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**GALACTIC
AFFAIRS**
LYNDI LAMONT

ALLIANCE: GALACTIC AFFAIRS

“Erok,” she panted. “I need...”

He cupped her ass and pulled her against him. “Is this what you need?”

“Yes, now.”

He laughed hoarsely and picked her up in his arms. “You are a bossy one, aren’t you?”

She felt a blush steal over her face. What had gotten into her? She’d never been this demanding of a lover before. There was something about this man that released all her inhibitions.

He laid her on the bunk and removed her boots. Her arms were still trapped and she ground her teeth. “Get this body suit off me.”

His grin was positively wicked. “All in good time, love.”

He removed his own clothing first, baring a sculpted chest with a matt of curly blond hair on it. When he sat on the edge of the bunk to remove his shoes, she let her gaze roam over his broad shoulders and strong back. Finally he stood and removed his pants. His upper torso was several shades darker than the rest of his skin. Golden hairs covered his arms and legs, unlike the smooth skin of the Mhajavi men she’d known. He was beautifully built, though. His buttocks were tight, his legs long and well-muscled. When he turned, she caught her breath at the sight of his fully erect shaft. The muscles in her *yoni* clenched with the need to have him inside her.

“Erok...”

“Yes, Jahni?” He lay beside her, one hand supporting his head as the other one played with her breasts.

She swore under her breath. “You know what I want.”

He kissed her lightly. “I do, and I think you’ve waited long enough...”

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ALLIANCE: GALACTIC AFFAIRS

BY

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ALLIANCE: GALACTIC AFFAIRS
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*A mystical coin dictates the erotic
currency of desire and a smoldering change of fate.
Magical temptation erupts into fiery,
intimate seduction. Fate. Destiny. Chance. All
demand the passionate fee of surrender.
Temptation's Price leads unsuspecting lovers down
the path to sensual, irresistible adventure.*

CHAPTER 1

Erok relaxed the minute his ship passed through the asteroid belt and entered Mhajavi space, relieved he'd made good time since leaving Algott. He thought about trying to contact his sister at the nearby raider camp, but decided it wasn't a good idea. Because of the increased shared patrols by Ziganese and Mhajavi ships, it was better to keep silent until absolutely necessary. He just hoped Kelida's pregnancy was proceeding normally.

With his course plotted and the controls set on autopilot, he retreated to his cabin to take inventory of the archeological treasures he'd brought with him. He'd had no choice but to leave in a rush. Not a good time to hang around, especially

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after snatching a bronze fertility statue from an untended cabin at the dig. Though not authentic, the statue would have been missed by now. Thank the gods he'd known about the abandoned space port in the Algottan Mountains. The Ziganese had once had great hopes of establishing a port there, but frequent earthquakes made most pilots leery of it. But not those, like himself, of Algottan origin. There he'd transferred his cargo to a waiting spaceship and taken off. That put him at least twelve hours ahead of any pursuers.

He entered his cabin and went right to his berth. Reaching up, he pressed a recessed button that opened a hidden panel in the bulkhead above the berth. He pulled out his bag of treasures and set it on a small table.

Most of the artifacts unearthed by the joint Ziganese-Mhajavi expedition were of little value to anyone but an archeologist—pot shards, primitive tools, the occasional arrowhead. While the professionals had been happily unearthing and cataloging such mundane treasures, he'd gone exploring in caves in the nearby hills, where he'd found a cache of coins and jewelry. That plus the fertility statue should make this trip worthwhile.

First, he sorted through the coins, pausing to study one which showed a man and woman having sex. He laughed. "Too bad they don't make coins like this anymore. The ancients must have been a horny crew."

Next, he removed the statue from a bag and set it on the table. A bronze figurine of a very pregnant woman stared back at him through purple xandrite eyes. The stones alone had

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intrinsic value, and he had no doubt he'd find a buyer gullible enough to believe the ancient Algottans had developed metallurgical techniques, even though the experts said otherwise.

A pang of guilt stabbed at him for taking the statue away from Fala, one of the Mhajavi members of the team. She'd been so thrilled when she found it. He'd liked her. Hell, he'd wanted her.

He sighed. "Sorry, Fala, but it's for a good cause. I can't let my friends starve."

"You should never have left Algott."

He spun around at the sound of another voice. To his amazement, a woman stood in the shadows, glaring at him.

"Who are you? How in blazes did you get on my ship?"

She stepped forward, and he saw she was quite old, with long, gray hair tied in braids. "I am called Maradon, and you brought me aboard ship yourself."

"What are you talking about? You're a stowaway."

She crossed her arms and pinned him with a steely gaze. "You took my statue away. I warned Fala dire consequences would follow should this happen."

"Fala? You must be the Maradon she kept talking about. The one who conned her with a fake statue."

"The statue is real."

He shrugged. "Either way it'll fetch a nice price in Mhajav."

Maradon's lips curved, but there was malice in her smile. "You will never arrive there with it. Your ship is going

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nowhere.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “On the contrary, we entered Mhajavi space a few minutes ago, and we’ll arrive there in another two days. There’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

The old woman’s face began to change, her eyes glowing red, her nose lengthening. She pointed a finger and a bolt of light flew out, ricocheting around the inside of the cabin, then disappearing through the floor. His ship shuddered, knocking Erok off his feet. Then the engines died.

He shook his head, uncertain what had happened.

“Now will you turn back?”

He looked up to see the old woman staring at him, her arms folded over her chest. “I can’t go back. I’m wanted for theft.”

“Then you can sit here for the rest of your life.”

He got to his feet and edged his way around her, heading for the door. “Someone will rescue me. I just have to send out a distress call.”

The old woman cocked her head to one side and a sly smile appeared on her face. She picked up one of the coins he’d found, the one showing a man and woman fucking.

“Do you know what this coin signifies?”

He shrugged. “No.”

She clutched it to her heart. “In ancient times, it was used as an offering to Maradon to ensure fidelity and true love.”

“So? That has nothing to do with me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I have been watching you, Erok. I see how you go from one woman to the next, never quite

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satisfied.”

“What do you mean? I’m always satisfied, and so are they.” He cringed a little at how conceited he’d sounded. But it was true. He prided himself on his ability to please a woman.

“But you have never fallen in love.”

“No,” he admitted quietly.

“You will,” she promised. Raising her voice and her hand, she intoned, “You will fall in love with the next woman you see.”

He chuckled. “Did you just curse me?”

“Yes, and the only way to break the curse is to return the statue to Algott.”

He studied the old woman for a moment. “You’re insane.” Turning on his heel, he strode to the cockpit and sent out a distress signal. He didn’t know who the old woman was or how she had managed to sneak onboard, but the minute a rescuer arrived, he was throwing her off his ship. For a few minutes he fantasized about pushing her out an airlock, not that he’d ever do so. No matter how annoying she was.

While he waited for a response, he cursed the aging engines on his ship, the old woman and fate itself.

* * *

Jahni stood on the bridge of the *Charaka* and watched as a shuttle attached cables to a stranded spacecraft. It had taken them hours to reach the coordinates after receiving a distress call from the *Aveza*, a small Ziganese trading vessel.

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Normally, she wouldn't have been involved, but Captain Belarav had requested her assistance in de-briefing the pilot, in hopes he would have seen some activity from the space raiders plaguing their galaxy.

Her heart pounded in anticipation. She'd spent the last several months on board, waiting for some sign of the raiders. So far, it had been a long and boring voyage, especially since she'd been shunned by most of the crew. It wasn't just the usual wariness of anyone from Mhajavi intelligence. It was because of who she was, or more precisely, who her parents were—supporters of the dictator Havar. In other words, traitors in the eyes of most Mhajavi. And it didn't help that she'd once worked for the Havar government.

She studied the small craft on the view screen. It appeared to be at least twenty years old and had definitely seen better days. She guessed the owner wasn't very successful at what he did. Of course, with raiders from both worlds preying on shipping, a lot of traders were hurting. The *Aveza* didn't look like it had been attacked, though. The pilot had said the engines had suddenly quit, for no apparent reason.

"When this Erok comes on board, I want you to interview him," Captain Belarav reminded her.

"Yes, sir. With pleasure."

She turned and left the bridge. It would be good to have something useful to do for a change. She'd spent hours pouring over charts of the asteroid belt, certain the region was where the raiders had gone to ground, but to no avail. They had to be holded up somewhere, but they'd done a good job of

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hiding their tracks.

When she entered the conference room, she turned on the view screen and set it to observe the arrival of the trading vessel in the main cargo bay. Once the unwieldy craft was finally maneuvered inside and the outer doors closed, a single figure emerged from the ship.

Her heart rate accelerated at the sight of the pilot. He was fair, like most Ziganese, and perhaps one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen. Tall and well built, with blond hair, light-colored eyes, fair skin and a deep masculine voice that had sent shivers through her body the first time she'd heard it over the comm link.

She drew in a deep breath and tried to calm herself. How pathetic was she to react this way to a stranger? But it had been such a long time, and she'd never made love to a Ziganese man. Were they really as hairy all over as she'd heard?

Blessed universe, what was wrong with her?

Once she'd had two lovers. One was Taryn, her daring revolutionary. She closed her eyes, remembering the excitement of their stolen hours together. He'd been as passionate in bed as he was in fighting for Mhajavi freedoms, and he'd paid the ultimate price. Her heart ached whenever she thought about his loss.

And then there was Rohan, her boss in the Havar government and sometime lover. In his own way, he'd been a superb lover, too. Unlike Taryn, whose passion burned hot, Rohan was experienced, controlled and controlling. Her face

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heated as she remembered how he'd often handcuffed her to his bed, then teased every inch of her body until she was screaming for release. He, too, was gone from her life, hiding out somewhere with the space raiders, and for the last six years, she'd been alone with her memories. She made a mental note to seek out a lover when she returned to Mhajav.

Flushed and more aware of her own body than she'd been in a long time, she paced the conference room awaiting Erok's arrival.

* * *

When his vessel had been towed aboard the Mhajavi ship, Erok opened the door and leaped out. He'd never felt so trapped, angry and helpless as he had sitting in his spacecraft, unable to move. He took a deep breath and tried to relax his tense muscles. He was thankful his rescuers were Mhajavi. At least there was a chance they hadn't been looking for him.

When a tall Mhajavi male entered the cargo bay and greeted him, Erok held out his hand in greeting. He was relieved when the other man shook it and politely introduced himself as Belarav, captain of the *Charaka*.

"Thanks for the rescue," Erok said.

"Glad to help. Our engineers can assist with engine repairs."

"No need," Erok said. "I can fix it myself." He'd rather not let anyone else on board.

"As you wish. However, we will have to do an inspection of your craft. Security reasons."

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“Of course,” Erok agreed reluctantly. He doubted they’d find his treasures. The secret compartment was well hidden, but if they tapped into the ship’s computer files, there was no telling what would happen. “I’m not transporting any hazardous materials.”

The captain smiled. “Good to know. In the meantime, please come with me. There’s someone who wants to speak with you.”

Erok had expected to be questioned, so he wasn’t surprised when the ever-polite Mhajavi led him to a small conference room. Erok entered and the door closed behind him. He was surprised to see the person waiting for him was a civilian and a woman. She was young and attractive, her tall, lithe body dressed in a black body suit that showed off her slim curves and contrasted with her skin, a warm shade of golden brown. Her short hair was dark brown, framing an angular face with large, almond-shaped brown eyes that tilted up slightly at the corners.

“Welcome to the *Charaka*, Captain Erok. My name is Jahni.”

When she held out a hand in greeting, he took it in his. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“It is our pleasure to be of assistance.”

Her hand still rested in his, and he had to control the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. Gods knew, he felt senseless enough himself. It was as if she had him mesmerized. It made no sense. Though attractive, she wasn’t his usual type of woman, being more slender than well-

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endowed. Still, arousal hummed through his veins, and his cock grew heavy with desire.

“Believe me, the pleasure is mine,” he murmured. “I’m not good at waiting.”

She withdrew her hand from his finally, but she didn’t step back. “You were lucky we answered your call. A disabled ship is easy prey for space raiders. You must have been worried.”

