



Beloved Traveler

BY
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Chapter One

In orbit above Baile Na

It was a lovely little planet, all blues and greens swathed in swirls of white clouds set against the blackness of space. On the bridge of the *Traveler's Choice*, Ana watched the main viewscreen and smiled in anticipation. After so much time spent in space she would soon breathe fresh air and have ground rather than metal beneath her feet. She could hardly wait to land.

"Your brother is where?"

Kavath's sounded savage. Startled by the tone, Ana tore her attention from the display to see her employer glaring at his wife. Normally Kavath adored his lovely and pregnant wife to the point of distraction, but now he looked furious.

Kavath was a big believer in family ... why should he not want his wife's brother around? Ana knew Mea and Kavath's children, Morgan and Kavy, would be thrilled that they were going to finally meet their Uncle Jack. They'd grown up listening to Mea's stories about the Travelers, and how she and her brother had lived in the original Baile Na, the abandoned mining platform they'd been driven out of.

The attack on Baile Na had orphaned Jack and Mea and they'd been induced to join Earth's military. Mea had become a fighter pilot, same as Kavath, but on the opposite side. They'd met when their ships had crashed onto the same planet, had fallen in love, and were now married with two children and a third on the way.

Mea's story sounded like the plot of a sappy holo-flick, particularly with the happy ending. But Ana had always liked that kind of holo-flick and truthfully she was a bit intrigued by the stories Mea told about her brother. From what Mea had said, Jack was a bit of scoundrel.

Gaian widows rarely got the chance to meet scoundrels, or have the kind of adventures that Mea and Kavath had experienced in real life. Not that she expected anything to come off that meeting ... adventures for Gaian ladies was another thing that only happened in sappy holo-flicks. Still it was fun to think about.

When Ana had been a teenager, she and her friends at school read a series of books entitled *Julie and the Pirate* about the romantic adventures of a young Gaian woman and a reformed space pirate named Romeo, the man who'd attached to her. Now that she was married, Ana knew better than to ever expect a man to be as romantic as Pirate Romeo but at the time the written romance sent her adolescent heart soaring, while Julie and Romeo's adventures entertained her for hours.

Ana shook her head. She could use a little adventure in her life. Maybe this trip to Mea's people would give her the kind of experiences she'd dreamed about. If she could ever bring herself to get off the ship. Once more she examined the lovely view of the planet in the viewscreen. Yes, she'd get off there, if only to enjoy the taste of fresh

air.

Mea and Kavath were still arguing and Ana thought of slipping off the bridge, but she was on pilot duty. If they needed to talk privately they should move to their cabin or relieve her. They did neither so she stayed at her post.

Mea calmly met her husband's glare with a gentle smile. "Jack is part of the settlement and lives there. He took off in his ship yesterday, but they said he'd be returning today."

"You know how I feel, Mea."

Mea gave her husband a long meaningful look, and then sighed. She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head on his chest. "I do know. But it was all so long ago. I'm glad he's here. It's been too long since I've seen him ... since we've seen him. So many years have gone by without resolution. He's the only family I have other than you and the children. It is time to put the past behind us."

Kavath stood stiffly for a moment, but with his wife's arms around him some of his tension gradually eased away. Ana watched her friends, envious of their love—but happy for them, as well.

"You're right," he said finally, kissing gently the top of Mea's head. "The past is past and it has been a lot of years. I wonder what he's been up to all this time."

* * * *

Captain Denn Fuller dragged his attention away from his digital solitaire game to look at his first mate. "What do you mean, they caught up with us?"

Doing double duty as Tactics and Comm officer, Steven Kwam rushed across the narrow bridge of the freighter from one control station to the other, a look of near panic on his face. Watching Denn reflected that it was a shame he couldn't help his crewman out. Unfortunately, he'd put on weight in the past couple of years—only fifty kilos or so—and could no longer fit into either of the station chairs.

Instead he had to wait in the captain's seat made specially to fit his bulk while his solitary crewman did the rest of the bridge chores. Maybe he should consider hiring a new crewman but the idea only lasted as long as it took to remember how much a crewman cost, both in wages and living expenses. If Denn knew nothing else, he knew how to run a ship on a shoestring ... a necessity given his cargo losses lately. Losses that if he was right about the bogie hunting them were just about to repeat themselves.

Denn spent a small curse on the men he was contracted with and their choice of cargo. If it were up to him, he'd give up the trade, but they were insistent and made it clear what they'd do if Denn dared cross them. Unfortunately those in the ship behind him were just as insistent and at the moment much more immediate.

Arriving at the navigation station, Kwam touched some controls and pulled up a new display. He pointed to a small red dot that Denn saw was indeed right on their tail, the red dot that had been haunting them for the past hour since they'd left their last port of call. "There. They were at least four-hundred clicks away five minutes ago, but they've snuck up on us."

Denn's heart sank. That possible cargo loss seemed to be a near certainty unless he suddenly turned lucky and his luck just wasn't that good. Still, no point in giving in yet. "Well, lose them again."

"I would if I could, Captain." The communit buzzed and Kwam switched stations again, running at full speed back to the comm to answer it. "Yes," he shouted.

Instead of a voice a shrill sound erupted from the speaker, a burst of smoke materializing from the console in its wake. "Damn it," Kwam said. "They've fried our comm!"

Similar puffs of smoke emitted from other panels around the bridge and Kwam looked around wildly. "Must have sent some kind of virus!"

Denn stared at his one and only crewman. "A virus? I thought our protections were up to date?"

"It must be a new one. You know how tricky—" Kwam's voice broke off as if not wanting to say the name of the man they both worried was after them.

"Is it ... ?" Denn started then stopped, equally reluctant.

Kwam's hands danced across the controls, bringing up an identity sheet, listing all of the known ships in the area. There weren't really that many. The mystery ship's beacon ID shouldn't be that hard to find.

He ran his finger down the list, until he found a match. "Here, this one ..."
Kwam's voice trailed off. "Uh, oh."

Who is it?" Denn demanded.

Kwam sighed and looked even more morose than usual. "Pirates."

With a groan Denn dragged himself to his feet. "Pirates? You mean ... ?"

"Yes, Captain. It's them again."

Denn let out his favorite and most colorful curse. "How the devil do they always find us? We'd better see if we can't jump to hyperdrive—"

The words were barely out of his mouth when an automated alert came through the overhead speakers, the voice coldly mechanical. "Hyperdrive offline."

Solitaire game abandoned Denn attacked the viewscreen in front of him.
"Computer. Damage report."

The same mechanical voice proceeded to list what other systems were offline.
"Navigation, long distance communication, weapons—"

"What about life-support?"

"Life-support?" There was a pause. "Life-support at fifty-percent. Sufficient for one hour at present consumption."

Collapsing into his seat, Denn growled a curse that even Kwam flinched at. The pair exchanged long meaningful looks and Denn wondered if the air on the bridge didn't already taste a little stale.

Their adversary could do anything to their systems and likely would if they didn't surrender immediately. Most likely the only reason they weren't breathing vacuum was due to their cargo.

Finally Denn shrugged. "Complete stop," he said unnecessarily. Their pursuer had disabled them and they weren't going anywhere.

Again.

From the communit came a short burst of sound. "Attention freighter *Bronda*. Prepare for boarding."

With a heartfelt sigh, Captain Fuller heaved himself to his feet and laboriously

headed for the corridor leading to the back of the ship and the airlock he knew his adversary would soon be knocking on. "I'll go see what they want."

That too was unnecessary. Both Kwam and Denn knew what this particular brigand wanted and would exchange for the anti-virus they'd need to get their ship operational again. Kwam watched his boss leave with an attitude of extreme depression.

Through the viewport next to the airlock, Denn watched a sleek ship two-thirds the size of his glide up alongside and extend a boarding chute. Minutes later there was a knock on the inside of the airlock door. Denn stared through the embedded glass at a dark-haired man who gave him a friendly wave with his particle disrupter.

Yes, it was the man he expected.

Grimacing, Denn unlatched the door to the airlock and opened it wide.

The pirate stepped through, his p-dee aimed at Denn's substantial stomach. Through the airlock behind him came a smaller figure, and Denn drew back instinctively. The attractive blonde had an exceptional figure, but she was no less armed than her captain and, Denn knew from previous experience, even fiercer.

Crossing his arms, Denn tried to ignore the implicit threat of the pair. "And what can I do for you today, Jack?"

Jack grinned at him. "You know what I want, Denn. I've warned you before about the kind of cargo you carry."

Denn tried a bluff. "And what makes you think I'm carrying that today?"

Jack's companion aimed her weapon a little lower, at Denn's favorite part of his anatomy.

"Please Jack, let me shoot him just once," she said in a husky voice that Denn might have thought sexy once. "I promise he'll live."

Flinching the big man had to force himself to not cover his genitals with his hands.

"No, Sonja. Don't shoot him yet."

"Aww boss, you never let me have any fun," the blonde pouted.

Jack returned his attention to Denn. "Let's just say my information is as good as usual and leave it at that," he said. He waved his hand towards the right where the cargo hold was located. "You know the routine. Give me what I want and we'll give you the anti-virus. If you'll lead the way."

Grumbling, Denn did exactly that. He didn't think Jack would shoot his balls off, but his companion was something else and he was certain he didn't want to test the theory Jack would keep her from pulling the trigger. Once at the cargo bay he tapped in the code for the thick door and stepped back.

The door opened slowly. Inside it was dark and a little stuffy, but the odor wasn't as bad as usual, and Denn realized that the life-support in the cargo bay hadn't been as curtailed as it had been on the bridge. Either that or the air on the bridge had been drawn away and deliberately sent to those in the cargo bay. His nemesis was a wiz at controlling ship systems that belonged to someone else.

Someday he was going to have to figure out how Jack did that.

Jack swept a hand inside and the light came on. Denn blinked as the interior grew as light as day. Inside the room three dozen pairs of eyes blinked back. Eighteen people

crowded into the small space, lying or sitting on the dozen narrow cots built into the wall or making do on the floor. His cargo was future slaves headed for ports where the trade wasn't as illegal as it should be. Once more Denn inwardly cursed the men who insisted on this profitable but dangerous cargo. It was only profitable if you didn't consistently get caught.

The room held men, women, and children, their faces showing a mixture of expressions—fear, defeat, and a few even anger. But at the sight of Jack and his companion, a grin broke out on the face of one of the older men. “Well if it isn't Black Jack himself!”

The small blonde woman stuck her gun into her belt and swept past Denn into the room. She spoke quietly to those inside while Jack pulled Denn further down the corridor. A few moments later she was back and the faces of those inside showed delight and hope.

“Eighteen, including the children, plus one infant,” she said quietly. “And one of the women is pregnant. Two Traveler families, but there are some others, as well. Also about eight are young women of an age ... you know what they wanted with them.”

Jack's face momentarily registered something beyond anger and his face hardened in a way Denn hadn't seen before. He didn't like that look at all.

After a moment Jack spoke. “Make all them the same offer, even the non-Travelers. I'll not willingly leave anyone here unless they want to stay.”

She disappeared back into the room and Jack turned to Denn. “Worse than usual, Captain. A few of these people aren't even on the allowed slaves list.”

“They aren't slaves. Indentured servants only.” Denn inserted quickly. “I've got contracts on all of them and they signed them willingly.”

Sonja reappeared with a two-year-old girl in her arms, the child's arms wrapped so tight around the woman's neck it was a wonder she could still breathe. Jack's jaw clinched as he took in the child's face and her wide-eyed fear. She buried her face in Sonja's shoulder.

“Yeah, I can tell. That one surely must have willingly signed her life away into servitude.”

Denn decided the better part of wisdom would be to keep his mouth shut, particularly with the look the blonde was giving him. He breathed a sigh of relief as Sonja continued down the corridor with the child.

As the people quietly slipped out of the hold and past them, some turned to stare at him before following Sonja to the airlock. Their looks were definitely not friendly.

Jack watched them grimly then pushed Denn against the wall. “This is the third time, Fuller. Don't let me catch you a fourth, or—”

“But what can I do, Jack?” he quailed under the other man's quiet fury. “You know I don't have a choice of cargo. I owe too much to Wilcox and Harris ... they decide what goes into my hold.”

Jack's face didn't change. “You have the choice of continuing to work with them then, don't you? You could take yourself to where they won't be able to find you, much less hurt you. If you aren't here to carry their cargo you can't load it. Otherwise—”

“Otherwise what?” he cried.

Jack leaned back and smiled. "Otherwise, next time maybe I'll let Sonja come over by herself to deal with you."

Denn blanched but said nothing more as he followed Jack back down the corridor. He waited outside the airlock until he saw through the viewport. There was a slight jerk as the pirate vessel disengaged and moved away.

When he was sure they were gone, Denn made his way back to the bridge. By the time he arrived Kwam was busy at work, loading the anti-virus into the computer system. "They sent it over just after their ship disengaged," he said.

Denn lowered himself into his chair and watched his crewman. He rubbed his jaw with a contemplative hand. "You know, Kwam, I've been thinking."

"Yes, boss?" the other man said hopefully, momentarily taking his attention from loading the anti-virus.

"Perhaps we should find another line of work. In another place. There are parts of the Outer Colonies we haven't been," he said.

Kwam looked visibly relieved. "You know, boss, that sounds like a terrific idea to me. A change of location is just what we need at least for now." His crewman's relief was short-lived. "But what about Wilcox and Harris?"

Denn shrugged. "At the moment I think they'll be easier to avoid than Jack is. Black Jack is keeping too close an eye on my colleagues shipping activities."

Kwam nodded. "Way too close for us, boss."

"Jack has some kind of vendetta going with those two," Denn said. "And that is another reason to find a different location to do our business. Eventually those three are going to meet up and I don't want to be anywhere nearby when it happens. It's going to be unhealthy for anyone within shooting distance."

Kwam returned his attention to loading the antivirus while Denn started devising plots to distant parts of the galaxy. Getting out of reach of Wilcox, Harris, Jack and, of course, Sonja was just what was needed. He finally found a location he thought would work.

"As soon as you can, set course for Space Station Blue. We'll see if we can't find a place to hide out for a couple of years until all this blows over."

* * * *

Back on his ship, Jack An Flena strode onto the bridge of the *Wanderlust* where his helmsman finished setting their course.

"All set and bound for Baile Na." Ryan said.

"Very good." He settled into the captain's chair. Rubbing his jaw, he stared at the slave trader's ship through the viewscreen. After a moment the lights of the other ship glowed to life and then it moved slowly away, its jump engines requiring time to recover.

He'd been off the other ship for all of five minutes and already he felt a hundred times better. Boarding a freighter and liberating slaves always took something out of him. It didn't help when he knew the destination of some of them, particularly the young women they'd taken. Those hit him harder than most.

Denn would definitely pay attention this time and stick to non-human cargo from now on, or better still move to another part of the galaxy. The threat of setting loose his

second-in-command on the other man hadn't been a light one. Sonja would love the opportunity to carve the man into pieces. She'd been a slave herself a long time ago and her dislike of those like Denn went more than skin deep.

Denn had continued to press his luck by transporting slaves for too long, and Jack didn't care that it was actually his former shipmates who were behind the contract. At some point he'd find a way to stop them from trafficking in human life. In the meantime he'd deal with the ships themselves.

"Reporting, Captain." From behind him his second-in-command spoke, her voice was a deep purr. Jack sighed over the sound. Once he would have found it sexy, but he and Sonja had been there and done that. He appreciated her for her loyalty and her efficiency, not to mention the wicked knife she knew how to use. But as a sex partner? Not likely.

He didn't know what he was looking for, but Sonja wasn't it. Fortunately she knew it and while she flirted occasionally she didn't push anything on him.

Jack gave her a brief smile. "What is it, Sonja?"

"Our guests are settled. They would like to say thank you in person." She leaned against his chair and grinned at him. "Several of the women in particular," she added.

Jack sighed. They were always grateful ... it would have been easy to take advantage of that but he didn't want the kind of gratitude the women usually offered. He wasn't rescuing slaves for sex. He wasn't even doing it for the satisfaction of helping others.

It would be too easy to say that he was trying to earn forgiveness for something that could never be forgiven. Jack knew that nothing he could ever do would make up for the past.

A long time ago he'd been part of a military task force that had performed an unspeakable job, the destruction of a girls' school. That Jack himself hadn't known ahead of time the nature of the target they'd destroyed didn't absolve him in his mind.

Earthforce had killed thousands of young women and girls barely out of childhood in an effort to subdue their colony, Gaia, and Jack had been one of the Dark Angels that had done the deed. The memories of what he'd seen while flying over the rubble of the girl's school haunted him today, and he'd sworn never to forget or forgive himself for blindly following orders.

Living with what he'd done was bad enough, but it had taken from him the one thing he'd valued most in the world, his younger sister. With her married to a Gaian man what else could he expect?

The pair had been married for six years and he'd not seen his sister at all in that entire time. Some of that was that he was here in the Outer Colonies and she was with her husband on Gaia. But also he felt responsible for the death of her husband's youngest sister who'd been at Carras and with that hanging over his head how could he try for good relations with his sister's family?

It was impossible to earn forgiveness from those he'd harmed. He neither hoped for nor expected it. Instead he'd tried to do for others as much as possible to buy back his soul for his own sake.

