt the urge to chuckle at the way the small woman suddenly looked appalled, but the urge went away as everyone in the room began to argue and demand things. It would be another couple of minutes before they'd be able to take all these people and put them in cells, but once that was done he'd be able to free Falk's brother and

speak to the man. After that...

CHAPTER 10

It took quite a few minutes before Tor and his people were able to find out the location of the detention cells. The woman Roblin flatly refused to accept that she'd been replaced, and it became necessary for Tor to have her taken into custody by members of his escort to get her out of the room. A stroke of inspiration told Tor to show his credentials to the two guardsmen who had been guarding the doors, and the paperwork immediately turned the two men into his guardsmen. At that point they became more than willing to show the way to the detention cells, ignoring the way the other "prisoners" screamed and cried.

The detention cells were located at the very top of the mansion, a much more humane location than somewhere underground would have been. More than half of the cells were already occupied, and once the former governor and her people were given cells of their own Tor went looking for Falk's brother.

Looking through the transparent doors let Tor search the easy way, and about half way down the hall he found the man he wanted. It was a shock to see what looked like Falk sitting in an easy chair ignoring some lecture on a very large screen, but Tor had been half expecting the sight.

Talla,

though, hadn't been expecting the same.

"That's not possible!" Talla hissed from where she stood to Tor's left.

"How could Falk have gotten here ahead of us and been arrested?"

"That's not Falk, it's his brother," Tor said, smiling to himself over how

much alike the two men looked. "I never knew the real meaning of 'identical twins' until just this minute. Let's get him out of there, and then he ought to be able to help with telling us which of these others also need to be freed."

They found the transparent door's release bar to the right of the cell on

the wall, but when the door opened the man in the chair didn't even bother

to look up.

"To answer your usual question at once, no, I'm not ready to be what you

call reasonable," Falk's brother said in a bored, dismissive tone.

"You can tell that woman she's still wasting her time and mine."

"I believe I'm addressing Halin Croft," Tor said, which did manage to gain

Croft's attention. "I'm delighted to tell you that - that woman - is no longer in charge, so you're free to go. I'm Torand Rego, the new governor."

"Torand Rego!" Croft exclaimed with a wide smile as he got to his feet.

"So Leron's efforts have finally succeeded just as I'd hoped they would.

You must tell me all about it."

"I'll be delighted to tell you the story, Mr. Croft, but first I'll need your help," Tor answered with his own smile. "You're not the only

one being detained here, and I need to know who else ought to be released."

"Everyone in these cells is a political prisoner, just as I was," Croft said after shaking hands with Tor. "Those who have committed actual crimes are interred elsewhere, but I believe that those offenses also need to be looked into. There's a big difference between committing cold-blooded murder and being politically incorrect on purpose, but both of those things are against the law."

"I know you're right, and it will be the first thing I look into," Tor agreed, then he gestured to Talla. "This is Talla Fain, my lieutenant governor, and she's also acquainted with your brother."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, young lady," Croft said as he also shook

Talla's hand. "And please call me Halin, both of you. Now we'd better get to releasing everyone else."

Releasing the people in the other detention cells didn't take all that long, but accepting fervent thanks and having to soothe those who actually

cried at being released took a while. When the last of the political prisoners was being helped to the lift that would take them to the ground

floor, Tor looked around for Halin Croft. He found the man standing in

front of the detention cell the former governor had been put in, and when

Tor joined Croft there he saw the woman behind the transparent door screaming wildly with fists clenched and raised.

"It's fortunate that nothing of the noise she's making can get through the

door to disturb us," Croft commented when Tor stopped beside him. "She

doesn't seem to understand just how antisocial such behavior is, or more

likely she doesn't want to understand. For some reason those who
make
rules for others to live by don't feel constrained to live by the same
rules. Taunting my former captor isn't very nice, I know, but it's a
human
failing that certainly is satisfying."
"She's lucky that all you want to do is stare at her," Tor commented
back,
also studying the rabidly angry woman. "Another man in your place
would
choose to hurt her rather than just look, but she doesn't seem to
understand that either. Doing something without being willing to
accept
the consequences of your actions is doing more than simply being
irresponsible... Mr. Croft - Halin - I need to speak to you about
Chayara."
"About my daughter?" Croft said with surprise, finally turning to
look at
Tor. "Ah, yes, I take it Leron told you about our plans for the two
of
you, and you'd now like to meet the young lady. She ought to be at
home,
unless she's out investigating something that's caught her interest."
"Halin, I've already met your daughter," Tor said, trying not to
make the
words sound like a confession. "When you were arrested she made
her way to
Moradan and found your brother. It's completely thanks to her that
we
succeeded in taking over the government at Utopia, and she
returned here
on my ship."
"Then you already know what an excellent match you two will
make," Croft
said with a wide smile, joining Tor in moving away from the
detention cell