He shrugged one shoulder. The raiders were the least of his worries, but he could hardly say so. “One of the hazards of the job. I was glad to hear a friendly voice, though. It was getting lonely out here.”

Her lips curved into a smile, and he suppressed the urge to run his tongue along her full lower lip. He had to force himself to pay attention to her question.

“Isn’t loneliness another hazard of your job? Since you don’t seem to have a crew.”

“I don’t spend all my time in space, thank the gods. I like people too much.” He took a small step closer to her. “Let me revise that. I like women too much.”

Her mouth quirked. “I imagine you have quite a reputation on your home world.”

“You have no idea.” He reached out to touch her hair, soft and silky, then ran the back of his hand along her jaw. “I especially like Mhajavi women.”

Her eyes widened and she swallowed. “Really? Why is that?”

He rested his hand on her throat, feeling her pulse racing beneath his fingers. “I’ve found the women of your world to

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be warm, generous and loving. Beautiful and sensual. Confident in their worth and their sexuality.” He let his voice drop and leaned closer to her. “In fact, I’m addicted to Mhajavi pussy.”

A small gasp escaped at his blunt talk, but she made no move to back away. Sliding his hand around to the back of her neck, he pulled her head closer until their lips met. When she kissed him back, he slipped his other arm around her waist and pulled her closer. Slanting his mouth across hers, he deepened the kiss, closing his lips over hers. He used his tongue to trace her lips, focusing on the fuller bottom lip, sucking and tugging on it. She let out a sigh, and he slipped his tongue inside her mouth. She clutched his shoulders as her breath hitched in her throat.

He drew back slightly so they could both catch their breath. She stared at him, her pupils dilated.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” she whispered. “I’m supposed to be interrogating you.”

“What’s the hurry?” His hand massaged the tight muscles in the back of her neck. “You need to relax more.”

She pushed against his shoulders. “I need a little space between us.”

He smiled and released her. “This isn’t over.” He sat and crossed his legs, hoping she wouldn’t notice the bulge in his pants.

She perched on the chair next to his and turned to face him. A pulse beat in her neck, and he knew she’d been as affected by the kiss as he had.

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“What do you need to ask me?”

She spread her hands. “Who you are, where you’re going, and why.”

“As I said, I’m a free trader headed for Mhajav. There’s really not much else to tell.”

She tilted her head and studied him. “Why aren’t you part of a convoy? You must know the dangers a small ship faces alone in space. Or are you involved with the space raiders?”

“You’ve seen my ship. It’s relatively slow and lightly armed, no threat to anyone.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I didn’t accuse you of being a raider. Obviously your craft isn’t capable of attacking another ship.”

He held up his hands. “I’m just a simple merchant.”

Her lips curved in a smile, revealing even white teeth. “I’m sure simple is the last thing you are. Brash, forward and clever, yes. Simple, no. What are you hiding? You seemed reluctant to have your ship searched.”

“I have valuable cargo aboard. If any of it is missing...”

“Your cargo won’t be touched. Just scanned for explosives and weapons.”

He relaxed marginally. “Then we have nothing to worry about.”

She asked a few more questions, jotting down the names of the Mhajavi merchants he intended to visit when he reached Mahdesh. “Have you visited our capital city before?”

“Yes, several times. I found it fascinating.”

Finally she stood, indicating the interview was over. “Allow me to show you to your quarters.”

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* * *

Jahni led the way to the cabin assigned to Erok. The interview had gone badly, she acknowledged to herself. He'd put her off stride with one passionate kiss and the naked desire in his gaze. It had been so long since a man had looked at her like that. Needs she'd suppressed overwhelmed her now. Awareness of the virile man beside her thrummed through her veins, making her heart race and her clit throb.

She didn't know what to do. It would be so easy to give in to the desire he'd awakened, so easy to let this man have what he wanted. *And why not?* If he were truly who he said he was, there would be no reason not to. And if he were hiding something, she might have a better chance of ferreting it out in the aftermath of passion. Sex often made men stupid. Who was she kidding? Sex made everyone stupid. The minute blood rushed from the brain to the sex organs, the ability to reason disappeared.

That tactic had certainly worked with Rohan. Unlike most men, he'd enjoyed cuddling and talking after sex. She'd pried many a secret out of him. She felt a pang of guilt at the way she'd used him, though it had all been for the cause of independence. Still, he'd deserved better from her. He'd been a good lover, and she missed him now. Since Rohan, her lovers had been few and infrequent, but none who had aroused her as easily as this Erok.

When they arrived at the guest quarters, she hit the button to open the door and entered. He stood in the doorway and looked around before entering.

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The cabin was surprisingly large. On one side of the room was a large bunk, a nook for personal belongings and a door to the lav. The other side contained two narrower bunks, one above the other. A table for four sat in front of a window with a view of space.

“Very roomy,” he said.

“It was designed for a family, though it has been primarily used for guests,” Jahni explained. “Most recently, a diplomat and his staff traveling to the conference on Zigan.”

Erok moved toward her, his step, his gaze, predatory. Her heart rate accelerated, but she stood her ground. “Do you need anything else?”

“Just you,” he murmured, before capturing her lips again. He swept his tongue inside her mouth and pulled her against him, letting her feel his hardened cock. She moaned into his mouth and wrapped her arms around his waist. Need surged through her, centering in her groin.

He moved his mouth from hers to press kisses to her jaw and down her neck. She tilted her head to give him better access to her throat as he licked and nibbled at it, sending shivers through her.

“What do you need, Jahni?” he whispered. “Do you want my cock inside you?”

“Yes,” she whimpered. “I want that very much.”

He growled and took her mouth almost savagely. She kissed him back, letting her tongue duel with his.

He moved his hand between their torsos and undid the front of her body suit. His hand slipped inside to cup one of

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her breasts. The nipple hardened under the touch of his fingers, sending a sharp pang of need right to her clit. She pulled her mouth from his to urge him on. "Yes, more, more."

He pushed the suit off her shoulders, baring her breasts and trapping her arms against her sides. She held her breath as he examined her. "Beautiful," he said, cupping her breasts in his hands. She exhaled shakily as he teased her nipples to aching hardness. "Kiss them," she ordered in a hoarse voice.

He laughed and lowered his head to take the tip of one into his mouth, running his tongue over the hardened peak. The sensations spiraling through her increased. She struggled to free her arms, but couldn't get her hands through the cuffs of her suit. "I want to touch you," she said.

He looked at her and a slow smile spread across his face. "Not yet. I think I like having you helpless right now. I suspect that's not the usual state of things for you."

She groaned as his mouth moved to her other breast, closing on the nipple to suck on it. Unable to move her hands, she wrapped one leg around his hips and ground her *yonis* against his leg. If he didn't touch her there soon, she thought she might die of need.

"Erok," she panted. "I need..."

He cupped her ass and pulled her against him. "Is this what you need?"

"Yes, now."

He laughed hoarsely and picked her up in his arms. "You are a bossy one, aren't you?"

She felt a blush steal over her face. What had gotten into

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her? She'd never been this demanding of a lover before. There was something about this man that released all her inhibitions.

He laid her on the bunk and removed her boots. Her arms were still trapped and she ground her teeth. "Get this body suit off me."

His grin was positively wicked. "All in good time, love."

He removed his own clothing first, baring a sculpted chest with a matt of curly blond hair on it. When he sat on the edge of the bunk to remove his shoes, she let her gaze roam over his broad shoulders and strong back. Finally he stood and removed his pants. His upper torso was several shades darker than the rest of his skin. Golden hairs covered his arms and legs, unlike the smooth skin of the Mhajavi men she'd known. He was beautifully built, though. His buttocks were tight, his legs long and well-muscled. When he turned, she caught her breath at the sight of his fully erect shaft. The muscles in her *yoni* clenched with the need to have him inside her.

"Erok..."

"Yes, Jahni?" He lay beside her, one hand supporting his head as the other one played with her breasts.

She swore under her breath. "You know what I want."

He kissed her lightly. "I do, and I think you've waited long enough."

When he unfastened the cuffs and pulled her arms out of her sleeves, she grabbed his head and pulled his mouth to hers for a long, wet kiss. She ran her hands over his shoulders and back, enjoying the feel of sleek skin over hard muscle.

When the kiss ended, he proceeded to strip the body suit

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off her, nibbling and licking her sensitized skin as he went. Her stomach, her hips, her thighs and calf, her instep. Every inch of her skin seemed to ache for his touch, most of all the aching core between her legs.

He parted her thighs and lay between them, and finally, oh blessed universe, finally he touched her mound and her hips bucked. His finger traced her slit, spreading her juices. When he grazed her distended clit, her breath caught. He lowered his head and kissed her, his whiskers abrading her skin. The rasp of it sent her higher, and she clutched the sheets with both fists. The touch of his tongue on her clit was all it took to propel her over the edge, into a gasping, panting climax.

When the spasms stopped, she opened her eyes to see him grinning at her. She smiled back and reached for him. He repositioned himself between her legs and eased his cock inside her vagina, slowly filling her. She wrapped her legs around him to better accommodate his width. Her state of arousal was still heightened and his thrusts sent her into another spiral. Never had she responded to a man the way she did to this one. She held on until she felt him climax, then let go and let herself spiral out of control.

* * *

Erok rolled to one side, but kept his arms around Jahni, reluctant to let go of her. Still shaken by the explosiveness of his orgasm, he held her close and waited for his heart rate and breathing to slow. He should return to his ship and get started on repairs, but he was no longer in a hurry to leave the

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Charaka. Not with a distraction like this in his arms.

He smoothed a lock of hair off her face. "Tell me about yourself. You did all the questioning earlier."

She smiled. "You haven't told me much."

"I answered all your questions," he protested.

Her brows quirked. "Oh? Why do I have the feeling you got the best of me?"

He dropped a kiss on her mouth. "Oh, I definitely got the best of this encounter."

A laugh gurgled from her throat. "I think we both did when it comes to the sex, but I'm not sure my superiors will be satisfied with the outcome of the interview."

"What more is there to tell? As I said, I'm a simple merchant headed for your planet, who ran into engine trouble."

She propped herself on one elbow and used the other hand to play with his chest hair. "I'm still puzzled why you didn't travel with a convoy."

"I didn't want to wait for one. Besides, the raiders have been rather quiet lately."

"I suppose," she said. "The joint patrols do seem to have driven them to ground, with no trace of their whereabouts, I might add."

"And that's a good thing, right? Makes life better for all of us. I thought that was the idea behind the alliance. The joint patrols keep the raiders in check, and merchants are free to trade without fear of attack."

"Yes, of course. I just can't help wondering how long this

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period of calm will last. Sooner or later the raiders will run out of supplies.”

He cupped her breast and ran his thumb over her nipple, causing it to harden instantly. “Has anyone ever told you you’re too serious?”

She smiled up at him. “Nearly everyone, from my parents to Taryn.” The smile faded from her face.

“Who is Taryn? Your lover?” He held his breath waiting for her reply. The last thing he wanted to hear was that she belonged to someone else.

“Not anymore. He died during the rebellion.”

Her sad expression filled Erok with unfamiliar feelings of tenderness. “And you still miss him.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “What about you? Is there someone special in your life?”

“No,” he said. “I’ve never been in love.” *Not until now.* The thought surprised him. He couldn’t possibly have fallen in love so quickly, could he?

“But there have been plenty of women, haven’t there?”

He forced a casual grin. “Guilty as charged.”

She stared at him, her deep brown eyes gazing into his, as if trying to search out all his secrets. He’d have to be careful around her. It was getting harder and harder to deflect all of her questions.

“I wonder what else you’re guilty of,” she mused.

He sat up, his back to her. “So the lover is gone and the interrogator is back.” Standing, he reached for his clothes. “I need to get back to the ship. The engine won’t repair itself.”

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“I’m sorry, Erok. Come back to bed.”

