

Chains Released

Chapter 1

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Jake Killen woke up to a throbbing head and an awareness that he lay on something lumpy and not very comfortable. It took some effort for him to turn to one side, and then he had to fight himself into a sitting position. Sitting up made his head spin even more, but once the dizziness eased up he could at least look around at where he was.

Light came into the room through a couple of small windows high up in one of the walls. The room itself was dirty and not very big, holding nothing but the pallet Jake sat on and a second pallet holding a still-unconscious Tandro. Why he and Tandro hadn't been killed was a question Jake wished he knew the answer to, but at the moment he wasn't able to worry about ulterior motives. As long as he was still alive it would be possible to escape at some point, hopefully a point that would be reached before they were given too much pain...

"Oh, my head," Tandro groaned, and then the native was also forcing himself to sit up with one hand to the head he'd mentioned. "What happened, and where are we?"

"This time we were attacked with clubs instead of knives, and I

have no idea where we are," Jake answered, moving just a little to look directly at Tandro.

"Since there was no one else on the street at the time of the attack, we're probably the only prisoners who were taken. You do remember that no one else was around, don't you?"

Tandro winced as he looked at Jake sharply, but happily the other man got the point Jake wanted him to. If Tain was as good as Jake thought she was, she'd gotten herself and Ennie out of harm's way before the attack was over. Their attackers might not know about the two slaves who'd been following the pack horses, and if they didn't know about the girls he didn't want Tandro telling them.

"Yes, I do remember that there was no one else on the street," Tandro finally said with a very faint smile. "That has to be why they jumped us at just that time. But I wonder if it's possible that someone saw what happened and is right now telling the guard about it. If so, we could be out of here in no time."

"That's possible, so let's hope it's true," Jake agreed, but only to reassure his friend and companion. Tain would probably decide against telling the guard anything, since she didn't know about the relationship he and Tandro had developed with Captain Sovri. Jake had been too busy messing around with Tain and then trying to apologize to keep the woman informed about what was going on, and now he was paying for that stupidity.

Tandro lapsed into silence, so Jake did the same. In a few minutes his head was feeling fractionally better, due entirely to the quiet, so he was hoping that the silence would go on for

a while. It did continue for a short while, and then someone opened the door to the room and walked in. The man was fairly large and on the heavy side, but those weren't the most interesting things about him. His vest and knife belt and sheathe were covered in jewels, the most ostentatious display of wealth Jake had seen on this planet.

"How nice, you're both awake," the newcomer said as he swaggered a few more steps into the room. He also looked from Jake to Tandro with a very disturbing smile on his face, a smile that made Jake's insides tighten.

"In case you were wondering, my name is Himlin."

"Why am I not surprised?" Jake said as he got slowly to his feet, seeing out of the corner of his eye that Tandro also stood. "What I don't understand, though, is why you changed tactics. The first two times you sent men with knives."

"But this time men with knives would have done me more harm than good,"

Himlin said, his smile changing to a very cold stare. "You two have lodged an official complaint against me, and you have to be still living to withdraw that complaint. Which you'll do either later today or tomorrow, depending on when I decide to send you out. I haven't made up my mind about that yet."

"And how do you expect to get us to withdraw that complaint?" Tandro asked in his calm and quiet way. "If we walk into guard headquarters either badly beaten or hurt in some other way, they'll know our decision was forced on us. As I understand it, forcing someone to withdraw a complaint is also against the law around here."

"You're right, it is," Himlin agreed, a flash of cruel anticipation appearing momentarily in the coldness of his gaze. "But I now have a way around that law, and you can thank your friend over there for supplying the way. I'll admit I probably wouldn't have thought of the idea on my own... Kneel to your master, slaves."

Jake had only just started to wonder why he wasn't making any attempt to jump Himlin when he found out the hard way. His body knelt without any direction from his mind, and Tandro did exactly the same. That told Jake he and Tandro had been given the slave drug, after which they'd been ordered not to make any trouble. Being unconscious hadn't kept them from hearing the order, and now that they were awake they were able to obey it.

"At first the idea of men being made into slaves outraged me, but that was only at first," Himlin said as he looked down at them with grim pleasure.

"Once I thought about it for a little while I realized that some men deserve to be enslaved, if only to teach them a lesson about what not to do. If you then add in the opportunity their master would have to take out some of his anger on the ones who made him angry to begin with, you end up with a really good idea. Uncover your bodies completely."

Jake and Tandro had no choice but to obey, and in no time at all they were kneeling naked.

Silently cursing himself out for having such a big mouth did Jake no good at all, especially when Himlin ordered them to stand up and follow him. The damage was already done, and now he and Tandro had to survive the results of Jake's bone-headed inspiration.

The next room wherever they were was at least three times larger than their original room, and some of the men who had captured Jake and Tandro were lounging around in chairs. In the middle of the other chairs was a larger one that was empty, which told Jake where Himlin would sit.

There were also two things standing not far from the chairs that looked like wooden saw horses, and Himlin gestured to them.

"Each of you stand behind one of the forms facing one another," the slaver directed as he headed for his chair. "Since you're both so concerned with what's done to female slaves, it's only fair that you find out first hand what their lot in life is like."

Jake would have enjoyed at least hesitating before obeying Himlin, but even that wasn't allowed him - or Tandro. The other man walked to the second saw horse which stood about five feet away from Jake's, and when he put himself behind the thing they were facing one another.

"Good," Himlin said, and Jake was sure that the slaver had seated himself.

"Now bend over the forms just a bit, but not so far that you can't still see each other."

It turned out to be necessary to hold to the top of what Himlin called a form in order to bend over and still be able to see Tandro, so that was the position Jake found himself in. The sight of Tandro in the same position looked disturbingly familiar to Jake, but before he was able to figure out why he felt disturbed he was distracted in a very unpleasant way.

"No, don't tense your muscles in an effort to resist," Himlin said, making Jake want to curse out loud. "You're slaves, and slaves aren't permitted to resist."

Which meant there was nothing to stop the person behind Jake from thrusting what had to be an insertion into Jake's backside. He could see the same thing being done to Tandro even as he felt it being done to him personally, and the grin on the face of the man behind Tandro filled Jake with the need to kill. But he couldn't kill, he wasn't being allowed to, and that made the situation ten times worse.

"Slaves are required to be obedient and pleasing at all times," Himlin said as Jake fought not to move around at the urging of the insertion. "My two newest slaves have been very disobedient and not at all pleasing, so now they're going to be punished. Slaves need to know what being bad slaves will bring them."

Jake's stomach had already clenched at the sight of what the man behind Tandro held because he knew there was another man behind him also holding a switch. If Himlin had decided to have them whipped, Tandro would probably be as happy as Jake; there are times

when intense pain is much preferable to less pain and intense humiliation. But they weren't being given the choice, especially not when Himlin wanted to send them to withdraw their complaint - A sound hissed out of Jake's throat at the feel of the first stroke across his backside, a painful stroke that made him move in a way he'd been trying to avoid. The movement combined with the sight and sound of Tandro being given a first stroke, and then Jake felt the second stroke land. He and Tandro weren't being switched at exactly the same time, an oddity Jake didn't understand.

It took half a dozen very painful strokes of the switch before Jake did understand what was being done. He was being made to watch Tandro's switching just as Tandro was watching his own, and after half a dozen strokes Jake was flinching and moving even when only Tandro was being struck. It was like doubling the punishment, and that insertion made the time pure hell. Not moving had become impossible, and Jake was horribly aware of how aroused he had become.

It came to Jake that if he'd been asked before now just how bad he considered a switching to be, he would not have hesitated in saying that it couldn't be thought of as fun but certainly wasn't all that bad. That conclusion came, of course, before he was made to stand bent over and do nothing but writhe as the thin branch was brought down hard on his backside again and again. He could feel his flesh quivering even when the switch wasn't hitting him, and anticipating the next stroke made the stroke worse when it came.

After a very short while Jake wanted to howl every time another stroke landed, and it was all he could do not to let the howl become audible.

Tandro had begun to grunt very low when he was struck, and then he began to grunt even when Jake was struck. Tandro was being made to watch - and share - Jake's punishment even as Jake was watching and sharing his, and the humiliation rose so high that Jake was amazed it was possible for him to breathe around it.

The time of the switching seemed absolutely endless, but it couldn't have gone on for more than fifteen or twenty minutes before Himlin unexpectedly called a halt.

"All right, that's enough for now," Himlin said, clearly speaking to the men with the switches. "If their behavior isn't absolutely perfect for the rest of the day we'll give them the same again later, and maybe I'll have them switched even if their behavior is perfect. Since I'm the one who owns these slaves, I can do anything I like with them. That should prove how much better it is to own a slave rather than be one."

The laughter coming from all the men who had watched Jake's humiliation made that humiliation even worse, but there was still nothing Jake could do to change things. The slaver wanted him and Tandro to wish they were masters again instead of slaves, but the tactic wasn't working the way the fool expected. Jake was now even more opposed to slavery, not to mention silently promising himself Himlin's blood as soon as it became possible to take it...

"All right, slaves, you can straighten up now but don't try to touch or take out what was put

inside you," Himlin said after the laughter died down. "Come over here, and then kneel at my feet to either side of my chair. I like having slaves around me when I relax."

Again Jake had no choice but to obey, and walking proved to be even more painful than he'd expected. But painful wasn't the only thing walking turned out to be, and by the time he reached Himlin's chair it was all he could do not to groan. The insertion had made him aroused during the switching, and walking had increased the arousal. The men seated in the chairs grinned wide as they watched him and Tandro, some of them chuckling as others laughed outright. They could all see how Jake and Tandro felt, the two men's condition being more than a little obvious.

"Yes, I enjoy having obedience from my slaves," Himlin said once Jake and

Tandro had knelt painfully to either side of his feet. "And I also enjoy having slaves around me. Bring in the first one."

One of the men was near a door in the far side of the room, and when

Himlin gave his order the man near the door turned and opened it. The way the man grinned was a hint Jake didn't want to believe, but the next moment the hint was reality that couldn't be denied. A really beautiful woman came in, moving with all the grace of a born and trained dancer, her naked body covered only with lengths of sheer lavender silk that were worse for Jake than complete nudity would have been.

The woman's dark hair hung down to her slender waist in bouncing waves, moving beyond her arms as she moved toward them. Most of her body was slender, but her breasts jutted against the silk to emphasize her small waist and rounded hips. Her lovely face wore a smile of welcome and encouragement, and actual amusement danced in her gorgeous blue eyes.

Jake's arousal was so intense and painful that he wanted to jump to his feet and use the woman no matter how many others were watching, but he'd been ordered to kneel and that order hadn't been rescinded. When Tandro groaned aloud, it took all of Jake's will not to do the same.

The music of a flute sounded suddenly, and the woman began to dance to the music. The flute-player had apparently followed the woman into the room, but Jake hadn't noticed the small man until he began to play. The way the woman swayed and turned and stepped and posed was sheer hell for Jake, and even closing his eyes didn't help much.

"I expect you slaves to watch this other slave's every move," Himlin's voice came, instantly ruining Jake's feeble escape attempt. "She's been trained for a specific purpose, and I want to know if that purpose has been achieved."

So Jake was forced to watch the dancer as she moved in a very small amount of space in front of Himlin. Jake's hands had turned to fists where they rested on his thighs, an outward admission that the ache in his backside wasn't enough of a distraction. His body flared with the demand of his need, but he wasn't being allowed to see to that need. He was just being

allowed to have the need increase, higher and higher without the least hope of getting it taken care of.

And then an odd thought came to Jake in spite of his barely being able to think. Himlin had said that the slave had been trained for a specific purpose, but he hadn't said exactly what that purpose was. It was just possible that Himlin meant to question him and Tandro after the girl finished dancing, and if they came up with the proper purpose of the girl's training they might be allowed to use her. Part of Jake was very ashamed that he would even consider taking advantage of a slave like that, but the rest of him needed release too badly to worry about the niceties. If he ever got away he could find the girl and apologize, but right now...

Right now Jake knew he had to figure out the answer to the question he'd be asked, so he watched the girl's dance carefully. Her movements were graceful but they were also slow and deliberate, the way she held to the silk and occasionally moved it emphasizing all the rest. Her gaze slid from one of the men watching her to the next, the smile on her face provocative, the look in her eyes the least bit challenging. Her hips moved in a way that turned Jake's mouth even drier, and - That's it, Jake thought when the realization forced its way through to his conscious mind. She's been trained to entice men into wanting to rape her, and the training has been very effective. If she would just come close enough for me to grab her...

But the girl didn't come close enough to be grabbed, only almost close enough. Out of the corner of his eye Jake could see that Tandro was writhing where he knelt, something that Jake would have also done if he hadn't had a ten-point-steel grip on himself. His intense interest couldn't be missed by anyone who looked at him, but at least he wasn't adding to his own humiliation by writhing.

The girl danced for a very long time, years and decades and centuries in Jake's estimation, but finally she went to her knees and bowed her head while she squirmed around a little and then the dance was over. The flute playing stopped while the men in the audience made loud sounds of appreciation, and then Himlin turned his head toward Jake.

"Well, slave, I can see that you liked the dance quite a lot," Himlin commented, making his men laugh again. "Now I'll find out if you also obeyed my orders. Without speaking aloud, tell me if you're able to say whether the female slave's special training has been effective - and that you know what she's been trained to do."

Jake nodded his head, the only way left him to show that he'd figured out the answer to the question, but Himlin didn't go on to ask that question. He turned to Tandro and said the same thing he'd said to Jake, but Tandro didn't show a nod the way Jake had. Tandro shook his head instead, which told Jake why Himlin had silenced him. If Jake had spoken aloud, he might have been able to share his knowledge with Tandro.

"Oh, that's really too bad," Himlin said when he saw Tandro's headshake, the slaver pretending to be upset on Tandro's behalf. "I'm afraid you're going to regret not having the answer, but maybe you won't be alone regretting the lack. Your friend claims to know how to answer my question, but maybe he doesn't know at all. It's time to find out, so tell me,

slave, what was the female slave trained to do?"

"She was trained to entice men into wanting to rape her," Jake said, suddenly wondering if his answer was the one Himlin was looking for. "And yes, her training has been very effective."

Those words brought laughter from all the men again, and Himlin wasn't shy about joining in. The slaver enjoyed his laugh while even the dancer smiled, and then he half leaned down to Jake.

"What a good slave you are, obeying your master so well," Himlin said as he patted Jake's head. "You've earned a small reward, which I know you'll be grateful for. Girl, go and bend over the form and raise that silk up to your waist."

Jake's mouth turned even drier as the girl instantly obeyed the orders she'd been given. She jumped to her feet and hurried to the form Jake himself had used, then raised the bottom of her silk costume before bending over the form. She was in exactly the right position to be used, and Jake waited tensely for permission to go and do that using. He needed a woman, needed her desperately, and even putting on a show for his captors wouldn't - make the time - a complete waste - It actually took Jake that long to realize that Himlin wasn't giving him permission to use the girl, but had gotten to his own feet and walked over to her. Himlin had his body wrap open in no time, showing that he was almost as badly aroused as Jake, and then the slaver was thrusting himself into the girl. The girl cried out when that very large tool was pushed into her, but she made no attempt to escape the following use. Not that she could have escaped even if she'd wanted to...

Terrible disappointment flooded over Jake, the emotion so sharp that for the first time in his adult life he really wanted to cry. He'd done exactly what he was supposed to do, had been praised and promised a reward, and then the reward he'd hoped for was snatched out of his hands by his master. Even though doing something like that was his master's prerogative, Jake still wanted to cry. He'd have to be careful to be much better the next time, or else this would just happen again - Jake shook his head hard as anger flooded his mind, chasing out all those alien thoughts. He didn't want to cry, he wanted to hurt Himlin for tormenting him, and also for giving him more orders while he was unconscious than he'd realized. If his previous reaction hadn't been so totally alien to his normal way of looking at things, he might not have been able to thrust the ideas away so easily. Jake could have ended up an eager slave, anxious to do well for the man who had made himself Jake's master...

It would have been nice if Jake could have spoken aloud the words that now filled his mind, but asking for trouble was definitely a bad idea. Himlin had probably given Jake the kind of orders that were given to female slaves, having no idea that the same kind of orders would be useless to hold a man. Which was a damned good thing, or Jake would have been really deep in it right now.

And the only question left now, Jake thought, was how much worse it would get. That it would get worse was so sure a thing that Jake would have willing to bet every cent he owned

on the certainty. And he couldn't even hope for rescue. Tain would be a fool if she didn't get Ennie and herself out of the town and back to base, but she might have been that kind of fool if Jake hadn't ... enjoyed himself.

It's my own fault, Jake thought as every ache and sense of need intensified in his awareness. This will be going on for a very long time, and I have no one but myself to blame. Not that that makes acceptance any easier... What the hell else will Himlin do to us...?

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Chains Released

Chapter 2

copyright 2003 by Sharon Green Himlin took his time with the girl slave, and from the way Tandro moved just a little where he knelt Jake knew that his friend was suffering at least as much as Jake himself. Every time the girl moaned Jake's suffering increased a notch, but there was a limit to the increase. The rise stopped just short of the point where Jake would have come just by watching, which showed another segment of the orders he'd been given. Without permission from his "master," he was allowed nothing in the way of relief.

When Himlin finished with the girl he closed his body wrap again and sauntered back to his chair. The girl seemed to be deeply satisfied, and it took a minute or so before she was able to leave the form and follow Himlin to kneel at his feet - just out of Jake's reach. She was also out of Tandro's reach, and having her so close but still beyond touching and use made her presence even worse for Jake.

"And now for the regret I spoke of earlier," Himlin said once the girl knelt in front of him, but the slaver's gaze was on Tandro rather than the girl. "A slave is required to be pleasing at all times, and you, slave, were less than pleasing by being unable to answer my questions. Go to the form and bend over it the way the girl did."

Jake watched as Tandro obeyed the orders he'd been given, but not even the expressionless expression Tandro showed was enough to keep Jake from knowing how really disturbed his friend was. The native tried hard not to limp - or flinch - as he made his way to the wooden form and bent over it, but Jake was sure Tandro knew what was coming as well as he did. Slaves who weren't pleasing were punished...

"Your reward, slave, is to know that you won't be punished - this time," Himlin said, and Jake glanced up to see that the slaver now looked at him. "You should also be rewarded with the knowledge that you've pleased your master just as a good slave is supposed to do. Now let's enjoy teaching a new slave his proper place in life."

By that time one of the slaver's men had positioned himself behind Tandro, a switch in his hand. Again Jake knew that a whipping would have been easier to take and watch, but he and Tandro weren't going to be given a chance to salve their pride. Humiliating pain was what slaves were given, and that's all that Jake and Tandro could look forward to. Stubborn



defiance had a way of melting back faster in the presence of humiliation than in the face of real pain...

Not that there wasn't real pain involved. Tandro couldn't quite swallow a hiss when the first stroke of the switch reached his backside, and the sound of the thin branch striking tender flesh even made Jake wince. As Tandro himself had once pointed out, no one in their right mind wanted to experience a second switching right on top of a previous one. But the observation hadn't been enough to save Tandro, and now an opinion was being turned into reality.

The second switching was given at the same pace as the first, and Tandro's body writhed even when the switch wasn't striking his backside. Every stroke added to the red the skin of his behind had turned, and by the third stroke Tandro was making soft sounds of pain. By the sixth stroke the sounds weren't quite as soft, but the last four strokes, landing

"smack! ... smack! ... smack! ... smack!" with precision and strength didn't change the volume of the sound. At that point Himlin gestured to his man with the switch, and the man stepped back.

"All right, slave, you can come back now and kneel in place again," Himlin said, his tone showing how much he'd enjoyed the show. "If you liked the punishment and want more of it, just continue to be displeasing. Your master will be more than happy to oblige you."

Tandro straightened and began to return to his place at the feet of

Himlin, but Jake could see that the other man was holding his breath against the added pain of movement. And Tandro was so aroused that Jake wondered why the other man's skin hadn't yet burst. By rights the pain should have ended Tandro's arousal, but thanks to those insertions he and Tandro were being allowed nothing of any kind of relief. Jake's knees had started to hurt from the way he was being kept kneeling, but that wasn't doing him any good either.

And it seemed that nothing would do him or Tandro any good. Once the native was kneeling, Himlin signaled to one of his men and a second female slave was allowed into the room. This second girl was easily as beautiful as the first and dressed in the same kind of silks, and when the flute player began to make music again Jake really did wish he could cry. His first thought was a silent demand to know just how many of these girls Himlin meant to parade in front of him and Tandro, but then Jake realized that he didn't really want to know.

Whatever the number, the time would be as far from pleasant as it's possible to get. Without the least chance of escape...

\* \* \*

Tain started to lead Ennie back in the direction they'd come from, having decided that reaching the gate they'd used to enter the town would be a better idea than trying for a different gate. She kept close to the back of the building, moving through shadow whenever

possible, but hadn't gone far when a strange woman stepped out of a doorway only a few feet ahead of them. The woman wore the thin, knee-length smock of a free woman of the lower classes, and held up a hand toward Tain.

"Don't be afraid, I only want to help you," the woman called softly.

"Come inside and we can talk."

"Do you think we can trust her?" Ennie asked in a whisper from behind Tain. "What if there are men inside and she's only luring us into slavery again?"

"Why would men bother doing it that way?" Tain murmured back, having already considered the point. "As far as they would know, they'd only have to step outside and order us to come to them. And now that you mention it, there's something I should have done sooner. Don't take orders from anyone but me."

A glance back showed Tain the way Ennie nodded almost distractedly, the momentary animation already beginning to slip away. Being in danger obviously let Ennie escape the depression holding her for short periods of time, but the relief wasn't, unfortunately, permanent. Well, Tain knew there was nothing she could do about the problem right now, so she led Ennie toward the doorway the strange woman had come out of.

The door stood slightly ajar, so Tain pushed it open further before stepping inside. Three women stood waiting in the empty warehouse, all of them dressed alike, and the woman who'd spoken a moment before took one step away from her companions.

"It's all right, we won't hurt you," the woman said with a smile. "I'm

Risdin, and I also used to be a slave, but now we're all free. To prove it, I'll say don't take anyone's orders ever again. It's just that easy to be free of the drug."

Tain knew that being freed would have been just that easy - if she hadn't been given orders not to take orders from anyone but Killen. And if Ennie hadn't been given orders not to listen to anyone but Tain herself. She felt the urge to tell the woman Risdin about not being able to take orders from her, but since she didn't really have to protect herself from Risdin the urge was easy to push aside. Since she knew that the order she'd been given had been meant for use with men, ignoring the required response was easier than it would have been ordinarily.

"Why are you risking yourselves by helping us?" Tain asked, a question that really did have to be put. Risdin was of average height and build, just like the two women behind her, but she was the only one of the three smiling. She had brown hair and seemed to have matching eyes, and was only faintly pretty. The two women behind her were downright plain.

"We're risking ourselves for you because others risked themselves for us," Risdin answered, her face sobering. "We saw you run when your owners were attacked, but we didn't show ourselves right away. Some slaves in your place would have gone back to the men once the fighting was over, and if you'd done that we couldn't have helped you. But you didn't go

back, which meant you wanted to escape, so now we can help. Let's start with giving you some real food to eat."

"I - think we need a few more answers first," Tain said, ignoring the way Risdin's gesture directed them more deeply into the building. "You seem to be saying that you and those others were once slaves yourselves, but if that's true then I don't understand why you're in this town. You ought to be out of here, to make sure you aren't caught and enslaved again."

"We were out of here, but we volunteered to come back," Risdin said, her face wearing an odd expression. "We fear slavery as much as the rest of our group, but some of us can't bear to just hide out and do nothing to help free as many women as we can. We stay here for about a month at a time, and then others of the group come to take our place. During the seasons when these warehouses are in use we hide elsewhere, but we prefer this place because it's closest to our secret way out of town."

"You shouldn't have told her that, Risdin," one of the other women said at once with a frown. "We still don't know if these two are real runaways or decoys to help catch us."

"She didn't tell me anything I hadn't already guessed," Tain said just as quickly before Risdin could speak. "If you three had come in through a gate without any men to act as your protection, you probably would have been taken as soon as you were out of sight of the guardhouse. And you don't have to worry that we're acting for the slavers. I'd sooner cut my own throat than give a slaver the time of day."

"I don't think they're decoys, Celene," the third woman said just as the second opened her mouth to argue. "Look at that other one, at the way she's staring at nothing. The slavers would never use someone like that as a decoy."