and toward the lift. "That stupid woman thought I'd agree to
destroying
our family by marrying my children to ciphers, which shows how
poor her
judgment was. As soon as you're settled into your new position as
governor
we'll hold the wedding, and - "
"There's a problem," Tor blurted, forcing himself to interrupt the
plans
that were being so happily made. "I - made a bad mistake with
Chayara when
she and I first met, and my efforts since then to straighten things out
have only made the situation worse. She's currently refusing to see
or
speak to me, and I was hoping you would be willing to intercede
with her.
I need to have one last conversation with her, and if that doesn't get
her
to change her mind then I'll - just get out of her life."
"The situation is that serious?" Croft said, staring sadly at Tor as
they
stopped in front of the lift doors. "I'm really sorry to hear that, and
of
course I'll speak to her on your behalf. If you're willing to share the
details of the problem, I might even be able to make some
suggestions on
the best way to repair whatever damage has been done."
"I ... caused something to happen between us, but Chayara refuses
to believe
that what happened was my doing," Tor responded after a long
moment,
struggling to tell the story without going into details. "She insists that
logic says she's the one responsible, and most of our troubles have
stemmed from that belief. If I can't get her to change her mind she'll
probably never be willing to marry me."
"And you're not one to take an unwilling bride," Croft said with

weariness

in his voice just as the lift doors opened. "Yes, Leron told me you would

most likely have that attitude, and when it comes to assessing people his

judgment can't be faulted. Let's go and find Chayara and see if we can't

get this mess straightened out."

Tor joined Croft in getting into the lift, but leaving immediately just wasn't possible. The entire mansion was in an uproar, and Tor had to call

a general meeting of all staff members to let them know about the change

in leadership. He gave everyone the chance to resign if they disliked the

new order of things, and more than half of the staff immediately took him

up on the offer.

"That idea was brilliant," one of the staff members choosing to stay murmured to Tor after the meeting. "Now you won't have the bother of

firing most of them. Unfortunately, though, about half of the deadwood has

chosen to stay, so you still have quite a bit of culling ahead of you.

My

advice would be to look into what everyone is supposed to be doing, and

then find out just how well they do that job. If you would be so kind as

to start with me, I'll then be able to get back to work - assuming you

want me to."

The man made no effort to avoid Tor's gaze at that point, giving Tor the

chance to say that only his own people would be working in the government.

But that wasn't the way Tor wanted to arrange things, so he smiled and nodded.

"Yes, I would like you to stay - assuming you're doing what you're supposed to be doing," Tor said, making the other chuckle.

"Lieutenant

Governor Fain will take a look at your efforts, and if they check out then

you'll be able to help her with the rest. I have some personal business to

take care of, and then I'll be back to do my part in returning sanity to

this world. What's your name?"

"I'm Feston Roode," the man responded with something of a bow.

"I'm

pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Excellency, and I'm certain we'll

do very well working together."

"I certainly hope so, Mr. Roode," Tor answered. "Let me introduce you to

the lieutenant governor, and then I'll be able to get on with that personal business I mentioned."

Tor took Roode over to Talla, and once Talla had been told what had to be

done Tor rejoined Halin Croft. The two left the mansion together, but Tor

paused just outside to call his ship.

"Lanni, I'm coming aboard with Chayara's father," Tor told his second in

command. "If the girl still refuses to come out of her cabin, we'll have

to be ready to break the door down."

"Tor, Chayara left the ship only a few minutes after you did," Lanni said

before Tor could end the call. "Everyone was so busy being alert against

some kind of attack that I didn't learn she was gone until we were told

you'd relieved the former governor and we could all stand down. One of our

people on watch saw her go, but we don't know where she's gone to."