He turned and almost wavered. She looked so delectable, lying there naked, her smooth brown skin begging to be touched, her sweet pussy calling out to him. Somehow he forced himself to remain still. Another go-round, and he might be confessing all his sins just for another chance to watch her come apart in his arms, another chance to sink his cock into her warm, tight pussy and fuck her until they both cried out for release.

Sucking in a deep breath, he turned, picked up his pants and pulled them on, despite the protests of his hardening cock. This woman was trouble, like a seductive spider. If he let himself get caught in her web again, he might never get out alive.

He heard her sigh and get out of bed, then the rustling of her clothes as she dressed. Turning, he waited for her to finish dressing. Just as she was about to leave his room, someone knocked at the door.

“Come in,” he said.

Two Mhajavi crewmen with sidearms strapped around their waists entered. “Captain Erok, you’re to come with us.”

Jahni stepped forward. “What’s going on?”

One of them turned to her. “Captain Belarav wants to see you in the cargo bay.”

“Yes, of course. Where are you taking Erok?”

The crewman turned to him. “To the brig. He’s being held pending the arrival of a Ziganese ship.”

“What for?” Jahni asked.

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“Theft.”

The look she flashed at Erok held a mixture of regret and anger. Abruptly, she turned and marched out of the cabin. Erok followed, flanked by his escort, cursing the enforced delay. This development would set his plans back again. But they'd have to let him go when they failed to find any evidence of theft. Thank the gods, his treasures were well hidden.

* * *

Jahni found Captain Belarav standing beside Erok's ship. “You sent for me.”

He turned to her. “Yes. A few minutes ago, we received a bulletin from the Ziganese fleet to be on the lookout for a trader by the name of Erok, who has been accused of stealing an artifact from an archeological site—a bronze statue of a fertility goddess. My men are searching the ship for any evidence.”

A thief. A common thief. Jahni's cheeks burned as she remembered how readily she'd fallen into the man's arms.

“Were you able to learn anything about him?” Belarav asked.

“No, not really. He's very closed-mouthed.” Of course, she hadn't minded when his mouth closed over her nipple or her clit. She'd known he was hiding something from her, and she'd still let him seduce her. What a pathetic fool she was.

Three men exited the craft and faced Belarav. “We looked everywhere, captain, but if he's carrying stolen property, it's

well hidden.”

“May I try?” Jahni asked.

The captain waved a hand toward the craft. “Be my guest.”

She entered the ship and turned toward the small cockpit. She ran her gaze over the compact space and found no likely spot for a hiding hole. Next she explored the cargo bay, which was partially filled with barrels and boxes of agricultural produce. She ignored the cargo, knowing Belarav’s efficient crewmen would have made a close examination of every container. No, Erok was too clever. If he had any kind of contraband, it would be well hidden.

Next she searched the engine room, followed by the galley and a small cabin Erok obviously used as an office. A crewman sat at the desk, checking Erok’s computer files.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Just the ship’s logs so far. Pretty routine stuff.”

“No list of contacts?”

He opened a screen containing a list of merchants, some in Mahdesh, others in Lodur, the capital of Zigan, and a few in Algott City.

“Isn’t Algott where the usurper Ludosh came from?” she asked.

The crewman shrugged. “You know more about Ziganese politics than I do.”

She nodded and moved on to Erok’s sleeping cabin, another small area containing a berth against one wall and a small table with one chair. A door to one side led to a tiny lav; the other door opened a small closet containing extra clothing

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and other personal effects. She shoved the clothes to one side, inhaling his odor, as arousal swamped her senses.

“Damn you, Erok, why couldn’t you just leave me alone?”

Running her hands around the closet wall, she felt for a hidden door, but there was nothing. That left the berth. Slowly she walked across the cabin, trying not to picture him lying there, nude, his cock hard and ready for her. Her jaw clenched in anger and frustration.

“What a fool I am. Of all the men in the galaxy...”

She let out a sigh, then turned and walked away. Just as she reached the doorway, she thought she heard something fall. Spinning around, she spotted the gleam of metal on the bunk.

Puzzled, she returned to find a coin resting on the blanket. Picking it up, she studied the engraved picture of a man and woman having sex. The words around the edge meant nothing to her, and it dawned on her this must be one of the stolen artifacts.

Disappointment flooded through her as she realized she’d been foolishly hoping he was innocent. *But where had the coin come from?* Slipping it in her pocket, she looked up and realized the bulkhead over Erok’s berth seemed lower than the others in the ship. Standing on the berth, she ran her hands over the panels until her fingers found a recessed button. A door opened above her head and she stretched to reach in. Her fingers encountered a canvas bag, and she pulled it down and dumped the contents on the berth. More coins fell out, along with a small bronze statue of a heavily pregnant woman. The

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eyes of the statue were made of gemstones that glowed purple in the dim light.

Jahni sank down on the bunk and rested her head in her hands. It was true. Bad enough she'd given her body, and nearly her heart, to a stranger, but he was a criminal, too.

* * *

After taking the bag of stolen goods to Captain Belarav, Jahni headed for the brig to confront Erok. He was lounging on the small bunk in his cell, looking as if he hadn't a care in the world. She had to give him credit for coolness under pressure.

She pressed a panel beside the door and entered the cell, hearing it lock behind her.

He swung lithely to his feet when he saw her. "Jahni, this is a pleasant surprise."

"This isn't a social call," she said. "I knew you were hiding something from me."

He crooked one eyebrow. "How was I to know I'd been falsely accused of theft?"

She reached into her pocket for the first coin she'd found and tossed it to him. "Then how do you explain this?"

He caught it in his hand and glanced at it. The only sign of discomfort was his frown. "Where did you find this?"

"In your cabin on the *Aveza*. I'm more interested in knowing where you found it."

He sat back on the bunk, seemingly unconcerned. "In a cave. I had a lot of free time in between flights and used it to

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explore the area. I found a stash of coins and jewelry in a nearby cave.” He shrugged. “Nothing of interest to the archeologists. Everyone knows the ancients didn’t have the means to process metal, so these must be modern. Probably intended to gull the tourists. I thought they might be of interest to one of my Mhajavi contacts, purely as curiosities, of course.”

She leaned against the wall and crossed her arms over her chests. “That sounds plausible, but how do you explain the fertility statue? The one stolen from the archeological site. The one I found in a hidden compartment above your berth.”

He tensed, and she was gratified to see she’d finally knocked him out of his complacency. Pushing away from the wall, she walked toward him, her hands clenched into fists. “You’re one of them, aren’t you? A raider.”

“No,” he denied. “I trade with them sometimes, that’s all.”

Disappointment filled her. “How could you? Do you have no idea of how brutal Havir and his followers are?”

His eyes narrowed into a glare. “I don’t trade with them, just the Ziganese raiders.”

“But why, Erok? They’re cut from the same mold as Havir.”

He stood, towering over her. “No, they are not.”

She refused to back down. “Ludosh tried to overthrow King Ormin. He has to be as power mad as Havir.”

“That comment shows how much you know of Ziganese politics,” he bit out. “Ludosh wanted to bring democracy to Zigan.”

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“That’s what dictators always say. They’re full of empty promises.”

“Not Ludosh,” Erok denied. “He was Algottan.”

She blinked at him. “And that’s supposed to mean something to me?”

He sighed and sat down. “Have a seat, and I’ll give you an Algottan history lesson.”

She perched on the edge of the one chair in his cell. “All right. We have time until the *Dalebor* arrives to pick up you and the stolen artifacts.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “How much do you already know about Algott?”

“It’s one of the more backward provinces on Zigan.”

“Backward. Yes, that’s what they want you to believe. The truth is Algott had an advanced civilization centuries ago, when the Ziganese were still barbarians. But the continent is geologically unstable. The civilization was wiped out by a series of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. The society fell into decline and had reverted to small warring tribes when the Ziganese arrived two centuries ago. By then, they had developed a fairly modern technology and considered themselves vastly superior to the Algottans.”

“Interesting, but what does that have to do with you and Ludosh?”

“I grew up in Algott and saw the prejudice against the local people. My mother was a local and my father treated her like an inferior. He’s an arrogant bastard, controlling and abusive when he doesn’t get his own way.”

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“And you rebelled?”

Erok flashed her a crooked smile. “At every opportunity.”

“And Ludosh?”

“He’s the last in a line of Algottan chiefs who were given noble standing by the conquering Ziganese. But unlike most of the aristocrats, Ludosh cares about the common people of Algott. He grew tired of seeing them—us—treated as second-class citizens. When all his reform proposals fell on deaf ears, he tried to seize power. Most of his followers were Algottan, though there were some others.”

“Were you one of them? Or just a sympathizer?”

“The latter. But I know some of the people who escaped, and I try to help them now and again by trading.”

“Stolen goods for stolen goods? How noble.”

He glared at her. “This is the first time I’ve stolen anything. But times are tougher for them now. As you said, the patrols have forced them into hiding and they’re short of food and other supplies.”

Jahni mulled over the information for a few moments. “It’s hard for me to understand how a man of principle could suddenly turn into a pirate. Not to mention joining up with a monster like Havar.”

“Ludosh and his followers are careful which ships they attack. They know who can afford the losses and who can’t. That’s why I wasn’t afraid to travel without an escort. They know my ship.”

“Hmm. What about Havar’s raiders?”

“They don’t attack Ziganese ships, and Ludosh’s followers

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don't attack Mhajavi vessels. It's part of their agreement."

"But they share the same lair. Where is it?"

He looked away from her. "What makes you think I'd know the location?"

"You must know how to find the raiders if you trade with them."

He leaned forward to rest his arms on his thighs. "Look, Jahni, I'm in enough trouble already without telling you any more."

"Not necessarily. There's a substantial reward for credible information about the raiders."

"I know all about the reward, but what good will it do me if I'm locked up in prison?"

"That hasn't happened yet." An idea was forming in her mind, but she wasn't ready to discuss it just yet. She stood to leave.

He rose to his feet and reached out to her. "Jahni, I want you to know one thing. What happened between us has nothing to do with any of this. I don't regret making love to you and I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He stepped closer until she could almost feel the heat of his body. "Any time, any place."

Her own heart accelerated as she gazed into his eyes. "I can't think about that now, Erok. I have a job to do."

She turned and called out to the crewman on duty. After exiting the cell, she turned to look back at Erok. His shoulders were slumped and his air of confidence gone. Ruthlessly she squelched any sympathy for the man. He'd broken the law and

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he'd have to pay the penalty. No doubt the arriving Ziganese would insist on it.

* * *

Jahni's plan was fully formed by the time the Ziganese vessel *Dalebora* arrived. She and Captain Belarav met Lieutenant Kovan, the *Dalebora's* first officer, in the same conference room where she'd attempted to interrogate Erok. She'd already laid out her plan to Captain Belarav and contacted her superiors at Mhajavi intelligence for their approval. Now it was time to sell it to the Ziganese and obtain Erok's cooperation.

After pleasantries were exchanged, Lieutenant Kovan asked about the prisoner.

"He'll be brought up from the brig shortly," Belarav assured him. "We have something to discuss first."

"As you wish," Kovan agreed, though he seemed puzzled.

After a nod from Belarav, Jahni launched into her plan. "As I said before, I'm with Mhajavi intelligence. We've been trying for years to learn the location of the raiders' hideout. It's possible your thief could lead us to them. Once we know the location, we can catch them unawares and put an end to the matter."

Kovan thought for a few minutes. "Your plan might work. But even if the prisoner agrees, why would he cooperate?"

"His cooperation depends on your government. I think he might agree to help us in return for his freedom."

Kovan frowned. "I don't have the authority to agree to

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immunity from prosecution.”

“No, we realize you’ll have to contact the authorities in Lodur. And first, we need to be certain Erok is willing to cooperate. In any case, we’ve found the artifacts, so they can be returned to Algott.”

“To Zigan, you mean,” Kovan said.

Jahni shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Even if he tells us where they’re holed up, as soon as our ships are within sensor range, they’ll scatter in all directions.”

“Erok’s ship wouldn’t set off any alarms. They know it already.”

Kovan nodded. “What guarantee do we have that he won’t warn them and disappear?”