But that wasn't the real reason he wouldn't seek the company of the women he'd

rescued. It was like his cooled interest in Sonja—Jack wanted more than sex. Sex was good and fun, but he no longer wanted to participate in meaningless sex.

What he wanted, he didn't exactly know, but he knew he wanted more than gratitude or a friendly face the next time he went to bed with a woman. He wanted passion that stretched beyond the physical. Sometimes he thought he wanted someone to love him without conditions even though she knew he didn't deserve it.

God knows he didn't deserve it.

"You know boss," Sonja said, rubbing gently against his shoulder, "there will be a welcome party as soon as we land on Baile Na. If you want someone to go with, I could be persuaded."

There was always a party when new Travelers arrived on planet. Baile Na meant "home" in the old language of the Travelers. Some of those who'd survived the destruction of the last Baile Na on the mining platforms in Earth's solar system had taken over an unclaimed planet in the Outer Colonies and created a new Traveler home there. It was a cause for celebration when those who were dispersed found their way to Baile Na.

Unfortunately, there was only one way he wanted to celebrate coming home. Jack shook his head. "Sorry Sonja. I think I'm just going to head for my caravan."

The little blonde folded her arms and fixed him with a piercing stare. "Go to your caravan and drink, you mean. There is more to life than getting drunk, boss."

How he celebrated was his business. Jack opened his mouth to growl that at her but before he could say anything, Ryan spoke up.

"I'll go with you, Sonja," he said.

"You?" Sonja sniffed indignantly. "And what would I do with you at a homecoming?"

"Anything you wish," he said wistfully.

Jack suppressed a grin. His helmsman had more than a bit of a thing for Sonja. Unfortunately, the blonde knew it and seemed to enjoy torturing him as a result. She really did have a mean streak in her when it came to men. Speaking of which, he knew one way to make her happy and get her off his case.

"By the way, I told Denn that this was the last time I expected to find him with slaves in his hold. He needs to find another line of work."

Sonja glanced at the departing freighter, a gleam in her eye. "So, do you think this time he'll take the hint?"

"I think they might." Jack studied his hands for a moment. "I suggested to Denn that next time we caught him I'd let you handle the boarding by yourself."

Sonja gave him a delightedly wicked grin. "In that case, boss, I really hope he doesn't." She paused on her way out of the room. "Okay Ryan, I'll meet you outside the ship when we land. You can help me take the newbies in to be processed."

She left the bridge with a bounce in her step and Ryan grinned at him.

"Captain, you are a wicked, wicked man," he said teasingly.

"I know," Jack replied, but he wasn't really sure if he was kidding.

Chapter Two

Ana stepped out of the ship and took a deep breath. Oh, yes. *Paradise. That was Baile Na, Mea's people's new home.* She took a moment to appreciate her surroundings beyond the planet's spaceport.

Baile Na wasn't exactly like her home on Gaia—the air was warmer and moister for one thing, and the forest denser than what she was used to. It was a wilder place than her home planet but after two weeks in space just breathing un-canned air was a treat, no matter how warm or humid it was. The air on the concrete platform smelled of the *Traveler's Choice's* cooling engines but the breeze coming from the woods nearby brought the smell of living things and fresh earth.

The Travelers had built their spaceport in a natural clearing of the woods, big enough for a pair of concrete platforms, both of which were occupied. She spared one short glance at the trim cruiser that shared the port, smaller than their freighter, to admire the clean lines of the ship. It looked fast, and was probably better armed than the *Traveler's Choice*.

On the side was written “*Wanderlust*.” She couldn't help but smile. It was a good name for a Traveler ship.

Beyond the clearing stretched a forest of tall deep-green trees for what had to be miles in every direction. Ana took another deep breath and smiled. She could barely wait to get over into the forest.

Behind her, the children literally exploded from the ship's portal. “Whee!” three-year-old Kavy screamed as her brother Morgan swung her down the ramp, holding her tight by the hands. At five, he'd appointed himself his little sister's guardian and fortunately the pair got along great.

The inside of a ship held very little room for play and the children were as happy to be outside as she was. Ana watched them chase each other around the landing platform.

“Watch your land legs!” Kavath shouted at them while helping Mea down the ship's short ramp. His efforts amused Ana as she knew it must amuse Mea. Mea wasn't so pregnant she needed assistance, but Ana knew Kavath just liked having his hands on her.

At their father's voice both children stopped. “What are land legs?” Morgan asked.

Mea answered. “You're used to ship's gravity and adjusting to being here takes time.”

“So we can't run?” They both looked so crestfallen Ana's heart went out to them. Mea and Kavath shared a quiet look. Ana knew that Mea would argue for letting them fail while Kavath, always the cautious one, would want them to stay safe.

Finally he shrugged, apparently having lost the unspoken argument. “You can

run down the road to the village ... but very slow and careful.”

Morgan took off at a slow run, Kavy following. After giving his wife a loving grin, Kavath followed and was soon hot on the heels of those with much shorter legs.

Ana and Mea glanced at each other then burst out laughing. “A slow and careful run?” Ana said.

Mea shrugged. “You know my husband, Mr. Caution.” She hesitated a moment. “I need to go after them. Are you sure you won’t change your mind and come with us? From what they said on the comm., there is quite a party going on. It will be fun.”

Fun? No way! Ana tamped down her instant panic. She could not go into a village filled with strangers, particularly unmarried men. A widow for almost six years, she’d been alone most of that time, or with family or married friends. Heading into space with her friends had been one of the most daring things she’d done in years and she’d only done so because Mea was pregnant and convinced Ana she needed a hand with the children. At every stop they’d made she’d stayed on the ship, not wanting to find herself in a crowd of strange men.

Most unmarried Gaian women had a hesitancy about being around strangers but she knew with herself it went beyond that. Ana could barely stand being in any kind of group and always got ill when touched by a man. She only hoped that if she ever did meet her match that would go away as it usually did.

She knew Traveler rules of social conduct were different from those of Gaia, but that didn’t make her any more comfortable with them. She couldn’t mix with so many unattached ... that is, unmarried people at once. Attending a party like the one Mea had described made her more than uncomfortable. It made her downright ill.

But she couldn’t tell Mea that or the woman would probably insist on staying with her. These were Mea’s people and she knew her friend was anxious to see them. She didn’t want Mea to stay behind and keep her company and she knew the softhearted woman would do so if she didn’t say something first.

“I’ll be fine here.” She glanced over in the direction of the lake that she knew was no more than a mile from the space port. It was so close that she could glimpse the moonlit surface through the trees. “Maybe I’ll take a walk over to that lake. Get my own land legs in order.”

At her echoing Kavath’s words Mea smiled for an instant but then her brows knit together into a frown. “I’m not so sure it is a good idea for you to go alone. It’s going to be dark in a short while.”

“I’m sure it will be all right. There are no large predators here and the double moons will give plenty of light once the sun goes down.” She patted one of her pockets. “I have a torch and a stunner, just in case. There is nothing to keep me from wandering around even at night.” Ana couldn’t help giving the woods so close by a longing look. “It will be wonderful to get out into nature again.”

Mea shuddered. “I’ll never get used to being in natural surroundings. Hard to believe that the Travelers I grew up with have settled on a planet instead of a new space station. But I know how much you Gaians love being out in the wild.” She patted Ana’s arm. “Just be careful. There are worse predators than those with four legs.”

Ana watched until Mea was well on the road, then sealed the ship behind her and

headed toward the lake along a narrow trail that had been cut from the spaceport. It was a beautiful evening for a stroll and she couldn't help enjoying the hush and small sounds of the woods around her. Beneath her feet the ground litter on the trail crunched softly and the crisp smell of broken leaves lifted her spirits.

She was almost sorry when she came out of the deep forest and arrived at the lake's edge. By now the light was fading from the sky and the water was smooth and dark.

While the lake edge stretched in either direction, the trail she'd followed ended and the brush was dense in either direction. It didn't look like she could go any farther without getting wet. For a moment she considered turning around and going back to the ship, but then she heard the faint sound of music coming from the brush close by.

It was the sound of some kind of stringed instrument and someone singing a melody. If it had been a group of people singing she would have left, but it wasn't. Instead it was one person, a man's voice coming through the trees. She couldn't understand the words but the melody was sad and sweet, and he sang in a fine clear tenor.

Ana thought about returning to the ship but rejected the idea. Through the comm she knew about the party the villagers had planned and from what she'd been told everyone on Baile Na should be at it. It was a celebration because a ship load of people destined for indentured servitude had been brought in today, including two Traveler families. The liberation of near slaves should have attracted everyone.

So, who could the unseen singer be if he wasn't someone from the village?

As she considered what to do the music stopped for a moment. When it began again he was singing a different song, even sadder than the first one. The music sounded lonely and tugged at Ana. Whoever was singing sounded as out of place as she did.

What would be the harm in seeing who he was? He wasn't a man of her people so he couldn't attach to her, the main reason unmarried Gaians had to stay separate unless they were looking for a mate. She didn't like being with crowds of people but what danger could one lone man be? She even had that small stunner if he turned out to be a threat.

Deliberately Ana headed towards the sound and, in the brush, she found a narrow trail she'd overlooked before, heading in that direction. The voice and trail led her back toward the edge of the small lake. Just as she got near, the song finished, but by then she could see a dim light shining through the trees in the growing dusk. She hurried to find another clearing by lake, much larger and this time occupied.

Near the water stood a small lamp, similar to those she'd used for camping when younger on Gaia. They could be set up to heat as well as illuminate a camping spot when fire wasn't a possibility. A stool sat on the ground near the lamp and leaning against the stool was a stringed instrument. She didn't recognize it, but she thought that must be what she'd heard being played. There was no sign of the player.

Along the back edge of the clearing stood a small house ... no, not exactly a house she realized, but more like a camping wagon sitting on skids so it could be easily moved. Gaians who didn't like to sleep in tents used similar vehicles in the woods although she'd never seen a camper painted like this one.

The wagon's sides were painted bright yellow and the windows, framed by

shutters, in an equally bright green that matched the partially open door near the back. Over the doorway a set of three-interlocking rings had been painted in bright red.

Ana recognized it. The Traveler symbol. Mea had it tattooed on her back and Kavath wore it on his marriage band. Whoever owned the wagon was one of Mea's people, which again asked the question why he wasn't in the village. She moved closer to get a better look.

She didn't see the unknown musician until the door on the side of the wagon opened and he stepped out into the lamplight. Once he was visible though Ana couldn't help but stare. When leaving to travel with Kavath and Mea she'd wondered if she'd come across one of the pirates that she'd heard frequented the Outer Colonies. Now she knew for certain they existed because she'd found one.

His hair was the first thing she noticed. Very black hair hung in shaggy waves across his forehead and along the back of his head, looking blacker still against his pale skin. Even from this distance she could tell he hadn't shaved or used a beard suppressor for at least a day. A dark shadow decorated his jaw line giving him the look of a rogue.

His clothing and bearing didn't help dispel her first impression. Black pants and calf-high boots with a distinct shine of military care covered his legs and feet while his shirt was a bright red and unfastened in front. The open "v" revealed the pale skin of his chest, lightly dusted with hair the same dark color as his head.

All he needed was a gold ring through one ear, a wide sash around his waist with a long knife stuck through it and he could have stepped right out of a holovid about ancient Earth pirates. Ana didn't know if she should swoon or fall down laughing.

Neither seemed like a good idea at the moment. The rogue stood tall and aristocratic and stared at her with piercing blue eyes. "Well. I didn't know I had company," he said sharply, a soft lilt in his voice, similar to how Mea sounded sometimes when she was annoyed. Kavath called it her Traveler's voice.

It wasn't a particularly friendly greeting and Ana immediately took offense. First man she'd been alone with in years and he had to be annoyed to see her. "I didn't mean to intrude. I heard you singing and followed the sound. I'll leave if you like."

For an instant she thought he'd demand her to do so. "And why would my singing attract you?"

"I liked it," she blurted out. "You have a nice voice."

His eyebrows went up and the scowl he wore lightened a little. "Did you? And who might you be? I don't know you and I thought I knew all the pretty maids in the village."

With his current attitude Ana didn't want to tell him anything. "I'm ... not from the village."

His blue eyes glittered with amusement. "I see. So perhaps you are from the forest?"

When she didn't respond he continued. "Do you belong to the trees? A wood nymph perhaps? But then there are your garments ... hardly what I would expect a wood nymph to wear" He gave her standard spacer garb, dark-green multi-pocketed pants and lighter green shirt a long perusal and shrugged his shoulders dismissively. "I thought that nymphs wore gauzy shifts that float about them hinting at the treasures they conceal.

And bare feet,” he added with a sharp glance at her space-duty footwear. “Not boots.”

Ana had been married, but never had a man’s attention cause her cheeks to heat the way this man’s did. The pirate stared arrogantly at her as if it were his given right to do so.

She was reminded of her favorite adolescent books and the urge to sass him, the way Julie would have sassed Romeo the pirate, came instantly.

Ana shrugged her shoulders. “You know gauzy garments are all well and good, but they tend to catch on the underbrush. Wood nymphs must be careful or we tend to ruin them.” She lifted one of her feet and pretended to examine the bottom of her boot. “As for bare feet it is far too easy to step on a sharp stick or hard stone and then you have a nymph with a sore foot. Lame wood nymphs aren’t a pretty sight.”

She gave him as close an appraising look as the one he’d given her. “Of course if I’d known what kind of man waited here I might have worn something more appropriate.”

He laughed and it was so infectious Ana couldn’t help but smile back.

Shaking his head, the pirate made a deep bow. “So my poor miserable voice had attracted a lady from the wood and she’s come to hear me sing? A very poor host I’d be to not appreciate her company. Please, take a seat.” He gestured with one hand to the stool painted the same bright green as the camper’s door that sat next to the lamp. “I’ll be right back with another.”

Ana settled herself on the stool and held her hands out to the lamp, which had been set to give out heat as well as light. For a moment she thought of the campfires she’d have back at home, when she’d go camping with her family and friends. There would be the friendly flickering of the fire and the scent of wood smoke on the air. It seemed odd to warm herself by a lamp, when all around them lay wood from the forest.

He returned with a second stool and placed it opposite her.

“Why don’t you have a fire?”

He paused and stared quizzically at her. “Don’t know how to make one. Besides an open fire is dangerous in space.”

“But we aren’t in space.”

His handsome lips contorted into a rueful frown. “So I’ve noticed.” Ana decided the pirate had as much love for being on the ground as her friend Mea had. Most likely he was one of the Travelers in spite of being so far from the village.

He had in his hand a bottle that he took a long drink from before offering it to her. Tentatively Ana took it and held it to her nose. At first it smelled faintly of fruit, but when she took a longer whiff she caught the harsh fumes of alcohol.

Grimacing Ana jerked it away from her face. “What is this?”

The pirate grinned at her. “Oh, just a little something I make up myself. I call it spacer grog but it really is just alcohol mixed with lemon juice. Keeps a man from getting scurvy.”

“Grog? You mean like a pirate would drink?”

If anything his grin grew wider. “Do I look like a pirate to you?”

Yes ... not that she’d tell him that. He clearly would be too delighted to hear it. Instead Ana passed the bottle back to him.

If he was disappointed she hadn't taken a drink he hid it, simply taking another swig before setting it down. "So I guess wood nymphs don't drink? Or if they do they don't drink spacer grog. Very well, more for me."

Ana was beginning to believe he'd had quite enough already. She hadn't noticed it before but his speech was slightly slurred and as he'd sat onto the stool he seemed to rock in his seat. But the hand he used to pick up his instrument was steady. He started to adjust the pegs and pluck the strings, releasing a mellow tone.

She couldn't help but be fascinated. "What is that?"

"A guitar." He stroked the smooth top with a loving hand. "Made by my grandfather many, many years ago. He traded an entire overhaul on a ship's engine for the Earth wood to make it."

Ana admired the unblemished finish. "It doesn't look that old."

"When a Traveler makes something, he makes it to last. I thought it had been lost when the space station was overrun, but another Traveler family saved it from the ruins of our home when it was destroyed. They gave it to me ... for services rendered I guess you might say."

"So you are a Traveler?" In spite of the caravan and his way of speaking she hadn't been sure up to now.

"Oh, yes. That ... and other things." His face lost its humor for a moment. But then he returned his attention to her and smiled. "So what song would my beautiful nymph like to hear?"

She shrugged. "I don't know any of your songs or even the language you sing them in, but they are lovely. Do you know any more like the last one?"

"Ah. A love ballad for the lady, of course."

With practiced hands he stroked the strings, releasing one soft chord after another, humming a tune as if to remind him self of how it went. Then he began to sing, but the words were in Standard rather than whatever language he was singing earlier so she understood the meaning. It was a song of love that a man had for a woman, unrequited and lost.

He did it beautifully and Ana found herself sighing as he finished. Why was it that a bad boy singing a heart-rending love song was so effective? His performance was worthy of holovid status.

After he was finished, he sat and gave her the kind of dark brooding look that had her wanting to caress his unruly hair off his forehead and remove his frown with a couple of well-placed kisses. For a long time they seemed to watch each other over the lamp's soft glow.

The effect was spoiled by him leaning over to pick up his bottle of grog, overbalancing and falling off the stool. Ana jumped to her feet, but he didn't seem to be hurt. Instead he sat in the dirt and blinked up at her.

His lips turned up into a rueful smile. "Well now. And that's a fine way to make an impression on a lady, by falling off one's seat." He carefully laid his instrument to one side before trying to stand up, failing and sliding back onto the ground.