"She's ... had a hard time," Tain said, turning to put an arm around Ennie. "Once we're out of here I'm sure she'll do better, but right now ... Come on, Ennie. Our new friends here are inviting us for a late breakfast, and it would be rude to refuse them."

Ennie didn't really respond to Tain's words, but she did let herself be urged into motion. The woman Celene, who had limp blond hair and hard blue eyes, was the only one who hesitated before coming forward to help with Ennie, but after a moment she did the same as her friends. Ennie's pain and distance were too deep to be an act, and all three women seemed to know that.

The third woman went to close the door Tain had left open before coming back to the small crowd, Risdin pretty much leading the way toward the right side of the warehouse. There were a few doors in that direction which suggested the presence of rooms rather than an open floor, and when they reached one of the doors and Risdin opened it Tain found that her guess was right. Behind the door was a fairly large room that looked cleaner and sturdier than the rest of the warehouse but just as empty.

"If you get sloppy and leave signs that you're around, you end up being retaken," Risdin said

as she gestured to the floor. "If you two will sit down and make yourselves comfortable, we'll have a meal put together for you in just a couple of minutes. Areen, will you close this door too, please?"

The third woman, Areen, turned and closed the door the way she had the outer one. She'd been staring at Ennie while Tain urged the girl to sit down on the floor, a heavy sadness in her brown eyes. Tain had the feeling that Areen might have been as bad off as Ennie at one time, and now felt a kinship with the girl. That Areen had pulled out of the depression said something about the woman's strength, a strength that her slender body and short brown hair didn't show signs of.

Risdin and Celene were busy moving aside one section of one of the room's walls, behind which there seemed to be quite a number of things. One of those things was a cast-iron grill, and after Risdin had dragged the thing out Celene filled it with charcoal. Getting a fire going didn't take long, and once the fire was burning well Risdin put a coffee pot on one side of the grill. Areen used the other side for a frying pan filled with eggs and potatoes, and in no time Tain's mouth began to water.

The food was ready before the coffee, but Areen didn't wait and neither did Tain. She accepted the metal plate handed to her and immediately began to stuff down the food, stopping only when she saw that Ennie was ignoring a similar plate.

"Ennie, you have to get your strength back," Tain said to the girl, speaking softly. "I'd really like you to eat as much of that food as you can hold, otherwise you'll be putting us and our new friends in danger. If we have to make a run for it at any point and you pass out, I can't see the rest of us just leaving you behind. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Tain was hoping hard that the girl wouldn't choose to ignore her, and for once her hopes came true. Ennie's head came up just a tad while she considered what Tain had said, and then she picked up the plate and began to eat. A glance at the three women showed Risdin smiling, Celene frowning, and Areen disturbed, but none of the three said anything. Relief at the silence let Tain go back to her own food, since she was fairly certain that she'd lied to Ennie. The three women most probably would not have risked stopping for Ennie if she fainted, but they'd realized that the truth was sometimes something that shouldn't be mentioned.

The coffee was ready by the time Tain had finished eating, and when Ennie refused a cup Risdin asked if Ennie would like to rest instead. The girl agreed that she would like to rest, so Areen got out a pallet that was downright fat with stuffing, put it against the far wall of the room, then arranged a blanket on it. Ennie seemed a bit steadier when she got up to go to the pallet, and once she'd lain down Areen came to join her two companions where they sat near Tain with coffee of their own.

"We can get you out of town tonight, once it gets dark," Risdin said to Tain in a low voice after tasting the coffee. Tain had already given her name and Ennie's, which had apparently made all the women feel better. "Our group has a few hiding places, but we know only one of

them so that's the one we'll take you to."

"That makes sense," Tain said after tasting her own coffee. The liquid was strong and unsweetened, but it added strength to what she'd gotten from the food. "If you happen to get captured, you won't be able to betray more than the one hiding place. But it's possible you won't betray anyone anyway unless you're tortured. Since you're still really under the influence of the drug, being given the drug a second time might not negate that order to ignore orders."

"You know, that never occurred to us," Risdin said after exchanging startled glances with the other two women. "We've never met anyone who was given the drug twice, so we don't know for certain what would happen. Do you know for certain?"

"No," Tain had to admit, but she'd also been trying to make up her mind about something. "Tell me, approximately how many women are in your group, and just how far are you prepared to go to be really free?"

"Why do you want to know how many of us there are?" Celene asked at once, suspicion flaring in her eyes again. "And what do you mean by really free? We're free right now and we mean to stay that way."

"You're not free of the drug and you're not free to walk the streets any time you please," Tain countered just as quickly, doing nothing to avoid that hard blue gaze. "I don't need to know exactly how many of you there are, but even if there are no more than fifty or so that's still too many to spend the rest of their lives in hiding. The rest of your lives. If there was a way to get rid of slavery for good, would you be willing to take a few chances?"

"What way, and what kind of chances?" Risdin asked as Celene just stared at Tain. "And why do I have the feeling that you're not like the rest of us? You should be both terrified and delighted at having been offered our help, but you don't seem to be either. What makes you so different?"

"I'm different because I'm not a native of this world," Tain said, having consciously overridden the need to keep her true origins secret.

"I'm part of a group that's trying to end slavery on this world, and it was just bad luck that my partner and I ended up as slaves ourselves. I meant to take my partner back to where our people can help her, but there's really something else I ought to do first. If I can count on you ladies getting Ennie out of here in case something happens to me, I can do that something else with a clear head."

"Why would people from another world care about what happens to us?" Areen asked, a question Tain had expected from Celene rather than from her. "Slavery has been going on for years and years, but now, suddenly, you're in the mood to stop it?"

"Our people have been trying for years, but the sad fact is that they expected to get somewhere with diplomacy," Tain explained, grimacing to show her opinion of the mindless

waste of time. "Diplomacy may work when you're dealing with people exactly like yourself, but when there's a big enough difference in cultures diplomacy doesn't stand much of a chance. That's why we were sent, to see if we could find a different way to settle the problem, but we're not alone. One of the two men you saw taken prisoner is one of mine."

The various revelations had the three women looking at each other, but for a long moment no one said anything. It was definitely disturbance that filled the three, but when Risdin looked directly at Tain again Tain saw something that might have been hope.

"That must be why the men were captured instead of killed," Risdin said, and Tain had the impression that she spoke more for the benefit of the other two women than for Tain's. "They have a plan, and someone wants to know what that plan is so they can stop it. Do you really think that whatever their plan is it will work?"

"Truthfully, I don't know," Tain admitted, refusing to let herself sigh.

"Ennie and I were originally on our own, but when the accident happened our people sent the two men to buy us out of slavery. I do know that they had some kind of meeting to attend that kept us from leaving this town, but they were taken before they could get to the meeting. What I want to do is free them from where they're being held."

"And you expect us to help with that?" Celene said with a snort of scorn.

"I don't know about you, but I swore off beating up on men twice my size."

"Well, it so happens that I didn't," Tain returned with the most evil grin she could produce. "Beating up on those men will be a true pleasure, but

I'm not fool enough to think I can take a large number of them all at once. What I want to do is sneak into that warehouse, wait until dark, and then break the two prisoners loose. But before I make my try I'll come back here and tell you that it's time. If I'm not back with the men an hour later at the most, you'll know that you have to take Ennie and get out of here."

"And what happens if you're found while you're sneaking around?" Celene demanded, her face showing that a struggle of some sort was going on inside her. "We still don't know if a second dose of the drug will put you back under their control, and even if it doesn't there's always that torture you mentioned. Sitting here waiting for you to get back could get us retaken."

"Not if only one of us waits for her," Risdin said before Tain could answer the objection, the dark-haired woman's body straightening where she sat. "I think this woman can do what she says, and I'm willing to risk my own freedom to help her. Help her help us, that is. You and Areen will take the girl and hide, and if a group of men come bursting in instead of Tain, you'll all run. I'll be able to keep from being recaptured long enough for you three to get away from the city and warn everyone in the hideout."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Tain agreed, sending Risdin a smile. "The only change I'd

make is that you do your own hiding, Risdin. That way if

I'm taken and the men come looking for you, they'll have to tear this place apart to find you. If the others are close enough to hear the noise, they'll know enough to run."

"I'm willing to stay close enough to hear the noise, assuming it happens,"

Areen said, the words not quite forced out of her. "Celene had a harder time than we did as a slave, so she has to be the one to take the girl farther away. Remembering what she went through will let her run as far and as fast as it's possible to go, and that's best for all of us."

Celene had looked as if she were trying to force herself to argue about who stayed close, but Areen's line of logic gave Celene a reason to simply nod her agreement. The decision was made, then, with everyone prepared to do her part, so they all went back to drinking coffee. Tain noticed that

Ennie hadn't moved from the pallet and the girl's eyes were closed, so it was possible that Ennie had fallen asleep. Tain sipped her coffee and hoped so, considering that the girl would need all the strength she could muster. Even if things went well, that would not be the same as having them go easily...

When she'd finished her coffee, Tain left the warehouse by the back door and made her cautious way to the front of the building. She'd considered letting the women take the red bands off her arms, then rejected the idea. If anyone saw her she wanted them to think she was a slave, a point she'd had to make with her three new companions. No man believed that a slave could be dangerous to him, which gave Tain a very large advantage. Taking off the bands and borrowing a change of clothes from one of the women would have thrown away the edge.

No one was in sight when Tain crossed the street to the warehouse Killen and Tandro had been taken into, but that didn't mean Tain simply opened the door and walked inside. Instead she made her way around to the back of the building, found a window, then peeked inside. There was still no sign of guards or anyone else, so she took a chance and opened the back door. Nothing but emptiness greeted her entrance, but she could hear voices from somewhere else in the building. Walls had been put up to divide the inner expanse, which ought to help Tain with her sneaking. Lurking behind walls was easier than lurking in shadows.

Ghosting around from place to place wasn't easy on Tain's nerves, but the search had to be made so she did it. She'd found a large room with chairs in it that could be seen through a crack in one of the walls, but there was no sign of Killen and Tandro. The narrow corridor she'd been using dead-ended just ahead, so Tain was about to retrace her steps to find a more productive corridor when she heard voices in the large room.

Looking through the crack again showed Tain that a number of men had entered the room, but again none of them were the two she searched for. For the second time she was about to

walk away when a big man entered the room from a doorway to the right. The big man wore a gaudily bejeweled vest and swordbelt, and right behind him came Killen and Tandro. The two men had been stripped naked, but they were still alive.

Now all she had to do was figure out a way to get them out of this place...

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Chains Released

Chapter 3

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At first Tain didn't understand what was happening. Not until the big man in the jewels ordered Killen and Tandro to the punishment forms and they obeyed without the slightest hesitation did the truth finally dawn. The drug that had, until now, been given to no one but women, was now being used on the two men.

I wonder what took them so long to think of the obvious, Tain thought as she watched Killen bend over the wooden form the way he'd been told to do. But maybe I'd do better wondering what caused the change of mind set. If it's unthinkable to use a drug for women on men, what would make it less unthinkable?

There was no easy answer to that question, so Tain dismissed the thought as she watched what was being done to Killen. The big, macho agent who'd had so much fun with her looked a lot less macho when the insertion was put in him, the same thing being done to Tandro. Tandro seemed to close his eyes for a moment, possibly remembering how he hadn't hesitated over his treatment of Ennie, but that was just the beginning of the native's regret - if regret it was.

The switching the two men were given looked extremely painful, and to make matters worse they were both aroused when they were finally allowed to straighten up. The other men in the room laughed at them as they made their way to the place where the man in the jeweled vest sat to kneel at his feet. Killen and his friend were being given the full treatment, and Tain couldn't help thinking that it couldn't have happened to a more deserving pair.

It wasn't possible to hear what the big boss said to his two new slaves, not even before the girl in the see-through silks was brought in to dance. The man in the fancy vest spoke softly to the two kneeling near him, and there was nothing in the way of an echo to bring even some of his words to where Tain stood. All she could do was watch the dance along with the men, hoping that something useful to her would soon happen.

But the only thing that happened was a sudden realization that Killen and Tandro - and the other men in the room - weren't nearly as bored with the dance as Tain was. When the girl finished her dance and knelt in front of the man in the vest, Killen looked ready to attack the girl and Tandro didn't seem any better. The man in the vest spoke to the two kneeling men one at a time, and then Killen said something. The something seemed to be what the man in



the vest wanted to hear, and he grinned as he sent the girl to bend over the wooden form Killen had used.

Tain knew at once that the girl would be used, and it was obvious that

Killen knew the same. Killen fairly quivered where he knelt, for some reason expecting to be allowed to go to the girl, but he ended up disappointed. It was the man in the vest who went and used the girl, which increased Killen's - and Tandro's - suffering.

Once the girl was kneeling again, Tandro was sent back to the wooden form to be switched a second time. It looked like Tandro had done something wrong or hadn't done something right enough, and the punishment he was given looked brutal. But not brutal enough for the native to accept what was done with stubborn courage. It's hard to be courageous when your bottom is being spanked, even if the spanking hurts more than being beaten up might. A spanking is a suitable punishment for a child; how are you supposed to show dignity and pride when you're being punished like a child?

Tain had already learned that lesson, and Tandro was taught the same thing thoroughly before he was allowed to go back to kneeling. When another dancing girl was brought in Killen looked like he wished he could cry, and

Tain didn't really blame him. She'd wondered if those insertions would be as terrible for a man as they were for a woman, and now it looked like the question had been answered.

The second dancer was used by another of the men in the room, and then a third dancer was brought in. After the third dancer was used by a third man, Killen was ordered to his feet and back to the wooden form. There had been some conversation with the man in the vest while the third girl danced, and this time it was Killen who hadn't done something in the proper way.

And there was a definite change from when Killen and Tandro had been switched and even from when Tandro had been punished alone. When the first stroke landed on Killen's backside he squeaked out an "Ow!" as he danced in place. The second stroke of the switch made him yell even louder and dance harder, and the third stroke made him cry. All the men in the room were laughing and so were the dancing girls, but that didn't stop Killen's performance. Every time the switch struck his bottom he howled and cried and danced with the pain, and Tandro now looked as if he wished he could close his eyes.

I'll bet Killen was ordered to act like a girl during the punishment, Tain thought once she'd gotten over the shock of seeing Killen doing something she would have sworn he'd never do. That man wants something from his two prisoners, and he knows he has to break them or he won't get whatever it is. But he can't afford to break them too far or he'd be using a whip on them instead of a switch. I wonder what it is that he wants...

That was another question Tain knew she couldn't answer, so it went on the mental shelf

along with her previous question and any others of the same kind that would come along later. She felt tempted not to watch the way Killen was being humiliated, but remembering that other persona he'd forced on her made her change her mind. If Killen survived what was done to him, there would now be a chance that he'd have a better understanding of just how awful the time had been for Tain.

Killen continued to howl and dance for a while after the switching stopped, and the tears definitely kept streaming down his face. Once his noise quieted a little he was ordered back to his place, and the way he limp-hopped back made his audience laugh all over again. It was hard for Tain to tell whether the male laughter or the female was worse for Killen, but when the man was back to kneeling his expression reminded Tain of Ennie.

The next few hours dragged by much too slowly. Each of the girls danced a second time, and after each dance a different man took the girl's use. Just about every man in the room got his jollies, all except Killen and Tandro. Those two were only allowed to watch while others were given relief, and it was perfectly obvious that they had no relief of their own.

When serving slaves began to enter with trays of food, it became clear that the man in the vest had called a meal break. Everyone was given the choice of actual food, but the everyone didn't include Killen and Tandro. Those two were given bowls with spoons, and Tain didn't have to look into the bowls to know they contained that cereal slaves were most often fed. Even the dancing girls were allowed real food, but the two newest slaves had to make do with the cereal.

Tain watched as Killen and Tandro stuffed down their food, obviously under orders to eat the tasteless fare. Once they finished they just knelt and watched everyone else eat real food, and once the others finished the dancing started again. The two kneeling men seemed to get a small amount of respite from their bodily demands during the meal, but once the dancing started again they went right back to where they'd been earlier.

More time went by, leading Tain to wonder how long it would be before darkness fell. It also came to her to wonder if Killen and Tandro would be left here in this warehouse or taken somewhere else once it was dark enough out. If the man in the vest left and took enough of his people with him, freeing Killen and Tandro shouldn't be hard at all. But if the two men themselves were taken somewhere else, Tain would have to try to follow

- without being spotted and captured.

Finally, at long, long last, the man in the vest stood up and stretched.

He said something to the two men still kneeling at his feet, and the two tried to stand up. After so long a time kneeling Killen and Tandro must have been in a lot of pain, and watching them force themselves to their feet showed Tain how much trouble they were having. Tandro actually fell on his first try, but the native spent no time at all lying still in an effort to ease the pain he felt. His second try was immediate, and this time he made it erect.

Once both of the men were standing, they headed for the door they'd come out of so many hours earlier. Their progress was on the slow side, but once they were through the doorway the door was pulled closed and two of the men in the room stood beside the door, one on each side. With that done the man in the vest spoke to the rest of his people, and then he led the way to a door opposite Tain's watchpost and to the left. The dancers brought up the rear with one of the men walking behind them, and in just a couple of minutes the room was empty of everyone but the two door guards.

Tain had shifted position on a regular basis during the past hours, so when she left the opening she'd been watching through she had no real trouble moving. She ghosted to the end of the corridor to the left, being very careful now, and got to the end of the closed-in area in time to see the man in the vest and the rest of his people leaving the warehouse through the door in front. Once the door closed Tain took a deep breath and let it out slowly, knowing that she had a fairly hard time ahead of her. She now had to wait for the two guards to be relieved, and only then would she be able to move. But first...

First she waited a short while to be certain the man in the vest and the rest of his people were gone, and then she made her careful way back to the warehouse across the street. There was no one outside, happily, so getting back to the other warehouse wasn't hard at all. Tain slid through the darkness to the back of the warehouse and went through the door carefully, then groped around for the candle and firemaker that had been left for her use.

When the candle was lit, Tain moved slowly toward the door that hid the living quarters the escaped slave women had been using. By now Risdin ought to know she was here, but it was possible the woman had taken a break. Tain had almost reached the door when the door was opened, but Risdin didn't step out. She simply opened the door widely enough to show she was alone, and then she waited.

"There are guards on my friend and I have to wait until the guards are replaced before I can do anything, but hopefully it won't be much longer." Tain had stopped a few feet from the door and her voice was relatively soft, but still loud enough to carry to where Risdin stood. "How are you doing?"

"Aside from being surprised I haven't had a heart attack, I'm not doing badly at all," Risdin answered, her grimace showing she wasn't really joking. "How badly did they hurt your friend?"

"Physically they didn't do anything to him that hasn't been done to women, but how he's taking it psychologically is another matter entirely," Tain answered with a sigh. "If a man isn't used to being treated like property, it can do a lot of harm to his mind."

"You can't mean they tried to make him a slave?" Risdin returned, her expression now looking shocked. "It isn't possible to do something like that to a man."

"It's more than possible if you give the man that slave drug," Tain pointed out, apparently shocking Risdin again. "Yes, they fed him the drug, and then they treated him the way they

would treat a disobedient female slave. He didn't enjoy it at all when they switched him twice."

"Imagine that," Risdin murmured distractedly, her mind seemingly busy with whirling thoughts. "Not enjoying being switched at someone's whim... So the drug does work on men as well as women. A lot of people believe only women can be affected because women are weak, but now we know that that isn't true. Celene thought I was being obscene and disgusting and dark, but it looks like she was wrong."

"What was she wrong about?" Tain asked, wondering what the other woman could be referring to.

"A slaver passing by with some new slaves accidentally dropped a pouch with a few doses of the drug, and I took the pouch and kept it."

Risdin's answer was accompanied by a spreading smile. "I had no idea why I wanted to keep it, maybe to let the drug act as something I could hate instead of hating the people around me, but now... Now I know that keeping the drug was pure inspiration."

"I think we can definitely do something with that," Tain said, her own thoughts starting to whirl. "Just make sure you don't run off on your own with some wild idea about getting even. Proper getting even takes planning and preparation, not to mention all the help you can find. If you can make yourself be patient I'll be delighted to do what I can to help."

"Be patient," Risdin said with another grimace, but the wildness was beginning to fade from her eyes. "You don't ask for much in return for your help, do you? Okay, yes, I promise I won't run off on my own. You'd just better know that when it comes to getting even I don't have a whole lot in the way of patience."

"You won't have to have a lot of patience, since we can't afford to wait very long before moving," Tain assured her. "I just have to figure out the best direction to do that moving, and my friend might be able to help. I think he knows something we need to know, and with that in mind I'd better get back. Don't get sloppy or careless while I'm gone."

"The same right back at you," Risdin countered with a feral grin. "If you get grabbed you'll miss out on what promises to be a lot of fun."

"When there's a purpose behind your fun, you tend to enjoy it a lot more," Tain said, then turned and went back to the warehouse's door. Blowing out the candle, making sure the wick was cool, and then putting the candle down on the floor again took only a couple of minutes, and by then Tain's night vision had returned so she could step outside. There was still no one around, but Tain didn't let that make her careless. She slid through the darkness the way she had earlier, listening to every sound the night air brought, and then she entered the other warehouse again.

It took about three hours before the guards were relieved by a different pair of men, and the only way Tain could stand the wait was to do it in hunting mode. When you're out hunting,

either game or men, the only way to make the hunt successful is to have patience. If you move too soon you either go hungry or end up dead or captured, so Tain forced patience on herself and waited. Once the two guards had been replaced it was only necessary to wait a few minutes to make certain the first two would not be coming back, and then the waiting was over.

As Tain moved around to the door that would take her into the room where the guards waited, she found that she was actually grateful for the so-called clothes she wore. If she'd been dressed in any other way she probably would have had a problem, but as it was...

The attention of both guards came to Tain the instant she stepped through the door, which hardly came as a surprise. Sneaking up on the two men would have been impossible, so Tain simply strolled toward them in the most provocative way she could manage. Her smile was teasing as well as faintly challenging, and the men got the exact idea she wanted them to.

"It looks like Himlin wants to be sure we don't fall asleep," one of the men said to the other without moving his delighted gaze from Tain.

"I think I can promise that I won't fall asleep."

"Hell, I'd do her even if I was asleep," the second man said with a very wide grin. "I heard that the ones who were with Himlin earlier got to use those dancers, and I've been hot ever since. Now I get to put the hot to use."

Neither of the men moved from his post as Tain approached, but they did start to discuss who would get to use her first. That gave Tain enough time to get into position, and once she was close enough to the first man she didn't hesitate. Throwing a fist into the man's throat put him down at once, and while the second was frozen in shock Tain jump-kicked him in the face. The man's neck snapped just the way it was supposed to, which let Tain turn back to her first victim. That man's throat and windpipe were crushed, and after thrashing around some he'd fallen unconscious. In just a short while he would be dead, so Tain was able to turn her attention to the door they'd guarded.

Beyond the door was a fairly small room, a single candle providing an even smaller amount of light. Killen and Tandro were stretched out face down on pallets, and the very brief, mostly silent fight outside their door hadn't wakened them from what looked like exhausted sleep. Tain hesitated only a second, and then she was moving to where Killen lay. When she reached him she knelt beside the pallet, then put a hand over his mouth.

"No talking and no struggling right now," she said when Killen's eyes flew open. "You'll only take orders from me, both of you. Do you understand?"

Tandro had awakened only a moment after Killen, so both men nodded in answer to her question. At that point Tain had no choice but to take her hand away from Killen's mouth, and when the big man stayed silent Tain let out the breath she'd been holding. If Killen had given her an order she would have had to obey him, but she'd managed to get her own order

in first.

“Good,” Tain said, getting back to her feet. “You, Killen, aren’t to ever give me orders about anything again, but right now you have to take my orders. Can both of you walk?”

“If it means getting out of here, I’m willing to crawl,” Killen answered, turning to his side on the pallet. “But we’ll have to be ordered to leave our ‘beds.’ Himlin ordered us into bed before he left.”

“Then I order you to get to your feet and follow me,” Tain said, privately relieved that Killen sounded so normal. “If anyone shows up and tries to stop us, you two are also ordered to fight. Do anything you have to in order to keep from being recaptured.”

“That’s one order I’ll obey with a big smile,” Tandro said as he moved slowly to his feet. “Assuming, of course, that my knees are able to hold me up.”

“Talk about unexpected pain,” Killen added as he made his own awkward way to his feet. “I had no idea kneeling so long could hurt so much, but I sure as hell know it now.”