“You have my guarantee. I’ll be going with him, undercover.”

Kovan stared at her in astonishment. “You?”

She stiffened. “I’m a trained undercover agent. In addition, I have some credibility with the Mhajavi raiders.”

“What credibility?” Kovan asked.

“My parents are with them,” Jahni admitted.

Kovan looked at her skeptically. “And your government would trust you on such a mission?”

She glared at him. “I’ve proven my loyalty over the last six years.” And more, she wanted to add, but her role as a double agent during the rebellion was still classified. “Havir is a monster who needs to be stopped. Again.”

“I beg your pardon,” Kovan apologized. “I didn’t mean to question your loyalty.”

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She nodded acceptance of his apology, but his words stung. She was tired of having her loyalty questioned by everyone she met. When this mission was over, she was going to ask her superiors to release her from her promise to keep silent about spying for the resistance.

“Shall we bring in the prisoner and see what develops?” Belarav suggested, breaking the tension in the room.

At Kovan’s nod, Belarav used his communicator to order the prisoner brought to the conference room. While they waited, Lieutenant Kovan contacted his ship to advise his captain of what was being discussed. After signing off, Kovan said, “My captain is going to contact his superiors in Lodur to see if they have any interest in proceeding with your plan. Assuming the prisoner has the knowledge we seek and is willing to cooperate.”

A few minutes later, Erok entered the room, followed by two guards.

“Please wait outside,” Belarav said to the guards, who immediately left the room.

Kovan stood to introduce himself, then said, “Erok, you are under arrest for stealing archeological artifacts from Algott, those artifacts having been found in your possession. It seems the government has an open-and-shut case against you.”

Erok looked at Jahni, his gaze bleak. “So it seems.”

Kovan continued, “My orders are to transfer you to the *Dalebore* where you will be transported back to Zigan to stand trial.”

“However, there may be another alternative,” Jahni added.

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Erok's expression grew puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"Sit down so we can talk about it."

Both men sat as Jahni stood. "Erok, I suspect you know where the space raiders are hiding. Or at least how to contact them. Would you be willing to trade that information for your freedom?"

* * *

Four steps, pivot, four steps back. Over and over Erok paced the short length of his cell in the brig, his mind in turmoil.

He couldn't wait to get his hands on Jahni again, but he didn't know whether to hug her or strangle her. She'd dangled nearly irresistible bait in front of him. His freedom loomed and all he had to do to obtain it was betray his sister and brother-in-law to the authorities.

He knew which choice would be expected of him. He'd always been a selfish bastard, or so his father claimed. Not just his father. The truth was he'd lived up to expectation more often than not. Jumping from one job to the next, one woman to the next, never settling down, leaving a trail of chaos in his wake.

He sighed and lay down on his bed, eyes closed. He should try to get some sleep, like the guard outside, whose snores sounded through the closed door. He'd have to decide what he was going to do by morning, and he needed to be fresh and able to think clearly. It would help if they'd dim the lights in

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his cell, but no such luck.

As he drifted off, he thought of the only two people he'd ever truly cared for. His mother and his sister. His now pregnant sister. How could he turn her in to give birth in a prison hospital? But if he ended up in prison, who would help her if something went wrong?

"Damn Jahni," he muttered. "How did she find my stash? She's not even tall enough to reach it."

"She is if she stands on the bed."

He jumped up to find the old woman who'd stowed away on his ship standing calmly in his cell. "How did you get in here? I didn't hear the door open."

"I have no need of doors," the old woman said. "I will leave you shortly, when the statue is returned to Algott. You have a chance now to redeem yourself. You should take it. Your future happiness may depend on it."

"Or you could just lift your curse and leave me alone."

The old woman nodded. "Consider the curse lifted. But if you still care for her after today, then it was meant to be."

"What was?"

"You and Jahni. The two of you belong together. Two misfits in need of each other."

Erok groaned. Talking to this old crone made him crazy. "Who are you anyway?"

"I am Maradon."

He glared at her. "I know your name, old woman, but who are you?"

Once again, her form changed before his eyes. She grew

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younger and her clothing became that of a queen, like the pictures of the goddess he'd seen in books.

He gasped. "No, that's not possible. The gods are myths."

"Are we?" she asked serenely.

He fell to one knee before her, his head bowed. "Maradon, if you truly exist and have any powers at all, help me to save Kelida."

He felt her hand on his head. "Since you ask for someone other than yourself, so shall it be. You need not worry about your sister. But you must go to her. Nothing can be done if you are in jail."

It was his answer. He looked up in gratitude, but she was gone. He shook his head, got to his feet and climbed back into his bunk, unsure if what he'd just experienced had been real or a hallucination. Either way, he had his answer. Jahni would be pleased.

Jahni. He wished she were with him now. He'd strip her clothes off her, touch and lick her smooth brown skin from top to bottom, taste the sweetness of her pussy, then plunge his cock into her tight channel until she screamed with pleasure. Muscles tightened in his groin and he unfastened his pants and cupped his cock. There was only one way to get relief tonight, but that would change. *Soon.*

CHAPTER 2

Jahni stowed her gear in Erok's cabin on the *Aveza* and looked around. This was the only sleeping cabin on his ship, so her cover was that of lover as well as business partner. The first part was true, at least. Or had been. Whether she'd let him make love to her again was uncertain. She knew very little about him, including whether or not he was to be trusted.

She touched the pendant she wore around her neck on a short chain. Before leaving Mahdesh, she'd had a stone given to her by her former lover Rohan re-set in a large brooch. Inside was a tiny camera chip triggered by her body heat. It should go undetected and would provide a visual and audio record of the mission.

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Captain Belarav and Lieutenant Kovan were waiting in the cockpit with final instructions. The Ziganese had agreed to drop all charges against Erok in exchange for his cooperation in locating the raiders' lair, though no public announcement would be made of the fact until he'd returned safely from the mission. He'd also bargained for amnesty for his sister and her husband, who were with the raiders. It had helped to know that concern for his sister had been his primary reason for trading with the outlaws.

Now she just had to make sure their mission went off without a hitch. Not an easy undertaking, especially when dealing with a free spirit like Erok.

"Are you clear about the objectives of this mission?" Belarav asked.

"Yes, sir," she said. "Get in, reconnoiter, and get out. Safely."

"Right. And make note of their defenses," Kovan added. "I'd feel better if one of my men accompanied you. Someone who understands military matters."

"No," Erok said. "A Ziganese would arouse suspicions. Jahni and I both have relatives with the raiders. You don't even have an Algottan on your crew."

Kovan held up a hand. "Yes, you're right. Just do the best you can, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Jahni agreed. She understood his concern. It would be the Ziganese military who went in, and the more information she could give them, the less chance there'd be of injury or death.

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Erok looked pointedly at the door. “If there are no more instructions...”

Belarav turned to her. “Be careful, Jahni. I expect to see you back here in one piece.”

“Yes, sir.” She accompanied both officers to the hatch.

“Good luck,” Kovan said as he exited.

She closed the hatch and returned to the cockpit, where she strapped herself into the copilot’s chair. She studied the control panel and wished she’d learned how to pilot a spacecraft. If something happened to Erok, she’d be helpless.

He glanced at her and said, “Watch what I do for now. Later I’ll give you lessons on how to maneuver the vessel.”

She nodded and relaxed. He’d read her mind. “Thanks. I’d feel better if I knew more about the spacecraft.”

Carefully he maneuvered his ship out of the cargo bay of the *Charaka*. Once they were out in space, he changed direction and headed toward the asteroid belt.

Jahni stared out the window at the small objects orbiting through space. She’d never traveled in such a small craft before, not this far out in space, and it was both thrilling and frightening. On the larger *Charaka*, she’d been surrounded by metal. The *Aveza* seemed minute in comparison, fragile and vulnerable.

“Don’t you find it daunting?” she asked, waving a hand toward the view.

“I find it awe-inspiring. If I had a bigger, faster ship, I’d travel farther out, maybe see what lies beyond our solar system.”

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His words chilled her. He was a wanderer, with no plans of ever settling down. *Don't get too attached to this man.* "Do you ever think about putting down roots somewhere?"

He turned to look at her, and a crooked grin spread across his face. "Would you miss me if I just disappeared?"

She studied his handsome face. "Yes," she whispered. "For a while, at least."

Turning his attention back to the controls, he pushed buttons and set levers. "There, I've set it to autopilot."

She turned to Erok. "Are you ready to trust me with the location of the raiders yet?"

"They're on Undhara."

"Impossible. Our ships have made Undhara a regular stop for years now. There's nothing left there but an empty processing plant from the years of mining."

"And lots of caves and tunnels," he added.

"They've gone underground?"

"Yes."

"They must have planned ahead," Jahni said slowly.

He leaned back in his seat. "The way I heard it is when the rebellion started to gain strength, Havir had his followers build a hideaway underground in the tunnels and caves, in case things didn't go well. When it was finished, he suspended mining operations, saying the ore was tapped out."

Jahni ran a hand through her hair. "No one ever said he was stupid. But how long can they continue to live there?"

"That's my concern, too."

"You're worried about your sister, aren't you?"

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“Yes. Kelida is pregnant. I hate the thought of her giving birth in such primitive conditions.”

“Is it so bad?”

He shrugged. “The planet supports life, but just barely. And the medical facilities are limited.”

“My mother is a physician. I’ll ask her to help Kelida when her time comes.”

He flashed her a look of gratitude. “Thanks, but I still hate the idea of her being there. The people have access to water from the underground river and energy from the solar panels, but all food, medicine and other goods have to be brought in. So they raid shipping for food and provisions.”

“And ships and weapons,” Jahni pointed out. “I can’t imagine Havir will be content to remain leader of a band of outlaws for long.”

“Do you think he’s planning another takeover of Mhajav?”

“He’d be a fool to try,” Jahni said. “We’re far stronger than we were six years ago.”

“You haven’t told me how dangerous this mission is to you. What if you’re recognized?”

Her smile was rueful. “I expect to be recognized. I worked for Havir’s government before the current one.”

He frowned. “How is that possible?”

She chose her words carefully. “When the rebellion ended, the new government offered a blanket immunity for everyone who had supported Havir and agreed to vow loyalty to the new regime. I was one who accepted the offer. My parents chose to flee, as did Rohan.”

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“Rohan?”

“My superior.” She reached behind her neck, removed her necklace and set it aside. Once it was away from her body heat, it would turn off. “I worked for Rohan. And slept with him,” she added.

Erok frowned. “I thought your lover was killed in the resistance.”

“That was Taryn.”

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You had two lovers? At the same time?”

“Yes.”

“Is that common on Mhajav?”

“It’s acceptable, as long as all parties agree.”

“Your boss didn’t object to you sleeping with a rebel? I heard the Mhajavi were open-minded, but—”

“Rohan never knew about Taryn. I had my reasons for deceiving him.”

“To protect Taryn,” Erok guessed. “But why didn’t you just stop sleeping with your boss?”

She stared at him, wishing she could confide in him. It would be so cathartic to pour out the entire tale to someone. Anyone. “I’d like to tell you, but I can’t. The less you know, the better for both of us.”

“You were a spy, weren’t you? I can’t think of another reason you’d have lovers in both camps. And you must have been working for the resistance. It’s the only reason the current government would trust you enough to make you an intelligence agent.”

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“I can neither confirm nor deny...”

He laughed out loud. “Don’t worry, *draha*. Your secret is safe.”

“What does *draha* mean?”

He leaned forward to stare into her eyes. “It’s an endearment, like your word *priya*.”

Unstrapping her restraints, she stood and held out a hand. “Make love to me, Erok.”

In seconds, he was out of his restraints and pulling her into his arms, one hand cupping her head. “I like a woman who knows how to take charge.”

He brushed her mouth with his in a gentle kiss, then settled his lips on hers, sucking on her lower lip. His other hand cupped her breast.

When she ran her hands around his waist and down his ass, pulling him closer, he deepened the kiss, his tongue delving inside her mouth. She let her tongue duel with his, tasting him, breathing in the scent of his arousal, her arousal. Letting the sensations of need build.