Shaking her head, Ana went to him and reached down to help him up, but as soon as she took hold of his arm, he pulled her down to land on the ground next to him.

Startled, but unhurt, Ana glared at him. "What do you think you are doing?" she asked.

A smirk danced across his handsome features. "Leveling the playing field. If I can't be on my feet, why should you be on yours?" He threw one arm around her and pulled her closer.

She tried to push on his arm but it was like trying to budge a freighter ship with bare hands. "Let me up. I don't like to sit in the dirt."

"Don't you? I can fix that." He pulled her to sit in his lap. "That's better, right? Off the ground and all." His arm cinched tight around her. "And aren't you a nice little armload." He nuzzled her neck. "You smell nice, too."

Swatting at his arm Ana tried to free herself. "Let me go."

"Not yet. There is a matter of payment."

Ana stilled. "Payment? For what?"

"For my performance." He nuzzled her again. "Don't you think I deserve some sort of payment for that song?"

Ana's heart thundered so loud she bet he could hear it. "What do you want?"

One hand slid behind her head and she felt his breath hot on her face. In spite of the alcohol on his breath there was something still enticing about his smell and she found herself leaning toward him. His blue eyes met hers, his look intent and amused and something else that was neither.

"A kiss," he said, his voice a harsh whisper. "A kiss to pay the piper. Doesn't it make sense to kiss the piper?"

Ana's jaw dropped. "Kiss? Piper?"

"Piper, player, singer. Whatever. The one who makes the music. It is customary to pay for entertainment. Time to pay the piper, sweetheart and give me a kiss."

He was going to kiss her. Ana wanted to lean away from him, but his grip on her was too strong. She should say something, do something and stop him before this went any further. Kissing was definitely not something she should do with any man, much less one she'd just met, who wasn't attached to her. It would make her sick.

She didn't even know his name.

Ana opened her mouth to tell him to let her go, but before she could his mouth covered hers. She froze as their lips met. She hadn't been kissed since her husband died and to feel another man's lips on hers was ... not awful at all!

Her pirate might be a stranger, but he knew his way around a pair of lips. Ana resolve to stop him evaporated like it had never been there.

The kiss started a touch rough, his lips a hard line as they moved across hers, but they softened as she melted into him. His arms tightened around her, bringing her up close against his body. Her hand landed against the opening of his red shirt and she felt the smooth hard skin of his chest.

With her mouth open she had no defense against his tongue, which swept inside her mouth like it owned the place. She tasted him, alcohol mixed with fruit juice a part of that taste, but mostly she tasted him, his flavor bittersweet on her tongue.

A hard man, bittersweet, but he could kiss, oh, yes, that was one thing he did very well. Ruthless and overbearing, but the man kissed like he sang and like he played, with

his whole heart in it.

His kiss made Ana wonder what else a man like him did with his whole heart. How did a man like this make love? The part of her that had been numb since her husband died came to life and reminded Ana of just how much pleasure there was in a man's touch. She trembled in his arms, dazed by the sensation.

He broke off from the kiss and leaned back and Ana looked into his eyes, so deeply blue. She read something in them, the amazement she felt mirrored there. Whatever had happened between them, he'd felt it too, she knew. His gaze narrowed at her and his lips turned into a frown.

He'd felt it and he hadn't liked it, and Ana's heart stopped for a few long seconds.

Just as quickly as the frown had been there, a smirk curled his lips and, like a shutter falling into place, the amazement and vulnerability she'd seen in his face was gone.

He laughed, a low chuckle that sounded forced. "Well then. You are a nice little bundle, aren't you? And tumbling you onto your back would be a pleasure for certain. But unfortunately I have one strict rule—I don't sleep with cargo."

Ana blinked at him. "Cargo?" she asked disbelieving.

He smiled. "Aye, darling nymph. And that's what you are. Sweet of you to come look me up, but you just arrived today and most likely from that ship me and mine played the bold pirate with. So that makes you cargo and that's that."

He shoved her off his lap and staggered to his feet. On the way up he grabbed the bottle. Stepping away, he was no longer in the lamplight so she could barely make out his face. He took a long swig from the bottle and when he spoke again the mocking lilt was back in his voice. "I'm sorry to be inhospitable, but I'm not in need of company tonight. Get back to the village where you belong."

"I said I didn't come from the village."

"That you did. But you aren't a Traveler and you arrived today. So that means you were on that ship my crew liberated and you've come to thank me. Well I appreciate the offer, but as I said it is not my habit—"

"To sleep with cargo. I heard you the first time." He'd come onto her, pulled her into his lap, and kissed her brazenly. Now he had the gall to assume she was here to seduce him?

Barely containing her outrage, Ana stood up and made a show of brushing the dirt off her pants.

"Not that that's why I came, but I'm certainly glad to hear that you have standards. I'd hate to think that a drunken pirate didn't live by some sort of moral code."

He narrowed his eyes at her until all she could see of the deep blue was a glittering slit. "Perhaps you are wanted someplace else?" His voice was dangerously quiet.

"Oh, I'm sure of that." Head high, Ana turned and headed for the narrow path she'd taken into the clearing. Halfway down the trail she nearly ran into a short trim woman with blond hair in a tight bun, wearing dark spacer clothes and moving silently. The woman looked nearly as surprised as she was.

The blonde gave her a long look up and down. "I'm Sonja. And you are?"

Ana was too furious to be cordial. "Apparently I'm cargo. Are you cargo too?" The woman's lips twitched upward as if she were dangerously close to a smile. "Cargo? No, I'd be crew."

"Well then, perhaps he'll be happy to see you."

She brushed past the blonde so quickly that she almost didn't catch the other woman's response. "Oh, I wouldn't count on that."

Curious, Ana paused at the end of the trail. Turning she saw the woman continue on and after a moment she followed, too intrigued as to what the blonde had meant to leave. She arrived back at the clearing and took refuge behind a tree, close enough to see and hear what was going on, but not such that she'd be noticed. Peering through the brush she saw the pirate scowl as his new visitor came to the fire.

Clearly the other woman been right that he wasn't going to be happy to see her, but that didn't seem to bother the blonde. She smiled at his glare. "Well, this is good. You aren't drunk yet."

As if to prove her wrong he took a deep swig from the bottle. "No, Sonja, I've been too busy entertaining uninvited guests to work my way through my bottle. Didn't I make myself clear before? I'm not looking for company. I thought you were going to make certain the women from the *Bronda* knew that and would leave me alone."

The blonde grinned at him. "Oh I did, boss."

"Well, you did a poor job of it. One was just here."

Her grin widened. "Who was that? She wasn't on the *Bronda*."

He paused in the middle of lifting the bottle to his lips, a look of confusion on his face. "What do you mean she wasn't on the ship?"

Clearly Sonja was enjoying this. "I mean she wasn't one of the women we rescued today."

"She wasn't a Traveler. Said she wasn't from the village. Who the hell was she then?"

The blonde shrugged. "If I had to make a guess I'd say she was likely your sister's nanny."

He stared at her dumbfounded. "What do you mean my sister's nanny? Mea?"

"Do you have another sister, boss?" Sonja blinked innocently at him. "Mea's the only one I know of."

He put the bottle down. "You mean she's here?"

"In the flesh and she has her very handsome husband and children with her."

Sonja nodded at the bottle in his hand. "And that's why it's a good thing you aren't drunk because you need to get over to the village before she comes looking for you here."

Jack got to his feet and ran his hands through his hair. "Hell, Sonja, why didn't you comm me?"

The petite blonde put her hands on her hips and looked exasperated. "Because as usual, boss, you have your mini-comm off, and most likely the unit in your caravan is set to silent as well. If you check, you'll find messages on both telling you she's here. You want to listen to them now, or are you going to waste more time?"

Ana ducked back behind the shelter of the trunk. Well, that was interesting. Her pirate was Mea's brother, Jack An Flena, and he really was a pirate, the man who'd

liberated the prisoners off that freighter earlier today. No wonder he kissed like a scoundrel when he was one, through and through. Well, he'd not kiss her again, not if she had anything to say about it.

She didn't want to be caught eavesdropping on them so she'd better head back for her ship. Or even better still, maybe she would head for the village. She wanted to be there when Black Jack saw his sister ... and more importantly, when Mea saw him because she knew if there was one thing Mea didn't care much for, drinking was one of them. It would be wonderful to see that drunken lout get taken down a peg.

As quietly as she'd come, Mea eased from her hiding place and moved back down the trail.

* * * *

Back in the clearing Sonja saw the flash of color near the tree. but schooled herself not to react as the watcher slid out of hiding and headed away. Instead she called after her boss who was heading into his caravan. "Better hurry up, Jack. You've got family waiting."

Family, and a certain someone else it looked like. Of course she'd known the woman she'd met on the trail would come back. After all, that's what she would have done in her place.

Sonja knew a woman who was flustered when she saw one, and the Gaian nanny was one flustered woman. She knew that the only way a woman got that flustered was if a man was involved and given that the only man around was an equally flustered-looking Jack, which meant something had happened between the Gaian nanny and Jack before she'd arrived.

She grinned. Anything that could fluster Jack made her happy.

Stars below, Jack needed someone to get his mind off his troubles and get him from trying to drink himself into an early grave. Sonja wasn't the woman for him, but perhaps this Gaian nanny was the woman to stop Jack from trying to balance the universe on his shoulders with a bottle between his lips.

Sonja bit back her grin and nodded approvingly as Jack came out of the caravan, shirt neatly fastened and hair combed, as cleaned up as he could get. He picked up the guitar from the ground.

"Are you going to bring it?"

Jack looked at it and shook his head. "No. You know I don't play anymore for people."

"And yet here it is outside. Did you play it for the nanny?"

Jack's face turned thunderous. "What I do in private is my affair, Sonja."

"Whatever you say, boss." As he returned the guitar to its place in the caravan Sonja couldn't help her grin returning in force. Something *had* happened.

Chapter Three

Jack rushed down the trail, moving fast, his mind moving even faster. He couldn't help his excitement.

Mea was here. Mea, his sister who he hadn't seen in over six years. Even better she'd brought her children who he hadn't seen at all. Family, his only family and they were here at last.

He didn't know whether to curse or cheer. The fact that Mea had also brought along her husband whose first encounter with Jack had ended with the man slugging him meant that their upcoming encounter was likely to be strained wasn't lost on Jack. But he'd let the man hit him again if it meant he'd be able to see Mea and her children.

He couldn't wait. He had to get there and even if it meant facing Kavath it would be worth it. And then there was the matter of the woman he'd just met, the one Sonja had called Mea's nanny. A Gaian woman.

A Gaian woman he'd kissed.

Jack momentarily slowed his headlong pace through the woods, no longer in quite such a rush. What was he going to do about ... her? He realized he didn't even know her name.

Not that it mattered what her name was. He'd had no business kissing any woman no matter who she was, much less one from the planet Gaia, but when she'd come so close to him in the clearing he hadn't seemed to be able to stop himself. There had been something so appealing about her sweet brown eyes as she'd listened to his singing. It had been a long time since he'd played for anyone and her rapt attention had captured his heart.

Well, maybe not his heart, but his interest had certainly been engaged and no woman had done that in a very long time. So when she'd suddenly appeared by his side it had seemed second nature to take her into his arms and kiss her the way he'd wanted to since laying eyes on her.

It had been even better when she'd begun to kiss him back. Oh yes, much better. He could have kissed ... and done more ... with this woman forever.

But then reality had crept in and he'd realized he was most likely violating his own rules about getting involved with one of the women he'd rescued and he'd forced himself to break off the kiss. She hadn't taken his rejection well. No reason for her to do so he supposed since he'd done it under the wrong circumstances.

She wasn't someone from the *Bronda*, but a free woman who'd come with his sister. But a woman from Gaia. Jack had rules about involvement with women from his village, women from the slavers, and women he worked closely with. This woman didn't fall into any of those categories, but she was a Gaian. That had to be a category all its own.

A category of woman he had no business being interested in. If only he could tell

the rest of him that because as soon as he thought of his visitor and her sweet lips all he wanted was to kiss her again.

And he didn't even know her name.

"What's up boss?" Sonja said from directly behind him and he realized he'd slowed even more. Jack resumed his fast pace to the village.

"Nothing. I just worry about how the Gaians will get treated in the village." With Mea along there shouldn't be any problems, but his people didn't always react the way they should. There could be problems.

* * * *

The Traveler village was tucked into a large open meadow at the edge of the forest. For a moment Ana wasn't sure she'd really found the place at first because it didn't look like any village she'd seen before. Villages on Gaia were made of houses spaced along roads for vehicles. Instead of houses, there were more caravans like the one Jack had, all sitting around a large square with light and heat units sitting in front, providing a place for people to gather.

As she approached she heard people talking and laughing and the smell of cooking filled the air, good cooking if the aroma wafting to her was anything to judge by. The village sounded warm and happy and all at once Ana wasn't as concerned to be there as she'd thought she would be. So what if it was a group of over a hundred people, how bad could it be?

She changed her mind as soon as she got closer and the stares began. As she stepped into the reach of the light people stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to her, their gazes watchful and blatantly suspicious. Clearly these were not the most trusting people in the world when it came to outsiders.

Mea had told her how the Travelers had been treated from the time they'd lived on Earth as outcasts. Never completely at home, they'd headed for the sky and taken over a set of abandoned mining platforms in the asteroid belt only to eventually be evicted when the Earth company, which officially owned the place, had decided they had value. Ironically it had been the Travelers who'd made the platforms into a thriving trading post, giving them value.

But that hadn't made a difference to the big company. The military group Earthforce had come in with fighter ships and forcefully removed the Travelers from their homes, relocating them to the Outer Colonies as scattered families. Only recently had some of them managed to find each other and gather again into a single group.

Mea and her brother had been pressed into the military after their only family, their mother and grandfather, had been killed in what had been termed an unfortunate accident during the eviction.

Of course, Ana never believed it was an accident. Mea had told them her grandfather had been one of the group's leaders and Ana thought it probable he'd been marked for death as a warning to the others.

The destruction of the girls' school on Carras had taught all Gaians that Earthforce was capable of any kind of outrage. She still had trouble understanding how Mea had managed to convince herself of the accident story, but Mea did. Probably because she couldn't stand the thought that she'd actually worked so closely with those

responsible for her family's death.

How Mea's brother Jack had dealt with the same thing bothered her even more. He'd been older than Mea and must have seen through the lies they'd told him.

Ana thought of the man she'd met, half-drunk but with the voice of an angel and the lips of a scoundrel. As she thought about it, there'd been bitterness in his manner. Perhaps he was fully aware of how things had gone. It would explain why he didn't have any shame over kissing a woman he didn't even know

She shook her head. He had kissed her, and even worse, it had been a really great kiss. She hadn't had a kiss like that since her husband had died and she realized she missed it. The feel of a man's lips on hers, the way her body reacted to his touch. All of his touch, when his hands found her back and pulled her closer. Holding her possessively, as if she might not stay with him. As if she mattered to him.

Ana hadn't felt anything like that in the past many years. In fact, when she'd finally decided her time as a widow should be up and volunteered for a marriage meet, no man had raised that kind of reaction. Instead she'd felt ill anytime someone had gotten close to her.

Slowing down her entrance to the village, Ana considered that. She'd had a completely different reaction to Mea's brother Jack than she should have. He wasn't Gaian. He wasn't even someone she should be remotely attracted to. Men of her own kind made her ill.

Jack didn't.

That was far too disturbing. Was it possible that a scoundrel like Jack An Flena was her match ... a man who wasn't Gaian? Ana shook her head. No, it wasn't possible. She wouldn't even consider it.

But it could be true, and if so ... what did that mean?

Again Ana shook her head to clear it of thoughts that didn't belong there. It didn't mean anything. She was attracted to Jack, of course. Why wouldn't she be? He was a good-looking man and even if she was Gaian, that didn't mean she was blind. And he'd taken her by surprise, kissing her when she didn't expect it. That was the most reasonable explanation as to why she hadn't felt ill when he touched her ... she just hadn't expected it and so couldn't react the way she was supposed to.

Sweet Gaia, that didn't make a lot of sense, but she hadn't any better explanation for it. After all, it wasn't like she could have an attachment reaction, the way a Gaian woman reacted when a man attached to her, when the man wasn't Gaian and certainly wasn't attached. The whole idea was ridiculous. Ridiculous and disturbing, but she wasn't going to be disturbed by it. When she saw him again she was going to be as unaffected by him as she could be. If it killed her.

Holding her head high Ana continued her way into the Traveler's village. The people continued to stare at her, but she forced a smile onto her face and ignored them as best she could. She was here with Mea and her family. No one was going to tell her she didn't belong.

Even so she was close to the breaking point when a pair of familiar small people saw her coming and with eager cries greeted her arrival.

"Ana! You came after all!" Morgan shouted, running towards her, Kavy, not

liking to be left behind in hot pursuit. They both threw their arms around her lower limbs and nearly tripped her. Only her long acquaintance with the antics of the pair kept her from falling, allowing her to kneel to hug the children.

She met their happy smiles with one of her own. "I decided to come see the village as well. Are you having fun?"

Morgan's smile faltered. "Kind of." He looked around as if to see if someone was listening then leaned over to her. "There are other kids here, but we can't play with them. They said we have to leave."