"Most likely she's gone home," Croft said quickly. Tor stood like a dummy

having no idea what to say or do, and the older man's hand came to Tor's

shoulder in support. "Following her will be much easier than breaking down

a cabin door, especially once we appropriate one of the governor's official vehicles."

"Yes, that's what we need, a ground vehicle," Tor agreed as he came out of

the fog. "Let's find someone who can tell us where those vehicles are."

After ending the call to Lanni, Tor joined Croft in going back inside the

mansion. It took only a short while to find a servant who was able to lead

them to where the official vehicles were, and not long after that they were in the vehicle and heading for Croft's house. Croft did the

driving while Tor sat and fretted, an arrangement the older man had insisted on.

Which was just as well, Tor admitted to himself. He was much too distracted to pay any kind of decent attention to driving...

"We're here, my boy," Croft said suddenly as the vehicle stopped. Tor

looked around to see that they'd pulled into the driveway of a very large

house, a driveway that curved around in a semi-circle. Croft had stopped

at the top of the arc, right in front of the wide steps leading up to

the

house, so Tor joined Croft in getting out of the vehicle. Just as they reached the top of the steps the front door of the house opened

and a

number of people came flying out.

"Halin, you're free!" a handsome older woman laughed as she threw herself

into Croft's arms. "And just in time, too! Instead of me talking the boys

out of trying to free you, I was on the verge of being talked into joining

their effort."

"No she wasn't, Father," one of the twin young men behind the woman said

after everyone had laughed. "Mother kept insisting that everything would

work out fine without our efforts, and it looks like she was right as usual."

At that point everyone was crowding around Croft to welcome him home, so

Tor stepped aside - just in time to see Chayara appear in the open doorway. Tor felt such vast relief that he nearly sat down on the wide

porch, but he knew he couldn't let himself be weak right now. So instead

of collapsing he strode over to the girl and took her in his arms.

"Chayara, please listen to me," he murmured to the wide blue eyes that

looked up at him with dismayed surprise. "I have something to tell you,

and that should make all the difference in our disagreement. If you'll just give me a chance to - "

"Oops, sorry," the girl he held said with an uncomfortable laugh, making

no effort to avoid his gaze. "I'm not Chayara, I'm Eilinna, Chay's sister.

Chay is off right now doing something important, but we're hoping she'll

be back really soon and then you can ... speak to her all you like."

"I'm sorry, Torand, but that is Eilinna," Croft said from behind him as

Tor struggled to decide if the girl was telling the truth. "Apparently Chayara hasn't yet made it home."

Tor released the girl hastily, ignoring his vast reluctance to do so.

Eilinna was definitely Chayara's identical twin, and holding her had felt

like the best thing the universe had to offer. All except for one small,

unimportant difference...

"Let's go inside," Croft said gently after patting Tor's shoulder in sympathy. "The former governor considered coffee bad for people,

so I haven't had a cup since they locked me up. Once we're settled with some of

that terrible drink in front of us, I'll call around to see if Chayara has gotten in touch with any of her friends."

Tor nodded while Croft hugged his other daughter, then followed the whole

group inside. It had been hours since Chayara left the Hawk, so why hadn't

she gotten home yet? And what would he do if she didn't come home, or get

in touch with any of her friends? How would he find one girl on this very

large world if she didn't want to be found...?

* * *

Chayara had no trouble leaving the vicinity of the governor's mansion and

finding a public callbox. One quick call had a Paid Vehicle on its way to

her immediately, one that reached her in less than five minutes. The pav

hadn't been far away, of course, and the driver took her to the
closest

branch of her bank where she withdrew the funds she needed to
pay for the

pav - and a few other things as well.

After she'd paid off the pav, Chayara walked the couple of blocks
necessary to find a pav stand. The stand was near a public
transportation

outlet, and the pavs were often used by those coming out of the
outlet.

Chayara took the first pav in line, directed it to the middle of the
city,

then paid the driver before getting out. Only a block away was the
store

she wanted, but walking the block was a better idea than letting the
pav

drop her off there. When her father found out that she was back on
her

home world, he would certainly send people out looking for her...

And Chayara didn't want to be found, not by anyone. She hated
the idea of

never seeing her family again, but staying away would be best for
everyone

involved. She'd become someone no one would want to know or
acknowledge as

a relative or friend, and experiencing that would be much too
painful.