Finally, she pulled away, breathing hard. Taking his hand, she led him to his quarters. This might be her last chance to make love with Erok. If their mission was successful, chances were she’d never see him again. And if it weren’t, chances were at least one of them could end up dead. Probably her.

Inside his quarters, she took her time unfastening his dark blue flight suit, stopping to admire and caress the skin underneath. She pushed the suit off his shoulders and down his arms, stopping to grin at him. “Maybe I should stop here, like

you did.”

“Don’t you dare,” he growled. “I want to touch you, too.”

She pretended to pout. “But it might be fun to have you totally in my power for a change.”

He gripped her hips with his hands, pulling her against his erection. “You already do, Jahni. I’ve been under your spell since the moment we met.”

He lowered his head to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the feel of his smooth, sleek muscles. She still didn’t know what to make of this man. He was a complex mix of charm, audacity and tenderness, at least in his lovemaking. It might take a lifetime to figure out who he really was. If only they had a lifetime.

She slid her arms from his shoulders down his arms, pushing his sleeves off. Her greedy gaze drank in the strong angles of his torso, from broad shoulders and sculpted chest to narrow waist. Moving her hands to his waist, she ran them up his chest, tugging lightly at the curly blond chest hair. She grazed her nails over his flat male nipples, eliciting a gasp from him. His pelvis pressed against her again.

“Are you going to finish undressing me or do I have to do it myself?”

She laughed and pushed his clothes down his hips, squeezing the taut muscles of his ass. His erect cock sprang free and she stopped undressing him to run a finger along its length. He let out a groan. “Woman, you are a tease.”

“Don’t you want me to touch it?” she asked, pretending innocence.

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He gave her a mock glare. "If you're going to touch it, don't stop so soon."

She laughed. "Then I think I'll make you wait." She knelt to unfasten and remove his boots one at a time before pulling the flight suit down his muscular legs. He stepped out of the suit and stood before her, magnificently nude and aroused.

She reached for his cock, but he caught her hands, urging her up. "Now it's my turn to undress you."

She pulled away. "No. I'm in charge, and I say you can look but not touch."

The side of his mouth quirked slightly. "I'm never one to pass up a free show." He moved to the bunk, lay on his side, head propped on one arm. "I'm ready."

So am I. She stared at him, her *yoni* throbbing with need, her slit weeping in desire. She wanted to rip off her clothes and jump on top of him, but forced herself to do the slow strip she'd promised.

She started by undoing the cuffs at her wrists, then slowly unfastening the front opening of her black flight suit.

She glanced at him and saw his free hand wrapped around his cock.

"Hurry up, woman," he growled. "I can't wait to get my hands on your tight ass, my mouth on your tits and my cock in your hot cunt."

His words sent shivers throughout her body. She hurriedly pushed the suit off her shoulders, freeing her arms. Then she sat to remove her boots, giving him a good view of her breasts. Boots off, she stood to push her suit down her hips

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and step out of it. All she wore now was a pair of bright red underpants. Wiggling her hips, she tugged them over her hips and down her legs, enjoying the heated look he shot her way. Now nude, she slid her hand down her stomach and touched her distended clit. A shudder shook her body.

“That’s it. Enough teasing.” In a lithe movement, he was up and off the bunk and moving toward her.

She leapt into his arms, legs wrapped around his waist, as their lips met and clung.

He backed toward the bunk and sat with her on his lap, legs still wrapped around his waist, his hard cock pulsing between them. She squirmed, rubbing her nipples against his hairy chest, enjoying the sensation.

His hands massaged her ass and teased the sensitive skin of her butt crack, heightening her awareness of her body. Every nerve was on alert, ready for action.

She moved her legs to kneel on either side of him and touched his cock, feeling a shiver pass through him. “Like that, do you?”

“Don’t stop.”

“I want you inside me.” She pressed his shaft against her clit, shuddering at the sensation, before guiding him to her vagina. Slowly she lowered herself on him, squeezing her internal muscles for maximum sensation. Using her thigh muscles, she rode him, up and down, slowly, then quicker, and again slowly.

Leaning back, supported by his hands, she changed the angle of penetration. Her breath quickened, her heart rate sped

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up. When he lowered his head to capture one of her nipples in his mouth, she stopped thrusting and swayed back and forth, pressing her *yoni* against him. Her pleasure came in waves now, tension slowly building throughout her body.

Erok switched his attention to her other breast at the same time his hand found her clit and flicked it from side to side. She stiffened and threw back her head as the waves built to a climax. Her muscles contracted and she cried out his name in release.

He thrust upward once more, then came with a guttural groan.

Afterwards, he stretched out on the bunk, pulling her close beside him as they waited for their breathing to return to normal. He let out a sigh. "I could get used to having you here."

She kissed his chest. "So could I."

The question was, would they have the opportunity to be together again?

* * *

When Undhara appeared on the view screen early the next morning, Jahni studied it eagerly. She'd heard much about the asteroid, but had never seen it. The northern half of the surface was scarred by the strip mining that had gone on for years. Apparently, when one area was tapped out, they'd moved the mining equipment to another area and started up.

"Is there no ore in the southern hemisphere?"

"Probably," Erok responded. "Guess they didn't get that

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far before Havir stopped the operation.”

“Then there’s no reason we couldn’t start mining again, once we have control of the asteroid. My superiors will find that information very interesting.”

She glanced at Erok and noted his tense expression. “It’s not just about your sister, is it? You sympathize with Ludosh and his followers.”

He turned to her, his gaze intent. “Yes. Ludosh had the best interests of the Ziganese people at heart. All the people, not just the aristocrats. He’d have made a better leader than King Ormin. You should be able to understand. In your own way, you fought for the rights of your people.”

Jahni bit her lip. “Has Ludosh ever been offered any kind of amnesty?”

“No, King Ormin would never allow it.”

“Even if his new allies suggested it?” she asked.

“Would Havir have granted amnesty?”

“Of course not, but your King Ormin is a far cry from Havir. He seems to be a fairly benevolent monarch.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Erok growled.

Jahni decided to drop the subject, but made a mental note to speak to her superiors about approaching the Ziganese about amnesty. She could understand why Ormin might not want Ludosh returned to Zigan, but if he went into exile on Mhajav, it might be possible. So far, most of the damage done by the outlaws had been to property, but a raid on the asteroid could result in countless deaths if they tried to fight their way out.

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Again she glanced at the screen. The processing plant was visible now through the foggy atmosphere, as well as the canopy used to collect the mined ores. Otherwise the ore would fly off into space, given the low gravity of the asteroid.

Erok stood suddenly. "Time to change. We'll be arriving soon."

She rose and followed him into the sleeping cabin. "Where will we land?"

He grabbed a warm overcoat out of the closet and put it on. "Under the canopy."

She grabbed her own coat and donned it. Undhara was known for its chilly temperatures. "Is it safe to land there?"

"Yes. The canopy was moved to an unmined area before the site was abandoned and a decent landing strip laid. Vessels not in use are stored in nearby caves."

She shook her head. "No wonder our patrols never spotted any activity. We should have investigated further."

He sat to pull on heavy boots. "They probably did. The entrances to the underground facilities are well hidden." He rose and put a stunner into his pocket.

"Will we be allowed to keep our weapons?"

He shrugged and handed her a small stunner. "I've never had a problem before. It's a dangerous galaxy."

She slid the stunner into a cargo-style pocket of her flight suit. "I just hope we don't need to use them."

"So do I, Jahni."

She moved toward him and took his face in her hands. "I'm sorry to endanger you, but there was no other choice."

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“No, there wasn’t. But I don’t regret a minute of the time I’ve shared with you.”

“I don’t either,” she whispered before his mouth descended on hers in a searing kiss.

Pulling away, he strode to the door. “I need to signal Undhara we’re on our way. Finish dressing and strap in for the landing.”

“I’ll be right there,” she promised, her heart pounding in anticipation and fear.

* * *

A welcoming committee of men waited for them under the canopy, despite the early hour. Some were fair like Erok, but others had the olive skin and dark hair she’d heard were peculiar to Algott.

“Ready?” Erok asked as they stood by the door of the spacecraft.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said.

He pulled her into his arms, lowered his head and kissed her. Parting her lips, she let him possess her mouth while her arms circled his waist. Finally he drew back. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Of course. You, too.”

He flashed her his reckless grin. “I’m never careful, just lucky.”

She pushed him away. “Like you were when your engines quit in the middle of nowhere?”

He cupped her head and gazed into her eyes. “That was the

luckiest day of my life. I met you.”

She closed her eyes and turned her head to press a kiss to his palm. Tears clogged her throat, making it impossible to speak.

He pulled her close again. “I know, *draha*. Don’t worry. We’ll come out of this just fine. That’s a promise.”

She managed a feeble smile and stood aside for him to open the door.

He jumped out and helped her down. “Take it easy. The gravity is lower than we’re used to.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, struggling to breath in the thick, foggy atmosphere. She held back, shivering in the cold Ungharan air, and let Erok take the lead. When he waved at the waiting men, a dark-haired man of medium height rushed forward to greet him.

“Nyman, good to see you,” Erok said, shaking his hand. “How’s Kelida?”

His brother-in-law’s smile faded. “Not well. She wanted to be here to greet you, but wasn’t up to the long walk.”

“Take me to her.”

“Yes, of course.” Nyman turned to the other men. “Can you take care of unloading the supplies?”

The apparent leader nodded and the men started forward, but stopped when Jahni stepped forward. She stared at their wary faces, unsure what to say. Fortunately, Erok rushed to her side.

“This is my new partner, Jahni,” he said. “We met in Mahdesh.”

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“You’ve partnered with a Mhajavi?” Nyman asked.

“Why not? You all have. Besides, her parents live here.”

The men exchanged glances, but made no reply.

“Come with me,” Nyman said. “I’ll show you around.”

As they walked toward the processing plant, he spoke in an undertone. “Some of us are regretting the partnership. Havir and his followers are...” He glanced at Jahni and said no more.

“Authoritarian?” she offered.

Nyman grimaced. “Cold, arrogant, and unfriendly. There’s very little interaction between us and the Mhajavis. They’re definitely cut from a different mold than we are.”

She wanted to reassure him she understood his reservations, that not all Mhajavis were like that, but knew it wasn’t wise to speak up. Not if she wanted to maintain her cover.

Inside the plant, Nyman led them to a working elevator that took them to the bottom level, then down a long corridor that seemed to dead end suddenly. He pressed his hand on the wall to his right and a hidden door swooshed open, revealing a rock-lined tunnel.

He turned and grinned at them. “This way to the inner sanctum.”

The tunnel wound down into the bowels of the asteroid. Jahni wondered how the other men were going to bring the cargo down this narrow passage, then realized there must be another entrance somewhere. She’d have to ask Erok about that. At least it was warmer inside, though the air was just as

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stuffy.

“Do you ever get used to the thick air and low gravity?” she asked.

Nyman grinned. “The air, no, but the low grav is a benefit. Especially for Kelida.”

“When is her baby due?”

Nyman’s gray eyes reflected his worry. “Soon, very soon. She’s in a lot of discomfort and her feet are swollen beyond belief.”

She exchanged a worried glance with Erok. “Is she seeing a good physician?”

“We don’t have any,” Nyman said.

“My mother is a physician, though she spent most of her career doing research. If she’s here, I’ll ask her to take a look at Kelida.”

Nyman stopped, hope in his eyes. “Would you? We’d be so grateful.”

“First chance I get,” Jahni promised.

The tunnel leveled out and ended in a large cave, which had been transformed into a tavern. Small tables dotted the room, most of them unoccupied at this time of day. A long bar stood at the far end of the room with shelves of bottles behind it.

“I assume most of the liquor was stolen,” Jahni said.

Nyman grinned. “The preferred word is liberated.”

She laughed. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“There’s locally brewed beer also,” Erok said. “It’s actually not too bad.”

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Nyman pointed to the right. "That tunnel leads to the main Mhajavi area, where you should find your parents."

Jahni turned to Erok. "Where will you be?"