Ana frowned. "Why?"

The little boy shrugged. "Because we're Gaian. They don't want us here."

"Who said that?"

"Him." Morgan pointed to a man standing near Mea and Kavath. A thin man with a jutting chin and mean expression, he was gesturing wildly. Behind him several people were standing as if in support.

For a moment Ana considered taking the children away from the argument, but Mea spotted her and waved. Straightening she told Morgan to stay with his sister and moved to join the gathering.

The man caught sight of her and his gestures grew more wild. "You brought a second wife?" he snarled at Kavath. "Don't you have any shame?"

"Wife?" Ana couldn't help but stare. "What are you talking about? Gaians don't have multiple wives."

"Wives or slaves. Everyone knows the Gaians have been stealing women all over the Outer Colonies. Why else would they need them?"

"Because one of our largest girls' schools was destroyed during the war with Earth—the war that killed thousands of young women. That left us needing more." Kavath said. "But we don't steal women from the Outer Colonies."

One of the women spoke up, a slender blonde holding a small girl about Kavy's age by the hand. "But you do take women. That's where I was headed on the *Bronda*, to be a Gaian slave and I wasn't the only one." Several other women nodded agreement with her. Ana noticed that they were wearing dark brown spacer fatigues like the man was, in contrast to the more colorful clothes of the Travelers. They must have been some of the people that Jack had rescued.

Kavath frowned and shook his head. "I don't understand. Gaians don't take slaves or steal women. In fact we're the only Gaian trading ship out in this part of the galaxy that I know of."

The belligerent man broke in. "Perhaps we should check your ship for slaves as well."

Anger flashed in Kavath's eyes and Ana wondered if there was going to be a fight, but just then another man dressed in Traveler clothes came over. He addressed the other man first.

"No one is going to be searching anyone's ship. Grant, you are a guest here and welcome, but we don't want trouble. Mea is a Traveler and one of us. If she says her ship doesn't have slaves, that is enough."

"Thank you, Chieftain Williams." Mea bowed respectfully to the older man. "If

you wish to come on board our ship I'll be glad to give you a tour." She cast a sharp look at Grant. "We have nothing to hide."

Williams smiled and patted Mea's shoulder. "That won't be necessary, although I'd love to see your ship's engine room and bridge. I've heard great things about Gaian technology."

"You're welcome anytime."

At the arrival of the Traveler's leader Grant and the others quieted and some of them left the group broke away, still sending suspicious glances at Kavath and Ana as they went.

Grant started to leave, but turned to Ana instead. For a moment he just looked her up and down and she had the uncomfortable feeling of being evaluated. Finally he smiled and held out his to her. "Sorry we got off on the wrong foot. My name is Grant Johan."

Ana held up her empty wrist in response. "Mine is Ana Ranalla. I'm sorry. Unmarried women don't touch men."

Grant's bushy eyebrows went up. "You're actually Gaian? I didn't think they let their women off the planet."

"You have a lot of misconceptions about us," Ana said coolly. "I work for Mea and Kavath."

"Work for them? Doing what?"

"Oh she's got a very important job." A different voice came from over Ana's shoulder and she swung around to see Jack standing there, the small blonde behind him. He'd cleaned himself up and if anything looked even more devastatingly handsome than before. Ana couldn't help the thrill that went through her at the sight of him.

Jack grinned. "From what I hear, she's my niece and nephew's nanny."

Chapter Four

Jack, Sonja following, joined the small group gathered around the heating element outside Chieftain William's caravan. At the sight of him several people wearing the drab spacer outfits left, including the man who'd try to take Ana's hand. Good thing, too, because the examination the other man had been giving her had sent a short wave of fury through Jack. He got himself under control, though. He had no reason to be jealous of Ana when he hadn't even been introduced to her.

Teasing her with the nanny remark had come naturally. Jack was enjoying the look of consternation on Ana's face when his sister spotted him.

JACK! SHE CRIED. HE BARELY HAD TIME TO BRACE HIMSELF BEFORE MEA JUMPED ON HIM. OUT OF THE CORNER OF HIS EYE HE SAW SONJA DROP BACK, AN AMUSED LOOK ON HER FACE AS HE RECEIVED THE ONSLAUGHT OF HIS SISTER'S PHYSICAL AFFECTION.

He responded with a full hug. "Mea," he murmured into her hair, longer than he remembered it, but still soft and curly.

She clutched him back in a way he found himself grateful for, in its unquestioning acceptance and as an expression of the deep abiding love he knew his sister had for him. If no one else in the universe gave a damn, at least Jack knew his sister cared about him. "It is so good to see you," he said. "It has been too long."

"Five years and two children too long," she told him. She patted her plump stomach and he realized she was pregnant again. "And now another one on the way. You should have come to see us," she scolded.

Jack let the criticism slide off. Visiting Gaia wasn't something that could happen while her husband remembered Jack's involvement at Carras, but no reason for him to bring that up. He changed the subject. "I'm glad you finally made it out here to find us."

"You didn't make it easy for us. We've searched just about every place in the Outer Colonies."

"Hard for you to find us, harder for our enemies as well," Jack said.

"What enemies?" Kavath said, taking his place beside Mea. He draped a possessive arm across the smaller woman's shoulder as if daring Jack to say something.

"Everyone has enemies," Jack said pointedly. "Even Gaians."

Kavath's eyes narrowed. "I want to talk to you about that. Something is clearly wrong out here."

"There is much to talk about. But later." Jack felt a sudden tug on his pants and looked down to see a small girl gazing up at him, wonder in her dark eyes. It wasn't hard to recognize the child ... his niece was the image of his sister at that age, the same black hair in unruly curls that he knew would be soft as a cloud to touch.

He smiled at the child. "You must be Kavy. I'm your Uncle Jack."

The child's face lit up. "How did you know my name?"

"Your mom told me a long time ago. When you were born." That had been a

bittersweet moment when he'd received the relayed comm message from Mea informing him of his new niece's birth. He'd only seen his sister twice since the war had ended, on a very brief visit to Earth during the signing of the peace treaty. Mea and Kavath had been part of the Gaian delegation while Jack had been there to resign from the Earthforce military.

Later he'd also stopped by Gaia on his way to the Outer Colonies, but hadn't stayed more than a day, meeting his sister at one of the checkpoint stations above the planet.

It had been good to see her so happy with her Gaian husband, holding her newborn son in her arms, but it had left him wondering about his own future happiness. His sister loved him, but Jack knew her husband held him responsible for the death of one of his family, and that strained their relationship.

Not that Jack blamed him. If it had been Jack's sister killed he would have been hard pressed to be even a little cordial, but after Kavath had given him a single well-placed slug to the jaw back on the unnamed planet where they'd met, and he'd not said another word to his wife's brother.

Certainly if Kavath did blame Jack, he couldn't blame him more than Jack did himself.

Now he knelt before the sweet-faced little girl in front of him and held out his arms. She didn't hesitate, but like his sister, jumped into them, giving him a kiss on the cheek without even being asked. Jack held her close, a deep longing rising in him over the fact that this wasn't his own daughter to hold. He'd been careful so far to avoid entanglements with anyone including the women he occasionally slept with. Careful to leave no offspring for their mother to raise alone, the way his father had sired Mea and himself.

Now he wished he'd not been quite so careful. Any kind of child would be better than having no one. It was just that he'd vowed years ago that when he had children it would be with a woman who he wanted to have as part of his life forever. To date that woman had not appeared.

Still holding the little girl, Jack gave an unthinking glance over at the Gaian woman he'd kissed next to his caravan. He caught a momentary look of something in her face as his gaze met hers. Not pity, but sympathy perhaps. He wondered if she had any children ... most likely not or they'd be here with her.

Perhaps her arms felt as empty as his did.

Ruthlessly he tore his gaze from hers and let the child slip from his arms. He was Black Jack, pirate, and not a man who needed sympathy, a child, or even a woman to make his life complete. He had plenty to do at the moment and in part it was because of the Gaians, not that they necessarily knew that.

He'd wondered if Kavath knew what had been happening in his people's name out here in the Outer Colonies and now he knew the truth. Kavath's anger told him that much.

A boy appeared by Kavy's side, his blond hair and green eyes a close match of his father's. No question who this child must be. "You are Morgan?"

The boy grinned. "Yes sir." He put a protective hand on his sister's shoulder, but

held the other hand out. "It is good to meet you."

Jack shook the boy's hand gravely. "Good to meet you too."

Kavy pulled on his hand. "Uncle Jack, you know Ana? She takes care of Morgan and me."

Jack stood up to face the woman in question. "Jack An Flena"

She nodded. "Ana Ranalla."

Her cheeks darkened slightly, but otherwise she made no comment about their earlier meeting. Apparently she didn't want Kavath and Mea to know they'd met in the forest. Jack felt that flash of annoyance over her ability to pretend that kiss hadn't happened. The urge to tease her became irresistible.

He took Ana's hand. "I'm not sure—you look familiar. Haven't we met someplace before?"

The pink in her cheeks grew deeper and her greenish brown eyes that had looked soft when he'd kissed her earlier suddenly grew wary. "I can't think of when we might have been introduced before. After all, I've just arrived here."

The half-lie almost made him laugh out loud. The Gaians were known for their tricks and her evasive answer proved she was true to her kind. During the war they'd rarely faced an enemy directly, preferring to use their technology to disable a ship rather than fire weapons at it. The result had meant far fewer casualties during the war than should have been expected which the Gaians claimed was due to their respect for human life. But sometimes Jack wondered if the Gaians didn't just enjoy outsmarting their opponents more than killing them.

He could hardly complain about it since the Gaians' actions had meant that his sister and he had both survived the war, when against any other opponent they could have been killed during battle. But he wasn't so sure he liked being outsmarted by anyone, particularly a woman he'd kissed and now seemed to be doing her best to deny it ever happened.

Masking his irritation, Jack grinned at her over the hand he still held. He caressed the back of it, watching as her eyes opened wider at his audacity. "I'm sure we've met somewhere. Have you ever been to Miracam's Reef?"

Ana's jaw dropped at his mention of the most infamous space dock in the Outer Colonies. Miracam was notorious for the antics of its wild men and wilder women, and he knew he was going to get the reaction he wanted from her when Mea interrupted.

"Jack! What are you doing? You can't hold the hand of an unattached Gaian woman."

Looking over Jack saw both Kavath and Mea staring at him. Maybe he shouldn't be holding her hand, but he had to admit her small hand felt pretty good. Again he stroked the back of it and felt its softness, grinning his best pirate grin at her. Her face bright pink, Ana tugged her hand away from him.

Glaring, Mea pulled Ana away. "Jack, Gaian women don't like to be touched by men. It makes them nauseous." She put her arm around the taller woman. "You alright?"

"I'm fine," Ana said. She gave his sister a funny smile. "It seems I don't react to him the way I do other men." The look she flashed him was tinged with humor.

“Perhaps I just don’t see him as a threat.”

“A threat?” Jack asked.

“You know. Sexually.” Ana smiled brightly—a smile perhaps a little too bright Jack thought. “It must be because he’s your brother. I think he’s harmless.”

“Harmless?” Jack couldn’t help uttering his annoyance. “I’ve been called many things by women, bastard, brigand, and scoundrel, but harmless was never one of them.”

Ana’s smile broadened to a grin. “Well I guess there is a first time for everything. To me you are harmless.”

Mea stared at him and then at Ana and her eyebrows arched. “Okay ... this is interesting.”

“Interesting or not, threat or not, you should not be touching an unmarried Gaian woman, Jack,” Kavath broke in. “Ana works for me and is my responsibility.”

His brother-in-law couldn’t have been clearer if he’d come right out and said it. Kavath didn’t think Jack was good enough to touch Ana, even if he was his wife’s brother. Jack had never liked being told what to do and he didn’t like it now at all.

He faced Kavath and stared into the taller man’s face. “What I do and who I do it with is not your business, Gaian man.”

Williams stepped in, the older traveler raising his hands in warning. “No fighting here, Jack. You know that.” He gestured to several chairs scattered around the heating element. “Why don’t we all sit and share a meal before talking further. I’ll see about scrounging up some Traveler stew,” he said before leaving.

Mea brightened immediately. “Traveler stew! That sounds wonderful.” Then glancing between her husband and Jack, Mea sat in the middle seat of the array of chairs. Jack took the empty seat next to her, leaving her other side to Kavath. With a watchful air, Kavath took the obvious seat. Ana stared at all of them for a moment and sat next to Kavath, much to Jack’s dismay as that put her furthest from him. She could have sat next to him, after all.

Sonja leaned against the step of the caravan and seemed to keep an eye out for everyone.

Fortunately Morgan grabbed the empty seat next to him and began pelting him with questions about being a pirate. Amused, Jack tried to answer him. “I’m not really a pirate. Mostly we use my ship the *Wanderlust* for trading with other colonies around here. But occasionally we hear of a ship like the *Bronda* carrying slaves so we go after them.”

“There really is slavery out here?” Mea shuddered. “That’s horrible.”

“Slavery or indentured servitude ... it’s pretty much the same thing.” Jack said. “Once a person has sold over their freedom, it is difficult to get it back. The men end up in situations like mining that are dangerous and often don’t live long enough to earn their freedom. The women ...” His voice trailed off, and he glanced at the children. There were things they didn’t need to hear.

Fortunately at that point Williams returned with two village women carrying trays of steaming stew and bottles of ale. The mouthwatering smell wafted over to Jack and he was reminded that he’d skipped dinner this evening. He took a bowl and dug in.

All conversation ended for the moment as Mea and her family began eating. Jack

looked over to see a happy smile on Ana's face as she took her first mouthful.

Ana sighed as the spoon left her mouth. Traveler stew was every bit as good as Mea had claimed it to be. She took another bite and savored the spicy meaty flavor. Her friend had described it as a hodge-podge of ingredients, mostly whatever was lying around at the time, but Ana knew there was more to it than that. The ingredients might vary but one thing was perfectly clear. Whoever made this stew did so with care and the skill to make it taste delicious.

Ana had heard that when Kavath and Mea had been stranded on the planet where they'd met, the former Earthforce lieutenant had spent a great deal of time experimenting with the local food sources to come up with dishes they'd both enjoyed. Now she knew just where Mea had learned that kind of innovative cooking. Her people were always seeking ways to make the best of whatever they had on hand and weren't afraid to experiment to make that happen. Even the one spectacular failure, letting the fruit juice they'd named Pink Zinger ferment too long so that it became nearly pure alcohol, hadn't been all that bad.

Kavath had once told her about the incident and that his and Mea's drunkenness had been one of the reasons they'd eventually married. Mea had attempted to seduce him that day and while he'd said 'no' at the time, he'd been unable to put her out of his mind afterward and when the opportunity had risen again he'd given in ... no, actually he'd dove head first into temptation. The best 'mistake' he'd ever made, he'd told her and one he'd do again any time.

Ana knew Kavath loved Mea with every fiber of his being and that she, in turn loved him. They were the happiest couple she knew, even more than most of her friends where both man and woman were Gaians. Not having exactly the same background hadn't been an issue for them, or if it had it was one their love had been able to iron out any problems with.

Her own marriage ... Ana sighed. She missed her husband, but the truth was they'd never really known each other beyond the physical in the short years of their marriages. Some people thought she hadn't remarried because she'd been too much in love with her husband, but in fact the opposite was true. She wasn't sure she'd ever fallen in love with Loran at all.

She glanced over at Kavath sitting so close to Mea, his arm around her waist and couldn't help envying them their closeness. What must it be like to be so much a part of another person's life, that even their breathing seemed synchronized when they were together? Two people from two very different worlds, from opposite sides of the war even, and yet they'd managed to find peace between them even before hostilities between their people had been eliminated.

The fact their son had been born barely four months after the end of the war left no doubt as to when Mea and Kavath signed their version of a personal peace treaty.

Ana sighed again. Another thing she envied her friends because they had a son and daughter. There were times she wanted a baby so badly she almost convinced herself to brave another marriage meet. A shudder ran through her even as she thought about it.

Then she looked up and saw Jack's face and that he was also watching Mea and

Kavath and she thought she recognized the look it held. Envy ... yes, envy and longing for what her friends had. As she watched Kavy crawled into her uncle's lap and while tentative at first, Jack began to stroke the little girl's hair, at which point she smiled and snuggled deeper into his arms.

He looked completely astonished as lulled by the warm stew, the dancing firelight, and the end of her small body's energy Kavy closed her eyes and fell asleep in the crook of his arms. Ana caught it then, the look of absolute vulnerability on his face. Jack might act like a big bad pirate, but the man wanted a family nearly as much as she did.

Maybe he wanted a family too. *And his touch didn't make her queasy like other men did*

On the contrary, being in his arms and kissing him had aroused parts of her body that had lain dormant since her husband had died. Ana still tingled as she remembered his kiss.

Ana sat back and considered Jack. Physically he was an attractive specimen with his long black hair that needed trimming, especially where it fell into his eyes. Although she suspected even a haircut wouldn't keep that black curl on his forehead under control. A woman would be forever tempted by that wayward lock of hair, tempted to touch it and him in the process to push that errant curl out of his face.

Ana could see herself wanting to do that. It could even become a lifelong obsession.

Shaking her head, Ana tried to clear it of that thought. She was not obsessed with Jack, nor was she intending a lifelong anything with him. A fling could be fun though. Maybe she could be the first Gain woman to ever have a temporary relationship with a man.