Tain felt the urge to comment about lessons that some people deserved to learn, but wasting time right now would have been stupid. Just because no one should have shown up didn’t mean no one would, so the sooner they got out of this place the better off they would be. She watched until the men were fairly steady, told them to pick up their discarded body wraps, and then she led the way out of the room.

Walking past the two bodies on the floor wasn’t hard for Tain at all, and a glance showed her that Killen wore an expression of deep satisfaction at the sight. Tandro, though, seemed deeply shocked, and he looked at Killen in confusion.

“Does this mean she can fight the way you do?” he asked Killen as they all headed for the door that would lead them out into the rest of the warehouse. “I never pictured women being taught this kind of thing.”

“If she hadn’t been taught this kind of thing, we’d still probably be prisoners in that room,” Killen pointed out, his hands playing with the body wrap he hadn’t been told he could put on again. “Would you be happier if we were still prisoners?”

“I get the point and I’m not arguing,” Tandro said after taking a deep breath. “Funny how outrage disappears in the face of a good enough cause.”

There wasn’t anything to say to that, so both men were silent as they paused to pick up their rifled but otherwise untouched saddlebags, put the bags over one shoulder, then followed Tain to the back door of the warehouse.

Tain stepped outside with every one of her senses alert, but the night still felt empty and calm. It wouldn’t have surprised her to find that the man in the vest was paranoid enough to set up

a trap in case anyone came to free his prisoners, but it looked like the man had been sure no one would come. If the man in the vest knew about the missing female slaves his captives had had, he'd dismissed the slaves as being completely unimportant. More fool, he.

Tain had to slow her pace to allow the men to follow her without trouble, but they all finally reached the back of the other warehouse and slipped inside. The candle wasn't hard to find but the firemaker was another story, and it took a good deal of groping before Tain had the thing in her hand. Shortly thereafter the candle was lit again, so Tain led her small parade toward the door where Risdin was supposed to be waiting. When

Risdin opened the door wide Tain felt a bit of relief, but her relief increased when she saw the grin the other woman wore.

"I forgot to ask how you would let me know that the men were in your control rather than you being in theirs," Risdin said as she studied

Killen and Tandro. "The point worried me, but I'm not worried any longer.

Have you asked them how they liked being treated in the way they treated others without the least hesitation?"

"I thought I'd leave that for you to do," Tain said as she moved toward the room and the door that could be closed. "As a reward for the patience you were forced to have. After you're done I'll put the questions I have."

"The coffee is still hot if you want some," Risdin said as she stepped back out of the way to let the three people enter, her gaze still on the men. "I couldn't wait that long without having coffee to sustain me, so help yourself while I put these slaves to their knees the way I was put so often."

"I don't want them on their knees," Tain said at once as she headed for the coffee pot that stood above dully glowing coals. "That man, Himlin, I

think his name is, kept them on their knees for hours, and doing it again could cripple them for a time. If we're going to move, we'll want them with us."

"All right, then let's have them sit down," Risdin said, having taken the candle to circle the two men after she closed the door behind them.

"A lot of times a slave is sent to sit on a wooden bench or a high stool after a switching, and she isn't even allowed to scream."

"Listen to me," Killen said to an angry Risdin before Tain could answer, his words gentle and filled with understanding. "I know how furious and hurt you feel, and I knew it even before I shared your experience as a slave for a few hours. I hate the idea of slavery and always have, and now that I know how damaging it is to everyone involved I hate it even more.

We didn't mind risking our lives to put an end to this horror before now, but from now on

we'll be dedicated to the idea with a passion only a former slave can appreciate. Do you understand?"

Risdin stood in silence for a time, staring first at Killen and then at

Tandro, seeing the way neither man made any effort to avoid her gaze. Tain knew that Risdin had been looking forward to getting some of her own back, but she was now being forced to admit that these men weren't the ones she wanted to get even with.

"Hurting them would make me as bad as the ones who hurt me, wouldn't it?" Risdin said, finally breaking the silence. "I didn't understand that before, but now I do. Just because it was men who hurt me, I can't put the blame on every man alive, can I."

"Some people do, but they're the ones who let their fear and hatred rule them," Tain answered, since she was the one Risdin had spoken to.

"Just as some men blame all women when it was only one who hurt them. Killen, you and Tandro can make yourselves comfortable in the best way you can, and then we'll talk. I have a few questions for you that may let you complete your chore faster and easier than you were expecting to."

"Wait a minute," Risdin said as the two men began to look around at the bare floor. "I'll get out blankets for them. Letting them lie down on the floor will make me feel like a savage."

"We very much appreciate that thought," Killen told Risdin, then he turned his attention to Tain. "What do you mean, I can finish my chore faster and easier? I thought we'd be heading back home right away."

"Not quite yet," Tain answered after sipping at the strong, black coffee. "Before we go home we're going to try to end slavery."

If for no other reason than to make sure we don't have to come back here again, Tain thought as Killen stared at her. Once I'm off this world I

don't ever want to have to come back...

Chains 2 Chapter 4

Chains Released

Chapter 4

copyright 2003 by Sharon Green Jake Killen was still in quite a bit of pain and had only a shaky hold on his sanity, so he gave himself a good talking to while he adjusted the blanket he'd been given. The worst of what he'd been put through was now over, he pointed out to himself, so losing it at this point would be stupid. He'd been dreaming of getting back to base and having that lousy drug cleared from his system, but listening to what Tain had in mind didn't mean he'd never get back.

Easing himself down on his left side on the folded blanket was a relief to his legs and knees



even if his pride was still taking a beating. Tain hadn't told him and Tandro that they could put on the body cloths they were still just holding, and without a deliberate order they continued to be bound by what Himlin had told them. Jake understood now why Tain hadn't let them dress earlier, but now that the woman they'd met had calmed down...

You seem to be forgetting something, pal, Jake said to himself as his previous thought petered out. You still have no interest at all in sitting down, so what makes you think you'd enjoy having that cloth touching your behind? Will being covered again make the pain worth it? The ones who laughed aren't here anymore...

Jake felt the urge to close his eyes, but instead he looked at Tain where she stood drinking coffee. At some point during the torture of the day, he'd managed to remember that he'd given almost the same humiliation to Tain that he was being given. He'd let that female slave into the room while he spanked Tain, and the girl had laughed just the way everyone now laughed at him. He no longer wondered why the episode had been so shocking to Tain; what he wondered now was how she'd retained her sanity. And why she hadn't made any effort to kill him...

"Let me start by asking a question that's been bugging me," Tain said suddenly, claiming Jake's attention. "Not that I'm really complaining, but why were you two taken captive instead of killed?"

"We filed a formal complaint against the slaver Himlin, who was responsible for hiring those assassins sent against us," Jake answered, hating that he had no choice but to answer. "If we leave or die without withdrawing the complaint, Himlin can be arrested the first time he shows his face back here. That's why Himlin did what he did to us, to make us really want to withdraw the complaint without messing around. He told us that if we did anything to let people know we were under his control, he'd have someone find us wherever we went and bring us back to him."

"And you were supposed to believe he'd let you go free if you got the charges against him dismissed?" Tain asked with a snort of derision.

"Did he order you to be that naive?"

"He might have thought to order us to believe him tomorrow, when he came back," Jake answered with a sigh and a shake of his head. "I noticed that some of his orders were designed more for women than for men, and there is a difference in dealing with the two genders. I think Himlin is too used to having frightened women to order around, victims who are too afraid to do anything but what they're told to do. Even if they have the choice."

"So the humiliation was designed to terrorize you," Tain said with a thoughtful nod that suddenly bothered Jake quite a lot. Just how much of what was done to him and Tandro did she see...? "I can understand why a slaver would think the ploy would work, considering that you're right about the kind of slaves he's used to. Okay, now for my next question: what were you supposed to do here in this town?"

"There's a man in this town named Gordi, who happens to be a strong leader," Jake responded, galled that he was being made to discuss a matter he'd kept private until now. "I was supposed to see and talk to Gordi and convince him that slavery was holding him and his people back from advancing into the modern universe. Since the man is supposed to be a bit above average in intelligence, we had high hopes for the plan."

"What has intelligence got to do with emotions?" Tain asked, her expression showing scorn again. "If it feels good to have slaves around you and someone comes along and tells you that having those slaves is holding you back, what you'll most probably do is ignore the someone. Having a slave who has to do exactly as you say is intoxicating, Killen, a fact you yourself can't argue no matter how much you might want to."

Jake would have enjoyed protesting the accusation, but he'd already been forced to admit the truth of that claim. Having someone in your complete power was a heady drug, and not even being against slavery in general was enough to keep from being enticed into excess.

"It's come to me that what you really need to change your outlook is a taste of what you consider so acceptable for others," Tain went on, drawing Jake's attention again. "Can you say truthfully that your emotional reaction to slavery hasn't been changed by what you went through?"

"No, I can't say that and not be lying," Jake agreed, now seriously bothered. "I disliked the idea of slavery before, but now I'd kill or die to keep it from happening to me again."

"And the only way to be absolutely certain that you can never be enslaved again is to make sure no one can be enslaved," Tain said, smiling grimly as she nodded. "You as an individual may be safe today, but as long as it's possible to enslave someone you might suddenly find your safety gone tomorrow. Does this strong leader you mentioned have friends or enemies with as much influence as he does?"

"I'm sure he does, but I don't know who they are," Jake answered, glancing at Tandro where he lay on his stomach on his own blanket.

"Tandro only knew about Gordi, so he was the one we meant to talk to. If we can talk Gordi around, and there's a good chance of that in spite of your point being valid, he ought to call in the others and let us talk to them as well."

"I'm not as big a fan of calm conversation as I used to be," Tain remarked, looking into her coffee cup before draining it. "I'm more of the opinion that one good experience is worth a million words instead of a thousand, not to mention twenty-five words or less. If the man really doesn't want to hear what you have to say, you'd be lucky to get in even as many as twenty-five words. Risdin, you and I need to talk."

And with that Tain walked over to the native woman and began to speak to her in tones too low for Jake to hear. He was being shut out of Tain's plans just the way he'd shut Tain out of his, and Jake found that he didn't like it any more than Tain had.

"What's going on, Killen?" Tandro asked from where he lay only a couple of feet away, his expression as calm as it usually was but agitation showing in his eyes. "Are we going to be free, or have we simply exchanged owners?"

"I'm sure we'll be free, but the question right now is when," Jake answered, speaking as softly as Tandro had. "I wanted to go straight home, but if there's a chance we can end slavery before we go then I'm willing to wait. Do you feel differently?"

"I can't decide," Tandro admitted, defining the agitation Jake had seen.

"I want to be free as soon as possible, but now that I know that drug will work on me as well as it does on women my familiar world suddenly scares me. How can I go back to living a normal life if that life can be stolen from me with very little effort? If your woman needs us to tell Gordi how bad being a slave is from the male point of view, I know I can be more than a little convincing."

"You and me both," Jake agreed, suddenly noticing that the woman Risdin had made a fresh pot of coffee as the aroma of the fresh brew began to fill the room. "If having us speak to Gordi of what we went through is part of Tain's plan, I'm hoping she doesn't ask us to go into real detail. Talking about it won't be quite as bad as having lived it, but I don't expect the experience to be pleasant."

"You really do like understatement, don't you," Tandro commented dryly, then he shook his head. "I'm trying very hard to forget those details you mentioned, but looking at your woman isn't making the effort easy. That insertion isn't affecting me any longer, but the outfit your woman is wearing is bringing back some of what we weren't allowed to relieve. And speaking of women, where's the girl?"

"Ennie must be safe, or Tain would hardly be acting so unconcerned," Jake assured the other man, bothered that he hadn't noticed the girl's absence himself. What he had noticed was the costume Tain still wore, but he'd finally remembered how to control himself. Without the insertion egging him on, controlling his reactions was no harder than standing on his hands for an hour would be. The effort would exhaust him, but it was possible...

And thinking about other things helped a good deal. With that in mind, Jake concentrated on the aroma of coffee brewing to blot out awareness of how badly he wanted to take Tain in his arms and make love to her...

\* \* \*

"We now have a workable plan," Tain told Risdin as soon as she'd moved far enough away from the men to make the conversation private. "If the only way to make men eager to end slavery is to force them to experience the state, we now have the perfect man to start with. As soon as we make Gordi ours we'll get a list of names from him, then we'll do the same with as many of the men on the list as we can."

"That's a great idea, but I'm afraid there's one small thing wrong with it," Risdin said, her

expression not quite ridiculing. "We could convince

Gordi if we could get to him, but we have no way of getting to him.

Inviting him to come visit and be enslaved probably won't work."

"That all depends on how you word the invitation," Tain countered, then waved away Risdin's immediate protest. "I'm just joking. I know you and your people can't get to Gordi, but Killen and I ought to be able to.

We're trained for this kind of thing, but we won't be able to do it tonight. Killen is hurting too badly and we all need to get some sleep, not to mention the fact that we have to stay out of that slaver's way. Is there some place other than here where we can all hide out until tomorrow night?"

"You think there's a chance we'll be found in this room?" Risdin asked, now looking faintly worried. "The others and I have always been safe here, so what makes you think that won't continue to be the case?"

"As soon as the slaver finds Killen and Tandro gone, he'll probably have his men search everywhere in the immediate neighborhood," Tain explained patiently. "He'll know that his former victims were too hurt to go very far, so he'll search hoping to find them again. And since he'll certainly be back first thing in the morning, we'll be best off not waiting to go elsewhere until his men are knocking on the door."

"Knocking down the door, you mean," Risdin corrected ruefully.

"And if you and your friend do manage to take Gordi, we'll need a place to keep him while we show him what slavery is all about. All right, we'll move everything out of here to where we keep it when the warehouse is being used, and then we'll get some sleep. But first I've got to tell Areen what we're doing. Help yourself to the fresh coffee and I'll be back in just a little while."

Risdin waited for Tain to nod agreement, then she turned and went to one of the cabinets in the wall to the far right. Instead of opening the cabinet doors she felt under the bottom of the unit, half her arm disappearing in the attempt.

When Tain heard a small click and then saw the whole cabinet section swing away from the wall, she understood where the other women had gone. A lantern hung on the wall just inside the hidden opening, but once Risdin was back on her feet and moving past the cabinet she left the lantern where it was and disappeared down what looked like wooden stairs.

"Your new friend seems to be very well organized," Killen commented from where he lay on the blanket he'd been given, his attention and Tandro's on the opening in the wall. "If that's where we'll be moving to, I can't tell you how glad I am to hear it. Thinking about the search Himlin will have his men make in the morning would have kept me, at least, from sleeping at all tonight."

"I didn't want to scare Risdin, but we might not have until morning for that search to start," Tain said, drawing the men's attention. "Your original guards stood their post for three hours before they were relieved, so that's the absolute maximum amount of time we can count on before the next pair of guards shows up. If I'm not mistaken it hasn't yet been an hour since I took out the guards, but I'll feel better getting us under cover as soon as possible. Do you think I'm wrong?"

"No, I couldn't agree with you more," Killen said at once, and Tain saw a look of fear ghost through his eyes before he regained control. "I was going to ask if I could have a cup of that coffee, but now I'd rather get started moving down those stairs."

"We'll have to wait until Risdin gets things set up," Tain said, seeing how the man would have jumped to his feet if he'd been in better physical condition - and was allowed to leave the blanket. "It shouldn't take her long, so we might as well spend the waiting time stoking up on caffeine. Would you also like a cup of coffee, Tandro?"

"Yes, please," the native answered after the barest of hesitations, his own gaze hidden from Tain's sight with the turn of his head. What

Tain could see of his body looked more tense than usual, which meant that both men were feeling the same fear. Not being sure you'd be able to protect yourself was definitely something to bring on fear, and Tain didn't have to work to understand how they felt. She'd felt the same herself when she'd been under Killen's control...

Rather than dwelling on the past, Tain found two more cups, filled them with coffee, then brought the coffee to Killen and Tandro. The men accepted the cups with thanks, but the thanks were mumbled and the coffee was swallowed in gulps in spite of how hot it was. Tain went back and refilled her own cup, pretending she didn't see how rattled Killen and

Tandro were. The fresh coffee was strong and hot and felt good going down, but if Risdin wasn't back in another ten minutes Tain meant to leave that good coffee and go looking for the woman.

No more than five of the ten minutes passed before Risdin reappeared at the top of the stairs, a smile on her face.

"Areen loved your idea, and she's now passing on the word and then she'll be back to help us move things down," Risdin announced as soon as she stepped through the opening. "I thought about waiting for her, but on the way up I decided I'd rather not. If that slaver finds out sooner than morning that his prisoners are gone, we don't still want to be in the middle of moving."

"You're right, so let's get to it this minute," Tain said, putting her cup down and moving off the wall she'd been leaning on. "You men pick up your blankets and body cloths, and you can carry those along with your cups. Risdin and I will carry the heavy stuff, and you can take your turn with doing more tomorrow, when you're not quite as stiff and hurting."

"What idea is Risdin talking about?" Killen asked as he and Tandro both began to get to their feet. "You haven't yet mentioned what you have in mind."

"You'll know when you need to know," Tain answered, feeling the least bit childish but not really caring. "But don't worry that you'll be left out of things, because you won't be. Pandora's box has been opened, and since you're the one who opened it you'll even get to tell people all about it."

"What's Pandora's box?" Risdin asked as Killen turned away to hide whatever his expression was like. "And what can a box have to do with any of what we're in the middle of?"

"Pandora's box is from very old folklore," Tain explained while she and Risdin began to empty the space behind the wall of what it held.

"Pandora was given a box and told not to open it, otherwise something very terrible would happen. The girl was able to stay away from the box for a short while, but eventually her curiosity got to be too much and she opened the box. The box held all the evils of the world, and once it was open Pandora found that it couldn't be closed again. All the evils escaped into the world, and that was supposed to be the reason that bad things happen to good people. Because someone didn't know enough to leave things the way they were."

"That doesn't make much sense," Risdin said as she led the way to the opening, bedding and blankets filling her arms. "If the person who gave Pandora the box had told her what was in it, she wouldn't have opened the thing. Not telling her just about guaranteed that the evils would be let loose, so it wasn't Pandora's fault but the fault of whoever gave her the box."

"I agree with you up to a certain point," Tain said, knowing the two men were following her the way she followed Risdin, her own arms full of food supplies. "Pandora should have been told what was in the box, but would knowing the truth have helped? If all the evils in the world were inside the box, Pandora had no real idea what evil was. Sometimes you have to know, personally, just how bad a thing can be before you can tell if it's something that shouldn't be allowed to exist. And you have to understand how far the evil can spread, otherwise opening the box doesn't seem to be a bad idea at all."

The silence behind Tain suggested that Killen might be thinking about what she'd said, or maybe he was ignoring it. She'd finally remembered hearing Killen tell Tandro that using the slave drug on a man the first time had been his idea, a doing that had been completely out of the question until that moment. Killen was definitely the one who had opened Pandora's box, so he couldn't very well complain that bad stuff was falling out of the sky all over him.

Another lantern hung on the wall half way down the stairs, and a third lantern lit the dimness at the bottom. There was more than enough room to get around the handrail at the bottom, and a corridor led into a series of small, doorless ... areas or alcoves that could be considered semi-private rooms. The corridor continued on into unrelieved darkness, but three of the rooms had candles in holders adding some much needed light.

"There isn't that much more to bring down, but we ought to get the men settled first," Risdin said over her shoulder, leading the way to the farthest of the three lit rooms. "You and I can share that first area, we can put the cooking stuff and the rest in the middle, and the men can sleep in the third."

There was no reason to argue the suggestion, so Tain simply nodded and joined Risdin in setting things up. While Risdin put two of the pallets in the third room and then took the others into the first room, Tain put the food she'd carried down into the middle area. She glanced into the men's alcove to see that both of them were lying down again with their cups of coffee, then she and Risdin went back upstairs for the rest of the things that could betray their presence.

The metal container the cooking was done on went down first, with both Tain and Risdin holding the container's wooden handles. There were still live coals in it so they had to be careful, not to mention the fact that the thing was heavy. Once that was done, though, the rest went much more quickly. Tain had Risdin, who knew what was where, empty the wall space and the cabinets and bring the stuff to the top of the stairs while she herself carted things down.

No more than ten minutes later Risdin was ready to help with taking things down, but first Tain had her make sure there was absolutely nothing left to show they'd been in the room. Risdin spent another couple of minutes brushing away charcoal dust and crumbs and closing all of the cabinets really tight, and then she took the candle and came onto the landing of the stairs. Another moment saw the hidden door closed and secured, and then she and Tain carried down what was left of the supplies.

"Half of me wants to watch to see what happens across the street," Risdin said as she and Tain put down the last of their burdens in the cooking room. "The other half, though, doesn't want to know anything about it. That slaver will be furious when he finds out about the men being gone, and I hate to think what he'll do to his women. And by the way, I've decided to make you something to eat before we go to bed. It finally came to me that you haven't had a single bite all day."

Tain's first urge was to tell Risdin not to bother with making her anything, but then she remembered that she did have to build up her strength after having so little real food for so long. She'd been able to do everything necessary tonight, but right now she felt empty and in need of recharging.

"I appreciate the offer, Risdin, and I accept it gladly," Tain said after only the smallest hesitation as she sat down on the stone floor. "As far as watching what goes on across the street, though, I have a feeling I'm much better off not seeing it. I'd hate to ruin things by losing my temper and going after that slimy man, thereby letting everyone know the men had help in getting away. If the slaver thinks his prisoners got themselves free he'll be knocked off balance, and that's the way we want him. Off balance."

"And frightened," Risdin said, giving all her attention to the fresh charcoal she'd put in the

metal container. "He deserves to be frightened, to feel what he makes so many others feel, and I only wish I could be the one to make him feel like that."

The woman's words were so fierce that Tain could almost feel the pain and hatred that lay behind them. It wasn't a pleasant experience, but it did give her an idea.

"Maybe something can be arranged," Tain said, knowing she sounded thoughtful. "I'll keep the possibility in mind while we wait to see how things turn out. Personally I would have just killed the man, but that would let him off too easily, wouldn't it."

Risdin flashed her such a delighted and grateful look that Tain filed the idea away for future use. Giving the slaver a taste of what he gave so easily to others would be the best poetic justice imaginable, but it might not prove to be possible. If circumstances forced his death he would die, but if not...

The meal Risdin produced was quick and hot, and Tain actually bolted it down when she was handed the plate. The food not only warmed her insides but added a rush of the strength Tain needed, and afterward she sipped her rewarmed coffee feeling full and satisfied. Risdin kept her company while she ate, sipping from a cup of coffee of her own, and then the two cleaned up from the meal. The clean-up didn't take long, and then they went to their alcove and lay down on pallets. The lamps and candles were left lit, to keep the underground darkness from becoming overwhelming.

Risdin fell asleep quickly, but Tain wasn't that lucky. She tossed around a short while, then decided to give up for the moment and got out from under her blanket. Her vest and "skirt" were folded neatly next to the pallet, but it only took a moment's worth of thought to leave the garments where they lay. Being completely naked was better than being "decorated," a position she hadn't changed her mind about.

Stepping out into the corridor let her hear soft snoring coming from the alcove where the men had been left. Tain's first thought had been to make herself a bit more coffee, and although it was still a good idea she decided to take a look at the men first.

Tain hadn't checked on the men before lying down because she'd felt they were badly in need of some privacy, but the disturbance she'd seen in Killen's eyes still bothered her. She needed the man to be at his best when they went after Gordi and a good night's sleep should bring him back closer to normal, but that wasn't Tain's only concern. What had happened to Killen certainly wasn't her fault, but for some reason she felt really bad about it...

Stopping at the opening to the alcove showed Tain that it was Tandro who was doing the snoring. The native was so deeply asleep that Tain could see and feel it, obviously in a state that was closer to unconsciousness than sleep. It was a reaction to what he'd gone through, of course, a way the body sometimes used when even the mind needed time to heal.

But Killen wasn't even close to being in the same condition. The man lay face down on his pallet, his eyes open and his gaze resting on her. His light hair looked tousled, matching the



almost-wounded look in those gray eyes, and Tain couldn't keep herself from moving closer and crouching down.

"Is something wrong?" she asked very softly, although she probably could have shouted without waking Tandro. "You really ought to be asleep."

"I agree, but sleep seems to be avoiding me," Killen responded in a murmur. "What are you doing wandering around?"

"I was about to make more coffee, which usually helps me sleep," Tain said, privately shocked that she had to close her hand into a fist to keep it from reaching out and stroking Killen's shoulder and arm. "It's cool enough down here that I seem to need something to warm me up."