He nodded his head in the other direction. "Nyman and Kelida are quartered at the end of the tunnel. Why don't we split up and meet back here mid-day?"

"I don't know," Jahni said. It made sense to split up, since they could cover more territory, but she didn't entirely trust Erok, especially where the Algottans were concerned. On the other hand, they would no doubt speak more freely if she were not present.

Erok squeezed her hand. "Your parents will wonder why you didn't go to them first thing."

She drew her hand out of his grasp. "Good point. I'll meet you back here in a few hours." It was important they saw as much of the complex as possible, and there was really no excuse for Erok to enter the Mhajavi area.

He pulled her close for a quick kiss, then whispered in her ear, "Be careful, *draha*. If you're not back here by mid-day, I'll come looking for you."

She wound her arms around his neck and murmured, "No. If something goes wrong, get in your vessel and get out of here. One of us has to report back with what we've found." She drew back to stare at his mutinous expression. "You know I'm right."

He gave a reluctant nod and released her. "I will see you later," he promised before turning to follow Nyman from the room.

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* * *

After a long trek down the tunnel on the Mhajavi side, Jahni found her mother in the medical offices doing paperwork. She was shocked at how much Driana had aged in the last six years. There were new lines in her face and her black hair was liberally streaked with gray.

Jahni blinked back tears and swallowed the lump that had suddenly lodged in her throat. "Mother?"

Her mother looked up and froze, her brown eyes staring in shock. "Jahni?"

She stepped forward, feeling awkward. "Yes, Mother. How are you?"

Driana stood and Jahni rushed to embrace her. "What are you doing here, child? After all this time?"

"I wanted to see you and Father."

Driana pulled back. "Oh, Jahni, your father died a year ago."

Jahni listened in shock as her mother told her about the death of her father from an apparent heart attack. Guilt and anger filled her as she realized Havir had killed her father, just as surely as if he'd been shot through the heart. Bringing him here to this primitive place. In her heart, she knew he'd still be alive if only he'd stayed on Mhajav, accepted the amnesty offered. She wondered how many others had died to feed Havir's ego.

And now there was someone else in danger. Quickly, she pulled away and told her mother about Erok and his sister, Kelida. By the look on her mother's face, Jahni could tell

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Driana was none too pleased to learn her daughter had teamed up with a Ziganese. Jahni had gotten the distinct impression at least some of the Mhajavi considered themselves superior to their fair-skinned allies. It was no more than she'd have expected from Havir and his elitist followers, but it was a disappointment coming from her own mother. Still, Driana agreed to meet Erok and examine Kelida.

"Thanks for coming with me to take a look at Erok's sister," Jahni said as they headed back down the long tunnel to the tavern. "He's very worried about her."

"Don't thank me yet," her mother cautioned. "I've never examined a Ziganese patient, much less a pregnant one. Their physiology may be very different than ours."

"It doesn't seem that different. At least not on the outside," Jahni said. "Still, it's a shame they don't have a doctor of their own,"

"Yes, apparently they didn't plan for the worst case scenario. Ludosh came to us, begging to be taken in."

"How did he find you, when the Mhajavi military couldn't?"

"He didn't...we found him. Ludosh had managed to acquire a Mhajavi vessel. He flew it into our airspace and waited for our raiders to pounce. Then he asked for political asylum."

Jahni smiled. "Very clever. Perhaps he planned ahead more than you think."

Her mother snorted. "He arrived with many followers and very few supplies. Havir was very gracious in granting refuge

to them.”

“I suppose so,” Jahni said noncommittally. Havir never did anything out of the goodness of his heart, so there must have been something in it for him.

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Driana said, putting an arm around her daughter’s shoulders. “After all these years.”

“I know,” Jahni agreed. “It seems strange to be here.”

“But right,” Driana said. “Your father and I were so disappointed when you failed to make the rendezvous and we had to leave Mhajav without you.”

“I’m sorry,” Jahni said, not divulging she’d missed the rendezvous on purpose. “It’s good to see you again. I’m just sorry I didn’t get to see Father again.”

“He spoke of you often,” her mother said softly. “He worried about you.”

“Needlessly,” Jahni assured her. “I accepted the amnesty offered by the authorities.”

“Is the amnesty still available?”

“I don’t know,” Jahni answered truthfully. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. What do you think of Undhara?”

Jahni was still amazed at all the tunnels branching off to both sides of the main route. “So many tunnels,” she murmured. “Don’t people get lost all the time?”

Driana chuckled. “Not really. All tunnels branch off from this one. If you reach the end and haven’t found what you’re looking for, you just turn around and go back.”

“I see.” Jahni wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. It meant

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she couldn't get lost, but if she were caught, there'd be no escape. This main tunnel seemed to go on forever, but since the gravity was lower than she was accustomed to, it was an easy walk.

"Most of the tunnels are unguarded, but there was one I saw earlier that had a steel door and two guards in front of it."

"That tunnel leads to the science lab," Driana replied, "where your father worked. Rohan has taken over since his death."

Jahni's internal sensors went on alert. She'd expected to find the fugitives living in more primitive circumstances. Obviously, Havir had planned well for his escape. What kind of research could her father have been working on and what danger did it bode for Mhajav?

"Robotics research here?" she asked.

"Why not?" Her mother shrugged. "Much of the mining operation was done by robots."

"True," Jahni agreed. Maybe that was all it was, an attempt to start mining operations again. But the activity would give away their location. No, there had to be more going on.

"Are they going to start the mine again?"

"I don't know, Jahni. Your father never discussed his work with me. It was top secret."

"Of course," she murmured. The secrecy could be significant, or not. As she recalled, everything done by the Havir government, no matter how inconsequential, had been top secret. Havir's paranoia had trickled down, making all his subordinates afraid to say too much for fear of who was

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listening. It had made for an uncomfortable working environment and, apparently, nothing had changed.

When they finally arrived at the tavern, Erok was nowhere to be seen, so Jahni and her mother chose a table and sat down to wait. Jahni tried not to show her nervousness. The sooner she got out of here, the better she'd feel. If only her mother would agree to go, too. But Driana had always been as loyal to Havir as her father.

* * *

Erok paused in the entrance to the tavern and spotted Jahni sitting with an attractive woman of about fifty. He let out a sigh of relief. After the way they'd parted, he hadn't been sure she'd make the rendezvous. It was dangerous for her to be here, and he'd worried she might take unnecessary chances. This mission meant a lot to her, and probably to her future with Mhajavi intelligence, but he was more concerned for her life than her career.

She looked up and saw him, her face brightening as she waved him to them. He wove his way around the tables to join her.

"Mother, this is Erok, my new partner," Jahni said in introduction.

Her mother held out a slim brown hand. "Call me Driana. Jahni has told me a little about you."

"A pleasure to meet you." He shook Driana's hand before sitting down beside Jahni.

Her mother gave him an assessing stare. "I must say I was

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surprised to hear my daughter had a Ziganese partner.”

Ah, here it comes—the parental interrogation. Erok tried to relax, but it was hard with his jaw clenched tight. “I’m really Algottan.”

Driana raised one delicate eyebrow. “Really? You look pure Ziganese to me.”

“My mother was Algottan,” he said. “I look like my father, much to his dismay.”

“Why is that?”

Erok grinned. “Let’s just say he and I don’t get along and never have.”

“And that’s why you supported the Algottan, Ludosh? Youthful rebellion?”

He felt his face flush. “No, I sympathized with Ludosh because I share his beliefs. The Algottan people have been treated like second-class citizens for far too long.”

“I see,” Driana murmured.

“Mother has agreed to take a look at your sister,” Jahni said, changing the subject.

Erok gave her a grateful smile. “My thanks to both of you. She doesn’t look well.”

“When is her child due?” Driana asked.

“In a month or so, and she’s miserable. Her back and feet hurt all the time.”

“That’s to be expected.”

“Is it normal that her feet are swollen to twice their normal size?”

Driana frowned. “No. Excess swelling is a sign of edema,

extreme water retention. I'll examine her after lunch."

"Speaking of which," Jahni said, "we should eat something. I'll go to the bar and order. What do you want to drink, Mother?"

"A glass of palm wine, please. And whatever food they're serving today."

"No choice?" Erok asked.

"Not anymore," she replied. "Things have been tight the last few months."

Erok stood. "I'll take care of ordering. You sit and talk with your mother. What do you want to drink?"

"I'll try the local beer."

"Beer?" Driana asked. "I thought you preferred palm wine."

Jahni shrugged. "I heard the local brew was good."

Erok nodded and left them to saunter over to the bar. He was fairly sure Jahni didn't want to drink any stolen wine, but he wasn't going to say so in front of her mother. He was glad to be away from her questioning for a few minutes. It was obvious she thought he wasn't good enough for her daughter. His jaw clenched again. The story of his life. He hadn't met a woman yet whose mother approved of him. Not that he'd really cared.

Until now.

He wasn't sure how it had happened, but he seemed to have fallen in love with Jahni. *Damn Maradon's curse.* Even though she'd said the curse was lifted, his feelings hadn't changed.

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After ordering, he returned to the table with their drinks, only to find a handsome Mhajavi man sitting in his chair. A man who wasn't old enough to be Jahni's father. *Shit. What now?*

Jahni saw him and motioned him over. "Erok, I want you to meet Rohan, my former boss."

Erok nodded at the other man as he handed the drinks to the women and took the only empty seat, next to Driana and across from Jahni. He took a long swig of beer before turning to Rohan. The man appeared to be in his forties, to judge by the lines on his face and the few strands of gray in his hair. His face was broad and he had a jagged scar on his forehead.

Rohan assessed him in return. "How long have you and Jahni known each other?"

"Not long," Erok replied. It would arouse suspicion to answer truthfully. Hard to believe it had only been a few days. It seemed as if she'd been a part of his life for a long time. No, she was the missing part he'd been longing for his whole life without even knowing it. That thought took him by surprise, but he couldn't deny the rightness of it.

Rohan turned to Jahni. "How long will you be staying?"

She shrugged. "Uncertain. We brought a shipment of food for the Algottans."

"Speaking of food, it looks like ours is here," Jahni said as a waitress set plates in front of three of them.

The waitress took Rohan's order and left. "Please, go ahead and eat," he said.

Erok dove into the plate of cooked grains and fresh

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vegetables. He'd worked up an appetite walking through the tunnels this morning. Though plain fare, the dish was surprisingly tasty, with a hint of spiciness.

"Where are you staying?" Rohan asked casually.

Erok exchanged a look with Jahni. "I suppose we can always sleep in the space craft. There's no room in the Algottan area."

"I have plenty of room," Rohan said. "You can bunk with me."

"Both of us?" Erok asked.

Rohan smiled. "I don't mind sharing."

But I do. The possessive thought surprised him.

He looked at Jahni, who nodded. "Thank you, Rohan. We appreciate it."

"Now that's settled, I'd like to see my patient," Driana said, as Rohan's food was delivered.

Erok drained the last of his beer and stood. "I'll take you to her. Jahni?"

She rose and drew him a few feet away from the table. "If you don't mind, I'd like to stay and talk with Rohan."

He stiffened, but managed to agree. "As you wish. I'll see you later."

Her smile conveyed her gratitude. He didn't know what she was up to, but figured she had her reasons.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and whispered in his ear, "When Rohan invited us to stay with him, he had more in mind than a place to sleep."

"What are you saying?"

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“He’s fond of threesomes.”

Erok pulled back and stared at her. He didn’t want any other man touching his woman. Whoa, when had she become his woman? “Is that what you want?”

Her dark eyes pleaded with him. “Yes.”

He dropped a kiss on her mouth and whispered, “Let me think about it.”

Then he turned and left the tavern, forcing himself not to look back at Jahni and her former lover, who liked threesomes.

CHAPTER 3

“Is your friend the possessive type?”

“Erok?” Jahni sat next to Rohan and took a sip of her remaining beer. “I wouldn’t have thought so, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Too bad. I wouldn’t object to a ménage.”