A group of children came over with a lighted ball, led by a tall boy Chieftain Williams called Jeff. He invited Morgan to play a game with them and with his parent's permission the youngster took off with them. With Kavy asleep in Jack's lap, that left only the adults.

Ana appreciated that Jack hadn't wanted to talk about slavery in front of the children. Now she leaned forward. "Jack, what is going on out here? Why do these people think that Gaians are responsible for slavery?"

He hesitated for a moment as if debating what to answer. But it was Sonja who'd been sitting quietly on the steps behind them who spoke up.

"The reason is that out here in the Outer Colonies there are women being taken for Gaian marriage meets," she said. "Stolen from their families and their homes, taken without their permission."

Kavath shook his head. "That can't be true."

"You might not want to believe it, but it is true." She rose and moved closer into the light. "I know it is true because I was one of them."

Chapter Five

Kavath still shook his head. "You were taken to a marriage meet? How do you know?"

Sonja sat in the empty chair. "Shall I tell you what a marriage meet looks like? I've been to several. A large room, lots of men, very few women. Everyone is wearing clothes that cover the face and body. A man makes a grunting noise and starts to follow you and that means he's attached to you."

Ana searched Sonja's face and saw she was telling the truth. "You've been to our marriage meets, but weren't there voluntarily?"

"That's right. I was taken there and forced into the robes."

Kavath held up his hands. "I don't understand any of this. We don't force women to participate in marriage meets on Gaia. For a while, we imported a lot of women from Earth, but they were never forced into a meet and even that stopped a few years ago." He sent Jack a strange look that Ana couldn't interpret. "Once we brought enough women in to make up for the ones we lost at Carras. Now only a few women from outside come in and those are all volunteers looking for a Gaian husband."

"As for slavery," he laughed, but without humor. "It would be impossible to land a ship full of slaves on Gaia. My family owns one of the largest trading companies on the planet and we are well aware of what can and can't be imported. Our border controls are very strict. A hold full of people would be impossible to get past the patrols."

Jack spoke up. "No one ever said that these women were being taken to Gaia. There are several large Gaian settlements in the fringe area between the Outer Colonies."

Ana shook her head. "Even those are subject to Gaian import laws. You shouldn't be able to bring slaves there."

Sonja reached up and took hold of the dangling earring hanging from one ear. The silver charm at the end glittered as she pulled it free and held it out to Ana. "Take it."

Ana wanted to refuse but there was something in the other woman's face that made her take the jewelry into her hand. From a distance the silvery charm looked like a piece of art, but up close Ana saw what it really was. She turned it over and checked the back of it, noted the tiny emblem on the back, a symbol of two connected loops, like a figure eight on its side, held within a circle. Infinity in the circle of the world. It was the symbol for Gaia and the trademark used on many objects of Gaian manufacture. Puzzled she handed it to Kavath. "Do you know what this is?"

He took it and turned it over in his hands. "It's a tracking device. They are used in some of the outer space mining colonies to keep track of the miners in case of accident. Inserted under the skin it has a long range and each can be set to a specific frequency so if a man is injured or if there is an equipment failure you can find them no matter where they are, floating in space or deep underground." He handed it back to

Sonja. "These have saved many men's lives."

"I'm sure you are right. They are quite useful," Sonja agreed.

Mea looked confused. "You had a Gaian tracking device embedded in your arm. You were a miner?"

"No. I was a slave," Sonja said patiently. She pulled off her jacket to reveal her bare upper arms. On the fleshy part was a nasty looking scar about an inch long. "I dug it out of there once I got free."

Ana winced. "You dug it out yourself?"

"The slavers put it into my arm before I woke on their ship. The inserter was painful, but not half as bad as it hurt getting it out. I did that myself with a sharp knife."

No matter how sharp the knife Ana couldn't imagine digging out a tracking device with it. Her respect for the other woman grew.

"As to why they put it into my arm, it was because it made it easier to find me when I escaped. Which I did, several times." Sonja stared at Mea for a moment then nodded slowly. "I think you, at least, are beginning to believe me."

Ana didn't respond. She'd had her taste of injustice at the hands of her people. It wasn't that hard a stretch to believe other wrongs might exist.

"I believe what you say," Kavath said reluctantly. "I'm just not sure I understand it. I can't believe any of my people would be involved in something like that. It is contrary to everything we hold dear."

"There aren't any people on Gaia who do something wrong? Everyone abides by the rules. No violence, no crime at all?"

"Of course there are crimes," Kavath said reluctantly. "Every society has some people who don't fit in—people who will find ways to make life easier for himself or herself at the expense of someone else. There aren't that many of them but they do exist. They rarely have families of their own because the men can't find a woman to attach to."

Jack nodded. "And what happens to these people when they are caught committing a crime?"

Ana knew that answer. "We have a few prisons on the planet, but the main place they go are the mining colonies ..." Ana's voice trailed off as she realized what Jack was implying. Her jaw dropped open. "You mean Sonja was sent to a mining colony as a bride?"

"In a sense," Sonja said. "Once I was taken I was sold to the company providing brides by the slavers who took me from my family farm. Me ... and my sisters."

Ana winced at the pain in Sonja's face. "Your sisters?"

"Two of them. My third sister was too young I guess since they left her behind with our mom and dad and little brother." Sonja glanced around at her now rapt audience. Ana leaned closer to hear the rest of her story.

"I guess I should start at the beginning. We had a small spread on Camalin Eight, raising grain, vegetable crops, and a few herd animals for meat. Not too big but profitable. I was living with my parents, three sisters and younger brother. Plenty of room to grow. I think Mom and Dad looked forward to the day we'd get married and bring someone back. They'd planned the farm so it could expand that way, become a real settlement. But then they came."

Sonja's face lost the little warmth it had held. "It was late night and everyone was asleep. They used some kind of gas ... just sprayed it into the air of the house and knocked everyone out. I had a tree house outside my bedroom window and was sleeping out there. I woke to see them moving around inside and climbed down the tree to see who it was. One came out of the house carrying Salla who lay like she was dead in his arms. The other had what looked like one of the sprayers we used on the crops. I tried to run for help, but he fired it at me. Next thing I remembered I was on a ship and they were injecting something into my arm. Turned out to be this ..." she touched the tracking device still in Ana's hand. "Salla and Suna were there, just waking up, too. I was the oldest, twenty-one, Salla, twenty, and Suna just short of eighteen."

She took a deep breath. "I was afraid they'd hurt us ... you know, rape, but they'd didn't. One thing about being destined for a Gaian marriage meet, they can't soil the goods ahead of time. A woman doesn't have to be a virgin, but she can't have had sex recently or the men won't attach otherwise."

Ana watched Mea take Kavath's arm. She hadn't been a virgin, but Kavath had attached anyway, because she hadn't been spending her bunk time with other men. Therefore she'd 'smelled' unattached to him.

Sonja shrugged. "So we were treated pretty well, but even good treatment isn't that great when you're a prisoner. And they had ways of making us cooperate that didn't leave any marks." Her voice trailed off and Ana didn't want to know just what methods the slavers had used.

She continued her story. "They took us with a bunch of other women to one meet after another. Most of the other women were like us, captured or enslaved for one reason or another. We'd put on the white dresses and those hooded robes. Couldn't understand why since the men couldn't see us but that didn't stop them from wanting us anyway."

Sonja paused in her story and for a moment Ana thought there might be tears in her eyes. But when the woman continued her eyes were dry and the look in them as hard as her voice. "Suna went first. One day after her eighteenth birthday she was claimed at the second marriage meet we were taken to. The man took her by the hand and she went with him. They hustled us out of there and I couldn't reach her. At the fourth meeting a man attached to Sulla and then she was gone, too. I never saw either of them again."

Ana had never had sisters, but she knew how she felt about Mea and her family and how she would feel if someone told her she'd never see them again. She saw that same pain in Sonja's eyes. Mea and Kavath looked sympathetic, as well, while Jack ...

Jack looked at his Mea and Ana realized that over the years he'd probably wondered if he'd ever see his only sister again. For a moment she felt a surge of sympathy for him.

"So what happened next?" Kavath asked.

"After my tenth meet my captors started getting irritated with me. The fact that no man had attached to me was my fault they said. I wasn't proving to be marriage material so maybe no one would attach to me. They started talking about recouping their losses on me by selling me someplace else. Someplace where keeping my virtue wasn't going to be an issue."

"Miracam's Reef?" Ana guessed.

Sonja gave a short bark of a laugh. "Oh there are far worse places than that, but it will do for an example. So one night I got hold of a knife and dug the tracking chip out of my arm. I was going to destroy it, but thought it might come in handy. My sisters had them too, and I guess I thought I might be able to find out how to find them later if I had mine to use to configure a tracker so I disabled it instead. Then I slipped out of the building, found a small shuttle and blasted off planet. I didn't know where I was, so I just went until I ran out of fuel and drifted in the space lanes after that. Drifted for nearly a week. I probably should have died, but instead I got lucky. Jack found me instead and hauled me back to civilization."

"Did you ever go back to your family?" Mea asked.

Sonja looked wistful. "For a little while. I went back to my farm once but it wasn't the same. I know my folks didn't blame me for losing Suna and Salla, but it didn't matter. I felt too guilty and just couldn't find a way to belong there anymore. I left soon afterward and was kicking around the spaceports when Jack located me again and offered me a crew job."

Jack shook his head. "And got the best second-in-command in the process. Don't make me the hero here, Sonja."

Ana watched the slender blonde put her earring back into her ear. "Yeah, I know, boss. All you ever do is your job," she said, but Ana knew she didn't mean it. Obviously Sonja worshiped the ground Jack walked on. For a moment she felt a surge of ridiculous jealousy. Ridiculous because as far as she could tell Jack didn't feel that way about his very pretty second-in-command.

Kavath looked thoughtful. "So what you are saying is that there are women being taken from the Outer Colonies to the Gaian mines to be wives? Unwilling women?" He shook his head. "I don't understand how that is possible. A Gaian can't rape a woman. As soon as she says no, he detaches."

Sonja shrugged. "There are a few ways around that. First of all terrorize the woman so she doesn't dare say no. Then you give her a drug to keep her quiet and peaceful."

"That's outrageous!" Ana didn't think she'd ever seen Kavath so angry. "No Gaian man would do that."

"No man like you would, but these aren't normal Gaian men. Do Gaians normally fight at marriage meets?"

"No, of course not. If a man can't control himself he gets barred from further meets ..." Kavath's voice trailed off. "And some of those men end up in the colonies where there aren't many women to attach to," he said grimly.

"Fighting happened often at the meets I went to. It seemed to be encouraged."

Kavath shook his head. "I wonder how long has this been going on?"

Williams had been quiet, but now he spoke up. "It has been longer than just since the war. We heard rumors of women being taken when we were first sent out to the colonies. It picked up in the last few years, probably because there were even more men without women."

Ana felt shaken. "All this time women have been stolen for the miners? What kind of life could they have had?"

"I don't know," Sonja said. "Once a woman left with a man, we never saw them again. I've wondered about my sisters, if they're all right. Someday I am going to go back there and find out."

Sonja's story still had them subdued when a young man and woman approached. Young and smiling brightly, they broke the somber mood of the group when they addressed Jack.

"Tomas, Babette." Ana saw the sudden wariness in Jack's face. He must know what they wanted and wasn't happy about it. "What can I do for you?" he asked politely, although she thought the words seemed dragged out of him.

The couple, wearing Traveler-style clothes and holding hands, looked at each other and then back at him. "We had a favor to ask ... since your sister is here and so maybe you weren't going to leave tomorrow as you said you'd planned," Tomas said. "Maybe you would change your mind about playing?"

Jack shook his head. "I don't think that's such a good idea," he began but Mea spoke up.

PLAYING WHAT?

"Babette and I normally sing the wedding song for the village," Tomas explained, "but tomorrow is our wedding day and it wouldn't be right for us to perform. We thought that maybe you'd change your mind and play it for us."

"I'm really out of practice ..." Jack began and Ana could see he was going to refuse. Remembering how earlier he'd sat in an empty clearing as far from anyone as he could be, she wondered when he had last performed for an audience. And why would that be, she wondered. She'd heard him earlier and he'd played wonderfully.

But Mea broke in. "A wedding?" she said, a huge smile on her face. "A Traveler wedding tomorrow?" She turned to her brother. "Oh Jack, I'd love to hear the wedding song again, it's been so many years since I've heard it and you always did such a wonderful job." Her eyes suddenly glistened with unshed tears. "I'd hoped that maybe you'd have played it at my wedding—"

She dashed the tears away with an impatient hand. "Oh, never mind me. Hormones are out of whack because of the baby. Even so, I would love to hear you perform again. You have such a wonderful voice."

The little girl in Jack's arms stirred and opened her eyes. "Uncle Jack sings? Can I hear too, please?"

Rolling his eyes, Jack let out a short bark of a laugh. "Well, then, that's a command performance. But you'd have to perform it with me," he said to Mea.

"Me?" She looked startled. "But it's been so long and my voice—" Suddenly she glanced over at Ana and looked thoughtful. "Well, maybe something could get worked out. I'll practice before tomorrow so I don't embarrass you."

Everyone laughed and Tomas and Barbette thanked him before moving on, but Ana saw the brief look of melancholy in Jack's face when they turned away. Why was he so gloomy over playing at a wedding? She'd have to ask Mea.

Kavy yawned again and went back to sleep. Ana rose to her feet. "It's getting late and the children should be getting back to the ship. I'll go find Morgan."

To her surprise Sonja stood as well. "I'll go with you. I know where the kids are

most likely playing now.”

* * * *

Jack watched Sonja leave with the Gaian woman Ana and wondered what they so chummy about. It wasn't like his second to get close to another woman, much less one from her least favorite planet, but then Sonja had a tendency to surprise him at times.

On the other hand, there were some sidelong glances in his direction as they headed back into the village. A chill went down Jack's spine, a sure sign that something was up ... something he wasn't likely to appreciate. Would his second really conspire against him with another woman?

Well, yeah, she probably would, he had to admit to himself. Sonja had gotten real strange in her relationship with him, from hero worship to something he was beginning to think of as blatantly maternal. Although the notion of a young petite blonde with a wicked knife-throwing arm as motherly was a bit far-fetched. Still Sonja seemed to be intent on what she felt would be good for him, whether or not it was something he had any interest in. Like he had any interest in any woman, much less one he had no business being interested in.

He laughed to himself. Yeah, a Gaian woman and he getting together after what he'd done to her people during the war. Not a very likely scenario so he shouldn't even be considering it. Still he couldn't keep from watching the small brown-haired woman.

That is until a sharp elbow caught him hard in the ribs. “What?” Jack turned to glare at his sister. “What was that for?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “We haven't seen each other in nearly seven years, and all you can do is stare at Ana. Whatever you have in mind Jack, let it go. She's not your type.”

“Not my type?” Jack couldn't help bristling over his sister's comment. “What do you mean by that? I'm not good enough for her?”

“No.” she shook her head. “But she's Gaian ... they have marriage on the mind when it comes to the opposite sex and unless you've changed more than I've expected, you aren't looking for a woman to settle down with. Ana wouldn't be interested in anything else.”

Wouldn't she? Suddenly Jack wondered about that. Certainly male Gaians were like that, but they didn't have much of a choice either. They couldn't get it up when with a woman they weren't attached to, but the women were different.

Ana hadn't seemed to mind that he'd kissed her. In fact, she'd been doing a pretty good job of kissing back before he'd dumped her off his lap. Something he now regretted as she'd felt pretty good there.

Maybe the good widow wasn't as adverse to his kissing her as Mea thought she might be—and if she didn't mind being kissed, maybe there were other things she might not mind doing with him. Alone with him and in his bed where he could find out if the way she kissed, without any hesitation or self-consciousness was the way she did other sensual activities.

He hugged his sister closer. It had been a long time since he'd had his arms around someone he genuinely cared about. Too long, by far.

Without thinking his gaze returned to the Gaian woman as she walked out of

sight. What would it be like to have a woman to love like her? What would it be like to have someone like her care about him?

He knew it was impossible ... but he couldn't help wondering about it anyway.

Jack rose to fetch another bottle of ale, but when he got to the chiller where they were stowed he found Mea had followed him.

She took it from him. "I think you've maybe had enough already," she whispered to him. "You've had two in addition to whatever you were drinking before you got here."

Busted. And he'd thought the hot tea Sonja had forced down his throat would have kept his sister from noticing. "I'm not so tipsy, Mea."

"Perhaps not, but I don't want you getting any worse this evening." She looked hard at him, worry in her face. "You were off somewhere drinking earlier when we arrived. That's why Sonja had to take off to fetch you. So where were you?" Mea said.

"In the forest."

She stared at him. "You were drinking alone in the forest?"

"I like my privacy. When I had my caravan here, the women we rescued would come knocking at my door so I moved down by the lake."

"You were near the lake?" Mea's eyes turned bright with sudden mischief. "That's funny. Ana said she was going to take a walk to the lake." She glanced to where Ana and Sonja had disappeared. "Something you want to tell me, Jack?"

He shook his head. "If she isn't going to talk about it, then neither am I. I don't kiss and tell."

"Kiss?" Mea's jaw dropped again. "You kissed her?"