Better to just disappear and let people keep their older, untainted
memories.

The day wasn't very warm and seemed to be threatening rain, two
things

Chayara was no longer used to after so long a time aboard various
ships.

By the time she reached the store she wanted she was ready to buy
a coat

or jacket first, but that would have been foolish. She bought two

complete

outfits in all colors but gray, added the necessary jacket, then chose

a

bag to pack her purchases in. She also picked up the toiletries she needed, and once she'd paid for everything she used a public rest

room to

change into one of the outfits. After stuffing everything including her backpack into the bag, she then left the rest room and located

another pav

stand.

The pav driver wasn't at all surprised to be taking Chayara to a hotel

near the spaceport. When someone's shuttle was scheduled to leave either

very late or very early in the day, people often took rooms near the port

to make sure there would be no delay when the time came to go to the port.

After paying off the pav Chayara put on the cap she'd bought to hide her

hair color, went into the hotel, and got herself a low-cost room.

The room was larger than the cabin she'd had aboard the Hawk, but closing

the door still made Chayara feel as if she were also closing the door on

the rest of her life.

"Life, what life?" she asked herself in a mutter as she put down her bag

and walked to the only chair to drop into it. "I have no life left, only something I'm terrible at but still something I'm meant to do. At

least

Rego's plan showed me that much."

Rego's plan. The phrase echoed in Chayara's head, bringing back the

various kinds of pain and embarrassment she'd endured for no reason. Rego

hadn't been trying to train her for the life of a slut, he'd been trying his best to discourage her. Just as if the choice were hers rather than something she'd been born to be. That belt had hurt when he'd spanked her with it, but the paddle had hurt even more. And after he'd used her the way a slut was usually used he'd said - "He said something about sharing, as if I wasn't bright enough to know how much better that was," Chayara whispered, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Why can't he understand that I would share everything with him alone if I could, but my nature won't let me do that? Why did he have to make me wish for something I'll never have?" The quiet tears turned to sobbing then, ruining Chayara's intention to think about what she might do with the rest of her life. Actively pursuing the life of a slut was now out of the question, but she didn't know what else there was to do for someone like her. The crying just went on and on, and when it finally worked itself to a stop Chayara felt exhausted. She hadn't had anything to eat since leaving the ship, but it had been quite some time since she'd had anything like an appetite. Instead of ordering anything from room service, she simply went to bed. When she woke up it was the next morning, and as soon as her eyes were open she knew that she had to order some food. She placed her

order before

getting into the shower, and by the time she'd dried and dressed there was

a knock on the door. A small table filled with breakfast dishes was rolled

inside when she opened the door, and after paying the man who had brought

the food she was able to sit down and eat.

While Chayara eased the pain in her middle by eating, her mind came up

with a half dozen different plans - and rejected them all. When she finally sat back with a second cup of coffee she seemed to be left with

only a single plan: buy a small house somewhere and never leave it. She

had more than enough money to do just about anything she pleased, most of

it in accounts that her family knew nothing about.

With the political situation being what it had been, she'd needed to be

prepared to disappear at a moment's notice. That woman who had been

governor could have decided to marry her off even without her father's

consent, and she knew that her sister and brothers had similar arrangements. If it had become necessary they all would have disappeared,

and with none of them knowing about the arrangements the others had made,

capturing one of them would not have caused the rest to be taken as well.

"But I can't decide if the house should be here on Evron or on another

world," Chayara murmured to the coffee in her cup. "If I were on another

world I'd never have to worry about being found by any of the

family, but

I'd also never know if something happened where they needed me.

How can I

- "

Chayara's soft words broke off when a knock came at her door, probably

produced by the man who had brought her food. He'd said something about

coming back later for the table and empty dishes, and that was perfectly

all right. She meant to keep her cup and the rest of the coffee, but the

rest could -

By now Chayara had gone to the door and opened it, but all she could do

was stand and stare. It wasn't the serving man who had knocked, it was -

"I really need to talk to you," Rego said, staring down at her with disturbed gray eyes. "May I come in?"

"How could you possibly have found me?" Chayara was finally able to ask as

he walked past her without waiting for her agreement. "I left nothing of a

trail that could be followed."