“I thought that might be what you have in mind. I asked Erok, and he said he’ll think about it.” She’d wondered how she could seduce Rohan without angering Erok. A threesome would be the perfect answer.

“I hope he agrees. I’ve missed you, *priya*.”

She smiled at Rohan. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk him into it.”

Rohan toasted her with his glass of stolen palm wine.

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“That’s the Jahni I know. You always knew how to talk a man into whatever you wanted.”

“You make me sound manipulative,” she objected.

“Seductive, rather,” he said with a suggestive smile.

A frisson of dread worked its way down her spine. Had he figured out she’d been spying for the resistance? No, surely not, or she’d have been arrested the moment she arrived on Undhara.

She rose. “I’d best see how Erok’s sister is doing. We’ll see you later.”

After Rohan gave her directions to his quarters, Jahni headed for the Algottan barracks, arriving just as her mother was finishing her examination of Kelida. They’d managed to block off a corner of the large cavern to provide a little privacy for the young woman.

When Erok introduced them, Jahni smiled at the blue-eyed blonde. “I’d have known you were Erok’s sister even if we’d never been introduced. You look so much alike.”

Kelida smiled, but her exhaustion was obvious. She had dark circles beneath her eyes and her complexion was wan. Jahni glanced at her mother, who looked concerned.

“Kelida needs to be in hospital,” Driana said briskly. “We do not have the medical facilities here to give her the care she needs.”

“Then she and Nyman have to leave with us,” Erok replied.

“How can we leave?” Nyman sat beside his wife and placed a protective arm around her shoulders. “We’ll be

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arrested the minute we set foot on Zigan. Jail will be no better for her.”

“You’re not wanted on Mhajav,” Jahni pointed out. “We’ll take you to Mahdesh, where there are excellent doctors.”

“There’s someone I can recommend,” Driana said, pulling a pen and pad from her pocket. She wrote a name and address and handed the paper to Jahni.

“But will they know how to treat a Ziganese woman?” Nyman asked.

“If they have questions, they can consult with a physician on your world,” Driana assured them. “I am serious, Nyman. Your wife’s health and that of your baby depend on getting her to a hospital.”

“Should we leave right away?” Erok asked.

“As soon as possible.”

“I’m not sure I’m up to the long walk to the landing strip,” Kelida said, yawning.

“Why don’t you take a nap while we make other arrangements?” Jahni suggested. “Surely there’s a gurney or wheelchair or something we can use to carry her to the ship.”

“I’ll see what I can find. I know the area better than you do.” Nyman kissed his wife tenderly before helping her stretch out on her cot, then covered her with a blanket. “Try to get some rest, *draha*.”

After exchanging worried glances with Erok, he left the room.

Driana sat beside her on a stool. “I’ll stay and monitor her condition. Why don’t you two get some rest? You have a long

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flight ahead of you.”

“Thank you, Mother. We will.”

Jahni took Erok by the hand and urged him to leave. His concern for his sister was endearing.

* * *

Rohan, dressed only in a plush black robe, was waiting for them when they arrived at his quarters. On the long walk through the tunnels, she’d persuaded Erok to agree to take part in a threesome. His reluctance to share her with another man had done her ego no harm, but she’d explained Rohan’s tendency to chatter after sex, and her hopes of learning something important.

Jahni was impressed by the size of the main room and the lavish furnishings. Heavy cloth of a deep blue draped the walls and an enormous bed dominated the room. He’d obviously been one of the elite who’d planned ahead for their exile. It was warm enough for her and Erok to shed their heavy coats.

“Welcome to my home away from home,” he said.

Erok surveyed the room and whistled. “I’m impressed.”

“Very nice,” Jahni agreed.

“Thank you.” Rohan gestured to a small cabinet with several bottles and glasses sitting on top. “Would you like a drink?”

“None for me,” Erok said. “I may have to fly again in a few hours.”

Rohan frowned. “Oh? I thought you were here to stay.”

“Erok’s sister needs to be taken to hospital. We leave for

Mahdesh later today.”

“Then we’d best make use of the time left. Have you given any thought to my suggestion?”

Erok moved to her side and put an arm around her waist. “If it’s what you want, *draha*, I’m willing.”

She drew his head down for a deep kiss, then held out an arm to Rohan who moved closer for a kiss of his own.

“Where do we start?” Erok asked.

Rohan raised his brows. “Have you never done this before?”

Erok stiffened. “If you mean a threesome, yes, of course. But it has usually been me and two women, and we usually started with them undressing me.”

Jahni exchanged an amused glance with Rohan. “Seems as good a way to proceed as any.”

She knelt to unfasten and remove one boot and Rohan joined her to work on the other.

“My, such long feet,” Rohan remarked, trailing a finger along Erok’s instep. “Is he as large everywhere?”

“Oh, yes,” Jahni assured him.

Standing, she undid his cuffs, then started unfastening the front of his flight suit. Rohan helped her pull it off Erok’s broad shoulders to his waist, then stopped to stare admiringly at his chest. Like a lot of Mhajavi men, Rohan was bisexual, though he generally preferred women.

“I do find Ziganese men fascinating,” he said, running a hand through Erok’s chest hair. “So furry.”

“Stop talking about me as though I’m not here,” Erok said

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through clenched teeth.

“Sorry, love,” Jahni said, squeezing his hand.

She nuzzled his chest, drinking in his musky scent, then tongued one of his nipples. From the corner of her eye, she saw Rohan doing the same with the other. Erok stiffened, but his breathing quickened.

Sliding her hand down the taut muscles of his abdomen, she delved under his flight suit and found his hardening cock. “Ah, yes, this is what I’ve been looking for.”

Rohan obligingly pushed the suit over Erok’s hips and ass and down his legs. “Very impressive.”

Erok stepped out of his flight suit, bent to pick it up, and threw it over a chair. “Now it’s Jahni’s turn.”

While both men knelt to unfasten her boots, she undid the cuffs at her wrists. Then, leaning on their shoulders, she stepped out of her boots and let them pull off her socks. Thick carpeting insulated her feet from the coldness of the cave floor.

Rising, Erok moved behind her, reached around to unfasten her flight suit, and pulled it off her shoulders and arms down to her hips. Her nipples puckered in the cool air, but warmed when he covered them with his hot hands. While he played with her breasts, rubbing his fingers over her sensitive nipples, he nibbled her neck. She moved her head to one side to give him better access, and he ran his tongue around the whorls of her ear, tugged gently on the lobe with his teeth. His erect cock pressed against her buttocks.

At the same time, Rohan had pulled her clothing down

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around her ankles, trailing his hands down her ass and legs in the process. Supported by Erok, she let Rohan lift each foot in turn to step out of her clothes. Urging her legs further apart, he gripped her ass and kissed her abdomen, swirling his tongue around her belly button. Pleasurable sensations spread through her torso, centering in her clit, and she arched her back.

Rohan's chuckle reverberated against her diaphragm. "Haven't I found the right spot yet?"

"You know you haven't," she said, her voice slightly breathless.

Erok shifted slightly and turned her head to kiss her full on the mouth, his tongue probing between her teeth. She let her tongue duel with his as Rohan moved his mouth lower and lower, until his breath puffed against her *yonis*. She gasped, letting Erok's tongue invade further into her mouth. She gripped his hair with one hand and sucked on his tongue as her heart rate sped up like a revving motor.

Rohan bypassed her needy clit to kiss her inner thighs and tickle the backs of her knees. She jerked and pulled her mouth from Erok's. "Stop that. You know I'm ticklish there."

Rohan looked up, a mischievous smile on his face. "I couldn't resist."

She reached down to tug at his hair, coarser than Erok's silky strands. "Don't do it again. You know what I want you to do."

He gave her a mock salute. "Yes, ma'am. You've become more assertive since we parted."

She shrugged, but kept her thoughts to herself. She'd

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always let him take the lead in their lovemaking, knowing he liked to be in control.

Erok ran his fingertips down her ribs. "I didn't know you were ticklish."

She caught his hands and returned them to her breasts. "I'm not, except in that one spot."

He pressed against her. "I'll have to remember that."

She opened her mouth to respond, but that was the second Rohan licked her pussy slowly from bottom to top and all that came out was a gasp. He followed that with licks and nibbles of her lower lips, all the while circling her throbbing center of need. When he finally pressed the tip of his tongue to her clit and held it there, a shudder passed through her body.

"Lean on me," Erok urged, pulling her closer. His cock was trapped between their bodies and his hands caressed her breasts and stomach.

She leaned back onto his chest and gave herself up to the intense sensations Rohan was stimulating with his clever mouth and tongue and fingers. While he continued to lick and nibble, he inserted a finger inside her vagina and she felt her inner muscles clamp down on it. At the same time, he used his thumb to caress the flesh around her clit. He inserted another finger and applied pressure to the front wall of her vagina.

Erok joined in, running his hand to her mound and pressing it, while Rohan sucked on her clit. Waves of pleasure built and receded and built again. Her muscles tensed and she thrust against Rohan's mouth. The sensations built again until she was convulsed with intense contractions that peaked in an

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explosive climax. Erok tightened his grip on her and held her through her orgasm, whispering encouraging words into her ear.

Slowly the sensations subsided, leaving her gasping for breath, her heart racing. She let her head loll back onto Erok's shoulder. "Blessed universe," she gasped.

Dimly she was aware of Rohan rising to his feet, a satisfied smile on his face. She managed a wobbly smile of her own.

Erok picked her up in his arms and laid her in the middle of Rohan's bed. It was large enough for three, with room to spare. Both men joined her, one on either side. She lay back against the high pillows, admiring the contrast between the two. Rohan so dark, with smooth brown skin. Erok so fair, though lightly tanned on his arms and chest, and with a soft golden mat covering his chest and limbs.

She reached out to take each man's cock in her hands. Both were magnificently aroused, Erok's cock long and slender, Rohan's short and thick. So different, yet both so exciting to her.

"Such riches. What am I to do with all this?"

Rohan laughed. "You know what I like."

She turned around to kneel, facing both men. "I have an idea. Rohan, move closer to the middle."

When Rohan did as instructed, she lay between his legs, her head at his crotch. "Erok, shove a pillow under my belly."

She lifted her hips, then relaxed onto the pillow and turned to Erok. "I think you know what to do now."

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He grinned and kissed her. "I can take it from here."

She took Rohan's cock into her hands and stroked the length of it, staring into his eyes, seeing them start to glaze over. Keeping one hand wrapped around the base, she leaned forward to kiss and nibble on his hardened shaft. A long, slow lick from base to tip sent shudders through his body.

In the meantime, Erok had moved behind her to stroke her back, waist, buttocks and thighs. She tensed, waiting for the touch to the back of her knees and flinched when it came, stifling a giggle. "I knew that was coming," she muttered.

Rohan laughed. "The back of the knees?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course,"

Erok chuckled and kissed her thigh. "Sorry, *draha*, but I couldn't resist. I'll look for a more sensitive spot now." He moved his hands up her inner thighs to her *yoni*, his fingers exploring the sensitive folds, entering her vagina to test her readiness for him. Again the sensations of arousal started spreading through her.

Though it was hard to concentrate with Erok's clever fingers engaged in exploration, she returned her attention to Rohan's cock, now fully erect, the veins standing out. When she licked it quickly from bottom to top, his hips bucked. She took the swollen tip into her mouth as she gently squeezed the shaft with her fingers. Closing her mouth over the head, she sucked as her hands continued to squeeze and stroke his shaft.

Erok chose that moment to ease his cock into her, pausing at the entrance. She spread her legs wider as he thrust into her eager body, his long cock stretching her inner muscles. The

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next few minutes were a haze of rising sensations and rhythmic thrusting.

She sucked harder on Rohan's cock, moving her head up and down. He let out a hoarse cry and came in her mouth.

Her own need was spiraling higher and she panted in anticipation. When Erok changed his angle of penetration and hit her sweet spot, she came, in a toe-curling orgasm. His release followed soon after and he collapsed on top of her.

They lay still for a few moments, Jahni's head on Rohan's thigh, Erok to one side, his legs entwined with hers, as their heart rates and breathing returned to normal. The smell of sex permeated the room, and Jahni smiled in contentment. She'd never been so well-pleasured before.