"I said I'm not going to talk about it." Jack threw his arm around her shoulder and directed her back to where Kavath was talking earnestly with Chieftain Williams. The men looked far too serious. "I think you should pay attention to Kavath and make sure he keeps out of trouble. He's too Gaian for his own good."

"Kavath's not the one who finds trouble," she said, but she returned to where they were sitting anyway.

Jack reached for another bottle of ale ... but grabbed a cold tea instead. He'd already been talked into performing at the wedding tomorrow, and the evening was only half over. His sister was right—if he wanted to avoid trouble he needed his wits about him tonight.

Chapter Six

After they left the lamp-lit area Ana waited until they were out of earshot before turning to Sonja. "I can hear where the kids are playing. I don't really need you to come with me."

The other woman grinned at her. "Oh, I know. But I wanted a chance to talk to you."

"Talk about what?"

"A couple of things. You were the first to believe that your people were at least partially responsible for what happened to my sisters and me. I think you know that even the best of people have something to hide and the Gaians are no exception."

"That's true enough," Ana said. She'd experienced that first-hand.

Sonja nodded. "By the same token, even the worst of people have good in them. You need to look deeper sometimes to find it, but it is there."

"You talking about Jack?" Ana guessed.

"About Jack. Maybe. Jack's a good man, but I don't think he believes it. Something in his past that he doesn't want to talk about. I think that maybe you also have something like that in your past." Sonja added, after a long perusing look at her.

"Me?" Startled, Ana stared at her. How could Sonja see that deep into her and know her secrets? "What do you know about me?"

She smiled slyly. "I didn't know anything other than the fact you were trying to avoid being around a lot of people, and that's unusual. Your reaction tells me I'm right. Whatever it is, I doubt it could be too bad, even if it seems to be in your own mind."

"What I think there is a lot of dark in all of us, especially after we've seen it in other people. It is how we stand up to the dark we've experienced that makes us who we are. Jack's devoted his life to making sure other people are spared the worse that can happen to them. By that measure, Jack is a very good man."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ana asked. "You trying to interest me in pursuing Jack?"

Sonja grinned. "Maybe. Jack's gotten too comfortable with the way things are and I'm not sure that's healthy for him. He puts people into categories."

Ana couldn't help but laugh. "Like Crew and Cargo."

"And Village. Exactly. He uses his categories to keep from committing to a woman. He says he values his peace, but I think he needs his peace disturbed and you appeared to disturb it earlier. So maybe you'll be good for him." She grinned mischievously. "At least you'll shake things up a little."

"What makes you think I'd want to shake Jack up?"

"Oh nothing ..." Her grin got wider. "Except for the fact that all through dinner you kept watching him out of the corner of your eyes."

Ana shook her head. "You are far too observant, Sonja."

“Yeah. That’s my job, it seems. To look out for others. Too bad I’m not as good at it as I like,” she said, a trace of bitterness in her tone.

Ana put her hand on the other woman’s shoulder. “Losing your sisters wasn’t your fault, Sonja.”

“Possibly not, but I meant what I said. Someday I’m going to get them back.”

* * * *

Morgan was quickly located, the little boy looking happy, but tired enough to come back to his parents with Ana. When they arrived back her friends rose to their feet, Kavath helping Mea up, then taking Kavy from Jack. Morgan stood too, swaying on his feet in weariness.

Mea wrapped her arm around her son. “It has been a long day for everyone. We should be getting back to the ship.”

Prepared to leave, Ana stood and reached for Kavy, but Mea stayed her from taking the child from Kavath.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you out of the ship and around people, Ana. Why don’t you stay awhile longer? You can see her back to the ship, can’t you Jack?”

Jack looked at Ana warily, then he smiled wickedly. “Oh I think I can manage to escort your nanny back to you in one piece.”

Kavath looked for a moment like he might object, but at a sharp glance at his wife shut his mouth firmly and simply gave Jack a meaningful glare. Again Ana wondered what the usually easy-going Kavath had against his wife’s brother.

As Ana watched Mea and Kavath leave with their children she also wondered what Jack meant by that grin. Maybe he was interested in pursuing something with her. She watched him from the corner of her eyes and saw again that brief look of longing in his eyes as Kavath’s free arm went around his wife, resting briefly across the rounded mound of their unborn child.

She almost smiled at Jack’s expression. Apparently he wanted a family as well. Not that that meant he’d think of her as the mother of those kids and of course there was the problem with his classification way of looking at women, Cargo, Crew or Village. But maybe she could make that work for her.

She did smile when he turned his attention back to her. “I guess you better show me around and introduce me to people.”

He grunted. “I guess so.” Standing he held out his hand to help her to her feet and after a momentary hesitation, Ana took it. It was warm and hard and her hand felt small in his. Again she felt no symptoms of getting ill. Somehow of all the men in the universe, Jack was someone she didn’t mind touching.

It was disturbing and exhilarating all at the same time. The prospect of spending the rest of the evening with him no longer seemed so daunting ... until she looked into his face and saw that he wasn’t unaffected by her touch. Then her breath caught in her throat and she seemed to have trouble getting enough air into her lungs to speak. For a moment they stood there, holding hands and not speaking a word.

Then Jack dropped her hand as if it were on fire. “Follow me,” he said, turning abruptly and striding away as if trying to escape. Caught off-guard, Ana stumbled after him, but she couldn’t help feeling a little twinge of pleasure in his discomfort.

As Sonja had said, Jack needed to be made uncomfortable. His second-in-command seemed to think it would be for his own good, but Ana knew differently. Jack needed to be uncomfortable because it was going to be so much fun to make him that way.

* * * *

How had he gotten into this ridiculous position? Jack wondered that as he took Ana from one family group to another in traditional Traveler visiting style. He watched as she greeted each person with her sweet smile and charm, winning them over without anything more.

It was typical Gaian behavior and just what he should have expected. The Gaians were just about perfect in every way, unlike the Travelers who were universally despised.

Why shouldn't Ana be seen as a lovely, intelligent woman, worthy of respect? She was exactly that, after all.

He just wished it wasn't as obvious to everyone else as it was to him. There was a part of him that wanted Ana all to himself and unfortunately that wasn't possible. Ana belonged to everyone.

Damn it.

There was one part of her that didn't belong though he noticed. She didn't touch anyone who wasn't female or a young child. Not a finger on the arm, not a hug. Not a simple kiss on the cheek. Ana occasionally held onto his arm but didn't reach out to anyone else at all.

He knew that was a Gaian thing ... the avoidance of physical contact with any of the men. But for whatever reason while Ana could and did seem comfortable with taking his arm as he led her around the village, she wasn't similarly comfortable when one of the villagers reached out to shake her hand. She avoided contact with them as much as possible.

Still Ana was friendly to them all, smiling and chatting lightly with everyone, and Jack saw how the Traveler's natural reticence to open up to strangers was gradually overcome. She seemed capable of winning anyone over.

Even so, after a while he noticed how her enthusiasm was growing forced and her smile faded as soon as she thought no one was looking. She was growing tired and clearly needed to go back to her ship. He put a proprietary arm around her shoulders and leaned over her.

"I think you've met enough people for one evening. Time to go home." Ana turned a surprised glance at him, but didn't object as he led her away from the last group of revelers. Instead she leaned into his arm and he could feel her shaking against him.

Jack made their excuses and after a few friendly waves they headed down the well-beaten path to the clearing that served the small colony as a spaceport. As the woods closed around them and the noise of the village faded behind them, Ana's shaking grew quieter and after a few moments she pulled slightly away from him and he reluctantly let her leave the protection of his arms.

"You don't have to walk me back to the ship. I know the way."

"I told Mea I'd make sure you got there safely," Jack said stubbornly. "That's what I'm going to do."

"There's no need. I'll be perfectly safe."

Jack shook his head. "This isn't your nice safe Gaia. I'm coming with you."

Ana rolled her eyes at him, but made no further objection. She plunged down the trail in front of him leaving him rushing to catch up with her. After the way she'd clung to him earlier he wondered at how determined she was now to keep away from him. The abrupt change in her manner irritated him so he followed close on her heels just to spite her.

Ana sent him a surprised look over her shoulder, but apparently realized the futility of escaping and stopped trying to outpace him, letting him catch up. For a while they walked together in silence, letting the quiet night noises of the woods around them be the only sound.

After a few long moments Ana sighed and stopped in the trail. "I guess it is silly for us not to talk."

"Very silly," he agreed.

"We have so much in common, after all."

"Yes. We do. My sister and her family, for one thing."

"Yes." Ana smiled.

"How did you get involved with them?" Jack asked. The topic seemed safe enough for now.

Ana gave him a wondering look as if judging his motive in asking the question then shrugged. "It was after the war ... and after my husband died. I needed a job and Kavath's family hired me as a pilot after Mea and I became friends."

"Your husband died in the war?" Jack hoped the answer wasn't yes ... that would have been another obstacle if Ana blamed the war and him by proxy on her husband's death. He let out the breath he hadn't even realized he was holding when she shook her head.

"No. It was an accident afterward ... I don't really want to talk about that."

Jack couldn't help letting out a frustrated sigh. "So we'll talk about something else. Why were you so nervous back there?"

"Back where?" she said with an innocence he didn't believe for a moment.

"Back in the village. You were shaking by the time we left. Do crowds make you nervous?"

"No!" Ana picked up speed again and he had to hurry to catch up with her. Finally he grabbed her arm and forced her to stop.

"Why don't you want to answer me? Is it a Gaian thing, being nervous in a crowd?"

She didn't meet his eyes. "It isn't nervousness and no, most Gaians aren't like me. I'm not sure what to call it. I just don't like being around a lot of people ... not just men, but all kinds of people, even women anymore."

"Oh. How did you manage at Breaker's End? Or Donovan's Reef?" Jack named two of the bigger space ports he knew his sister and Kavath had stopped at.

"I never got off the ship. Not until here ... and then I didn't want to go into the village."

"Instead you went for a walk in the forest and met me. Why then did you go to

the village?" At her guilty look he suddenly smiled. "Ah, you wanted to see me with my sister?"

Ana shrugged. "Something like that. Now that we're telling secrets, why didn't you want to play for that young couple's wedding tomorrow? It had nothing to do with not playing well ... you play wonderfully."

He didn't want to answer her, but she'd been honest with him. "For you, and for just a few others I'm okay. But I haven't played for a group ... well, not since I was a teenager. Not since our old home was destroyed..." He broke off what he intended to say, no point in bringing up the death of his family to a woman he barely knew. Even so, a pang went through him as he remembered his mother and grandfather.

He'd pushed aside the past for so long he barely remembered what they looked like. Focusing, he managed to bring their faces into his mind, his mother's sweet smile and black curly hair so like his sister's, his grandfather's worn features embedded with his wise and knowing eyes. The man had always been able to determine the truth from his grandson and Jack had never been able to get away with anything from his grandfather.

Jack remembered how his mother had tears in her eyes when she heard Mea and he perform the wedding song, and for a moment he coughed to clear his throat.

Ana put her hand on his arm as if noting his distress. "It must have been hard to lose your family that way. Mea told me about what happened."

Jack said nothing but he appreciated her gentle comfort. Ana reminded him in some ways of his mother, how just her presence could make him feel better. It had been a long time since he'd been around a woman that made him feel that way.

One good thing. His mother would be pleased that he and Mea would be singing together again.

They started again down the path. Both of them fell into silence, but Jack realized it wasn't uncomfortable the way most silences were. It was more that Ana and he were comfortable in their thoughts and didn't need words at the moment. She even reached over and without thinking he took her hand and they walked together.

They continued that way until they reached the landing area that served as the planet's space port and the platform where the *Traveler's Choice* sat parked. Jack couldn't help but admire the ship's trim lines. "It sure doesn't look like any freighter I've seen before."

"Doesn't fly like one either," Ana said, recognizable pride in her voice. "She's faster and far more maneuverable. Her jump engines can handle short hops and with our navigation computer and sensors working properly, we can hopscotch through a planetary system rather than move at sub-light speed."

"Hopscotch?" Jack smiled at the archaic term. He'd heard SHS jumps referred to by many names, but not that one before.

"You know, like the children's game. Short hyperspace jumps from one location to the next. All we need is a clear piece of space to land in and we're fine. Our long distance sensors are accurate enough to see if we're going to materialize in occupied space, making that possible. Hop scotching is a lot faster way of moving from one planet to the next."

The reached the landing ramp of her ship and Ana hesitated at the doorway. "Thank you for walking me home."

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed them. Ana's eyes widened, but she didn't pull her hand away.

Jack couldn't resist teasing her. "So do I get a good night kiss?"

With delicate precision her teeth caught her lower lip and chewed it slightly, a habit he'd noticed earlier when Ana appeared nervous. "I don't know. Is that customary?"

"Sometimes. Among Travelers a kiss in exchange for a favor isn't that far-fetched."

"It isn't done on Gaia. Kissing a man you aren't attached to, that is."

"I guess not. But isn't that because it makes a Gaian woman ill?"

Ana stared and nodded warily at him without speaking. Having her look so unsure was too delightful to not take advantage of. He moved closer.

"But you kissed me earlier," he said.

Ana found her voice. "Actually you kissed me."

"Either way, it didn't make you ill. So that means something."

"We've talked about this already."

And the answer she'd given had been completely humiliating. "I know. You think I'm harmless." He dared her to disagree with him, and she didn't. But that left him an opening.

"If I'm so harmless, it won't matter if you kiss me again."

"You want to kiss me again?" she asked, doubt in her voice.

"No," he said, and almost smiled at her immediate crestfallen expression. The little minx did want to kiss, but didn't want to admit it.

"You don't want to kiss me?"

"No," he repeated, but he moved closer to her. "This time, I want *you* to kiss *me*." He made sure she heard the emphasis this time.

"Oh." Ana looked thoughtful for a moment and again worried her lower lip. Then she nodded. "I've never done that before, but I don't see why not."

Moving quickly as if worried she might lose her nerve, Ana leaned up and touched her lips to his in a very brief kiss. The quick, almost innocent press of her lips was barely there, but the electric thrill that went through him shocked Jack to his core. He'd been kissed by some of the most skilled ladies of the trade in Maracam's Reef and elsewhere, but Ana's lips left him breathless without even trying.

Still he fought his reaction to stare down at her. "Oh, little nymph, you can hardly call that a kiss. I know you Gaians don't get a lot of practice, but is that the best you can do?"

Ana's eyes narrowed and he could see he'd managed to prick her pride. She stepped closer to him. "Okay, I'll try again."

This time her arms went around his neck and she pulled him into her with more strength than he'd given her credit for. A little surprised he stared down at her as she glared up into his eyes. "Let's see if this is better."

Her lips met his with an intensity that he knew was partly her anger, but also had

a lot to do with how attractive she found him. Maybe she was inexperienced at kissing strangers, but she was obviously a quick study. There was no mistaking her waking passion as her lips moved over his.

Ana enticed and teased him with her lips, tantalized him with her tongue. When he opened to let her in, her tongue swept across his and all the world seemed to stand still as she tasted him and even more as he tasted her.

For a moment Jack stood in shock, relishing her boldness. Then he responded in kind and soon they were all tangled up, tongues and lips and limbs moving together in a warm and passionate confusion.

The kiss lasted far longer than the few minutes he'd expected. Without thinking Jack pulled her up hard against him and felt again the soft fullness of her breasts against his chest. He hadn't intended to react that strongly to her, but his sex had other plans and in moments he had an erection as hard as the ship behind them. His shaft pressed into her stomach and she jerked away from him, staring into his face in surprise. "You do want me!"

Jack couldn't help a mortified chuckle. "Hell, yes woman. I'm not like your people. A lovely woman kisses me, I get hard. It's that simple."

She moved back so he was no longer pressed against her and it was all Jack could do not to yank her close again. But she didn't leave completely, only leaned her head against his chest, her arms still around his neck.

Ana sighed. "Sometimes I wish it was that simple for me."

The sadness in her simple declaration stilled any additional sardonic comments he planned and instead he found himself letting her have the distance she needed while still holding onto her.

He lifted her chin and stared down into her face, blushing with confusion. "Well, we can make it pretty simple. Just take things as they come up. We're attracted to each other. We can admit that without going further. No reason anything more is needed right now."

In a surge of nobility he wasn't sure of the source of, Jack released her, only giving her a kiss on the forehead before doing so. "Just go to bed, Ana. Maybe tomorrow things will seem simpler."

Her expression remained uncertain but her smile warmed him. "Maybe they will at that."

Jack watched Ana punch in the code that unlocked the entry and the door close after her, but it was a few moments before he could bring himself to leave. Even when he turned to head for the woods, he still felt the smoothness of Ana's skin on his lips.

Tomorrow he'd see her again and they'd see ... what there was to see.

* * * *

Inside the ship Ana watched the viewer directed at the door until Jack finally headed for the woods where she knew his caravan was parked. Behind her she heard Mea's quick step from the bridge.

She turned to face her. "You were waiting up for me?"

"In a way," Mea said evasively. "I was having trouble sleeping. Did you and my brother finally find something in common?"

“A few things,” Ana said slowly. She studied Mea’s troubled face. “If you’re worried about me or him, you don’t need to.”

“I’m not, exactly. But I’m not sure either of you know what is best for you right now.”

“I’m not sure we know either.” She gave a quick laugh. “But it is kind of fun trying to figure it out.”