"Yes, I can tell that you're cold," Killen said in a very ... neutral way, his glance having touched her hardened nipples. "Are you sure it's coffee you want and not an excuse to indulge in a little ... exercise of ownership?"

"What are you talking about?" Tain asked, honestly having no idea what he meant. "What can ownership have to do with anything?"

"Don't worry, Tain, you don't have to lie to cover the fact that you're only human," Killen said in a weary voice, the look in his eyes sad now.

"You're in control of me just the way I was in control of you, and that's a very ... overwhelming thing when it really hits you. The sudden understanding makes you want to exercise that control in the most basic way possible, the most intimate way. The feeling is irresistible in the beginning and won't start to bother you until the novelty wears off, so there's no reason not to indulge yourself."

Killen no longer looked directly at Tain, which might have been a very good thing. She had to fight really hard to keep her face from showing what she now felt, which was an incredible mixture of ... she wasn't completely sure what it was a mixture of. What she did know for an iron-hard fact was that Killen had misinterpreted her reactions.

Tain stared down at the man who was now under her control, feeling nothing of a desire to make him serve her the way he'd forced her to serve him.

Yes, her body had been reacting to his naked nearness, but not because of an urge to humiliate him even more. Tain had hated the idea of slavery even before she'd been forced to experience the state personally, and taking advantage of someone who couldn't refuse her was completely against her beliefs.

And that thought made her admit to herself the real reason her body had tightened and hardened. It was a combination of concern and desire, concern over Killen's well-being and a desire to feel his hands on her again. If he made love to her the act would prove that he was

all right, and she very much needed him to be all right. But not because of what she had planned for tomorrow, not for any reason she was willing to admit even in the privacy of her own mind.

Happily, though, Killen had misinterpreted her reason for being there and for feeling the way she did. More than that he'd given her a way to get what she wanted more and more badly with each passing minute -without letting him know the truth...

"You know, it's really helpful to deal with someone who doesn't have to have the facts of life explained to him," Tain drawled after what was really only a very brief hesitation. "Turn to your side so I can join you under that blanket."

Killen stiffened, but he still did just as Tain had ordered. The pallet wasn't very wide, but there was enough room for her to slip under the blanket and press her body to his. His warmth flowed into her at the touch, showing that she really was cold, but something else became even more clear. Killen's mind might be reluctant, but his body certainly wasn't.

"You are so nicely made," Tain murmured as she ran her hands slowly over Killen, feeling a faint trembling in his body. "Will you be able to lie on your back without much pain if you brace yourself with your feet?"

"I think so," Killen answered, the words sounding as if they were being dragged out of him. The blankness of his expression said he didn't want her to know how he really felt, but it was a waste of effort. Tain knew Killen hated what was being done to him, and that fit in perfectly with her plans. With any luck the man would also hate her, and that would end any possibility of their ever getting together in a relationship. That end was something Tain knew she needed to survive, but a very small part of her hated the need more than she knew was possible...

Once Killen had put himself to his back with his knees bent to let his feet brace him, Tain made sure he wasn't in pain before she began to kiss his body. In no time at all Killen was moaning, his arousal completely returned, and Tain found that she couldn't continue with the foreplay. Her own arousal was so high that under other circumstances she would have been whimpering, but with her in control there was no reason to whimper. She went to her knees and straddled Killen, then quickly took him inside her.

Killen's hands came to her waist as her own hands rested on his shoulders, her up and down movement making them share the moaning. It felt so good to have Killen inside her again, even though it would have felt better if he'd been on top. But Tain couldn't allow that, so she'd have to make do with this as her final goodbye to him.

As a final goodbye it could have been much worse, considering how long Killen let the time last. Tain came more than once while Killen matched her movements with his eyes closed, but finally he was no longer able to hold off his own release. He came while Tain shuddered from the latest of her orgasms, and all she wanted to do was collapse on top of him. But doing that wasn't part of her plan, so she patted his face instead, climbed off him, then left the alcove to

return to her own bed.

And once she lay under her blanket she had to fight really hard to keep her crying from getting loud enough to wake Risdin...

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Chains Released

Chapter 5

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Jake woke up feeling so comfortable that for a moment he didn't remember where he was. He lay on his stomach, and even though his body ached here and there he was also aware of a sense of satisfaction. He hadn't felt this sated since the last time he'd - That was when he remembered the night before, and what had come of Tain's visit. All satisfaction and comfort disappeared as he sat up slowly, now aware of the disappointment he felt. It was stupid to have thought that Tain was a better person than he, someone who would never have taken advantage of a bad situation. But she had taken the same advantage he had, and even though his body had enjoyed the time his mind certainly hadn't.

"Obviously you needed sleep even more than I did," Tandro's voice came from behind him, the words soft. "I've been awake for a while, long enough to hear one of the women moving around, but whichever one it is she didn't come in here."

Jake turned to see that Tandro also sat on his pallet, which meant that things were looking up for them. Last night he would have been able to sit if he'd really had to, but this morning there was nothing but a shadow left of the punishment he'd been given.

"If it isn't Tain who's awake, coming in here would be a waste of time," Jake said, speaking just as softly. "Have you forgotten that we aren't allowed to obey anyone but her? That means, of course, that we stay on these pallets until she says we can get up."

Jake expected to see anger in Tandro over what he'd said, but the native suddenly looked drawn instead.

"After yesterday I really didn't need any more lessons on the evils of slavery, but it looks like I'll be getting them whether I need them or not." The man's voice was low, as if he were controlling himself sternly, but it was pain rather than anger that he strove to hold off. "It isn't really possible to understand how bad it can get unless you go through it yourself, is it? Why is it that human beings can't seem to learn except the hard way? Why can't we know that something is wrong without having our faces rubbed in the wrongness?"

"If you ever find out the answer to that question I'd appreciate it you let me know," Jake responded, reflecting that he'd thought some human beings knew right from wrong the easy way. But that was before last night...

"Good morning, men," Risdin said from the doorway before she walked in holding two filled

plates. "I've made breakfast, which I'm sure you can use. You can get started on the food while I go back for the coffee."

"Thank you," Jake said, taking the plate she handed him as he studied her face. "You're being extremely good to us, and I don't understand why."

Unless I'm mistaken you were once a slave yourself, so why would you treat two men in any way but badly?"

"Since I found myself the only one awake this morning, I did some thinking," Risdin answered, her smile wry. "I know how badly the slaver treated you two, and that didn't make any sense - until I realized that he must have done it because you're against slavery. There isn't really any other reason for making you slaves, and you were hurt and humiliated because you want to make it impossible for me to be hurt again. Was I

wrong?"

"No," Jake admitted with a shake of his head after exchanging a glance with Tandro. "But I'd like to know how you know that we were humiliated as well as hurt. Did Tain tell you what was done to us?"

"Tain didn't say a word, but she didn't have to," Risdin answered, her expression now more angry than wry. "Being enslaved means you're going to be humiliated as well as hurt, since that's the fastest and easiest way to control a slave. There are people who are strong enough to ignore pain, but I don't think there's anyone strong enough to withstand humiliation."

"Before yesterday I might have disagreed with you, but not now," Tandro said, his expression having fallen all the way to bleak. "What they did to Killen terrified me, thinking they might do the same to me. I don't know how he managed to stay sane after something that bad, but I wouldn't have been able to handle it like that. I was ready to do just about anything to keep from - "

Tandro's words broke off before he went into details of what he meant, bringing Jake a good deal of relief. He'd been able to keep himself from remembering that he'd been forced to react like a frightened girl during that second switching, and even now he couldn't do more than touch on the subject from a distance. The time had been so devastating that it was a miracle he hadn't gone crazy...

"Hey, it's all right," Risdin said, putting a hand to Tandro's shoulder in shared compassion. "That's actually the worst part of being a strong man or woman. If you're weak you just do as you're told even if you don't like it, thereby proving that you don't have to be humiliated all that badly in order to obey completely. But the strong ones hold back part of themselves in spite of the drug, and the slavers always know the difference. And always do something to make them want to stop holding back. Sometimes that kind breaks rather than bends, which doesn't make much sense to me. If you break and lose it completely, you can't comfort yourself with the dream of escaping some day and finding a way to get even."

"I think you're possibly the bravest person I've ever met," Jake said to her with as good a smile as he could manage, speaking the truth.

"Backing down seems to be against my nature, even when it happens to be the sensible course of action. If I'd at least pretended to back down yesterday, Himlin probably wouldn't have done what he did to me."

"It might be a good idea to remember that for next time," Risdin said with a much better smile than his. "In the meantime your food is getting cold, so you two eat up while I fetch the coffee. We have important things to do today."

That reminded Jake of Tain's "plan," but before he could ask any questions Risdin turned and left the alcove. He tackled the food while he waited for the woman to come back, but even when she did he found he couldn't question her. He didn't understand why until he was almost finished eating, and if he hadn't been so hollow he would have lost his appetite. Tain had told him that he didn't yet need to know the plan, and that was what had kept him from questioning Risdin.

Heavier depression tried to crowd into Jake's mind, but he banished it by forcing himself to anger. Risdin's advice wasn't easy to take, but he needed to be in real control of himself; knowing that he would be free in just a little while should keep him going, and once he was free...

Once he was back where he belonged and free of the drug he'd never have to see Ms. Tain Halliday ever again...

\* \* \*

Tain awoke to the aroma of food, an aroma that made her returning appetite stir. When she opened her eyes she saw Risdin crouched beside her with a plate, a smile on the other woman's face.

"If you weren't ready to wake up I didn't want to disturb you, so I just waved the food under your nose," she said, making a small gesture with the plate. "We ought to have company at any time, so let's get eating out of the way before they get here."

"Good idea," Tain agreed, sitting up and stretching a little before taking the plate. "But the next meal will be mine to make. You've already had more than your turn."

"I'll take cooking over sneaking around near slavers any day," Risdin said with a small sound of scorn as she straightened up. "If I let you do the cooking then I might have to do the sneaking, so no thank you. I like this arrangement much better the way it is right now."

Tain smiled as Risdin left the alcove, understanding that Risdin needed something to keep her busy. Waiting while other people risked themselves and your safety - was often harder than doing the risking personally, and having something to occupy your time also helped to save your sanity. If Risdin was happy with the way things were right now, Tain would not argue

the arrangement.

It didn't take long to eat the food and drink the coffee that had been put down next to the pallet, and then Tain got into her "clothes." It still wasn't time to get rid of the trappings of a slave, and thinking about how much she hated the costume helped to keep her thoughts away from Killen. She knew how unhappy he would be about what she'd done last night, and her best bet would be to add to that unhappiness without being obvious about it.

Tain was certain that Killen was the sort to risk himself for a woman he cared about, and that was the best reason to make sure he didn't care. They still had some touchy situations ahead of them, and if Killen died trying to protect her it would be worse for Tain than if she died instead. She couldn't get involved with the man without having her life fall apart, but that didn't mean something inside her wouldn't break if he were killed.

Taking a deep breath helped Tain regain control of the agitation that wanted to send her to Killen with an apology, and then she was able to leave the alcove and head toward the area given the men. She was a professional, after all, so her expression would be just what she wanted it to be. For as long as she had to have it that way...

Killen and Tandro sat talking quietly, neither of them noticing Tain when she stopped in the doorway. The empty plates and cups near their pallets said they'd already been given breakfast, which made one less thing to worry about.

"Good morning, you two," Tain said, drawing their immediate attention. "You can get up and walk around and even put on your body cloths, but don't try to leave this underground area. Risdin may have mentioned that we're expecting the arrival of more of the women in her group, so you men will have to be as unobtrusive as possible. I don't think I have to tell you why."

"Some of them will hate us, and some of them will be afraid of us," Killen said with a nod as he immediately reached for his body cloth. "I would have understood the point before yesterday, but now I really understand it."

"What about the girl, Ennie?" Tandro asked as he also reached for his body cloth. "Is she safe? Is she likely to be with the females coming here?"

"I made sure she'd be safe before I went after you two," Tain answered slowly, wondering about the odd expression Tandro seemed to be trying to hide behind easy calm. "As to whether or not she'll be coming back here, I really don't know. Why do you ask?"

"I'm the one who was supposed to be responsible for her," Tandro answered evenly, but this time he avoided Tain's gaze. "I'd really hate to be blamed if - something happened to her."

"I see," Tain murmured, well aware of the fact that she hadn't demanded that the men tell her the truth. Oddly enough it hadn't occurred to her that Tandro might actually have feelings for Ennie, but now that she thought back there were signs enough that her own problems hadn't let her notice at the time. It was almost laughable that Ennie had decided no

one cared about her when she was with a man who actually did care.

But Tandro's been hiding his true feelings, and I don't understand why,

Tain thought as she left the alcove and headed for the cooking area. If

Ennie has become more than just another female for him, why didn't he say

- Tain's mental stewing stopped short when an answer came, an answer that should have been perfectly obvious. Tandro hadn't said or done anything to show his true feelings because he knew Ennie wasn't part of his world. The girl would only be on this planet for a short while, and then she would leave Tandro behind and return to her normal life. The native must have felt pitiful falling in love with someone he considered completely beyond his reach, but that was a typical male reaction. It had probably never occurred to him to ask Ennie how she felt about it...

Tain bypassed the cooking area and returned to her pallet to collect her plate and cup, then she joined Risdin where the other woman sat drinking coffee. After Tain refilled her own cup she spoke to Risdin about how the other women would be getting to the underground area, having wondered if her guess would turn out to be right.

"Yes, this tunnel goes all the way to a place in the woods beyond the town's wall," Risdin confirmed with a smile. "I'd love to say that we were the ones who dug it out, but all we did was find it. We think the tunnel and underground areas were made by the people who first got to this planet and were kept a secret from everyone but a few of those who lived in the house above here. The house must have been fairly big, but then something happened to it and what was left was made a part of the warehouse that replaced the house. Or so we think."

"That explanation makes a lot of sense," Tain agreed. "If everyone who knew about the tunnel died at the same time, the secret would have died with them. And by the time the warehouse was built, a lot of the old knowledge was lost along with certain memories. I wondered why the room holding the secret entrance looked more solid than the rest of the warehouse, and now I know. The new owner of the land who built the warehouse added to the rooms that had been left standing because the old rooms were better constructed than the new stuff."

"Which made life a whole lot easier for us," Risdin said with another smile. "If they'd knocked down the walls of the room above us they would have found the tunnel, and then we would never have been able to use all this."

"How did your people find this?" Tain asked, a point she hadn't tried to guess about. "With the release lever so far under the bottom of the cabinet, I can't quite picture someone stumbling across it by accident."

"It was the other end one of ours found," Risdin supplied, no longer smiling. "The poor woman was an escaped slave with her owner not far behind her, which made her frantic for a

place to hide. She literally tripped over part of the exit door in the woods, a rock door that looked like it was part of a very big boulder. She fell close enough to the door to see that the boulder wasn't solid, and one touch showed her a handhold carved into the bottom of the door. She pulled on the handhold and the door opened right up, although it did stick a little after that. She managed to get into the tunnel and close the door again behind herself, and her owner never found her. She waited two days before getting up the courage to come out again, and she was almost dead when she stumbled into the area where our hideout is. Once she recovered she told us about the stone door, and the rest is history."

"It was obviously a stroke of pure luck, good luck for you and bad for the men," Tain said after taking another swallow of her coffee. "How soon do you expect the other women to get here? We can't move until well after dark tonight, but I'd rather have things arranged early than at the last minute. And do you know if Ennie, the girl who was with me, will be coming back?"

"As I said, the women should be here at any time unless there were men in the area of the hidden entrance and they had to wait for the men to leave," Risdin answered. "As far as that girl is concerned, though, Areen said she and Celene were going to try to make her stay at the hideout. The girl is hurt on the inside, and that's never easy to heal."

"The healing will hopefully be easier once we get her back where she belongs," Tain said, making no effort to explain what was really bothering Ennie. Not being cared about was a lack the girl shared with a very large number of women on this world, but the fact that the lack of caring had been worse for the natives was not likely to be something that Ennie would want to consider.

"Let's take a walk and see if we can meet the newcomers half way," Risdin suddenly suggested as she got to her feet. "Just sitting around here is making me edgy, and I hate feeling edgy. And if you like, I have another smock you can wear."

"I wish I could take you up on both your suggestions, but I'll have to settle for just one," Tain said as she also stood. "Going to meet your friends is fine, but I might as well stay in this outfit because I have to wear it when I go out tonight. People pay less attention to a slave or ignore her completely, and that attitude will make my job a lot easier.

Besides, if I put on a smock instead of this stuff, I probably won't want to get into these things again."

"That I can understand," Risdin said, shaking her head as she looked at the costume Tain wore. "I wasn't considered pretty enough to be put into an outfit like that, which made me pity the pretty ones instead of envying them... Well, let's go meet our company."

Risdin stopped outside the alcove to take a lamp and light it, and then she and Tain headed into the dark. A glance showed Tain that the men were dressed and moving around in their alcove, and then the living area was left behind. The lamp pushed the darkness away a bit, but there was still a heaviness and weight to the dimness that wasn't often found



aboveground.

If the walls and floor and ceiling all around her hadn't been made of stone, Tain knew that she would be feeling extremely uncomfortable in their very necessary hideaway.

Tain was prepared for a long hike, but no more than five minutes after she and Risdin started to walk they saw the faint light of another lamp coming out of the darkness toward them. Risdin made a sound of satisfaction, but Tain didn't relax until the approaching smudge of light showed that it was women who also approached. The fact that Risdin had apparently spent not a single moment wondering if the secret of the tunnel might have been found out made Tain a bit uneasy, but the suspicion on two of the faces coming toward them made her feel a bit better.

"Risdin, what's wrong?" one of the suspicious ones called as soon as they all got a bit closer. "Why did you come to meet us?"

"Nothing's wrong, Char," Risdin answered with a small laugh. "Tain and I got tired of waiting for all of you, so we decided to come and meet you. What time of day is it outside?"

"When we entered the tunnel it was just about noon," the woman named Char answered, her frown showing that her suspicion hadn't been completely soothed away. "And if you needed more smocks, why didn't you ask us to bring some?"

The closer the group got, the easier it was for Tain to see individuals. Char was a fairly tall, very beautiful woman, her outline under the smock she wore suggesting that her body was as attractive as her face. The only thing that didn't fit with the rest was the look in Char's eyes, a look of hatred and distrust that promised never to ease back or fade even a little.

"Tain doesn't want a smock, not when she'll have to get back into the tease again later," Risdin explained, her tone filled with calm patience. "I know how much you hate to see one of us dressed in the tease, Char, but this time it's necessary."

"We'll talk about it and see how necessary it really is," Char returned, the small growl in her voice suggesting she meant to argue Tain's decision. "First, though, I want to hear from your own lips that you actually brought men down into the tunnel. Some things can be forgiven, Risdin, but others can't be."

"But she didn't bring men down into the tunnel," Tain said when Risdin went very still and didn't respond. "She brought down slaves to protect them, which is supposed to be one of the purposes of the tunnel, isn't it?"

"Don't you play with me!" Char snarled as she stepped closer to Tain, her face suddenly livid with rage. "Do you have any idea what I went through as a slave, what we all went through? It was men who did that to us, and

I'll die before I help any of them in any way at all!"

"Then how about helping yourself?" Tain countered at once, knowing immediately that sympathy would be worse than slapping the woman. "As long as it's possible for anyone to be enslaved, you and these others will have to hide out for the rest of your lives. If we can give the men a damned good reason for outlawing slavery completely, then all of you will be able to lead normal lives. Isn't that end worth compromising your dedication just a little?"

"You can't do that," Char stated, the growl still in her voice, although at a lower intensity, the hatred still flaring in her light eyes. "You can't make the men change their minds when they get so much enjoyment out of holding women as slaves. There isn't a reason strong enough -"

"But there is," Risdin interrupted, drawing that blazing gaze away from

Tain. "Did you miss hearing that the drug works on men as well as women, or did you simply refuse to believe? No matter how much a man enjoys having slaves, getting a taste of slavery himself will make him change his mind. And the best part is that we don't have to do it to all men, just the ones who have enough power to outlaw slavery."

"But all men deserve to be enslaved!" Char spat, her anger increasing rather than fading. "They're all the same, all of them, and they deserve to be hurt just the way we were hurt! Don't you understand -"

"Stop it!" Tain snapped, her tone sharp enough to startle the irate woman.

"It wasn't all men who hurt you, so don't waste our time trying to claim it was. By ending slavery we'll hurt just the ones who do deserve your hatred, men who'll remember how 'good' they had it before the change. When they find that no woman will do for them once she's been freed they'll suffer, but they'll also have to be watched. Some of them could decide to force women back into slavery without the drug, and then they'll be fair game. But only for someone who helped end slavery and became a free citizen again."

Char's beautiful face twisted with inner agitation, making Tain wonder if the woman was too far gone into her obsession for any sanity to be left.

There was no doubt that she'd been savaged more than once during her time as a slave, and all Tain could hope was that she'd been left enough ... balance to let her achieve and enjoy actual freedom.

"Yes, if you can manage this then the ones like my owner will have to be watched," Char muttered after a long hesitation, apparently talking to herself. "He'll be one of those who tries to break the new law, and then I'll be able to - Yes, I want it that way, and then I can stand there and laugh..."

"Now that that's settled, let's go and get all of you some coffee," Risdin said to the others, all of them showing relief to one degree or another. Areen was there and so was Celene along with a third woman Tain didn't know, and when Risdin touched Char's arm to get her moving everyone followed. Char still seemed to be very involved with her thoughts, the smile

on her face more than a little disturbing. Tain was about to go along with the others when there was a touch on her own arm.

"Tain, what's wrong with her?" Ennie asked, nodding toward Char. The girl had been behind the other women, and Tain hadn't seen her until the party began to move. Ennie also now wore a smock like the others, and her red armbands were gone. "Char was so ... welcoming and warm when I was brought to her, but today... The closer we got to the tunnel the more she changed, and I don't understand what's happening."

"I think it's fear doing this to her," Tain suggested after a moment's thought, she and Ennie trailing along behind the others. "She's trying not to admit to herself that she's back in the town, but she knows well enough that she isn't in her hideout any longer and she's terrified. She shows fear by turning insanely angry, and if she can't control herself I'll have to have one or two of the others take her back out."

"Is it true that the men were enslaved but you got them free?" Ennie asked, clearly changing a painful topic. "Why would you do something like that?"

"There are a couple of things I'm not able to tell you, but that doesn't really matter now," Tain said, her own anger soothed by the realization that she didn't have to get around Killen's orders not to tell Ennie that he worked for the department. All she had to do was order Killen himself to say what he'd forbidden Tain to talk about. "You'll soon know what you need to, but what I can tell you is that both men are now under my control. Does that fact interest you in any way at all?"

"You know, I think it does," Ennie answered slowly as she watched her feet, and then her gaze came up as she smiled. "I never thought of myself as a vengeful person, but maybe that was because I didn't really have anything to get even for. Now that I do..."

"Most times getting even feels really good, but there are exceptions to just about every rule," Tain commented, keeping her own expression bland as Ennie's words trailed off into thoughtfulness. "While we're walking, why don't you think about whether or not you'd like to test the waters, so to speak? If you decide you'd like to give getting even a try, I can certainly oblige you."

Ennie's lips curved into a faint smile, but instead of speaking she just nodded. The girl looked better than she had, and Tain knew it would be interesting to see what her decision turned out to be.

Risdin and the others moved somewhat slowly ahead of Tain and Ennie, most of them engaged in soft-voiced conversation, so it took a little longer going back than it had coming out. When the larger group passed the men's alcove everyone but Char glanced in at them, but no one stopped. They continued on until they reached the cooking alcove, and then they all disappeared inside. Ennie did a doubletake when she and Tain reached the men's alcove, and the faint smile on her face widened just a bit.

"I need to see if I can get something, and then I'll be taking you up on your offer," Ennie said as she paused and put a hand to Tain's arm.

"Wait for me here, please."

Tain nodded to show that she'd wait, then watched Ennie disappear into the cooking alcove before she turned to the two men who had come to the doorway of their area.

"You can't give Ennie orders any longer, but I still don't want either of you to even try," Tain said to a curious Killen and a calm-faced Tandro. "She'll be back in a minute, and when she returns, Tandro, you'll obey everything she tells you to do. You, Killen, don't have to obey her, but you also aren't to interfere with her. You do, however, have to tell her what you didn't let me talk about. Do both of you understand?"