Finally, Erok stirred and rose. She rolled over to smile up at him. "Did you enjoy our group session?"

He grinned down at her. "Yes. More importantly, you enjoyed it."

She jumped up to hug him. "I did. Thank you for agreeing."

Her returned her embrace. "Anything for you, *draha*."

Releasing her, he bent to pick up his flight suit and pulled it on.

"Leaving us so soon?" asked Rohan, who was still reclining on the bed.

A worried frown creased Erok's face. "I have to check on my sister. Are you coming with me?" he asked Jahni.

"In a few minutes. I'd like to talk to Rohan for a while." She hoped Erok understood what she was asking.

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“All right,” he agreed, “but don’t take too long.”

“I won’t,” she promised him before kissing him again.

After he grabbed his coat and left, she climbed back into bed with Rohan and rested her head on his shoulder. “Do you still like to cuddle after sex?”

He hugged her close. “Always, *priya*. You can’t know how I’ve missed you. My heart broke when you didn’t show up for our rendezvous.”

“I couldn’t,” she lied. “I’ve missed you, too, and Mother and Father, of course. I still can’t believe he’s dead. I didn’t even know he had a heart condition.”

“He didn’t.”

Jahni sat up abruptly and stared at him. “What do you mean by that?”

He raised one eyebrow. “You should realize there are several poisons that can mimic a heart attack.”

She jumped off the bed and began pacing the room, unable to sit still any longer. Her heart ached for what had happened to her father. And her mother. *Blessed universe, how awful for her. And she’d been all alone, with no one to comfort her.* Jahni ran a hand through her hair, guilt now added to her mix of emotions.

“My father was poisoned? Who would want to...Havir?”

At his nod, she asked, “But why? Father was one of his most loyal followers.”

“Was being the operative word,” Rohan explained. “Your father had grown...disillusioned, shall we say?”

She reached for her flight suit and pulled it on. She needed

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to talk to her mother. “Given the circumstances, I can’t imagine Father was the only one who was disillusioned. Why was he killed?”

Rohan spread his hands. “He refused when Havir ordered him to start working on the robotics program.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would Father refuse to work on mining robots?”

Rohan laughed. “Who said anything about mining?”

Jahni stopped in the process of putting on her boots to stare at him. “Then what...” Suddenly she knew, and a chill passed through her. “Robotic soldiers,” she whispered.

Rohan stood and moved toward her. “Right as always, *priya*. You always were a smart girl. A little too smart for your own good.”

She finished fastening her boots and stood, her heart pounding. She’d learned more than anticipated, but now it was time to get out of here and report back to her superiors. *Act normally.*

She managed to smile at Rohan, who stood between her and the door. “It was good to see you. Perhaps we’ll meet again some day.”

“Going somewhere?”

“Erok and I never intended to stay long. Just drop off provisions, visit with family, you know.”

“I know all too well, *priya*.” He moved toward her, a strange look on his face. “It took me a while, but I finally figured it out.”

She wet her dry lips. “Figured what out?”

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“That you were a resistance spy.”

She stared at him in astonishment. How long had he known? “What? Why would you say that?” she blustered. “I was as loyal as—”

“Your father?”

“Father was loyal, perhaps too loyal,” she said.

“Enough about your father,” he said, an annoyed expression on his face. “I want to talk about you. About us.”

She plastered a smile on her lips. “Maybe next time, Rohan. I have to go now.”

“You’re not going anywhere, *priya*. You know too much. I can’t let you run back to Mhajav and tell your superiors about our plans.”

“I won’t say anything,” she lied.

His lips curled in a sneer. “If you think I’m going to let you betray me again, you’re not as smart as I thought. Did you think it was coincidence that your rebel lover was killed on his way to meet you?”

Pain ripped through her, and she gave up the pretense of innocence. “You killed Taryn?”

Rohan’s lips twisted into an unpleasant smirk. “Yes. He was in the way. I wanted you to myself, Jahni. I still do.”

“But why would you still want me if you think I betrayed you?”

He shrugged. “Love doesn’t need a reason.”

“Love?” she asked, her voice rising. “Do you even know what the word means?”

“I know you’re mine. That’s all that matters.”

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“That’s not love.” *No, it was obsession, madness.* She hugged herself, realizing how little she’d understood Rohan.

He pulled a pair of pants off a shelf and donned them. “Now we’re going to go visit your friend Erok and tell him you’re staying here with me. You’ll cooperate, if you want to see him live. Though why you’d care about a Ziganese is beyond me.” His lips curled in a sneer. “Or is he a spy also?”

“No,” she denied. “He’s just a free trader.”

Rohan heaved a sigh. “Jahni, Jahni, you can do better than a common thief.”

She forced a laugh. “You don’t think I care about him, do you? I took advantage of his contacts to find my way here.”

“That sounds more like my Jahni. He’s not the first man to fall for your wiles.”

Her eyes widened. He talked as if she were a practiced seductress. But, in all honesty, that’s what she’d been with him. She’d taken Taryn and Erok to bed because she desired them, but she’d seduced Rohan for what she could learn from him, though she’d never held back in bed. He’d gotten what he wanted from her, too. In short, they’d used each other, but this had to be the end of it.

As he pulled a shirt over his head, she reached into her pocket for her stunner and moved toward him. He froze when he saw the weapon in her hand.

“I can’t stay here, Rohan.”

He smiled complacently. “You won’t kill me. You don’t have it in you.”

“You’re right. I won’t kill you. It’s set to stun.” With that,

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she fired the weapon. His body convulsed, then collapsed to the floor.

Hands shaking, she pocketed her weapon and checked his vital signs. His pulse beat strongly and she heaved a sigh. He'd been right about one thing. She couldn't kill him. That meant she and Erok needed to leave immediately. She didn't know how long Rohan would be out, but she could immobilize him to give them more time.

Pulling the sash off his robe, she tied his hands behind his back, then found a sock and stuffed it in his mouth. That should keep him quiet for a while longer. She grabbed her heavy coat and left without a backward glance.

* * *

Jahni was anxious to find Erok, but it was a long walk to Kelida and Nyman's quarters, and too much haste might seem suspicious, so she forced herself to walk quickly rather than run headlong down the tunnels. Her mind was still reeling with what she'd learned from Rohan. She'd had no idea her cover had been blown. Did anyone else here on Undhara know? In any case, she'd never be able to return now.

Finally she came to the end of her journey. As she entered the chamber, she heard Erok and Kelida talking.

"Maradon really appeared to you?" Kelida asked, her voice full of wonder.

"I swear it's true," Erok said. "There I was, stranded in space, and who shows up but an angry goddess. She was furious I'd stolen her statue from Algott. I didn't realize it was

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genuine, but she was so irate, she cursed me.”

Jahni stopped in the entryway. This was the first time she’d heard this part of his story. *Who was Maradon?*

Kelida laughed. “Only my big brother could manage to incur the wrath of the goddess. What kind of curse was it?”

He paused, then spoke so quietly, Jahni had to strain to hear.

“A love curse. She said I’d fall in love with the first woman I saw. And I did.”

The first woman he saw. Jahni’s heart sank as she realized that was her. Not that she believed in curses...that was just silly superstition. But apparently he did. *Could this day get any worse?*

It could. She put her hurt aside and entered the room.

Erok looked up from where he was sitting on Kelida’s bunk and smiled when he saw Jahni. “There you are.”

“We have to leave. Now,” she said.

“What’s the hurry?”

“No time to explain, but we can’t wait.” She pulled him aside and lowered her voice. “Rohan knows I’m working for the Mhajavi authorities.”

Erok frowned. “How did he find out?”

She sighed. “Apparently he saw through my cover years ago. It’s a long story. For the moment, he’s tied up and gagged, but he won’t be that way forever. Has Nyman found a way to get Kelida to the landing area?”

“He and your mother went to look for a gurney. They should be back any moment.”

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"I don't know if we can wait."

He put a hand on her arm. "Don't worry, *draha*—"

She pulled away. "Don't call me that."

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I'm just worried." She stiffened when she heard approaching footsteps, then relaxed when she saw her mother and Nyman, but without a gurney.

She ran to her mother and threw her arms around her.

Driana hugged her back. "What's wrong, child?"

"We have to leave." Jahni drew back to look at her mother.

"I wish you could come with us."

"I *am* coming with you," she said.

Relief flooded through Jahni. "I'm glad. I'll do what I can to see you get amnesty."

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I'm sure that won't be a problem, considering how much I know. But getting away won't be easy."

Jahni wrung her hands. "How are we going to get Kelida to the landing area without a gurney? It's such a long walk."

Erok leaned down to scoop his sister into his strong arms. "No, it isn't. Nyman brought you the long way around."

Jahni turned to him. "Is that true?"

He flushed. "I wasn't sure how much we could trust you, being Mhajavi and all."

She and her mother exchanged a look. "An uneasy alliance, it would seem," Jahni said.

Her mother nodded in agreement.

Erok flashed her a lopsided grin. "Sorry, *draha*. I told them

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you were to be trusted, but they didn't believe me."

She managed to return his smile. The question now was could she trust his feelings for her? Or was it all an illusion?

* * *

Jahni anxiously monitored the comm links until Erok's ship was far from Undhara, with no signs of pursuit. She let out a sigh. "I think we made it."

He grinned at her from the pilot's seat. Her mother, Kelida and Nyman had taken up residence in his cabin, leaving the cockpit to her and Erok. "We did it then."

She smiled back in relief. "Yes, we did."

"Are you going to tell me about Rohan?"

She filled him in on what she'd learned from Rohan, noticing his jaw tighten when she mentioned her father's death. "That bastard. I can't believe we..."

"There's a lot I can't believe." She shook her head. "I was so arrogant, thinking I was the one manipulating him."

"It sounds like he didn't know the entire time."

She brooded over that. "If I'd known he was responsible for Taryn's death..."

"If you'd known, you'd never have come here. Then we wouldn't know what they were planning."

She shuddered. "An army of robotic soldiers would make Havir invincible. He has to be stopped, and the sooner the better."

"Agreed. I wish I'd known, so we could warn Ludosh about him."

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“You can still do so,” Jahni said. “At least I think so. I told Rohan you didn’t know anything, that you were just a thieving free trader. I told him I took advantage of you to find my way to Undhara.”

Erok slanted her a look as he set the controls for auto pilot. “Is that what happened, Jahni? You’ve been acting strangely ever since you left Rohan.”

She turned to him. “You know that’s not what happened. We both had our reasons for coming here. What I am concerned about, Erok, is your reason for getting involved with me. You know—sexually.”

He got out of his seat and moved to kneel in front of her. “The first time I saw you, it was like a lightning bolt hit me.”

She stared at him sadly. “Because of the curse.”

His brows shot up. “What do you know about that?”

“I heard you telling Kelida about how you were cursed to fall in love with the first woman you saw. That had to be me.”

He ran a hand down her face. “Yes, but the curse was lifted before we left the *Charaka*, and my feelings toward you haven’t changed. I love you, Jahni.”

“Oh, Erok, I love you, too.” She turned her face to kiss the palm of his hand.

He undid her restraints and pulled her up and into his arms for a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, filled with a fierce joy.

When the kiss ended, she rested her head against his shoulder.

“I want us to be together for the rest of our lives,” he said,

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“though I have no idea if that’s even possible.”

A thought suddenly struck her and she pulled back to look up at him. “I just had an idea. How would you like to work for Mhajavi intelligence?”

“What are you talking about, Jahni? I doubt they’d hire a Ziganese.”

“It would have to be unofficial cover, but with your contacts in the raiders’ camp, you could be invaluable to us. We make a good team.”

He grinned back at her. “That we do.”

She laughed and hugged him back. “Yes, in fact, I think we’ve taken galactic affairs to a new level.”

To Be Continued...

LYNDI LAMONT

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance. Since becoming Lyndi Lamont, she has discovered that writing erotic romance is a license to be naughty, and at her age, those opportunities don't come along very often!

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* * *

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