Some of the worry left Mea’s face. “Well, at least you left the ship. That’s got to be a good sign. And there is the wedding tomorrow, that will be a lot of fun. Dancing and singing. Traveler weddings are celebrations.”

Ana nodded. “Yes. I’m looking forward to it. I’d like you to show me how to do some of your dances.”

Mea smiled and Ana startled at the mischief in her friend’s face. She almost resembled her daughter when she was up to something. “I’ll teach you to dance, but there is something else I need to teach you first.”

Chapter Seven

Ana stared at her reflection in the narrow mirror on the inside of her cabin door. It had been months since she'd seen herself in any kind of clothing other than space fatigues, the loose multi-pocketed pants and utilitarian tops that most spacefarers wore. Such clothing was comfortable, allowed for lots of carrying places, and allowed her to fit in virtually anywhere. Only the color was different in that Gaian space fatigues were more likely to be blues or greens than the more common black, grey or beige, but even so they were monochromatic.

So now she pulled at her multicolor skirt and the low-cut white top with its decorative hand-embroidered trim and felt like a drab bird who had suddenly grown bright feathers. Dressed as she was, she'd probably attract attention today whether she wanted to or not.

And for once attracting attention didn't sound so bad. Hopefully she'd catch one man's attention at least. Ana wanted Jack to notice her.

She finished adjusting her clothes and slipped into her shoes. After wearing space boots all this time, her slippers felt light on her feet. Light enough to dance and there would be dancing tonight. Maybe she could dance with Jack

Ana shook her head. She was as giddy as a girl just out of school, heading for her first marriage meet. She should keep herself grounded, but it was so difficult to do. In her bright clothes and light-weight shoes she almost felt like the forest nymph Jack had called her on their first meeting.

That meeting where she'd received her first kiss since the death of her husband. With luck, possibly more than a kiss would come her way.

A surge of worry sped through Ana. Could she really do this, seduce a man for a temporary relationship? Such things did not happen on Gaia, where marriages were made young and lasted until the participants were dead. Taking Jack as her lover was contrary to everything Ana had been taught a Gaian woman did.

A Gaian woman waited for a man to attach to her and make her his wife for the rest of their lives. To be with a man for only a short time ... could she really do that? Her inability to cope with the marriage meets made it impossible to find a man of her own people, but was she ready to throw away her beliefs for the sake of a man from another culture, just because she felt desire for him?

"Ana, are you ready?" Mea's voice outside her door broke her train of thought. "Kavath and the children are outside the ship."

"Just about." Ana took one last look in the mirror and nodded. Yes, she was ready. It was time she took charge of her love life. Up to now she'd not had a love affair worthy of the name and she might never get this kind of opportunity again. It was time give herself something to remember.

Humming the tune Mea had taught last night, Ana turned to leave her small cabin

but when she reached the door, she had a sudden thought. Turning around, she went to the small cabinet next to her bed where she found the anti-conception pills she'd stored—just in case they were needed.

After washing one of them down with water, Ana joined her friend in the hallway. Now she was ready.

* * * *

Jack busied himself with adjusting the tuning pegs of his instrument and listening carefully to the sound of the strings, but in truth his attention was mostly spent in keeping an eye out for his sister's family and their 'nanny' as Sonja had labeled her—Ana, the pretty lady whose sweet face had kept him up most of last night.

Actually it hadn't been her face as much as her sweet kiss that he remembered. A sweet kiss that had surprised him when it had turned far too sensual for comfort. Ana might behave like an innocent but inside her was a passionate woman, one that he knew would be a memorable lover. Too bad he wasn't in the market for a relationship he wanted to remember. He had enough memories of women, enough to last a lifetime.

He'd told her last night that perhaps today things would be simpler, but when he'd dragged himself out of bed this morning the only thing that had changed was that he could no longer pretend that he had any business being interested in Ana. Ana belonged to a people he's once wronged terribly, and he knew if she knew the truth about him she'd be appalled.

He might like her, and desire her but in the end it would be for nothing.

If he'd learned nothing else from watching what his mother had suffered with his father, it was that a good woman needed to have someone in her life who would stand by her. He couldn't be a man like that always there for his woman, but there was no way he'd be like his father, either. His father had neither stayed nor stayed away, but had moved through the lives of his children and their mother like a space phantom, here for a day, then gone for months.

Jack would rather not have a family than be responsible for putting someone he cared for through the uncertainty he'd grown up with. So he'd never have a family and he'd never have a wife. That meant he had no business being interested in a woman like Ana Ranalla, a woman who should be some man's wife.

Jack made one final adjustment to the keys and strummed a long chord. Unfortunately, knowing he shouldn't be interested didn't stop him from being interested. And it wasn't stopping him from keeping watch for Ana's arrival at the village.

It was Kavy and Morgan he saw first, though. Both children ran ahead of their elders. The village children usually kept their distance from him, but as soon as Mea's offspring arrived they closed in on him as if they had no concerns at all about him.

The little girl who so reminded him of his sister when she'd been young perched on a low stool next to him her face rapt as she stared at the guitar in his hands. Her brother stood nearby and looked on with the indifferent air of an older brother.

"Can I touch it?" Kavy asked, one hand already outstretched toward the strings.

Jack smiled indulgently and laid her small fingers on the taut lengths of wire lying across the open hole. "It is a Traveler instrument. Hard to damage and easy to fix. It was made to be touched, little one."

Her eyes widened as he strummed softly on the strings and they vibrated under her fingers. "They tickle."

Morgan gave up his pretend indifference and came closer. "Can I try them, too?"

With a nod Jack made room on his bench for the boy and let both children feel the strings as he continued to test his tuning. When he was satisfied he played several long chords to finish. "Later on perhaps I'll show you how to play a simple song my grandfather taught me."

"Really?" Morgan and little Kavy were both overjoyed. "That would be great!" the boy said.

Jack looked over to see his sister and her husband watching them with big smiles, Ana standing next to them. "But now you need to go sit down. I think the wedding is about to start."

Sure enough the entire village, Travelers and newcomers alike had assembled and filled the benches lined up along a narrow aisle. Down that aisle would walk the bride and groom together. When they arrived at the front they'd declare their love in front of the officiating village elders. The elders would then declare them husband and wife and the ceremony would be over.

Jack's part was to play and sing the marriage song, with Mea's help, as the young couple walked down the aisle. Traveler weddings were simple, but as meaningful as any other marriage ceremony in the universe.

Nearby Kavath selected an empty bench and gestured to the children to join him. Jack watched them go and pulled the stool that Kavy had used closer to him. That's where Mea would sit when she sang the higher parts of the wedding song. He tried to shake off his nervousness at performing in front of such a large group when he hadn't done that in so long. Thank goodness his sister would be joining him. Her pure soprano had always been the highlight of the song and when she sang no one ever cared how well he performed.

To Jack's surprise, Mea wasn't the one to sit next to him. Instead Ana took her place.

She was wearing a colorful skirt and embroidered blouse, the traditional clothes that he knew Gaian women wore. The loose and low-necked top gave him a glimpse of the well-shaped breasts he'd felt pressed against him last night. Ana looked younger than he knew she was, almost a girl still although he knew how much of a woman she really was. As she settled into her seat she even seemed a little shy of him.

He couldn't help his physical reaction—even as he wondered at it. When had a blushing woman made him hard this way?

Jack shook his head and leaned close to her trying to ignore whatever perfume it was that she used. Or maybe it wasn't a perfume, but just her natural smell? Whatever it was, it was distracting and beside the point. The wedding was about the start and he wasn't going to sing the wedding song by himself.

"What are you doing over here? Go tell Mea I need her," he said quietly.

Ana whispered back. "Mea can't sing with you."

For an instant Jack's heart stuttered and seemed to stop. "What?"

Without meeting his eyes, Ana continued to fuss with her skirt. "Mea says her

voice has changed since having the children. Gotten deeper and she can't sing as high as she could. She can't do the descant."

Jack blinked in alarm. "She said she'd do this with me."

"She sent me instead. She taught me her part last night." Finally Ana looked at him and smiled with what he was sure was supposed to be confidence. Even so he heard a thready tremor in her voice. "Don't worry. I can make the high notes."

It wasn't the high notes he was worried about. "The song is sung in the old language."

That didn't seem to phase Ana. "She taught me that, too. It's okay, Jack. I don't need to know what the words mean to pronounce them."

Jack wanted to argue further, but just then Tomas and Barbette showed up at the head of the aisle and Williams, the head of the clan nodded to him.

Jack put his hands on the strings, but hesitated. He knew what to play, but for a moment the first chord of the song escaped him. He'd played it note-perfect several times last night when sleep had eluded him, but now, for the life of him, he couldn't remember it now.

He swallowed hard and considered begging out of playing.

Ana put her hand on his knee. "Just play as if we were the only ones here, Jack," she whispered. "Like you did last night in the forest."

Jack took a deep breath and nodded. His fingers found the right places and then he played the introductory chord, then the second one and those that followed. After the introduction he sang the first stanza, which was the man's part. At first he sang tentative, but he continued with growing confidence. He made it through and went back to the musical bridge that preceded the woman's part of the song.

To Jack's surprise, when it was Ana's turn to sing, she came in right on time and in tune.

In fact, more than just in tune ... her voice was clear and lovely and, if possible, even better in the higher range than Mea's ever had been. Jack found himself smiling as he listened to her complete her part of the song and go to silence as he repeated the bridge once more.

Then they were both singing the duet—Ana's voice soaring over his nearly effortlessly. It was the best rendition of the wedding song he could remember hearing.

Something had been added. Jack and Mea had sung the wedding song frequently when they were children, but he'd never before heard the song performed by an adult man and woman who weren't related. Ana had claimed that she didn't know what the words meant, but Mea must have told her something of what they meant.

The lyrics described how two people had found their match in each other and would be parted no longer. They would put aside all else in favor of their relationship. The song was a declaration of love and commitment between a man and woman and Ana sang it as if her heart was in her voice.

Singing the Traveler's wedding song with Ana was considerably different from singing it with his sister.

By the time they'd finished the last note, Jack's hand was practically shaking on the strings and when he looked up he saw that Ana had tears in her eyes. A respectful

hush had come over the crowd as they played and the silence persisted after they finished. For a few moments Jack could pretend that he and Ana really were alone.

Finally Chieftain Williams, head of the elders, cleared his throat at the front of the assembly and Jack and Ana turned to the wedding couple.

Williams invited Tomas and Babette to recite their vows and the ceremony began. Jack rested his instrument on his lap and with his free hand covered Ana's hand, which still rested on his knee. For a woman whose people couldn't touch other people, she certainly seemed to like touching him.

The ceremony ended, the newly married couple walking back down the aisle. Without even thinking about it Jack began playing the instrumental music that he used to play at the end of weddings, a joyful tune full of hope and sweetness.

Not any more sweet than Ana or with more hope than he currently felt. Perhaps things might become simple today after all. Simple enough for them to explore this attraction they held for each other.

Chapter Eight

Traveler weddings were colorful, boisterous, and lively affairs. Never comfortable in a crowd and overwhelmed by the attention she and Jack had gotten with their performance, Ana stood to one side and watched as the villagers celebrated their newest couples marriage with songs and dancing, food and drink. The ceremony had been touching and sweet, but now the Travelers were celebrating and she'd never seen anything like it before.

Gaians didn't actually have weddings in the usual sense. After a man and woman attached, they exchanged bands and declared themselves a couple, something that often happened without witnesses. Later, a party might be organized by their families to celebrate the new couple, but that was generally a quiet and calm affair.

Nothing like this. Ana stood closer to Jack, holding his arm as men and women surged around her, high in spirits and full of them as well. And with good reason were they intoxicated. She'd tried a little of the Traveler's local brew and had been shocked at its potency, afterward preferring to stick to the much lighter ale or even water.

She expected Jack to drink more, but he surprised her in staying relatively sober. Instead of drinking he watched her carefully, staying near her at all times. There had been a connection between them when they'd sung together this afternoon and that had continued into the evening. More and more she felt comfortable to be near him.

More than comfortable. She enjoyed being with him. Enjoyed the feel of his hand on her back. Enjoyed what it felt like to hold his arm.

So far he'd said little about her singing with him and she wondered what was on his mind. She knew men were usually quiet about their feelings, but his silence was driving her slightly crazy.

Finally she couldn't stand his stillness any longer. "Your people certainly know how to party."

Jack shot her an amused glance. "You might say that. The Travelers have always had a hard enough life that when a celebration is warranted, we like to do it right."

"And marriage warrants a celebration?"

"Always. It is rare enough even among our people to find someone you want to live with forever." Jack looked over to where the happy couple sat on a bench together with friends and family hovering over them. Both Tomas and Babette looked overwhelmed by the attention, but their arms were around one another and Ana saw how they faced the crowd together, each taking strength from the other's presence.

Having stated vows, they were a couple now, in their minds and in the minds of the people around them, as much a couple as any normal Gaian man and wife.

More a couple than she and Loran had been. Ana shook her head. She was not going to think about Loran now and what had happened to their marriage. They'd been aberrations, exceptions to the rule. Most Gaians had very satisfactory marriages.

Jack cleared his throat, catching her attention. "I didn't get a chance to thank you for singing with me."

Ana tried to shrug it off. "It was my pleasure."

"You've done it before, sung publicly?"

"Not in years." Not since Loran's death, in fact. "But I sang for the children so Mea knew I could do the song."

"How much of it did you understand?" He said the words carefully, Ana thought. She knew the basic premise of the song, but there was that one set of lyrics that she'd gotten Mea to explain when she'd heard their intensity.

Ana answered just as carefully. "There is that one line about 'to death us part, I will love you.'"

"Ah. You did understand that. And do you believe in love until death, Ana?"

"I believe that it happens for a great many people."

"Did it for you? With your husband that is?"

Her voice caught in her throat. "I ..." she began but just then a familiar couple charged over, Sonja and a dark-haired man that Ana didn't know.

"Hey, song-birds, the dancing is about to start." Sonja's face was flushed and her usual wary expression seemed banished through the power of drink. "You should both be getting over to the dance floor."

Jack all but rolled his eyes. "Song-bird, is it? Don't you remember who pays your salary?"

Sonja grinned at him. "Not only my salary, but you've promised me that fat bastard's ass if he ever comes back here. But that doesn't mean I don't like your singing, boss. You're really good and should do more of it." She gave Ana a sly glance. "You should do a lot more of a lot of other things too. Why don't you take your fellow birdie and dance with her?"

"We were talking—"

"Too much talk, not enough action." She grabbed Jack by the hands. "I've got an idea. Ryan, you take Ana and I'll get Jack on the floor." With that, she dragged Jack away leaving Ana to stare wide-eyed at her abandoned companion.

Ryan gave her a lop-sided smile and a shrug. "You heard the lady. She outranks me." He put one hand on her back before Ana could protest and pushed her gently in the direction Sonja and Jack had gone.

Immediately Ana felt a surge of panic, but she controlled it as best she could. This man was harmless to her. She felt no interest other than friendship coming from him. Uncomfortable as she might be, she could dance with him so long as they didn't get too close. The Traveler dances Mea had taught her last night were like the folk-dances she'd seen in old Earth films, mostly done without touching your partner.

Since the steps were new to her, Ana had to stay focused on getting them correct and she found that the occasional touch of Ryan's hand didn't bother her as much as she'd expected. In fact by the end of the first dance she was happily whirling around the smooth metal platform the villagers had set up in the same space they'd used for the marriage hall.

Overhead small lamps were strung on long ropes to illuminate the floor against

the approaching night. Next to the platform sat a group of musicians, playing string instruments she'd only seen in those same old Earth films. After the second dance, Ana and Ryan took a break to watch them play.

The guitars she knew already, but there was a similar instrument that was much smaller and played with a long slender wand. A fiddle, Ryan told her as the musicians were tuning up.

"Also we have horns, and a bass, plus there is the electronic music that Krause creates for us. It all blends together."

Ana nodded at the musicians who conversed and checked out their instruments. Every once in a while someone would play a short riff which the other musicians would then take up. "Trying to decide what to play next?" she asked.

"Probably," Ryan said, but his eyes weren't on her and Ana realized he seemed distracted. She looked where he was staring and realized that he was intent on Sonja, who appeared to be in a heated argument with Jack on the other side of the platform.

Ryan frowned. "That doesn't look so good. I don't want her upset tonight."

For a brief moment Ana wondered why, then she realized the man was more than a little enamored of the slender blonde he'd said out-ranked him. She had to hide a smile over that ... Ryan must have the same ambition she did for the evening.

"Maybe we should go interrupt?"

"Oh, I think so," Ryan said, pushing away from the narrow railing that separated the dance platform from the musicians. "But I think you should stay here. No telling what they are arguing about and you don't want to get involved. I'll send Jack over to you."

Ana considered going after him. She wanted to know what had Jack looking so heated, but she couldn't very well chase after Ryan. In the meantime the musicians seemed to have made a decision as to what song to do next and struck up a slower dance than the ones that had come before. Ana smiled as the tune registered with her ... it was one of the few dances Mea had taught her where the man actually had his arms around his partner. For a moment she imagined how it would be to dance with Jack.

"Ah, you're finally free!" The stranger's voice startled Ana and she turned to see a man she'd met the day before standing next to her, Grant Johan. Occasionally during the dancing she'd caught sight of him watching her with hard and interested eyes, and she'd turned from him quickly.