"You certainly didn't," Rego agreed, stopping in the middle of the room to

turn back to her. "But I'd like to save explanations for later. Right now

we need to talk about this business of you being a slut."

"I'd really rather not," Chayara said after closing the door, avoiding his

gaze as she went back to her coffee. "And since I'll be checking out of

here soon I'd also appreciate your leaving now."

"Not until I say what I came to," Rego insisted, his tone flat and final.

"You've been doing a lot of talking about how much of a slut you are, but

I'm willing to bet you don't really know what a slut is."

"Of course I know what a slut is," Chayara returned with badly hidden

impatience, still not looking at him. "A slut is a girl who throws herself

at men, and if it's in your nature to be a slut there's nothing you can do

to change it."

"But that's just the point," Rego said at once, and his tone had, for some

reason, grown more gentle. "I recently found out that it's not in any girl's nature to be a slut. It's a mode of behavior with a couple of reasons causing the condition, so let's find out if those reasons apply to

you. Were you so insecure that you were willing to do anything to attract

the attention of men, up to and including letting them use your body?"

"No, of course not," Chayara answered with a small sound of ridicule,

glancing at Rego where he'd taken a seat on the end of her bed. "I had

more important things to worry about than attracting the attention of men.

But that doesn't - "

"Then maybe you were operating from the other cause," Rego said, interrupting her counterargument. "If a girl is sexually abused at a very

young age by an older male relative, she'll often be told how special she

is. She doesn't enjoy the sexual abuse but endures it in order to continue

being 'special,' but then the abuse comes to an end when she gets too

'old.' It often takes a few years, but then she starts to run after men
in
order to regain the special feeling, or to get even with her abuser by
giving others what only he had for so long. Does that reason apply
to
you?"

"No, you know it doesn't," Chayara said, her coffee forgotten as
she
stared at the disturbance in Rego's expression. "I was a virgin when
you
took me to your bed... But what you said doesn't make any sense.
If that

kind of behavior is caused by something other than a girl's nature,
why
would a mother warn a daughter against 'acting like a slut?' If a
daughter
didn't have those reasons moving her, there would be no danger of
- "

"I think you just got part of the truth," Rego said with a smile that
had
no amusement in it. "If the daughter wasn't popular, she could end
up
trading her dignity for a taste of that popularity she wants so badly.
And

you have to remember that most people still don't understand why
some
girls act like that. They see the actions without knowing what
caused
those actions, then jump to the conclusion that the girl involved
wants to
act like that. I didn't understand myself until Jerman showed me a
study
that dug for the truth and found it."

Chayara felt very disturbed over what Rego had said, so much so
that it
took a good minute before she remembered the flaw in his

argument.

"What you say may be true, but that doesn't explain why I acted the way I

did," she stated, almost too confused to think. "You can't deny that what

I did wasn't what a normal woman would do, so - "

"Chayara, you were drugged," Rego interrupted again, now speaking slowly

and emphasizing each word. "I could see that the girl I meant to take to

bed wasn't likely to make an effort even to be adequate not to speak of

good, so I took care of the matter in advance. I fed you the Green Glow

and called it medication, and you never knew the difference. It had been

too long since the last time I'd had a woman for me to want a struggle

instead of enjoyment. The Green Glow guaranteed my enjoyment."

A headshake should have helped Chayara's thinking to clear, but for some

reason it didn't. Now that Rego had mentioned it, she finally remembered

the awful "medication" he'd given her. She'd never had anything like it

before, and if it had really been a medication against the spread of disease she should have at least read about it. The logical basis for her

refusal to believe Rego was suddenly beginning to crumble...

"It should be clear by now that you aren't really a slut," Rego said after

a moment while Chayara's head continued to spin. "The girl in those Dreams

you experienced... Chances are good she was trying to recapture what she'd

had with 'daddy' by going after older men. You do understand and

believe

what I've been saying, I hope."

"Yes, I understand what you're trying to say," Chayara told him

with a

sigh, a final point having forced itself to her attention. "You drugged me

that first time and that's why I behaved the way I did, but the drug doesn't account for the way I behaved afterward. I kept trying to get back

into your bed, and that isn't normal behavior for anyone. If you think

I'll believe that the drug hung on for that long, I have to tell you I'm not that gullible."