The two men nodded, but their expressions had changed to ones that were almost identical. Both men were suddenly ... concerned about what would happen, but neither looked actually worried. After all, Tain could almost see them thinking, it was Ennie they were talking about. What could a silly little girl do that would cause more than mild disturbance? Killen didn't look happy about needing to tell Ennie something he hadn't wanted her to know, but aside from that...

It wasn't more than a couple of minutes before Ennie reappeared carrying a knife belt without the knife. It looked like she'd found the men's possessions where they'd been put in the cooking room and had ... borrowed one of those possessions. Tain suddenly knew exactly what Ennie meant to do, and was glad that the girl had chosen as well as she had. The belt wasn't stiff or hard but it was leather, so it ought to do a fine job.

"Ennie, I do need to ask a favor before you get started," Tain said softly, stopping the girl just short of the doorway into the alcove -out of sight of the men. "I'm going to need Tandro later, when he and Killen and I go out after our targets, so I'm afraid you'll have to use a bit of restraint. Will you help me out with that?"

"Sure, Tain, glad to oblige," Ennie answered with an amused smile.

"And don't worry about me asking to go out with you three. I know I'm not up to something like that yet, so I'll wait here with the others. And now I hope you'll excuse me. I have some getting-even to do."

Tain nodded and stepped back out of the way, making sure her surprise didn't show on her face. Ennie had said she wasn't up to rough stuff yet, a comment that was unexpected in two ways. The girl had admitted knowing she wasn't properly trained, something she hadn't done in the beginning, but apparently she meant to change that state of affairs. Later, she and Ennie would definitely have to sit down and talk.

But right now there was some getting-even to watch being done...

## Chains Released

### Chapter 6

copyright 2003 by Sharon Green Jake watched Ennie walk into the alcove as he went back to his pallet, glad the girl no longer showed that deadly depression she'd been in before the slaver's attack. He hated that he had to go against his own best judgment simply because Tain didn't agree with him, but he had no choice at all about obeying her order. He parted his lips to say what he'd been told he had to, but Tain interrupted before he could get the first word out.

"Killen, save that explanation until after Ennie is done with what she has in mind," Tain said, and damned if the woman didn't look amused. Jake closed his mouth again and nodded to acknowledge this newest order, but the annoyance he felt disappeared when he finally noticed what Ennie carried. Unless he was mistaken, that was Tandro's knife belt she had...

"Tandro, that body cloth isn't appropriate right this moment," Ennie said as she walked toward the native where he'd backed up to his own pallet, her gaze directly on the man. "You can start by taking the cloth off."

Tandro's expression of calm control didn't really change as he reached to his covering, but Jake could see the sudden worry in the man's dark eyes. Not to mention the sudden desperation. It had been bad enough when another man was in charge of them; having a girl being in charge instead was ten times worse.

"Good boy," Ennie purred with an odd smile as soon as Tandro had put his body cloth to one side of the pallet. She also sat down on the pallet, which put a wary look on Tandro's face. "Now I'd like you to arrange yourself face down over my lap, taking the same position you put me in so often."

Tandro didn't actually pale as he moved as he'd been told to, but Jake saw that the wariness in the man's eyes had given way to total desperation. Tandro was probably remembering the same thing Jake was: that time in the hostel when Tandro spanked Ennie in front of Jake and Tain both. It was fairly obvious that the girl meant to return the compliment, but much more thoroughly than Jake had expected.

A gasp was forced out of Tandro's throat when Ennie reached to the man's backside with both hands. The girl had put the belt down for the purpose, and now that the belt was out of the way Jake could see that Ennie had carried something besides the leather in her hand. Jake got a glimpse of the insertion just before Ennie put the thing in Tandro, and then she was picking up the belt again.

"You're a good boy now, but you haven't always been a good boy, have you?"

Ennie asked as she stroked Tandro's hair slowly and gently. "I'd say that this is going to hurt me more than it does you, but I think we both know that that would be a lie. You've earned punishing, boy, and it's become my place to see that you get it."

Jake thought Tandro was about to say something, but the first stroke of the leather belt on his backside turned the words into a garbled sound.

The stroke couldn't have hurt all that much, not when Ennie was far from being well-muscled, but the touch hadn't been a gentle gesture either. And it was probable that Tandro had automatically tightened his muscles in anticipation of the stroke, an action that would have brought the insertion into play.

"When you did this to me you ordered me to say something that you wanted to hear," Ennie murmured as her arm brought the leather down on Tandro's rear a second time. "I, on the other hand, don't want to hear any kind of words from you. All you have to do is take your licking like a man."

Tandro groaned as he began to writhe a little, giving Jake the impression that the man wasn't quite as over the switching from yesterday as they'd both thought they were. Not to mention the fact that Jake had gotten bodily relief the night before but Tandro hadn't. The insertion was obviously bringing back the arousal Tandro hadn't had satisfied, but there was nothing either of them could do to stop what was happening. They'd been given orders they weren't allowed to refuse...

Jake watched his friend get half a dozen strokes of that leather belt before it came to him that this time he hadn't been ordered to watch the punishment. Jake's embarrassment on Tandro's behalf was intense, so he quickly turned away - only to see that the audience was larger than just himself and Tain. All the women who had passed by earlier were now standing in the open doorway, and most of them wore expressions of such grim satisfaction that their presence was more disturbing than embarrassing.

The spanking went on for what was actually only a short time, but every time Jake heard another stroke of the belt land he had to keep himself from flinching. The women in the doorway watched avidly but silently, and Jake could only hope that Tandro didn't know they were there. Tain stood at the back of the small crowd, her face expressionless as she made no effort to stop what was going on, and that was what got to Jake the most. Tain knew exactly what Tandro was being put through, just the way all the women did, but even she wasn't prepared to stop the punishment. So much for compassion on behalf of the helpless...

"All right, boy, you can straighten up to kneel on your pallet until I'm out of the way," Ennie finally said, showing that the spanking was over. "You seem to need something rather badly, but I'm afraid your need is going to be with you for a while. I may get around to doing something about it later, or I may not. We'll just have to wait and see what my mood is like."

Jake heard sounds of movement, and then he realized that Ennie was now standing next to his own pallet. He'd been busy studying his hands, and when he looked up he not only saw Ennie but that the other women were no longer in the doorway.

"I think you have something to tell me, Killen," Ennie said, using his name for what was probably the first time. "Let's hear it."

"I ... didn't know how you would take the news, Ennie, and that's why I kept it from you," Jake said, hating himself for making excuses. "The truth is, Tain and I work for the same people, and Tandro and I meant to take you two back home as soon as we saw to our assignment. If you'd had more experience in the field I would have been able to trust you with knowing everything, but you had no experience and also almost nothing in the way of training. I couldn't take the chance that you would screw everything up if you knew what was really going on."

Adding that last made Jake feel a bit better, but the words still made his insides turn over. He'd been told that he didn't have to obey Ennie, but the possibility existed that Ennie would talk Tain into changing that freedom to something he would sincerely regret. He didn't quite hold his breath while Ennie simply stared at him with no expression on her face, and then she nodded.

"I'd love to say your opinion of me was wrong, but lying doesn't solve anything," the girl said, not very happy with him but far from the rage he'd half expected. "I'll have to think about what you just told me for a while before I can really react to the news, but I can give you a hint about the way I'll feel. I think it's highly unlikely that you and I will ever be friends."

And with that the girl turned and left the alcove, going left toward where the other women had probably gone. Jake had expected to feel a lot of relief once he and Tandro were no longer the objects of such close attention, but suddenly he heard the almost-silent moaning Tandro was doing behind Jake. There wasn't a single doubt in Jake's mind that the moaning came from Tandro's urgent need for Ennie's return, a return that hadn't quite been promised to the man.

Jake lay down on his own pallet without turning to look at Tandro, trying to give his friend as much privacy as the cramped quarters allowed. He also suddenly found himself in a brooding mood, and there was no time like the present to indulge.

\* \* \*

Tain had followed the other women back to the cooking alcove, and by the time Ennie showed up Tain had gotten a fresh cup of coffee. Ennie returned the belt from where she'd gotten it, poured a cup of coffee of her own, then came to sit down near Tain.

"Why are some of the women looking like they just inherited a fortune while a couple of the others look like they were written out of the will?" Ennie asked softly with her back to the others once she was seated. "Char, especially, looks like she's floating on air, but Risdin seems to want to cry."

"Seeing a man being treated the way you treated Tandro has apparently made Char's day," Tain answered just as softly. "The utter delight she got chased away enough of her fear to let her relax a little, so it looks like I'll be able to let her stay. Risdin, on the other hand, isn't happy with what you did, because she said the men were hurt by the slaver for being against

slavery. Taking advantage of their helplessness strikes Risdin as being wrong, but possibly that's because she wasn't Tandro's slave before he became a slave himself."

"What do you mean, they were hurt by the slaver?" Ennie asked, the look in her eyes suddenly sharpening. "No one told me anything had been done to them, and I assumed they were just locked up until you broke them loose. How were they hurt?"

"The slaver did to both of them what you did to Tandro, but his men weren't quite as gentle as you were," Tain said, now watching the girl's reactions carefully. "By the time I got them out they were having a lot of trouble walking, and not just from the switchings they were given. But I

have to tell you... One of the first things Tandro said when he was allowed to speak again was to ask if you were all right. He kept saying during the trip that he didn't want to be blamed by our people if anything really horrible happened to you, so maybe that's why he asked."

"After going through all that himself he took the trouble to ask about me?" Ennie said, staring into space instead of meeting Tain's gaze.

"After talking to the women I went with, it suddenly came to me that they were in a worse position than I ever was. I might not have had anyone who really cared about me, but I still wasn't enslaved and beaten and raped and hurt all the way down to my soul. I felt like an ungrateful idiot for complaining about my life when theirs were so much worse, and now you tell me that Tandro asked about me? But what I did to him..."

Ennie put her coffee cup down before closing her eyes for a moment, then she scrambled to her feet and hurried out of the alcove. Since the girl turned right, Tain didn't have to wonder where Ennie was going. The only thing left to wonder about was whether Tandro would be able to forgive

Ennie for doing to him what he'd done to her. If he couldn't, then Ennie would be much better off without him.

After a while Risdin made lunch for everyone with Areen helping her, and

Tain ate slowly to fill in as much of the waiting time as possible. After lunch she spoke to the women and told them most of her plan, and then they wasted a bit more time discussing what they'd heard. Most of the women liked Tain's idea, but they were also more than a little afraid. The fear didn't cause them to refuse to help out, though; it just made them wish they could refuse.

Once the meeting was over, Tain took a walk to see how Ennie, Tandro, and

Killen were doing. Peeking inside the men's alcove showed Ennie and Tandro asleep in each other's arms on Tandro's pallet, and even Killen had managed to fall asleep. Getting some rest seemed like a really good idea, so Tain went to her own pallet and forced herself to sleep. The



automatic alarm clock in her head would help to wake her up, she knew, and if the trick somehow missed then it would be Risdin who woke her. Before leaving the cooking alcove Tain had spoken to Risdin, who now knew that Tain wanted to leave right after she and the men had something to eat.

Sleeping in the middle of the day did manage to throw off Tain's inner clock. She opened her eyes to Risdin's hand on her shoulder, then had to get back into the costume before following the other woman to the cooking alcove. And the mood Tain woke with wasn't even as good as the one she'd gone to sleep with; she'd been dreaming about taking a long, delicious bath, and waking up to reality hadn't been pleasant.

Risdin had made a plain vegetable stew for everyone, and after the food had been put into bowls with wooden spoons added she helped Tain carry the four bowls to the men's alcove. Areen and the woman whose name Tain didn't know followed with two cups of coffee each, and once all the food and drink had been distributed the three native women left the alcove. Since Killen, Tandro, and Ennie were awake and sitting up on their respective pallets, Areen and the other coffee carrier left a good deal faster than Risdin.

"We'll be leaving here as soon as we finish eating, so if you have any questions on what I'm about to tell you don't hold back," Tain said to the two men after sitting down on the stone floor. "Ennie already knows she won't be going with us, so the outing will just be a threesome."

"Where will we be going?" Killen asked at once while Tandro looked deeply relieved. "Since Ennie will be staying behind, it's fairly obvious we aren't going to be heading home."

"Tonight we'll be going out to do some kidnapping," Tain said, noticing that Killen wasn't diving into the food any faster than she herself.

"We're going to start with Gordi, and once we have him we'll move on to the names he gives us. I intend to get Gordi himself, the two next most powerful leaders who support him, and his most powerful ... opponent tonight. Once we have them we'll get them to understand just how bad slavery is, and once that's done we'll then head home."

"You expect us to convince Gordi and the others just like that in one night?" Killen said, the words not quite mocking. "I consider myself a fairly good talker, Tain, but unless you're better than fairly good you might want to try another plan."

"I said we'll be getting the men tonight, not that we'll convince them that quickly," Tain corrected mildly. "It will probably take the entire following day or even a bit longer before they really get the message, but this is important work. Heading home will have to wait until the work is done, so I need to ask: are you two in good enough shape to help, or will it be smarter to leave you behind along with Ennie?"

Tain had actually addressed her question to Tandro, and the native smiled in that calm way he had.

"I'm perfectly fine, so staying behind won't be necessary," Tandro stated, speaking just as mildly as Tain had. "Killen, I think, is doing even better than I am."

"Yeah, I'm definitely doing better than fine," Killen agreed, but not with anything like enthusiasm. "And is that all we'll be doing tonight?"

Kidnapping men and then sitting down to talk to them?"

"Actually, the talking won't take place until those women in the next alcove show the men just what it's like to be a slave," Tain answered, ignoring the urge to tell Killen that the rest of the plan was none of his business. "We happen to have some doses of the slave drug at our disposal, which make my plan more than just wishful thinking. Risdin found a package with a dozen doses that some slaver lost, and I mean to double up on each of the men."

"To compensate for their greater size and body weight," Killen said with a startled nod, his distant stare saying he was thinking about what he'd been told. "That's probably what was done with us... And you believe that Gordi and the others will be convinced by being enslaved themselves? What if they react the other way after being treated badly by women and decide to hold their slaves even tighter than before?"

"I'll know if that happens because I mean to ask before letting the men go again," Tain said, making no effort to avoid Killen's gaze. "If any of those men react like fools instead of rational beings, I'm going to cut their throats instead of turning them loose. I won't give people like

Himlin any more supporters than they already have."

Killen's expression didn't change, but the look in his eyes almost made

Tain want to flinch. Mention of the slaver Himlin had made Killen show a hint of how he felt about that slaver, a reaction that had nothing in the way of fear about it. Dismemberment and bloody murder, yes; fear, no.

"Now we'd better get this food eaten so we can get on with our chore,"

Tain said, breaking what had become an awkward silence. "I want us to be finished and back here with everyone before daylight."

They'd all just been sitting and holding their bowls, but Tain's reminder set the other three to beginning the meal. Tain didn't really want the vegetable stew, she wanted a decent meal, but getting a meal like that wasn't going to happen until she was back where she belonged. In the meanwhile there was work to do, and since skipping the meal wasn't a good idea she picked up her own spoon and began to eat.

Once everyone had finished the last drop of coffee in their cups, Tain, Killen, and Tandro got on with their chore. A candle let them find their way up the stairs and into the room with the secret entrance to the tunnel, then out of the warehouse. Tandro carried the pack holding the

doses of the drug, leaving her and Killen's hands free for any fighting that might have to be done.

It turned out that there was rough stuff, but no actual fighting. Tandro guided them through the empty streets to Gordi's house, deep night and silence all around them as they moved silently. Four men who could be considered perimeter guards stood a small distance from the house, and Tain made two of them unconscious while Killen did the same for the other two. Once the guards were out of the way, getting into the house wasn't hard at all.

The man Gordi lay asleep in his bed beside a woman who didn't wear anything to mark her as a slave, so Tain knew that the woman could well be Gordi's wife. The man himself looked large and well-muscled even in the dark, which meant that Killen rendered the woman unconscious and then he, Tain, and Tandro all sat on Gordi while Tain forced the drug down Gordi's throat. Gordi struggled hard before the first of the drug trickled into him, and then his struggles turned very lethargic.

By the time the second dose was down the man's throat, all the fight had gone out of him. It wasn't easy to tell in the dark, but Gordi looked dazed and mostly out of it.

"Gordi, can you hear me?" Tain asked softly, needing to know if they'd have to wait until they could all get out of there. "If you can, say so."

"I can hear you," Gordi obliged, but the dazed quality was clear in his voice.

"Good," Tain said, feeling more than a little relieved. "Get out of bed and get dressed."

Gordi obeyed without hesitation, but his movements were very deliberate and definitely on the slow side. Tain realized that the man wasn't resisting, he was simply reacting to the drug he'd been given. He obviously needed some time to adjust, but Tain didn't have the time to give him.

Once they had the man out of his house, Tain moved very close to him.

"You're going to close your eyes now, but that isn't all I want you to do," she murmured. "Until you're told otherwise, you're going to see nothing, hear nothing but my voice, and smell nothing. You'll have absolutely no idea of where you're being taken, and that will continue to hold true even if someone orders you to remember whatever you can. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Gordi answered in the same kind of murmur, his eyes already closed. "There's nothing around me but unrelieved darkness."

"Too bad he didn't realize that sooner," Killen muttered, and Tain knew he wasn't talking about the state Tain had put the man into. "Let's get out of here before one or more of those guards wakes up."

Since Tain had been about to say the same thing she didn't argue, and they all moved off into

the cool dark. She'd noticed that Killen hadn't been very friendly lately, not even to the point of neutrality. It looked like her plan to discourage him had worked, helped along by her plan to change the minds of the town and area leaders. Killen knew as well as she did that the job had to be done, but he obviously hated using the drug to accomplish the task. Tain could understand how he felt, but since there was no choice if the talks were to be effective rather than a waste of time and breath...

Getting back to the warehouse took only a little longer than leaving it had. Tain and Killen searched the darkness carefully for anyone who might be around - like some of Himlin's men, for instance - but the area was completely deserted. Once inside the warehouse they relit their candle, then Tain began to question Gordi. She got the names she needed along with locations of the men's houses, and shortly thereafter they were in the room with the secret panel. Tain used the release to open the cabinet-door, and once it opened she got a surprise.

"I've been waiting for you guys to get back," Ennie said from where she stood just past the secret door. "It came to me that you three have a lot to do, and it will save time if you don't have to go all the way down and then back up again. But if you don't agree - "

"As a matter of fact I do agree," Tain assured the anxious girl, giving her a real smile. "Your idea is more than good, and I appreciate the help. I'm going to turn this man over to you, and then you can take him the rest of the way. Once you have him you-know-where, don't let the others start on the rest of the plan. I want to be there to make sure they don't go overboard."

"That's an even better idea," Ennie said, her own smile on the rueful side. "Those women have been hurt so badly that going overboard is probably a guarantee rather than a possibility. But I'll make sure they stay away from him."

"Let them know that the delay is only temporary," Tain advised.

"That way you shouldn't have too much trouble." Then she turned her attention to their captive. "Gordi, from here there will be someone else leading you. When she tells you to lie down you'll do it, and then you'll go right to sleep. You won't wake again until you hear my voice, and when you do wake up you'll be able to see and hear and smell things again. You just won't be able to refuse orders, defend yourself, or try to escape. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand," Gordi answered, his eyes still closed tight. He seemed a little less dazed now so Tain let Ennie lead the man to the stairs, and once they began to descend without the man falling, Tain closed the cabinet-door again.

"Okay, who do we go for first?" Tain asked Tandro, who had watched Ennie until the door cut off sight of her. "I want to take the most distant victim first and work our way back in this direction, and we can't waste the time to bring each of them here before going for the next. As soon as the alarm is raised we'll have half the town searching for us."

"I hadn't thought of that, but you're right," Tandro said, his face showing a frown. "All three of our targets live fairly close to one another, but not in the same area that Gordi does. If we

move fast we can have all three down in the tunnel before anyone gives the alarm.”

“Let’s hope it works out like that,” Tain said, shielding the candle’s flame with one hand as they moved as quickly as possible to the warehouse exit. “And here’s hoping none of the three have as many guards as Gordi did. Taking them down isn’t hard, but it does waste a lot of time.”

Tain saw an odd look on Tandro’s face before she blew out the candle, but there wasn’t time to wonder what the expression meant. Instead she just let the native lead the way to the house of their next victim, a man named

Flam who didn’t seem to believe in guards. His house was large but easy to get into, and there were three female slaves sleeping on pallets in what seemed to be a closet in his bedroom. Flam himself was alone in his bed, so after closing the closet door Tain and her companions fed the man the drug. He reacted in the same way that Gordi had, and Tain put him under immediate control. They now had Gordi’s main opponent, and had only

Gordi’s supporters still to get.

They finally made it back to the warehouse with all three men, and as far as Tain could tell no one had sounded an alarm yet. Their luck was running better than she’d dared to hope it would, but that might not be the blessing it seemed. They had all four of the men they wanted in their control, but how those men would react to what was done to them remained to be seen.

Ennie wasn’t waiting this time when Tain opened the secret door, which probably meant she hadn’t felt it wise to leave Gordi by himself even asleep. She left Killen and Tandro to see to their prisoners after she closed the secret door again, then went ahead to find out if her guess had been right.

“You’re back,” Ennie exclaimed with a smile when Tain walked into the fourth alcove, the room they’d gotten ready for their prisoners. Ennie sat on the floor next to a sleeping Gordi, but now she got to her feet. “I

thought about leaving this man alone when I found that the other women were asleep, but considering the fact that he’s the important one I

decided it might be better if I stayed. Did you get all the others?”

“We certainly did,” Tain said, relieved that her worry had been misplaced. “Killen and Tandro are bringing them down so they ought to be here in a minute or two.”

“After that I think we all ought to get some sleep,” Ennie said, running a weary hand through her hair. “I know I had that nap earlier, but all the good it did has been slowly wearing off.”

Tain nodded her agreement, then turned to wait for the men to be brought to the alcove. If

she cued the others to her voice the way she had with Gordi, none of the men would wake up until she wanted them to. But that didn't mean she'd be able to sleep anywhere but right there in the alcove with the prisoners. If the native women hadn't made any trouble yet, that didn't mean tomorrow wouldn't be another story entirely...

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Chains Released

Chapter 7

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Jake had trouble falling asleep after they got the captives bedded down, and then suddenly found himself awake after a period of time that didn't feel very long at all. Ennie had joined Tandro on his pallet again, and even though the two didn't make love, this time was harder on Jake than the last when they did make love. Even without looking Jake knew that Tandro had his arms around Ennie, and that knowledge was oddly painful. Tain had taken a pallet into the captives' alcove, giving Jake not the smallest indication that she would have welcomed his presence on the pallet with her.

Not that he wanted to sleep with Tain. She'd been treating him like some kind of unintelligent hireling, someone whose expertise was to be used when necessary but at all other times completely ignored. Being treated that way made Jake feel like less than he knew himself to be, and he refused to accept being put down like that. He was a human being, and no matter how he was treated he intended to continue acting like a human being.

Trying to fall asleep again turned out to be a waste of time, so Jake got up quietly and went into what was called the cooking alcove. His intention was to make a fresh pot of coffee, and discovering that there was already fresh coffee being kept warm was something of a surprise. The native women were all asleep in the first alcove, so Jake didn't find out who had made the coffee until he carried his cup into the captives' area. Tain sat on her pallet drinking instead of sleeping, looking up when he appeared in the doorway. Looking up but not saying anything...

"I want a chance to talk to Gordi before you go on with the rest of your ... plan," Jake found himself saying, something he'd been thinking about since the night before. "If I can bring the man over to our side with just words, we won't have to chance turning him completely against us from what the women do."

"It's worth a try," Tain conceded after a very long moment of simply staring at him. "But that's the only thing I want you to try without checking with me first. You aren't to order any of these men to obey no one but you, not unless I say you can."

Jake nodded his head once, hating the fact that Tain didn't need his agreement. He was still required to obey her, a fact he couldn't forget even if he wanted to. She seemed to take every opportunity to remind him...

Once Jake had been given his orders, Tain got up and went over to where Gordi lay on a plain blanket. That was all any of the captives had been given to lie on, which meant they would definitely wake up hurting.

"Gordi, listen to me," Tain said softly right next to the big man. "In a moment you're going to wake up, but when you do you won't remember what was done to you in your house before you were taken out of it. You won't have any idea how you got here, but you'll be able to see and hear and smell things again. You just won't be able to leave without permission or try to hurt the people around you. All right, you can wake up now."

The big man Tain had been speaking to began to stir, and then he sat up slowly on the blanket as he looked around. Gordi used one hand to rub at his shoulder as his gaze took in the other men who were still sleeping, and then suddenly his attention was completely on Jake.

"What the hell is this?" Gordi asked in a deep voice that suggested the man was very used to giving orders. "Why are we all here and who the hell are you?"

"I'm one of the men you'd agreed to meet with the day before yesterday," Jake answered mildly as he moved a step closer to where Gordi sat. "When my friend made the appointment he asked you and your people to keep the subject of our visit private, but one of you dropped a word in the wrong ear. My friend and I were attacked twice by assassins, once before we reached town, once in our hostel. And then yesterday morning, when we were on our way to your house, my friend and I were knocked unconscious by men with clubs and he and I were taken captive."

"I thought my people could be trusted, but it looks like I was wrong," Gordi answered after a very brief hesitation, a touch of guilt showing in the blue of his eyes. "When you and your friend didn't show up I thought you might have changed your minds... But that still doesn't explain what I and those others are doing here. And if you were taken captive, how come you're free now instead of being dead?"

"I'm free because an associate helped out, and I'm not dead because dead wasn't the way Himlin wanted me to be," Jake said, watching Gordi carefully. "One of his assassins named Himlin, and Tandro and I lodged formal complaints against him. Himlin wanted Tandro and me to withdraw those complaints."

"Hearing that slaver's name doesn't surprise me one bit," Gordi said, his face twisted in a grimace that showed his opinion of Himlin. "And if that's who one of my people talked to, I'm definitely going to find out who the big-mouth is."

"That's fine for later, but right now we have another point to talk about," Jake said, crouching down in front of Gordi. "There are a lot of people who listen to what you have to say, Gordi, and that's why I wanted to talk to you. I was told that you aren't all that fond of slavery, and that you might even listen when I proved that slavery needs to be abolished. Are you willing to listen?"

"I listen to what everyone has to say," Gordi returned with a much more neutral expression. "If you don't listen to both sides of an argument you can't decide which side to support with any hope of being right."

"I admire that intelligent an outlook, and now I'm going to take advantage of it," Jake said, and then he explained how enslaving women was keeping society on this world from advancing. Gordi developed a frown as he listened, and then he shook his head.

"I knew I didn't much like slavery, but I had no idea that it was actually hurting us," he said, his expression sober. "What impresses me most is that you people are trying to talk us into changing things, not strolling onto our world and telling us what to do. But there are those who won't be impressed by any of it, and even more they'll claim that you're lying.

People like Flam over there, and that brings us back to a point you haven't explained yet. How did we all get here?"

"You can thank that slaver Himlin for your being here," Tain said while

Jake searched for the proper words to answer Gordi's question.

"Himlin decided to make use of a new idea, so we did the same."

"She means that Himlin didn't just kidnap Tandro and me and try to talk us into withdrawing our complaints," Jake said hurriedly while Gordi frowned at Tain as if a piece of furniture had suddenly spoken to him.

"Himlin used the slave drug on my friend and me, then gave us a taste of what women go through with him. Needless to say, Tandro and I now hate slavery even more than we did."

"But that's not possible," Gordi protested, still giving Tain an occasional disapproving glance. "That drug doesn't work on men, only on women."

"Guess again," Tain said, sitting straighter on her pallet. It was fairly clear that Tain had noticed Gordi's attitude toward her and wasn't happy about it. "There are only a very small number of drugs that don't work on both men and women, and you people aren't sophisticated enough to have any of those. If you thought you were safe from being put through what's only been done to women until now, you were wrong."

"I don't like your attitude," Gordi stated, having done his own straightening where he sat. "You're dressed like a slave and even have the proper armbands, so you have no right talking to a free man like that. I want an immediate and proper apology from you, slave, and then I want that pallet you're sitting on."

"I really am so sorry, sir, but I'm not allowed to take the orders of anyone but my owner," Tain answered at once with a very ... feral kind of smile. "You claim you don't like slavery, but you still don't hesitate to give orders to someone you consider a slave and you even resent being talked to by that someone. With those facts clear before us, I'm sure you won't mind if I



do the same as you."

"Tain, please don't," Jake said, the order he'd meant to give coming out in the only way it was possible for him to speak to her. "I thought we agreed - "

"I agreed to give you a chance," Tain interrupted to point out, the look in her own blue eyes a good deal calmer than Jake had thought it would be.

"He thinks it's a shame that slavery seems to have been holding his people back, but he still doesn't consider slavery wrong. If you want people to see things your way, you have to make the matter more personal for them."

Jake really did want to argue the point, but this time it was reason that held the words back. It so happened that he agreed with Tain, but pushing the matter to the limit could make the whole interview blow up in their faces.

"I think people ought to be what they are," Gordi said, taking advantage of Jake's silence. "It isn't hard to make a woman a slave, but the same can't be said of men. If it's truth you're looking for, you now have it."

"Truth isn't truth when you're only looking at one side of the coin," Tain countered, seeing the challenge in Gordi's attitude just as Jake did.

"It's now become time to flip that coin, so why don't you get to your knees, put your head to the floor, apologize to me for speaking out of turn, and then sit down again."

Gordi didn't hesitate to do as he'd been told, of course, and once he was back sitting as he'd been the look in his eyes was pure pole-axed.

"Now you know how we got you here, and you also know that making a man a slave isn't hard at all," Tain said to a Gordi who looked like he might pass out. "Not to add insult to injury, but you have to obey everyone, not just me. How did you like the experience of being what you are?"

"I never thought -! This can't be possible, but I know I didn't imagine it!" Gordi sounded almost wild, and then he looked at Tain again. "I don't want to tell you that I hated what you just did, but I can't stop myself. You have to get this drug out of me, you have to!"

"There is an antidote to the drug, but no one on this world has it," Tain answered, her words still mild. "I think if you people outlaw slavery and really mean it, our own people will see their way clear to supplying the antidote for your use. On the provision, of course, that the women get to be freed first. After all, they've been chained to that drug longer than you have."

Gordi opened his mouth, probably to protest, then he closed his eyes and shook his head.

"It never occurred to me that being subject to the drug could be so ... devastating," Gordi muttered as he ran his hands through his black hair. "You can't refuse to do something even

if you want to, and that's not right. Using the drug isn't right, and that's one stance no one will ever move me from."

"I'm glad to hear that," Tain told him, and her tone was the least bit more gentle now. "And since you're such a fan of truths, here's one that ought to be self-evident right now: as long as anyone at all is in danger of being enslaved, you yourself are not safe no matter how well protected you think you are. As long as any kind of slavery is possible, just because you aren't enslaved today doesn't mean it won't happen to you tomorrow."

"Ten minutes ago I would have argued that statement, but right now all I can do is agree," Gordi said, raising his head to look directly at Tain. "It hadn't come to me sooner, but you're not from this world either, are you? Does that mean off-worlders aren't as easy a mark for the drug as we are?"

"No, it just means we're sneakier than you are," Tain responded with something of a smile. "We brought you and your friends - and your major opponent - here to show you our side of things, but Killen wanted to start with you alone. He obviously thought you were the most reasonable of the bunch, and I'm glad to say I now agree with him. But the question still has to be put: will you talk to those others and try to get them to see things your way?"

"I think I now need to talk them around," Gordi said slowly, as though examining his words as he spoke them. "For the second time I wouldn't have said exactly that if I'd been given the choice, but this damn drug isn't giving me the choice. You bet I'll talk to them, and if one of them doesn't see it my way I'll probably break his neck."

Jake expected Tain to tell Gordi that he couldn't break anyone's neck without her permission, but she just smiled and left her pallet to move closer to the three sleeping men. She spoke softly to each of the three, and a couple of minutes later they were all sitting on their blankets fully awake.

"What the hell is this?" the man named Flam asked as soon as he could, glaring around at everyone in the room. "How did you manage this, Gordi? No, never mind how you managed it. Just show me the way out of here."

"You were brought here for the same reason I was, Flam, and you won't be leaving until you hear what I have to say," Gordi returned at once. Then he began to tell the three what he'd been told by Jake, but he didn't stop there. He also described the rest of what had happened, and the two men who were supporters of his ended up looking shaken. Flam, though, was another matter.

"If you expect me to believe all that garbage you're a bigger fool than I thought," Flam said with a snort as soon as Gordi fell silent. "I don't know how you got me here, but whatever you did it was a waste of time. Keeping slaves isn't what's holding us back, listening to fools like you is what's doing it. And if the drug worked on you and this other fool, that doesn't mean it will work on me. I'm not as soft and womanish as the rest of you, so stop wasting my time with bullshit."

"If what you were told is bullshit, why are you still sitting on that blanket?" Jake heard Tain say as she came back into the alcove. He'd only been distantly aware of the fact that she'd left as soon as the three men were awake, but now she was back.

"I don't answer to slaves, they answer to me," Flam spat as he glared at Tain. "Go to your knees to me, slave, and beg me to punish you for insolence."

"Sorry, sir, but I'm not allowed to obey the orders of anyone but my owner," Tain stated, the look in her eyes even more feral now.

"And it so happens that my owner isn't allowed to give me any more orders. The same, though, can't be said for you. You have to obey anyone I tell you to obey, and now I'm telling you to obey these two women."

Tain gestured toward the archway, and it was Risdin and Char who walked in. The second woman looked furious with what seemed to be terror hidden beneath, but Risdin didn't look the same. And Risdin was also carrying a switch.

"I don't like the looks of you, slave," Risdin said to Flam in a hard voice. "Get to your knees and bow to me, and then beg me to punish you for being insolent."

Flam went to his knees instantly, bowed his head to the floor, then said, "Please punish me for being insolent." Gordi wasn't as shocked as the other two men, but Jake could see that even Gordi was shaken by what was happening.

"It will be my pleasure to punish you, slave," Risdin answered with a smile that was one of the most frightening Jake had ever seen.

"First, though, you can take that body cloth off. Slaves don't cover themselves without the permission of their owners."

Jake expected Flam to straighten up to take off his body cloth, but instead the man removed his covering just as he was. It came to Jake then that Risdin hadn't said the man could straighten up, so he hadn't even tried.

"You were too slow stripping yourself, so you've earned even more punishment," Risdin said once Flam was naked. "Crawl over here and then position yourself properly in front of me."

When Flam raised his head and began to crawl, Jake was able to see the man's face. Someone else in Flam's place would have been shocked, but this man was nothing but totally outraged and furious. He was so filled with hatred for what was being done to him that he seemed to have room for no other awareness.

"I don't like the expression on your face, slave," Risdin said while Char shivered where she stood behind the other woman. "If you reach the point of not being able to take any more punishment, you have my permission to beg for forgiveness."

"That's not going to happen, bitch," Flam snarled from where he knelt facing away from

Risdin. "I'm not a whiny female who can be made to - Ah!"

The first stroke of the switch ended Flam's rage-filled attempt at defiance, a thin red line appearing on the man's heavy buttocks. Flam carried more weight than a man of his size should, which made his backside a really easy target. Risdin gave him another stroke of the switch, obviously putting a lot of her strength into the effort, and Flam's light-brown-haired head came up with his hiss of pain.

It wasn't long before Jake was flinching with every stroke Flam was given, but Flam himself was doing more than just flinching. The man's buttocks were being turned really red, and Flam began to writhe with every stroke.

After his first gasp he hadn't made a sound, but Jake thought that Flam wasn't keeping his jaw locked just to stay quiet. The man could see the other three men watching him being punished, and it looked like that awareness was almost as painful as the switching.

Flam took about two dozen of the hard strokes delivered by the switch before Jake noticed a slight difference in the man's attitude. It wasn't pain alone that was twisting the man around; humiliation rode Flam like something with spurs, and after the two dozen strokes Flam couldn't take any more.

"All right, you've made your point!" he said suddenly, his tone less than even. "I can't resist the drug any more than anyone else, so there's no need to go on with this."

"Is that your idea of begging for forgiveness?" Risdin asked, having paused in the switching. "If it is, I suggest you think again."

Flam gritted his teeth again, but was only able to take two more strokes of the switch before he had to admit defeat.

"All right, all right, I'm begging!" he blurted, the hatred he felt thick in his voice. "I'm begging to be forgiven, so you can stop this now!"

"You know, I once begged my owner to stop punishing me," Char said suddenly, stepping closer to where Risdin stood. "I was crying at the time so I sounded a lot more sincere than you just did, but all my owner said was that he wasn't ready to forgive me. With that in mind, I don't think we ought to be ready to forgive you."

Disturbance flickered across Flam's face along with a frown, but Risdin grinned and offered the switch to Char. Char looked at the switch for a moment with no expression, then her lips curved into a smile that turned her radiantly lovely and she took the offered branch.

Five minutes later Flam was shouting out his pain and doing a much better job of begging, but Char just kept striking his backside with that switch and all the strength she could muster. Jake understood how the woman felt, but he still had to force himself to keep watching. His own experience with punishment was still too fresh for him to watch without reacting, and when the first trace of blood appeared among the welts he just had to look

away.

"All right, Char, that's enough, I think," Tain's voice came a long minute later. "He's crying just the way you were and he's also begging, so let's show him that you have more compassion than your owner did. Give me the switch."

Jake looked up to see that Flam's backside now bled in a lot more places and the man was more hysterical than simply crying, but Char was still switching him. The look on her face was frenzied and she didn't seem to have heard Tain, so Tain didn't waste her breath repeating what she'd said. She touched Char's neck in the same way he and Tain had touched those guards the night before, and when Char collapsed into unconsciousness Tain caught her before she hit the floor. Risdin, looking seriously disturbed, took Char from Tain and carried the beautiful woman out of the alcove, the other native women stepping back from where they'd been standing just outside. Once all the women were gone, Tain turned back to Gordi and his supporters.

"You've now had the most striking example possible of how much damage slavery can do," Tain said to the men over Flam's sobs, undoubtedly seeing, as Jake did, how pale and shaken the three men were.

"That woman is so beautiful that she didn't have a prayer of not being enslaved, and now she may never recover. She should have been someone's loving wife and the doting mother of children, but she may never come far enough back to sanity to do any of that. Is being able to use her body any time her owner allows it worth losing her as a human being?"

"No, not for me," Gordi said at once, his voice rough and his gaze haunted. "What about you, Artro, and you, Dimmis? How do you feel about it?"

"I feel like throwing up," the larger of the two men said, looking directly at Gordi. "And not just because I know it could be me kneeling there instead of Flam. That woman... She looked afraid when she first came in here, but then the hatred took her over... I don't ever want anyone to hate me as much as she seems to, and it kills me that I don't know how to heal her. And it kills me even more that I would have used her happily if she were a slave and was offered to me."

The smaller of the two had also raised his head, and when Gordi looked in his direction all he did was nod slowly with pain in his gaze. He made no effort to disagree with the first man in any way at all, and when Gordi saw that he nodded.

"Then we're all agreed," Gordi said, now sounding more grimly satisfied than shaken. "Slavery has to be ended at any cost before it destroys us completely."

"But you're not all agreed," Tain pointed out, drawing the attention of the three men. "There's still someone who hasn't been heard from, so let's get his opinion. What do you, think, Flam? Have you decided to be against slavery now?"

"I'm going to see you all dead, devil take me if I don't," Flam choked out, obviously being

forced to speak the truth. "I'll find those females wherever they try to hide, and once I have them I'll flay them myself. But first I'm going to see all of you dead, just the way you deserve to be for doing this to me. Dead, I want you all dead!"

By that time Flam was screaming, and Gordi exchanged glances with the other two men. Jake knew well enough what he would do in their place, but the decision belonged to the men who lived on this world.

"I can't help but notice that Flam isn't taking any part of the responsibility for what happened to him," the smaller of the two men said slowly. "Considering the fact that he has more than one slave and never hesitates to knock them around, he ought to have at least hesitated before deciding that this is all other people's fault. I have a feeling that Flam can't admit that he brought this on himself, not now and not ever."

"I'm forced to agree with you, Dimmis," Gordi said with a shake of his head. "I always thought that Flam just refused to admit out loud that he might be wrong about something, but that isn't true. Even this hasn't convinced him he's wrong, which means there isn't anything that will."

"And that leaves us no choice about what to do," the taller man, who had to be Artro, said in the same sober way. "Flam has the ability to talk the hotheads and empty heads into going along with him, and we can't let that happen again. This time the matter is far too important."

"What are all of you talking about?" Flam demanded from where he still knelt, his face twisted into a horrible mask. "How can you just sit there without even offering to help me? You deserve to die along with them, and once I'm out of here I'll make sure it happens!"

"I've heard it suggested that you make a habit of seeing people who don't agree with you disappear or die," Gordi said, apparently pretending that

Flam hadn't just promised to kill him. "Is the suggestion true? Are you the one who sent assassins after me and made it necessary for me to have guards around all the time?"

"Of course I'm the one," Flam answered with a snort of ridicule, glaring at his questioner. "Too many of those damn fools listen to you instead of to me, but the lousy assassin blew it. But don't worry, I just found some who can reach you no matter how many guards you have, and all I have to do is pay them. Then I'll never be bothered by you again."

Gordi's jaw tightened when he heard that and he sat straighter, but before he could speak Tain interrupted again.

"I think you three men should be free to treat Flam the way he's begging to be treated," she said, then glanced toward Jake. "Come on, Killen."

Gordi and his friends need some privacy right now."

Jake happened to agree with Tain, but it still set his teeth on edge to have to follow her out of the alcove. She led the way to the right, away from where the others were and toward the darkness, and then she stopped and turned to look at him.

"I think we're almost finished here, and while we're waiting there's something I'd like you to do," she said, looking up at him with no expression on her face. "I want you to cancel every order you ever gave me, and then I want you to order me not to take anyone's orders, including yours, ever again."

Jake had no choice but to obey, and once he'd done as she'd asked he also didn't hesitate putting in his own request.

"Now that you're completely free, how about doing me the same favor?" he said, wondering why her expression hadn't changed at all. "You can't really argue that doing as I ask would be anything more than fair."

"Doing as you ask would have been fair if you'd made the offer of freeing me first on your own," she said, no longer meeting his gaze. "I spent more than a little time wondering if you would ever get around to making the suggestion, and then I got tired of waiting. I'm going to have the women get ready to leave here, and once the men are done with their chore I'd like you to do the same with them. I want out of here and off this world as soon as I can get them."

And with that she pushed past him and strode away, making no effort to glance into the alcove to see if Flam had been put out of his misery yet.

Jake stood for a moment and watched her go, finding it impossible to dig out words of his own. He had the feeling he might have screwed up somehow, but right now he couldn't see where. Tain seemed to feel that he hadn't considered her, but the same could most definitely be said about her toward him. If she'd cared anything at all about him, she never would have treated him the way she was doing.

Going back to the captives' alcove showed Jake that Flam was almost dead.

Artro and Dimmis had obviously held Flam down while Gordi smothered him with one of the blankets folded up for easier handling, but the three hadn't moved back even though Flam was no longer struggling. They were making very sure that Flam was dead before they ended their efforts, which was wise of them. It's never pleasant when you have to kill someone twice in the space of ten minutes.

The women, two of them helping Char, hurried past the alcove right after the three men stood up, so Jake told Gordi and his friends that they would be turned loose in just a little while. The men nodded to show that they'd heard him, but other than that they didn't say anything. They didn't look as if they regretted what they'd done, but they also weren't particularly happy about it. They spoke together in low tones for a minute or two, and when Tain walked into the alcove again Gordi turned to her.

"When Dimmis and Artro are free, they're going straight to the guard," Gordi said without preamble. "They're going to give a statement saying they heard Flam admit that he sent assassins after me, so no one will wonder when Flam can't be found. I'd like you two to be my houseguests for a little while, at least until the guard catches up with Himlin. My friends intend to mention your associate's kidnapping along with the rest... And we'd also like to know when we can expect to be freed as far as possible until that antidote can be gotten."

"What makes you think there's a way to do that?" Tain asked mildly. "If you're judging by what I'm wearing, you have to remember there's such a thing as being in disguise."

"Please don't," Gordi said, his tone and expression both weary.

"I'm not blind, and I do try not to be a fool. Those women who ... punished Flam... It was perfectly clear that they were both slaves at some time, but when Flam tried to give them orders they had no trouble refusing him. There's some way you can be freed of the slave drug and we'd like you to use that way unless you've already decided not to."

"No, I haven't made a decision like that," Tain answered, still speaking mildly. "But before we get to your request, I'd like each of you to tell me whether or not you're speaking the truth about your intentions. Are the plans you mentioned the only ones you have, or are there other plans you've decided to keep to yourselves?"

"Our only intentions are to do as I said and to work toward getting rid of slavery as quickly as possible," Gordi responded at once without the least hesitation. "I don't blame you for being suspicious, not when I'd be the same in your place."

"That's good to hear," Tain said once the other two men had supported Gordi with their own assurances. "There is a way to free you men and I'll use it in a minute, but first you need to be told something. If, once you're freed, any of you change your mind and do something to cause either capture or hurt for me or my friends, you will immediately revert to needing to take orders from everyone - and you'll never be able to be partially freed again. Do all of you understand what that means?"

Jake saw the three men sigh before they nodded, happily showing nothing in the way of suspicious regret. Tain was trying to make sure he and the others would be as safe as possible, but there would be no true safety for any of them until they were off this world...

Chains 2 Chapter 8

Chains Released

Chapter 8

copyright 2003 by Sharon Green Jake noticed Tandro and Ennie entering the alcove while Tain spoke to Gordi and his friends, but the two just stopped near him and stood quietly. Somehow Tain had managed to put herself in charge of everyone and everything, and Jake still wasn't quite sure how she had done that. And, in the back of his mind, he also wasn't



quite sure he liked the accomplishment...

"There's one other thing I want to say before I free you," Tain told the men. "I don't want anyone knowing about this place, so once we're out of here you'll all forget about where you were kept and even what building you were brought to. Does everyone understand?"

Jake saw the three men nod, and oddly enough he, Ennie, and Tandro also nodded. Then Tain was telling the three men not to take orders from anyone but her, and once she left even that exception would expire. If she came back even a single day later, they would no longer have to take her orders. Gordi and the other two men looked extremely relieved, and then it was time to start leaving.

Jake joined Tandro in getting their gear together while Tain escorted Artro and Dimmis out first. Those two weren't going back to Gordi's house with the rest of them, so it made sense to let them leave first. If seven people left the warehouse at the same time someone might notice; as it was, keeping the five of them together might be pushing the bounds of luck.

When Tain came back it turned out that it still wasn't time for the rest of them to leave.

"We can't just leave Flam's body there," she said, looking down at the body in question. "We also can't take the body out with us, so we have to choose the final option."

"Which is what?" Jake asked, his eagerness to be on his way playing havoc with his temper. "Wave a magic wand to make the body disappear?"

"You're close," Tain said with barely a glance in his direction.

"Before the women left I asked them about a place to dump serious garbage, and they gave me directions. If you three men will pick up the body, we can take care of its disposal before we go."

There was no choice at all, so Jake took Flam's shoulders while Tandro took his legs, and once the two of them had the body off the floor Gordi helped by supporting his former opponent's middle. Tain took a lamp and then led the way into the tunnel, turning toward the darkness rather than the other way.

They walked for what seemed like a very long time, long enough for Jake to feel the body he carried getting heavier and heavier. When they'd first started out he'd considered Gordi's "help" unnecessary, but by the time Tain stopped by a fold in the rock of the wall Gordi was sharing a lot more of the weight of their burden.

"Now you have to be careful," Tain said, holding the lamp close to the fold. "There's supposed to be a deep pit just behind here, and we don't want anyone but Flam going into it."

Tandro had been leading the way with Flam's feet, so Jake moved the other two men around

until his part of the body was closest to the fold. A

glance inside showed the pit Tain had mentioned, so Jake eased the body down at the lip of the opening and let it go. Then he joined Gordi near the middle of the body, and the two of them pushed. A moment later Flam's legs were disappearing into the dark hole, and that was that.

Ennie had been trailing along behind them, obviously unwilling to just sit and wait until everyone else got back, so they made a parade of it retracing their steps. Ennie seemed a bit green around the gills to Jake even in the dim light of the lamp, and Tandro apparently saw the same. The native put his arm around Ennie as they walked, and the girl leaned into Tandro as though trying to share his warmth.

When they finally made it back to the lit portions of the tunnel, Jake went directly to his saddlebags and Tandro did the same. If any other delays had come up Jake probably would have exploded, but Tain just replaced the lamp she'd been carrying and led the way to the stairs they'd come down. They were finally getting out of that place, the first step to being on their way to leaving this world entirely.