"Stubborn is what you are, but that's perfectly all right," Rego said,

a

touch of annoyance easily seen in his gray eyes. "You do need to have all

your objections answered, and this is the time for it. Falk - your uncle -

was delighted that your luck made you stow away aboard my ship, but there

was a reason for his delight that he didn't mention until later. Falk loved the idea that your luck approved of me just as much as he did,

otherwise the luck would never have gotten you onto my ship. It seems that

Falk and your father agreed some time ago that I was the perfect match for

you. They want us to marry, Chayara, and so does your luck.

That's why you

kept trying to get back into my bed. You knew that the place is supposed

to be yours."

Chayara knew that sitting with your mouth open isn't very attractive, but

for a very long moment there was nothing else she could do. Shock

had a

habit of freezing you in place, and once the shock began to fade she found

herself able to speak nothing but incoherent sounds.

"Yes, I know, that's a lot to absorb all at once, but I'm sure you can do

it," Rego said as he leaned forward to take her hand. "I think you may be

trying to deny that your luck wants us to be married, but the answer to an

earlier question of yours should settle the matter. You asked how I found

you when you left nothing of a trail, didn't you?"

A nod was all Chayara could manage, so she nodded. Rego's hand tightened

just a little around her hand and he smiled.

"The way I found you was pure luck," he said, and now those eyes were

filled with amusement. "Your father was the one who suggested the idea,

and even though I privately considered him crazy I still went along with

it. He got out a map of the city and the surrounding area, I sat down near

the map, then I put a hand over the map and closed my eyes. It took no

more than seconds before my hand started to move, and when my finger

touched the map I opened my eyes to see that I was touching a place near

the public port. I called my new offices then and had them start an official inquiry with all the hotels in the area about someone of your

description having registered yesterday. There was only one other person

fitting your description found, but she had checked out early so I came

directly here. And now you have a very important decision to make."

"Decision?" Chayara said, still more than a little confused and lost.

"What are you talking about?"

"You have to decide if you really do want to marry me," Rego answered,

less amusement and more worry in the gaze that clung to her face.

"When

Falk said he and your father wanted me to be your husband, I felt more

elation than when I was told I'd be governor here. But you and I have been

through some unpleasant experiences, so if you would prefer to have

someone else as your husband then I'll just step aside. Everything you

went through thinking you were a slut was my fault, and if you can't forgive me for causing you such ... turmoil, then I can't really blame you."

He'd let her hand go by then, and Chayara suddenly discovered that her

thinking had completely cleared. Ideas flowed as quickly as they always

did, so it wasn't very long before she knew exactly what to say and do.

"You're wrong about everything being all your fault," Chayara said as she

rose from the chair to walk to Rego and sit down on his lap. "If I hadn't

thought I knew it all I wouldn't have gone flying off on a flight of fantasy that I took for reality. I am tempted to doubt that story

about

how you found me, but it's much too outrageous to be anything but the

truth. It looks like everything including my luck wants me to marry you,

so who am I to refuse?"

"Do you mean that?" Rego asked, his arms around her in the same way hers

were around his neck. "If you have any doubts - "

"I have no doubts," she stated, this time interrupting him. "As long as

you don't give me any more Dreams to experience, we shouldn't have much

trouble getting along at all."

His grin matched her smile, and then they were kissing the way she would

have dreamed about if she'd let herself hope that this man would ever be

hers. The kiss was lovely and long, bringing to mind something else

Chayara wanted to share with Rego, and as soon as his lips left hers he

look her arms from around his neck. That made Chayara think he felt the

same and was about to make love to her, but instead he suddenly turned her

so that she was face down across his lap.

"What are you doing?" Chayara demanded, struggling to free herself in a

way she hadn't done on the ship. "I thought we were all through with this

kind of thing."

"We'll be all through with it once you've been punished for running off

without a word to anyone," Rego answered as he pulled down her pants and

undies. "The worry almost ate me alive, and if you ever try the same again

you'll regret it for a good deal longer than you will this time."

Chayara squawked at the first smack of his hand, but before long she was

howling rather than squawking. The spanking he gave her was

harder than

any of the others had been, but the time wasn't quite as long as she'd

been afraid it would be. Her bottom flared with pain before the spanking

was over, his hand coming down again and again, but a single idea was all

she was able to think about.

Would he make love to her afterward? What would Nikki do to make certain

he did...?

THE END