Tain checked the area carefully before she let any of them leave the warehouse, but then they were out in the afternoon sunshine and heat. Jake wasn't the only one who took a deep breath of what seemed like freer air, and Gordi even smiled.

"I'd better move to the head of this little procession now," the big man said, looking around at all of them. "My people will have been searching for me, and we don't want them to think I'm your prisoner." Then his smile disappeared. "I didn't want to ask this earlier, but now I have to. If my people didn't stop you from taking me to begin with, it can only be because they weren't able to. Did you ... hurt any of them seriously?"

"If you're asking if we killed them, the answer is no," Jake assured the man. "We only made them unconscious for a while, and by now they ought to be as good as new."

"That's a very great relief," Gordi responded, his smile returning and widening. "Those people are my friends as well as my supporters, and if anything serious had happened to them..."

"If anything serious had happened to them you wouldn't have been very happy with us," Jake finished when Gordi didn't. "We understand the point because we would have felt the same way, and that's why we were careful. We don't mind killing to protect ourselves, but killing someone just for the hell of it when making them unconscious will do as well isn't something we're willing to consider."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Gordi said as he began to walk. "It makes me eager to hear what other ways your people are willing to help us besides supplying that antidote to the slave drug. While you and your friends are my guests, you and I will have to talk."

"My pleasure," Jake agreed, surprised and delighted that things were working out so well.

His department hadn't expected anything beyond getting the natives of this world to abolish slavery, and hadn't even been sure they could manage that much.

Now Gordi was all but offering his support of whatever else Jake's people might have in mind to help his world, but the man wanted some details before he committed himself completely. That was as far from unreasonable as you could get, and suddenly Jake was also eager to have that talk. He did want to get back to base as quickly as possible, but the delay of an hour or two wasn't likely to be all that hard to take.

They walked back toward Gordi's house with Gordi and Jake leading the way, the two of them discussing what problems to expect when slavery was abolished. The slavers would hardly be the only ones who resisted the change, and Jake explained what Gordi's people would have to be on the lookout for. They had just passed the house closest to Gordi's and still hadn't run into any searchers, which probably meant Gordi's people were searching a different part of the town - The attack came so fast that Jake barely had time to understand what was going on, not to mention react. When he heard Ennie scream he whirled around and saw the slaver Himlin. Oddly enough Himlin was alone, but the slaver held a knife and clearly meant to use the weapon on Jake. In fact

Himlin had obviously intended to knife Jake in the back, but somehow Tain had gotten in the way. The blade had sliced open Tain's arm, but she'd delayed Himlin long enough for Jake to take over.

Which Jake did as soon as he thrust his saddlebags at Gordi. The big man took the saddlebags and moved back out of the way, and then Jake had nothing to distract him from the slaver. Himlin slashed at Jake, obviously intending to cut Jake open, but Jake had no trouble avoiding the slash.

"You're a dead man," Himlin snarled as he slashed at Jake again.

"Guardsmen have arrested all my people, and I was only just able to get away myself. I don't know how you managed to escape and report me, but you won't live long enough to enjoy the betrayal. Now obey me and stand still while I kill you as slowly and painfully as I can."

"You're not going to kill me in any way at all," Jake growled in answer, rage having risen in him at sight of the slaver. "The last time we met you were protected by the presence of a large number of men as well as having put a drug in me. Now you're alone and the drug doesn't work, which means I'm going to show the world what a stinking coward you really are."

Himlin paled just a little when he realized that he couldn't order Jake around any longer, but then he snarled and came at Jake again. After all, he had a knife and Jake's knife was in a saddlebag, so what was there to worry about? Jake could almost hear the man thinking like that, which made Jake smile as he answered the unspoken question. He waited for the next slash to go by before he moved in, then his left hand was wrapped around Himlin's right wrist and his right fist was being thrown into Himlin's face.

By the time Himlin fell to the ground, Jake had already gotten the knife away from the slaver and had tossed the weapon out of reach. Then Jake reached down to Himlin's fancy vest, pulled the man upright again, and hit him a second time. The third time the slaver went down he was unconscious, and Jake's rage had been calmed just enough to let him think about other things. Tain had been hurt...

Turning quickly showed Jake that Tandro had gotten some cloth out of his saddlebags and had bound up the wound on Tain's left arm. The woman looked a bit pale, and that disturbed Jake more than he'd thought it would. After all, the slaver had cut Tain just to get her out of the way so he could reach Jake himself...

"Listen to me, all of you," Tain said suddenly before Jake could say a word. "You're to stay as Gordi's houseguests for a full two days at least, and none of you is to try to stop me now or even follow me. In case you were wondering, those were orders."

And with that she turned and hurried away, leaving them able to do nothing but stand and stare after her until she was gone from sight.

"Why did she do that?" Jake asked no one in particular as he tried to figure out the answer on his own. "She's hurt only because she was in Himlin's way, so why didn't she stay with us?"

"That's not why she was hurt," Ennie said, and Jake turned to see the girl staring at him oddly. "She saw that man before any of the rest of us, and she deliberately got in his way before he could stab you in the back. If not for her, you would be dead now."

Shock hit Jake worse than it ever had, even during the time he'd been Himlin's slave. Tain had let herself be hurt just to save his life? She must have seen Himlin only at the last second, otherwise she would have been able to interfere with the slaver in a different way. And if she let herself be hurt like that rather than see Jake hurt, he had to mean more to her than she'd been admitting...

"My guess would be that the woman doesn't want to be near you now," Tandro said, faint disturbance to be heard behind the calm of his voice.

"Either she thinks she can't trust you, or she doesn't trust herself."

"Or both," Jake said, feeling more than a little weary as he remembered what Tain had said about being tired of waiting for him to consider her. He hadn't even really thanked her for getting him and Tandro out of

Himlin's clutches, which was downright inexcusable. But she still felt something for him, and was afraid he would find that out if she stayed...

"Gordi, you're the only one of us who'll be completely free once we get to your house," Jake said, turning to look at the big native. "Would you be willing to order some of your people to go after the woman? If she passes out from blood loss while she's alone, she could die."

"I'll be glad to send my people out as soon as we take care of this garbage," Gordi said, nodding toward the still-unconscious slaver.

"All you have to do is tell me where to send my men."

Jake opened his mouth to answer, but the words he wanted refused to come. He had no idea where the hideout they'd just left was, something that made him curse with feeling.

"That miserable female," Jake said bitterly once the cursing ran down. "She must have had something like this in mind even before we left wherever we were. If she happens to survive and we catch up with her, I'm going to beat her within an inch of her life!"

"I think you're going to need that antidote first," Gordi suggested, speaking when Tandro and Ennie simply exchanged a glance and then stayed silent. "If you don't have the antidote, you probably won't get very far trying to punish her for being a fool."

Jake would have loved to argue, but there was no sense in wasting his breath. Tain Halliday had waged a better campaign against Jake than he had against her, and now she'd left him behind. Not having to take any more orders from the woman should have made Jake feel really good, but the thought of Tain being wounded and all alone made his insides curl. All he could do was pray she survived long enough for him to kill her. If she didn't, Jake didn't know what he would do...

\* \* \*

Tain walked into her department's headquarters on her own world, no longer feeling odd wearing real clothes. She'd gotten out of the town on Oliven by using the tunnel under the warehouse, first changing into the smock the women had left for her. She'd also been able to remove the red armbands, so there hadn't been anything to bring her to anyone's attention in the woods. The wound on her arm had given her trouble, of course, but that hadn't kept her from getting some food and water from the women's hideout and then finding a farm with a horse to steal.

She really had been only a couple of days from her people's base, and having the food pack meant she hadn't even stopped to hunt. She did stop to give her stolen horse a rest every few hours, but once the horse seemed recovered she went on. When she reached the base she turned the horse loose to find its way back home, let her people doctor her arm and give her the antidote to the drug, and then she made them give her a ride to the nearest liner station. She was much too tired and aching to want to pilot herself, and seeing that she meant to take a liner was the only thing that kept the base personnel from insisting she stay until she was in better shape.

And all that pushing helped to keep me from having to do any thinking,

Tain admitted privately as she made her way to Coleson's office. I spent most of the liner ride sleeping, and now I have the strength to keep myself from thinking about anything I like. At least until I'm out of this place...

"Ah, Agent Halliday," Coleson's secretary said with a smile when he looked up and saw Tain. "Right on time for your appointment. You can go right in."

Tain nodded her thanks and continued on into Coleson's office. The room was larger than anyone really needed for a work space, not to mention that it was so poshly furnished it must have cost a fortune to decorate. But it wasn't just an office, after all, it was a political statement about

Coleson's position and standing. Coleson was very much a politician, and that was only one of the reasons Tain didn't return the man's smile of welcome.

"I'm glad to see you back, Tain," Coleson said warmly as she approached his ten-acre desk, then he gestured toward the line of chairs in front of the desk. "Have a seat and you can give me a synopsis of what your report will say."

"Thanks anyway, but I'd rather stand," Tain said, watching the smile fade from the man's face. Coleson was handsome, well-built, and extremely charming, which was why people thought he made a great department head. "I've already sent copies of my report to everyone I could think of, but you'll probably be able to get it quashed anyway. Still, I'm hoping that someone uses the thing to beat you over the head for at least a little while."

"What are you talking about?" Coleson demanded, most of the charm no longer apparent. "What could you have put into your report that you think will harm me?"

"I described how you insisted that I take Ennie as a partner even though the girl wasn't properly trained," Tain obliged, showing a smile that had nothing of humor or good feeling behind it. "You did that because you expected Ennie to mess up in some way, and when she did you would be able to embarrass her uncle with her failure. It didn't bother you in the least that you risked my life and hers just so you could further your political ambitions."

"Now, now, it was nothing so dire and dangerous as that," Coleson said, his smile back in place as he relaxed in his very expensive chair. "I

already know that the girl did mess up, and the fault for her not being properly trained was her uncle's. He insisted that she start to work as an agent right away, and all I could do was go along with him. If the assignment had been on any other planet than Oliven I would have lodged a firm protest, but the worst that could have happened - what did, in fact, happen - was that you and she were enslaved. Considering the fact that you and she were retrieved by our own people almost at once means there was really no harm done at all."

"No harm done at all," Tain echoed, seeing that Coleson really wasn't in the least bothered. "One of these days I'm going to show you exactly how little the harm can be considered. You have my word that you won't enjoy the time."

"I can understand your being upset, Tain, and that's why I authorized a bonus for you," Coleson said, still showing that smile as he laced his fingers comfortably across his middle.

"I've even arranged for you to have some leave, during which time you can spend some of the bonus, but I do need you back here in about four days. There's an assignment that -"

"Too bad, Coleson, but I won't be back," Tain interrupted, this time enjoying herself quite a bit. "Not only did you risk my neck for political reasons, but you went back on the deal we had. I told you that if you ever assigned Killen to work with me I would quit, but it looks like you didn't believe me. This is my resignation, and if you try to fight it you'll find out what nonpolitical down and dirty is like."

Tain pulled the envelope with her resignation out of her shoulder bag and tossed it on Coleson's desk, and the man's hand slapped down on the envelope as he straightened in his chair. All amusement was gone from Coleson's face, and heavy disturbance had taken its place.

"Come on, Tain, you can't mean that!" he protested, obviously having taken the resignation only by reflex. "I didn't break our agreement on purpose and you have to know it! Jake Killen was already on the planet when we got word of your capture, and there weren't - a lot of - others to go to your rescue."

"That's right, you can't lie about there being no one else, not when I saw the others at the base," Tain said with a satisfied nod as Coleson limped through an effort to excuse what he'd done. "You had your choice of three other agents to use, but you were so eager to play your private game that you forgot about everything else. Now you can take your new assignment and shove it up your ass."

"No, don't do this," Coleson said almost desperately after standing up and putting his hand out with the resignation clutched in it. "You know you're the best agent I have, and I don't want to lose you! Tain, be reasonable!"

"Goodbye, Coleson, and have a lousy life," Tain said before turning and walking toward the door. Coleson kept trying to call her back, but she hadn't been joking about leaving. They both knew she would have no trouble finding the same kind of work elsewhere, but first she was going to take a small vacation. There were things that needed to be thought about and then forgotten, and she would manage the forgetting. Even if it took a little while...

\* \* \*

Jake walked into headquarters, more grimly determined than he'd been in quite a while. It had seemed like an eternity of being worried out of his mind before he and Tandro and Ennie had been able to leave for the base on horses supplied by Gordi, and then the trip had felt like an extension of that eternity. Not until he learned that Tain had made it back herself was Jake able to rest for a little while, not to mention sleep. But when he woke up he was angry rather than worried, and that anger had been growing.

"Agent Killen," Coleson's secretary said when he saw Jake, the man's expression uncertain.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Coleson isn't available right now. If you'd like to make an appointment I'd be glad to - Agent Killen!"

By that time Jake was already at the door to Coleson's office, and a moment later he was through the door. Coleson sat stiffly behind his desk, staring at a monitor screen that Jake couldn't see. When Jake walked in Coleson didn't look up immediately, but when he did look up his expression lacked the smarmy charm that Jake usually had trouble stomaching.

"How could you say that that girl did an adequate job on her first assignment?" Coleson demanded, which told Jake that the man had been reading the report Jake had filed. "It was her fault that she and Tain were enslaved, and that's a truth no one can get around!"

"What Ennie did was an accident, due mainly to her lack of proper training," Jake answered mildly, enjoying Coleson's agitation.

"Once she had some experience to call on, she did rather well."

"But she brought a native of Oliven back with her!" Coleson shouted, then he seemed to regain control of himself. "She brought a native back with her, and that simply isn't done," Coleson continued more calmly.

"It's going to be my painful duty to tell her that the man has to be sent back at once."

"It would be premature to start enjoying that idea," Jake advised when he saw the vicious gleam in Coleson's eyes. "Ennie has already checked with her lawyers, and they've told her that Tandro isn't a criminal so he can go anywhere he pleases. Besides, she's about to hand in her resignation, citing inadequate departmental leadership as the reason for breaking her contract. You were the one who let her go out without adequate training, you know."

"My skirts are clean on that one," Coleson responded, that smarmy look beginning to come back as he relaxed into his chair. "Her uncle, who is a director, don't forget, told me to put the girl to work at once. If she wasn't adequately trained it wasn't my fault."

"Of course it was," Jake countered, showing his own version of a smile. "You're supposed to be in charge of this department, and if someone gives you an improper order it's your place to say so and refuse to comply. A

challenged order would have been brought before the board if it wasn't withdrawn, and only then would your hands have been clean. As it is it's perfectly clear that you were playing politics, which the head of this department isn't supposed to do. I hear there's going to be an investigation made, and if you're found culpable you'll be gone so fast your imprint in that chair will still be visible."

Coleson had gone pale listening to Jake, and his left hand turned to a fist on the arm of his chair. The man was finally starting to understand the ramifications of what he'd done, a circumstance that couldn't have pleased Jake more.



"But warning you to be ready to file for unemployment isn't the reason I'm here," Jake continued, drawing Coleson's angry gaze. "I was told Tain Halliday stopped by to see you when she got back, and I want to know where she went."

"Where Halliday went is no longer my concern," Coleson returned, his manner suddenly even stiffer than it had been. "She came by to resign, and since I accepted her resignation I don't care if she went straight to hell. My suggestion would be that you go and look for her there."

"She quit?" Jake demanded, feeling as if he'd been hit hard in his middle. "How could you let her do that?"

"I decided that this department would be much better off without her, and I do still run this place," Coleson answered, the man's snottiness returning visibly. "With that point in mind, Killen, you can expect your next assignment in a couple or three days. And don't even think about quitting yourself. You have no basis for a breach of contract, and if you walk out anyway I'll have you enjoined from working anywhere else. Now get out of my office."

Jake stared at Coleson for a moment, that close to quitting anyway, but cutting his own throat would accomplish nothing.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not quitting," Jake said, showing a smile again. "I want to be right here when they kick you out on your ass. That's a show I'd be willing to pay money to see."

When Coleson's lips peeled back from his teeth to show a silent snarl, Jake turned and walked out of the office leaving the door open behind him. He very much felt like snarling himself, but held back on the urge until he was out of the office entirely.

"Well?" Ennie asked as soon as Jake came out into the corridor, Tandro's expression almost as intense as hers. "Did you find out where Tain is?"

"Coleson refused to talk about Tain except to tell me that she quit," Jake answered, frustration beginning to fill him. "Since we already know she isn't at her apartment or with any of her friends, I don't know where the hell she is."

"Can we help you look for her, my friend?" Tandro asked, the calm in his voice acting as an aid to settle Jake down. "I don't know how much help I would be, but Ennie knows her way around almost as well as you do."

"I appreciate the offer, but you two have your own plans to take care of," Jake said with a sincere smile. Ennie meant to take the training she'd missed from a private source, and Tandro would do the same. Then the two were going back to Oliven to help Gordi abolish slavery, an end they were both determined to accomplish.

"Do you think you'll find her if you search?" Ennie asked, sympathy clear in her eyes. "If you need professional help, I'd be more than willing to hire some private detectives."

"If I decide I need the help I'll let you know," Jake assured her, then they all left the headquarters building in silence. Once outside they separated, Tandro and Ennie on their way back to her house, Jake to his own apartment. Tandro had looked uncomfortable in the clothes Ennie had bought for him, but Jake knew the man would get used to wearing more than a body cloth. Most planets weren't as warm as Oliven...

Once in his apartment, Jake threw himself into a chair and began to brood.

He'd already tried to trace Tain's movements, but the woman had obviously covered her tracks to make sure no one followed her. If only she was less of a professional, less able to disappear without a trace...

A picture of Tain formed in front of Jake's inner eye, Tain the way he'd seen her so often during their time on Oliven. Her beautiful brown hair fell in gentle waves and framed her lovely face and blue eyes, leading his own eye down to the teasing view of that vest. Every now and then the vest had parted to show glimpses of her large and rounded breasts, and that skirt thing had framed her private parts with the promise of an even better view if she moved wrong.

"Or moved right, depending on your point of view," Jake murmured, falling into a waking dream. In the dream she stood waiting while he walked over to her, his hands going to her face before he leaned down to kiss her softly. Her lips were like a magnet to the iron in his blood, and that blood began to thunder around inside him as his hands moved down and started to take off her vest. She made no effort to stop him, of course, so those incredible breasts were bared to his sight in no more than a brief moment.

"You've now run away from me twice," Jake murmured as he caressed her with both hands, hating that she refused to respond in any way to the touch. "At first I thought it was because you hated me, but if you hated me you wouldn't have run. You would have told me exactly how you felt, and then you would have turned and walked away. Why did you run?"

"That's my business," she answered, looking through rather than at him. "Why are you wasting time?"

Jake knew she meant the way he was touching her. He'd forgotten the point for a time, but it had come back to him that female agents were taught a way to sublimate their physical responses if that kind of thing became necessary. Tain wasn't letting herself respond to him, which wasn't at all the same as being uninterested.

"You're right, I am wasting time," he agreed, then reached down and removed her skirt before taking her wrist and pulling her after him. She wouldn't have followed on her own, of course, but being his slave gave him all the choices. He'd made some mistakes with her, but sometimes a mistake can still be very satisfying.

"You were a very bad girl and caused me an endless amount of worry, and now you're going to be punished for that," Jake said as he led her to the chair, sat, and then pulled her over his

lap. "I think you know you deserve what you're about to get, but you don't yet regret having earned it. That lack, however, is about to be remedied."

The way Tain moved just a little showed how unhappy she was to be in that position, but she wasn't allowed to do anything but accept what was done to her. Not having to hold her down let Jake use both hands to put the insertion into her round little bottom, and when she gasped he smiled. All the training in the universe couldn't keep her from responding once that insertion was in place.

But first there was a punishment to be given her. Jake picked up the thin, narrow wooden paddle, and once his hand was wrapped comfortably around the handle he began to spank Tain. One stroke and she made a sound in her throat as she fought not to squirm. Two strokes and the sound was repeated as she continued to resist moving. The third stroke drew a slightly louder sound from her, but it wasn't until the fifth stroke that she lost the battle to lie still. Her pretty bottom was starting to turn pink, and Jake was only just beginning to warm up - so to speak.

After ten strokes Tain was moving in desperation as she half whimpered and half moaned. Jake watched the squirming as he applied that paddle to her bottom over and over, memory of how worried he'd been about her adding to the strength of his arm. It had taken her two days to get back to the base, and if she'd passed out from blood loss at any point she could have died.

Tain was kicking and howling, her bottom red and tender-looking when Jake came back to himself. He'd been so furious over almost losing her that the paddling had been a bit harder than he'd originally intended. There was no question that she deserved to be punished, but he wanted her able to respond to what came next. If he gave her too much pain, her response would be less than what he wanted it to be.

So he gave her only three more strokes of the paddle, each stroke making her jump and yell and writhe. When he put the paddle aside and urged her to her feet, he felt nothing of a sense of not having done a proper job. After all, tomorrow was another day and so was the day after. It would take more than a few days for his anger to disappear, and Tain, being responsible for the anger, would also be responsible for easing the emotion.

Once Jake got to his feet, he picked Tain up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She was crying, of course, but that was only to be expected. He put her down and then followed, letting her raise her aching bottom off the bed while he leaned over those breasts and began to kiss and lick them. Tain's breath came in gasps almost as soon as he started, but when he began to kiss his way down her body she also began to moan.

Her knees were spread nice and wide, and when he began to lick her lowest softness her moans turned downright frantic. She probably would have been begging him to ease her if she'd been permitted to speak, but slaves did only what their owners allowed. Jake made her writhe and squirm for quite some time before he straightened and began to take off his body cloth. He would have enjoyed feeling her hands on his own body while he took pleasure from

hers, but letting her touch him would have interfered with the rest of her punishment. Jake knew she wanted to touch him, but she hadn't earned the right to do that.

When he finally knelt between her legs and began to enter her, the squeaking she'd been doing started to intensify. The insertion made her so delightfully tight that he might have had trouble entering her if he hadn't gotten her so aroused that her body wept in its desperation for his. Once he had all of him inside her he began to stroke her in a different way, his arms braced on either side of her body. He knew she wanted to be held as he used her and meant to refuse as a continuing punishment, but after a very short time he found that it was he who was being punished. This woman meant too much to him for him to just use her like a hole in the ground.

So Jake gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers while he eased them both, and suddenly her own arms were around him. She'd been denied the touching of him until she really wanted to, until she wanted to touch him. The feel of her hands sliding down his back was so good, so incredibly good, so - Jake had to shake his head hard to pull all the way out of the daydream, and then his sense of loss rose to new heights. His dream had kept changing to match his changing desires, and the last of it was almost pitiful. He wanted Tain Halliday to want him as much as he wanted her, but all that wanting just wasn't going to happen, at least not on her part. He might be able to talk her around somehow, but first he had to find her.

And how was he supposed to do that...?

Chains 2 Chapter 8 Chains: 2

Chains Released

Chapter 8

copyright 2003 by Sharon Green Jake noticed Tandro and Ennie entering the alcove while Tain spoke to Gordi and his friends, but the two just stopped near him and stood quietly. Somehow Tain had managed to put herself in charge of everyone and everything, and Jake still wasn't quite sure how she had done that. And, in the back of his mind, he also wasn't quite sure he liked the accomplishment...

"There's one other thing I want to say before I free you," Tain told the men. "I don't want anyone knowing about this place, so once we're out of here you'll all forget about where you were kept and even what building you were brought to. Does everyone understand?"

Jake saw the three men nod, and oddly enough he, Ennie, and Tandro also nodded. Then Tain was telling the three men not to take orders from anyone but her, and once she left even that exception would expire. If she came back even a single day later, they would no longer have to take her orders. Gordi and the other two men looked extremely relieved, and then it was time to start leaving.

Jake joined Tandro in getting their gear together while Tain escorted Artro and Dimmis out

first. Those two weren't going back to Gordi's house with the rest of them, so it made sense to let them leave first. If seven people left the warehouse at the same time someone might notice; as it was, keeping the five of them together might be pushing the bounds of luck.

When Tain came back it turned out that it still wasn't time for the rest of them to leave.

"We can't just leave Flam's body there," she said, looking down at the body in question. "We also can't take the body out with us, so we have to choose the final option."

"Which is what?" Jake asked, his eagerness to be on his way playing havoc with his temper. "Wave a magic wand to make the body disappear?"

"You're close," Tain said with barely a glance in his direction.

"Before the women left I asked them about a place to dump serious garbage, and they gave me directions. If you three men will pick up the body, we can take care of its disposal before we go."

There was no choice at all, so Jake took Flam's shoulders while Tandro took his legs, and once the two of them had the body off the floor Gordi helped by supporting his former opponent's middle. Tain took a lamp and then led the way into the tunnel, turning toward the darkness rather than the other way.

They walked for what seemed like a very long time, long enough for Jake to feel the body he carried getting heavier and heavier. When they'd first started out he'd considered Gordi's "help" unnecessary, but by the time Tain stopped by a fold in the rock of the wall Gordi was sharing a lot more of the weight of their burden.

"Now you have to be careful," Tain said, holding the lamp close to the fold. "There's supposed to be a deep pit just behind here, and we don't want anyone but Flam going into it."

Tandro had been leading the way with Flam's feet, so Jake moved the other two men around until his part of the body was closest to the fold. A

glance inside showed the pit Tain had mentioned, so Jake eased the body down at the lip of the opening and let it go. Then he joined Gordi near the middle of the body, and the two of them pushed. A moment later Flam's legs were disappearing into the dark hole, and that was that.

Ennie had been trailing along behind them, obviously unwilling to just sit and wait until everyone else got back, so they made a parade of it retracing their steps. Ennie seemed a bit green around the gills to Jake even in the dim light of the lamp, and Tandro apparently saw the same. The native put his arm around Ennie as they walked, and the girl leaned into Tandro as though trying to share his warmth.

When they finally made it back to the lit portions of the tunnel, Jake went directly to his saddlebags and Tandro did the same. If any other delays had come up Jake probably would have exploded, but Tain just replaced the lamp she'd been carrying and led the way to the stairs they'd come down. They were finally getting out of that place, the first step to being on their way to leaving this world entirely.

Tain checked the area carefully before she let any of them leave the warehouse, but then they were out in the afternoon sunshine and heat. Jake wasn't the only one who took a deep breath of what seemed like freer air, and Gordi even smiled.

"I'd better move to the head of this little procession now," the big man said, looking around at all of them. "My people will have been searching for me, and we don't want them to think I'm your prisoner." Then his smile disappeared. "I didn't want to ask this earlier, but now I have to. If my people didn't stop you from taking me to begin with, it can only be because they weren't able to. Did you ... hurt any of them seriously?"

"If you're asking if we killed them, the answer is no," Jake assured the man. "We only made them unconscious for a while, and by now they ought to be as good as new."

"That's a very great relief," Gordi responded, his smile returning and widening. "Those people are my friends as well as my supporters, and if anything serious had happened to them..."

"If anything serious had happened to them you wouldn't have been very happy with us," Jake finished when Gordi didn't. "We understand the point because we would have felt the same way, and that's why we were careful. We don't mind killing to protect ourselves, but killing someone just for the hell of it when making them unconscious will do as well isn't something we're willing to consider."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Gordi said as he began to walk. "It makes me eager to hear what other ways your people are willing to help us besides supplying that antidote to the slave drug. While you and your friends are my guests, you and I will have to talk."

"My pleasure," Jake agreed, surprised and delighted that things were working out so well. His department hadn't expected anything beyond getting the natives of this world to abolish slavery, and hadn't even been sure they could manage that much.

Now Gordi was all but offering his support of whatever else Jake's people might have in mind to help his world, but the man wanted some details before he committed himself completely. That was as far from unreasonable as you could get, and suddenly Jake was also eager to have that talk. He did want to get back to base as quickly as possible, but the delay of an hour or two wasn't likely to be all that hard to take.

They walked back toward Gordi's house with Gordi and Jake leading the way, the two of them discussing what problems to expect when slavery was abolished. The slavers would hardly be the only ones who resisted the change, and Jake explained what Gordi's people

would have to be on the lookout for. They had just passed the house closest to Gordi's and still hadn't run into any searchers, which probably meant Gordi's people were searching a different part of the town - The attack came so fast that Jake barely had time to understand what was going on, not to mention react. When he heard Ennie scream he whirled around and saw the slaver Himlin. Oddly enough Himlin was alone, but the slaver held a knife and clearly meant to use the weapon on Jake. In fact Himlin had obviously intended to knife Jake in the back, but somehow Tain had gotten in the way. The blade had sliced open Tain's arm, but she'd delayed Himlin long enough for Jake to take over.

Which Jake did as soon as he thrust his saddlebags at Gordi. The big man took the saddlebags and moved back out of the way, and then Jake had nothing to distract him from the slaver. Himlin slashed at Jake, obviously intending to cut Jake open, but Jake had no trouble avoiding the slash.

"You're a dead man," Himlin snarled as he slashed at Jake again.

"Guardsmen have arrested all my people, and I was only just able to get away myself. I don't know how you managed to escape and report me, but you won't live long enough to enjoy the betrayal. Now obey me and stand still while I kill you as slowly and painfully as I can."

"You're not going to kill me in any way at all," Jake growled in answer, rage having risen in him at sight of the slaver. "The last time we met you were protected by the presence of a large number of men as well as having put a drug in me. Now you're alone and the drug doesn't work, which means I'm going to show the world what a stinking coward you really are."

Himlin paled just a little when he realized that he couldn't order Jake around any longer, but then he snarled and came at Jake again. After all, he had a knife and Jake's knife was in a saddlebag, so what was there to worry about? Jake could almost hear the man thinking like that, which made Jake smile as he answered the unspoken question. He waited for the next slash to go by before he moved in, then his left hand was wrapped around Himlin's right wrist and his right fist was being thrown into Himlin's face.

By the time Himlin fell to the ground, Jake had already gotten the knife away from the slaver and had tossed the weapon out of reach. Then Jake reached down to Himlin's fancy vest, pulled the man upright again, and hit him a second time. The third time the slaver went down he was unconscious, and Jake's rage had been calmed just enough to let him think about other things. Tain had been hurt...

Turning quickly showed Jake that Tandro had gotten some cloth out of his saddlebags and had bound up the wound on Tain's left arm. The woman looked a bit pale, and that disturbed Jake more than he'd thought it would. After all, the slaver had cut Tain just to get her out of the way so he could reach Jake himself...

"Listen to me, all of you," Tain said suddenly before Jake could say a word. "You're to stay as Gordi's houseguests for a full two days at least, and none of you is to try to stop me now or even follow me. In case you were wondering, those were orders."

And with that she turned and hurried away, leaving them able to do nothing but stand and stare after her until she was gone from sight.

"Why did she do that?" Jake asked no one in particular as he tried to figure out the answer on his own. "She's hurt only because she was in Himlin's way, so why didn't she stay with us?"

"That's not why she was hurt," Ennie said, and Jake turned to see the girl staring at him oddly. "She saw that man before any of the rest of us, and she deliberately got in his way before he could stab you in the back. If not for her, you would be dead now."

Shock hit Jake worse than it ever had, even during the time he'd been Himlin's slave. Tain had let herself be hurt just to save his life? She must have seen Himlin only at the last second, otherwise she would have been able to interfere with the slaver in a different way. And if she let herself be hurt like that rather than see Jake hurt, he had to mean more to her than she'd been admitting...

"My guess would be that the woman doesn't want to be near you now," Tandro said, faint disturbance to be heard behind the calm of his voice.

"Either she thinks she can't trust you, or she doesn't trust herself."

"Or both," Jake said, feeling more than a little weary as he remembered what Tain had said about being tired of waiting for him to consider her. He hadn't even really thanked her for getting him and Tandro out of

Himlin's clutches, which was downright inexcusable. But she still felt something for him, and was afraid he would find that out if she stayed...

"Gordi, you're the only one of us who'll be completely free once we get to your house," Jake said, turning to look at the big native. "Would you be willing to order some of your people to go after the woman? If she passes out from blood loss while she's alone, she could die."

"I'll be glad to send my people out as soon as we take care of this garbage," Gordi said, nodding toward the still-unconscious slaver.

"All you have to do is tell me where to send my men."

Jake opened his mouth to answer, but the words he wanted refused to come.

He had no idea where the hideout they'd just left was, something that made him curse with feeling.

"That miserable female," Jake said bitterly once the cursing ran down. "She must have had something like this in mind even before we left wherever we were. If she happens to survive and we catch up with her, I'm going to beat her within an inch of her life!"

"I think you're going to need that antidote first," Gordi suggested, speaking when Tandro and Ennie simply exchanged a glance and then stayed silent. "If you don't have the antidote,



you probably won't get very far trying to punish her for being a fool."

Jake would have loved to argue, but there was no sense in wasting his breath. Tain Halliday had waged a better campaign against Jake than he had against her, and now she'd left him behind. Not having to take any more orders from the woman should have made Jake feel really good, but the thought of Tain being wounded and all alone made his insides curl. All he could do was pray she survived long enough for him to kill her. If she didn't, Jake didn't know what he would do...

\* \* \*

Tain walked into her department's headquarters on her own world, no longer feeling odd wearing real clothes. She'd gotten out of the town on Oliven by using the tunnel under the warehouse, first changing into the smock the women had left for her. She'd also been able to remove the red armbands, so there hadn't been anything to bring her to anyone's attention in the woods. The wound on her arm had given her trouble, of course, but that hadn't kept her from getting some food and water from the women's hideout and then finding a farm with a horse to steal.

She really had been only a couple of days from her people's base, and having the food pack meant she hadn't even stopped to hunt. She did stop to give her stolen horse a rest every few hours, but once the horse seemed recovered she went on. When she reached the base she turned the horse loose to find its way back home, let her people doctor her arm and give her the antidote to the drug, and then she made them give her a ride to the nearest liner station. She was much too tired and aching to want to pilot herself, and seeing that she meant to take a liner was the only thing that kept the base personnel from insisting she stay until she was in better shape.

And all that pushing helped to keep me from having to do any thinking, Tain admitted privately as she made her way to Coleson's office. I

spent most of the liner ride sleeping, and now I have the strength to keep myself from thinking about anything I like. At least until I'm out of this place...

"Ah, Agent Halliday," Coleson's secretary said with a smile when he looked up and saw Tain. "Right on time for your appointment. You can go right in."

Tain nodded her thanks and continued on into Coleson's office. The room was larger than anyone really needed for a work space, not to mention that it was so poshly furnished it must have cost a fortune to decorate. But it wasn't just an office, after all, it was a political statement about

Coleson's position and standing. Coleson was very much a politician, and that was only one of the reasons Tain didn't return the man's smile of welcome.

"I'm glad to see you back, Tain," Coleson said warmly as she approached his ten-acre desk,

then he gestured toward the line of chairs in front of the desk. "Have a seat and you can give me a synopsis of what your report will say."

"Thanks anyway, but I'd rather stand," Tain said, watching the smile fade from the man's face. Coleson was handsome, well-built, and extremely charming, which was why people thought he made a great department head. "I've already sent copies of my report to everyone I could think of, but you'll probably be able to get it quashed anyway. Still, I'm hoping that someone uses the thing to beat you over the head for at least a little while."

"What are you talking about?" Coleson demanded, most of the charm no longer apparent. "What could you have put into your report that you think will harm me?"

"I described how you insisted that I take Ennie as a partner even though the girl wasn't properly trained," Tain obliged, showing a smile that had nothing of humor or good feeling behind it. "You did that because you expected Ennie to mess up in some way, and when she did you would be able to embarrass her uncle with her failure. It didn't bother you in the least that you risked my life and hers just so you could further your political ambitions."

"Now, now, it was nothing so dire and dangerous as that," Coleson said, his smile back in place as he relaxed in his very expensive chair. "I

already know that the girl did mess up, and the fault for her not being properly trained was her uncle's. He insisted that she start to work as an agent right away, and all I could do was go along with him. If the assignment had been on any other planet than Oliven I would have lodged a firm protest, but the worst that could have happened - what did, in fact, happen - was that you and she were enslaved. Considering the fact that you and she were retrieved by our own people almost at once means there was really no harm done at all."

"No harm done at all," Tain echoed, seeing that Coleson really wasn't in the least bothered. "One of these days I'm going to show you exactly how little the harm can be considered. You have my word that you won't enjoy the time."

"I can understand your being upset, Tain, and that's why I authorized a bonus for you," Coleson said, still showing that smile as he laced his fingers comfortably across his middle. "I've even arranged for you to have some leave, during which time you can spend some of the bonus, but I do need you back here in about four days. There's an assignment that -"

"Too bad, Coleson, but I won't be back," Tain interrupted, this time enjoying herself quite a bit. "Not only did you risk my neck for political reasons, but you went back on the deal we had. I told you that if you ever assigned Killen to work with me I would quit, but it looks like you didn't believe me. This is my resignation, and if you try to fight it you'll find out what nonpolitical down and dirty is like."

Tain pulled the envelope with her resignation out of her shoulder bag and tossed it on Coleson's desk, and the man's hand slapped down on the envelope as he straightened in his

chair. All amusement was gone from Coleson's face, and heavy disturbance had taken its place.

"Come on, Tain, you can't mean that!" he protested, obviously having taken the resignation only by reflex. "I didn't break our agreement on purpose and you have to know it! Jake Killen was already on the planet when we got word of your capture, and there weren't - a lot of - others to go to your rescue."

"That's right, you can't lie about there being no one else, not when I saw the others at the base," Tain said with a satisfied nod as Coleson limped through an effort to excuse what he'd done. "You had your choice of three other agents to use, but you were so eager to play your private game that you forgot about everything else. Now you can take your new assignment and shove it up your ass."

"No, don't do this," Coleson said almost desperately after standing up and putting his hand out with the resignation clutched in it. "You know you're the best agent I have, and I don't want to lose you! Tain, be reasonable!"

"Goodbye, Coleson, and have a lousy life," Tain said before turning and walking toward the door. Coleson kept trying to call her back, but she hadn't been joking about leaving. They both knew she would have no trouble finding the same kind of work elsewhere, but first she was going to take a small vacation. There were things that needed to be thought about and then forgotten, and she would manage the forgetting. Even if it took a little while...

\* \* \*

Jake walked into headquarters, more grimly determined than he'd been in quite a while. It had seemed like an eternity of being worried out of his mind before he and Tandro and Ennie had been able to leave for the base on horses supplied by Gordi, and then the trip had felt like an extension of that eternity. Not until he learned that Tain had made it back herself was

Jake able to rest for a little while, not to mention sleep. But when he woke up he was angry rather than worried, and that anger had been growing.

"Agent Killen," Coleson's secretary said when he saw Jake, the man's expression uncertain. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Coleson isn't available right now. If you'd like to make an appointment I'd be glad to - Agent Killen!"

By that time Jake was already at the door to Coleson's office, and a moment later he was through the door. Coleson sat stiffly behind his desk, staring at a monitor screen that Jake couldn't see. When Jake walked in Coleson didn't look up immediately, but when he did look up his expression lacked the smarmy charm that Jake usually had trouble stomaching.

"How could you say that that girl did an adequate job on her first assignment?" Coleson demanded, which told Jake that the man had been reading the report Jake had filed. "It was her fault that she and Tain were enslaved, and that's a truth no one can get around!"

"What Ennie did was an accident, due mainly to her lack of proper training," Jake answered mildly, enjoying Coleson's agitation.

"Once she had some experience to call on, she did rather well."

"But she brought a native of Oliven back with her!" Coleson shouted, then he seemed to regain control of himself. "She brought a native back with her, and that simply isn't done," Coleson continued more calmly.

"It's going to be my painful duty to tell her that the man has to be sent back at once."

"It would be premature to start enjoying that idea," Jake advised when he saw the vicious gleam in Coleson's eyes. "Ennie has already checked with her lawyers, and they've told her that Tandro isn't a criminal so he can go anywhere he pleases. Besides, she's about to hand in her resignation, citing inadequate departmental leadership as the reason for breaking her contract. You were the one who let her go out without adequate training, you know."

"My skirts are clean on that one," Coleson responded, that smarmy look beginning to come back as he relaxed into his chair. "Her uncle, who is a director, don't forget, told me to put the girl to work at once. If she wasn't adequately trained it wasn't my fault."

"Of course it was," Jake countered, showing his own version of a smile.

"You're supposed to be in charge of this department, and if someone gives you an improper order it's your place to say so and refuse to comply. A

challenged order would have been brought before the board if it wasn't withdrawn, and only then would your hands have been clean. As it is it's perfectly clear that you were playing politics, which the head of this department isn't supposed to do. I hear there's going to be an investigation made, and if you're found culpable you'll be gone so fast your imprint in that chair will still be visible."

Coleson had gone pale listening to Jake, and his left hand turned to a fist on the arm of his chair. The man was finally starting to understand the ramifications of what he'd done, a circumstance that couldn't have pleased Jake more.

"But warning you to be ready to file for unemployment isn't the reason I'm here," Jake continued, drawing Coleson's angry gaze. "I was told Tain Halliday stopped by to see you when she got back, and I want to know where she went."

"Where Halliday went is no longer my concern," Coleson returned, his manner suddenly even stiffer than it had been. "She came by to resign, and since I accepted her resignation I don't care if she went straight to hell. My suggestion would be that you go and look for her there."

"She quit?" Jake demanded, feeling as if he'd been hit hard in his middle. "How could you let her do that?"

"I decided that this department would be much better off without her, and I do still run this place," Coleson answered, the man's snottiness returning visibly. "With that point in mind, Killen, you can expect your next assignment in a couple or three days. And don't even think about quitting yourself. You have no basis for a breach of contract, and if you walk out anyway I'll have you enjoined from working anywhere else. Now get out of my office."

Jake stared at Coleson for a moment, that close to quitting anyway, but cutting his own throat would accomplish nothing.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not quitting," Jake said, showing a smile again. "I want to be right here when they kick you out on your ass. That's a show I'd be willing to pay money to see."

When Coleson's lips peeled back from his teeth to show a silent snarl, Jake turned and walked out of the office leaving the door open behind him. He very much felt like snarling himself, but held back on the urge until he was out of the office entirely.

"Well?" Ennie asked as soon as Jake came out into the corridor, Tandro's expression almost as intense as hers. "Did you find out where Tain is?"

"Coleson refused to talk about Tain except to tell me that she quit," Jake answered, frustration beginning to fill him. "Since we already know she isn't at her apartment or with any of her friends, I don't know where the hell she is."

"Can we help you look for her, my friend?" Tandro asked, the calm in his voice acting as an aid to settle Jake down. "I don't know how much help I

would be, but Ennie knows her way around almost as well as you do."

"I appreciate the offer, but you two have your own plans to take care of,"

Jake said with a sincere smile. Ennie meant to take the training she'd missed from a private source, and Tandro would do the same. Then the two were going back to Oliven to help Gordi abolish slavery, an end they were both determined to accomplish.

"Do you think you'll find her if you search?" Ennie asked, sympathy clear in her eyes. "If you need professional help, I'd be more than willing to hire some private detectives."

"If I decide I need the help I'll let you know," Jake assured her, then they all left the headquarters building in silence. Once outside they separated, Tandro and Ennie on their way back to her house, Jake to his own apartment. Tandro had looked uncomfortable in the clothes Ennie had bought for him, but Jake knew the man would get used to wearing more than a body cloth. Most planets weren't as warm as Oliven...

Once in his apartment, Jake threw himself into a chair and began to brood. He'd already tried to trace Tain's movements, but the woman had obviously covered her tracks to make sure no one followed her. If only she was less of a professional, less able to disappear without a trace...

A picture of Tain formed in front of Jake's inner eye, Tain the way he'd seen her so often during their time on Oliven. Her beautiful brown hair fell in gentle waves and framed her lovely face and blue eyes, leading his own eye down to the teasing view of that vest. Every now and then the vest had parted to show glimpses of her large and rounded breasts, and that skirt thing had framed her private parts with the promise of an even better view if she moved wrong.

"Or moved right, depending on your point of view," Jake murmured, falling into a waking dream. In the dream she stood waiting while he walked over to her, his hands going to her face before he leaned down to kiss her softly. Her lips were like a magnet to the iron in his blood, and that blood began to thunder around inside him as his hands moved down and started to take off her vest. She made no effort to stop him, of course, so those incredible breasts were bared to his sight in no more than a brief moment.

"You've now run away from me twice," Jake murmured as he caressed her with both hands, hating that she refused to respond in any way to the touch. "At first I thought it was because you hated me, but if you hated me you wouldn't have run. You would have told me exactly how you felt, and then you would have turned and walked away. Why did you run?"

"That's my business," she answered, looking through rather than at him. "Why are you wasting time?"

Jake knew she meant the way he was touching her. He'd forgotten the point for a time, but it had come back to him that female agents were taught a way to sublimate their physical responses if that kind of thing became necessary. Tain wasn't letting herself respond to him, which wasn't at all the same as being uninterested.

"You're right, I am wasting time," he agreed, then reached down and removed her skirt before taking her wrist and pulling her after him. She wouldn't have followed on her own, of course, but being his slave gave him all the choices. He'd made some mistakes with her, but sometimes a mistake can still be very satisfying.

"You were a very bad girl and caused me an endless amount of worry, and now you're going to be punished for that," Jake said as he led her to the chair, sat, and then pulled her over his lap. "I think you know you deserve what you're about to get, but you don't yet regret having earned it. That lack, however, is about to be remedied."

The way Tain moved just a little showed how unhappy she was to be in that position, but she wasn't allowed to do anything but accept what was done to her. Not having to hold her down let Jake use both hands to put the insertion into her round little bottom, and when she gasped he smiled. All the training in the universe couldn't keep her from responding once that insertion was in place.

But first there was a punishment to be given her. Jake picked up the thin, narrow wooden paddle, and once his hand was wrapped comfortably around the handle he began to spank Tain. One stroke and she made a sound in her throat as she fought not to squirm. Two strokes

and the sound was repeated as she continued to resist moving. The third stroke drew a slightly louder sound from her, but it wasn't until the fifth stroke that she lost the battle to lie still. Her pretty bottom was starting to turn pink, and Jake was only just beginning to warm up - so to speak.

After ten strokes Tain was moving in desperation as she half whimpered and half moaned. Jake watched the squirming as he applied that paddle to her bottom over and over, memory of how worried he'd been about her adding to the strength of his arm. It had taken her two days to get back to the base, and if she'd passed out from blood loss at any point she could have died.

Tain was kicking and howling, her bottom red and tender-looking when Jake came back to himself. He'd been so furious over almost losing her that the paddling had been a bit harder than he'd originally intended. There was no question that she deserved to be punished, but he wanted her able to respond to what came next. If he gave her too much pain, her response would be less than what he wanted it to be.

So he gave her only three more strokes of the paddle, each stroke making her jump and yell and writhe. When he put the paddle aside and urged her to her feet, he felt nothing of a sense of not having done a proper job. After all, tomorrow was another day and so was the day after. It would take more than a few days for his anger to disappear, and Tain, being responsible for the anger, would also be responsible for easing the emotion.

Once Jake got to his feet, he picked Tain up in his arms and carried her to the bed. She was crying, of course, but that was only to be expected.

He put her down and then followed, letting her raise her aching bottom off the bed while he leaned over those breasts and began to kiss and lick them. Tain's breath came in gasps almost as soon as he started, but when he began to kiss his way down her body she also began to moan.

Her knees were spread nice and wide, and when he began to lick her lowest softness her moans turned downright frantic. She probably would have been begging him to ease her if she'd been permitted to speak, but slaves did only what their owners allowed. Jake made her writhe and squirm for quite some time before he straightened and began to take off his body cloth. He would have enjoyed feeling her hands on his own body while he took pleasure from hers, but letting her touch him would have interfered with the rest of her punishment. Jake knew she wanted to touch him, but she hadn't earned the right to do that.

When he finally knelt between her legs and began to enter her, the squeaking she'd been doing started to intensify. The insertion made her so delightfully tight that he might have had trouble entering her if he hadn't gotten her so aroused that her body wept in its desperation for his. Once he had all of him inside her he began to stroke her in a different way, his arms braced on either side of her body. He knew she wanted to be held as he used her and meant to refuse as a continuing punishment, but after a very short time he found that it was he who was being punished. This woman meant too much to him for him to just use her like a hole in

the ground.

So Jake gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers while he eased them both, and suddenly her own arms were around him. She'd been denied the touching of him until she really wanted to, until she wanted to touch him. The feel of her hands sliding down his back was so good, so incredibly good, so - Jake had to shake his head hard to pull all the way out of the daydream, and then his sense of loss rose to new heights. His dream had kept changing to match his changing desires, and the last of it was almost pitiful. He wanted Tain Halliday to want him as much as he wanted her, but all that wanting just wasn't going to happen, at least not on her part. He might be able to talk her around somehow, but first he had to find her.

And how was he supposed to do that...?