Now that Ryan had left her alone he'd apparently sought her out. Ana leaned back against the rail, hoping to find a way to make the newcomer go away. A glance in the direction of Ryan, Jack, and Sonja showed they were too intent to notice her predicament.

The stranger didn't seem to notice her distress. "I've been promising myself a dance with you, Gaian lady."

"I'm sorry, but I don't dance with strangers."

"Oh you can't say that. I warrant you didn't know Ryan before this evening and you've danced with him all night. But I know he's only got eyes for the fair Sonja so that leaves you for me, don't it?" He grabbed her hand before she could pull away and dragged her into the dancing crowd. "Now you wouldn't want to give Grant a hard time,

would you doll? It's just a dance after all."

He pulled her into his arms and quickly Ana realized that without making a scene she was trapped in Grant's arms. She smelled Traveler's home-brew on his breath and knew there was going to be no reasoning with him.

Miserably she tried to relax and fought down her nausea. As the man had said it was only a dance. How bad could it get?

Then Grant pulled her close to him, breathed hard into her face, and Ana knew it was going to get pretty damn bad.

* * * *

Jack's patience was wearing really thin. Yes, he was interested in Ana but he didn't want everyone in on that, including his second-in-command. Surely a man could spend a little time with a woman without the other women in his life trying to make a big deal over it.

Maybe he was more interested in Ana than he had a right to be, given what she was and who he was, given the war and his role in it, given the fact that he hadn't been with a woman as sweet as her in God-only-knew how long. Ana was clearly someone who deserved a hell of a lot more than a man like him.

Even so, he was tempted to act on most of the inappropriate, but enticing ideas, he got when he was around her. But that was all private. Dancing with Ana would be a public declaration of what she meant to him and that wasn't something he was ready to do.

He'd no plan to dance with her the way his second-in-command seemed to think he should, that being the crux of the argument they'd been involved in for the past half-hour. Sonja's point had been that since Ryan could dance with Ana, there was no reason he couldn't.

Sonja had continued that argument as he'd watched Ryan enjoying Ana's charms, laughing and dancing and doing everything he wanted to do with Ana and tried to convince his second that he didn't. He couldn't remember being as frustrated in his life. All he wanted to do was walk away from Sonja, grab Ana and get her the hell out of there.

His mood didn't improve when Ryan showed up and threw his arm around Sonja's shoulders. Knowing the petite blonde's "don't touch me" inclinations, he was surprised when she allowed his pilot to leave his arm there rather than tearing it out and beating him over the head with it.

"Now why is my date so passionate when she's not with me?" Ryan murmured loud enough for Jack to hear.

Sonja glared at him but didn't argue, surprising Jack again. Maybe his second was succumbing to Ryan's persistence. "Jack thinks Gaians don't like to dance and that's why he's keeping hands off of Ana. It is a dumb argument and we all know it."

"She danced with me," Ryan said, "and seemed to enjoy herself. Also Kavath and Mea have been out on the floor many times."

"They're a married couple. Unmarried women don't dance with unmarried men." Jack said. "And before you say anything, you might as well be married with the way you keep going after Sonja."

He regretted saying so much when Ryan's face flushed bright pink, visible even under the dim lights overhead. He dropped his arm off Sonja's shoulder and blanched after looking into her wary face. "I didn't know it was that obvious."

Sonja stared back at him. "It isn't. But the boss sees us together too often."

Jack shook his head. "Listen you two, why don't you figure out your love life before you start messing around with anyone else's."

"You have a point, boss." Ryan grabbed her hand. "Listen, maybe we should go someplace and talk."

Sonja still looked like someone had hit her with a sonic wrench. "Ryan ... I don't know," she sighed. "Maybe that is a good idea." She glanced up at Jack. "Don't you do anything stupid while we're gone, like kick Ana out of your life forever. That woman is good for you."

Jack watched them head in the direction of the woods where he knew Sonja had a hidden spot she liked to use instead of the ship when she was on the planet. A throwback to her childhood, he expected. She'd mentioned often enough the tree house where she'd liked to sleep on hot nights as child. Not that he'd ever accuse the diminutive, but deadly, woman he relied on as second on his ship of being childish. Sonja was simply different.

As Ana was different. Yes, Ana was good for him ... and too good for him as well. Maybe he should rethink his idea of bringing her back to his place. If he were smart he'd head back to his caravan right now before he got any more involved with her and ended up hurting one or both of them—most likely both.

But it didn't seem right to just leave without saying good night so he'd better look for her before he went. His eyes swept the area around the edges of the dance floor, in particular looking at the railing where he'd last seen Ana with Ryan but she wasn't there. It took a minute to find her but when he did, he wasn't happy at all.

Contrary to what he'd told Ryan and Sonja, Ana was again on the dance floor, but this time her partner wasn't the safe man that he knew Ryan to be. She was dancing with Grant, one of the men he and his crew had rescued off the *Bronda* and he'd already heard some complaints about the man from Williams, headman of the village.

Grant was apparently a womanizer who'd tried to seduce a number of the village women, not always taking 'no' as an answer. From what Jack had heard the man had been slapped several times and even kneed once in the crotch. Traveler women didn't take well to being man-handled.

How Grant had managed to get onto the dance floor near the last woman he should be close to, Jack didn't know, but he was going to find out.

Chapter Nine

Ana was fighting serious nausea by the time the music ended and the dance was over. She breathed a sigh of relief and pulled out of Grant's arms, hoping to get away from him before he could say or do anything, but it wasn't to be. The next song started right away and she was again pulled against him.

"Please," she said. "You're holding me too tight."

He didn't release her, instead holding her closer until his breath was hot on her face. "But you are such a sweet little thing. You should like being held close."

"The lady said she didn't. Maybe you should listen to her and let her go." At Jack's voice over her shoulder, Ana could have wept with relief. She tried to pull away again without it turning into a fight, but Grant didn't let go.

If Grant was impressed by Jack's sudden appearance he didn't show it. Instead he kept a firm hand on her and sneered. "Why if it isn't Black Jack himself? And what do you think you're doing defending a lady's honor? Kind of an odd occupation, given what I've heard about you."

Jack's voice turned low and mean. "Whatever it is you've heard, when a woman says no, she means no. From what I've heard you have a problem understanding that."

Grant's sneer continued. "How do you know she means it? She's a Gaian and everyone knows how tricky they can be."

Ana had had enough of being held too tight by a man who made her sick. She'd also had enough insults over being Gaian.

Raising one foot with well-placed accuracy, she kicked Grant hard in the shin. He cursed and loosened his grip on her, and she slipped out of his arms to stand by Jack.

"When I say something, I mean it," she told Grant, now rubbing his injured leg. "Touch me again and I won't stop at kicking your leg. I'll aim a lot higher."

Ana had put enough emphasis in the last word to get a reaction. Both Jack and Grant flinched and stepped away. Around them people stopped dancing and Ana felt the weight of their approving stares.

It would have been a proud moment for her if her stomach hadn't finally had enough of the crowd on the dance floor, the smell of Traveler brew, and tension of being the center of attention. Worried she was about to disgrace herself in front of the entire village, Ana dashed for the edge of the platform and in short order the privacy of the woods a few steps beyond.

Still fighting queasiness she stepped behind a tree and took deep breaths, hoping to calm her stomach. Suddenly she felt Jack's presence behind her and the weight of his hand on her shoulder.

"Maybe we should get out of here," he murmured into her ear.

Ana turned to him and felt him gather her into his arms. She felt safe and the tension in her stomach eased. This was where she wanted to be, she knew. It would have

been fun to dance with him, but going someplace with Jack certainly had promise.

She nodded and saw him smile. "Wait here," he told her. "I'll just get my guitar."

While he was gone, Ana thought about what she was about to do. Was she really going to this man's bed? A surge of excitement came at that thought and she smiled.

* * * *

Sonja and Ryan were involved in far more than talk when they heard Jack and Ana pass beneath Sonja's private hideaway in the woods, a small platform she'd built into a closely bunched set of trees that was nearly hidden by leaves. They broke off, kissing long enough to watch the pair travel the barely-there path, Jack's arm securely around the woman's shoulders.

From the direction they were going, Sonja knew the only place they could be headed was Jack's caravan. She smiled. "Well, well, that's a good thing."

"You expected it, didn't you?"

"I hoped. Jack needs her."

Ryan leaned up on one arm, his reddish brown hair tousled and making him look years younger than she knew he was. "What makes you say that? Jack's had lots of women."

Sonja shook her head. "Jack's women have all been easy. He picks them up as he travels and leaves them behind without a thought. Not one of them has made him leave the path for long and that's not good. I know where the road he's on leads, and it isn't a good place for him."

"What place is that?"

Sonja knew she was revealing too much, but she couldn't help it. "It's the place where you are alone and you convince yourself that is a good thing. That you shouldn't be around people, that no one should care for you, that you don't deserve better. That's Jack's road."

Ryan regarded her with thoughtful eyes. "You know the road to that place because you walk it yourself, Sonja. Perhaps you should think about following your own advice and find a different path."

Sonja sighed. Ryan was right, but she'd gone too far already to find a new destination. "I'd leave it if I could. You know that."

Ryan was silent for a while. When he finally spoke there was more than a little sadness in his voice. "What I know is that you need a man to make you want to go a different way than what you've chosen for yourself. I'd like to be that man for you, but I'm not ... am I?"

She reached her hand up to touch his face. "Perhaps not, but the road is a lot less lonely when you are with me."

"Well then, perhaps that's enough for now," Ryan said. He kissed her again. And for that moment it was.

* * * *

Jack's caravan was a marvel of efficiency, Ana decided. It really was a miniature house, made to be moved to wherever he wanted to set up his home. About as close to being impermanent as you could get and still have a place to call your own around you.

She identified with that idea. Since her husband had died she hadn't even tried to make a home out of the places she'd lived. Everything she cared about was in her cabin on Mea and Kavath's ship. She'd left behind nothing on Gaia when she'd left with them on their tour of the outer colonies.

Some of that was because she'd owned very little over the years, but she'd deliberately gotten rid of anything she couldn't take with her. Perhaps she hadn't really thought she'd ever return there. It was true that she hadn't thought of her home planet as home in a long time.

Jack's home was here in this caravan. She could tell by the personal touches in decorations ... strictly male touches like a set of well-used knives with colorful handles lined up and fixed onto the wall. On another wall was a rack into which he carefully placed his guitar.

Part of the living space was set up for sitting with comfortable looking chairs. A small carved wooden table and attached seats flanked a new and expensive combination cooking and food synthesizer unit, a mixture of new and old. In a corner there was a workbench that looked remarkably similar to the one Mea had installed on their ship.

Or maybe not so remarkable ... it was the 'tinker' in her and in Jack that made them Travelers, able to make whatever was needed out of the scrap of the universe.

A funny thought occurred to her. What would this Traveler man be able to do with her scrap of a heart?

The one part of the caravan she could not see was screened off, but she bet that the hidden space held a bed. Ana let her eyes linger on the screen a little long and when she looked at Jack he was watching her. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

Then he stepped forward and took her into his arms, and they kissed again and it was so good she gave up thinking for a while. So good to feel wanted, to have his lips caressing hers, to feel a man's hard body against her softer one.

No, not just a man's body, but Jack's body. Jack with his funny smile that was like the sun coming up. He wasn't smiling now but she felt his body humming with awareness of her, and it seemed a happy hum. Here was someone she could make happy and all she had to do was what came natural to every other woman in the universe.

Every other non-Gaian woman in the universe and she was a Gaian woman. She wasn't so sure she could do this. She broke off the kiss and looked into Jack's eyes. His brilliant blue eyes filled with desire and want, and inside Ana something woke up, something she hadn't felt since her husband. Something even stronger than what she'd felt with her husband.

It was passion—passion that made her heart skip and beat faster, passion that made her limbs weak and her body tighten. Passion made her aware of his scent, warm and masculine, and made her want to bury her face into his shoulder and breathe him in.

She wanted his mouth on hers and his hands on her breasts. She wanted the hot bulge she felt against her abdomen, but she didn't want it there. She needed it lower, much lower, pressing against her own sex and rubbing it awake.

Ana wanted all of Jack, wanted him everywhere and in particular she wanted him inside her.

Could she do this, make love to a man outside the bounds of marriage, to a man

not of her people? Oh yes, provided it was this man. Provided it was Jack, the man she could do anything with. From the way he was touching her, and the way he held her against him, he clearly wanted to make love to her.

Jack pulled out the waistband of her skirt and ran his hand up under her top. She'd forgone any kind of undergarment to secure her breasts so he found them without any trouble. "Soft," he whispered as he caressed them. Ana enjoyed his massage, but when his fingers caressed her nipples she moaned aloud.

Jack chuckled. "Like that do you?"

"Yes," she whispered against his lips.

"So sensitive, ready ... you are ready aren't you?" Jack leaned back from her and stared into her face, his face suddenly serious. "You know where this will end."

"End?" Suddenly befuddled, Ana stared back at him. What did he mean?

"End up in bed. With me. You are going to bed with me, right?"

Now she understood. He wanted her agreement so there would be no confusion. "Oh, yes. If you don't mind."

"Mind?" Jack laughed. "Oh, it will be my pleasure, I assure you." And he kissed her again and she knew just how much pleasure he'd be taking.

Their clothes came off in short order and ended in a pile on the floor, their hands suddenly fumbling in process of removal. They wanted to be together too much and being dressed, there was too much between them.

Fortunately neither her skirt or his shirt and pants had anything tricky about their fastenings because by the time she was down to her underpants she was shaking. Jack stopped, kneeling before her in preparation for sliding her underwear off, and took her hands in his and raised them to his lips.

"Don't worry, sweetling. It will be fine."

That was easier for him to say. Jack had, she was sure, lots of practice at the art of making love while she'd only been with one man and only a few times at that. Something suddenly occurred to her.

"Jack, I'm not very good at this."

Again she heard his deep-throated chuckle. "There is no such thing as being a bad lover, Ana, not if you're with the right person."

"Are you the right person?"

He paused, as if struck by the thought. Suddenly serious Jack raised his head to stare at her. "For you, now, in this place, yes. That much I can promise. For the rest—"

She leaned down to kiss him on the lips, silencing him. "Let's focus only on now."

With one movement Jack stripped her underpants off, then stood and lifted her into his arms. In a blur he pushed past the partition, sliding it away to reveal the bed. He held her for a moment longer as if relishing the feel of her in his arms before laying her down.

Before he joined her Ana took a moment to examine his naked form, now that she wasn't distracted by his kissing. She saw for the first time his body, no longer covered by his clothes, all of him now visible to her.

Jack took her breath away. She'd known he was solidly built, with wide

shoulders and a slender waist but now she could see the breath of his chest, the sprinkling of dark curly hair that covered it, just right for running her fingers through. She saw that for all the drinking she'd seen him do, he must work out as well because his abdomen was as firm as his biceps.

Mea had said he'd been part of an elite Earthforce military unit and that physical fitness was part of their credo. Jack seemed to have taken that credo to heart and kept up with the exercising well past his leaving the service.

His chest impressed her so much that she almost missed letting her eyes wander lower, but when she did she no longer so interested in his upper body.

It had been a long time since she'd seen an erection, but Jack's drove all other memories from her mind. *He's beautiful.* That's all she could think of, was how hard, long, and gorgeous his cock was. It had been over six years since she'd had a man inside of her and it took her breath away that this man, that cock, was going to be inside her sometime very soon.

Jack didn't seem to note her preoccupation with his apparatus, since when she looked up to see his face he seemed intent on staring at her breasts. He reached out to touch them almost reverently.

Ana almost laughed. Jack seemed as stunned by her as she was by him. But how was that possible when he'd seen so many women and what were likely more perfect breasts before.

"You are so beautiful," Jack said, his voice pure worship. He looked up at her and Ana saw his absolute sincerity and she nearly melted on the spot.

"It's nice of you to say so," she said quietly.

"Nothing nice about it. You are glorious, Ana. Perfect. I can't wait to be inside you."

She reached out to him. "What are we waiting for?"

His smile as he came towards told her she'd said the right thing. "I can't think of a thing."

Jack pushed her onto her back and climbed closer to her, taking his time to worship her body with his hands, and his mouth. For a moment she thought about how this was so much like what she'd expected her first sexual experience to be like and hadn't been. But then she banished from her mind all thoughts of her husband and the disappointment that had been her marriage.

This was all new. This was with Jack and she didn't need to think about anyone else.

She reached for him and he didn't disappoint her, sliding over her to rest on top. His lips found her nipples and now he was worshipping in earnest, earning from her one small cry after another.

Ana hadn't had this kind of experience before, a man loving her so thoroughly that she could barely remember her name. With a moan Ana gave into her first real orgasm in too long to think about right now. She climaxed from just Jack suckling her nipples, her body shivering as her mind sped off to another place.

When she came back, Jack was watching her with something akin to wonder in his eyes. "You looked like you needed that."

Ana found the words to answer. "I need you," she said simply, holding out her arms to him.

He rose above her, fitting himself to the apex of her legs, eyes still lost in wonder. Ana felt the same wonder. She felt the blunt tip of him testing her opening, his actions tentative as if afraid he'd hurt her.

Putting her hands on his ass, she pushed slightly. "Make love to me, Jack."

Again there was that strange smile of his. "My pleasure."

He drove home within her, filling her completely and it was more than good, great, or anything else. It was pure pleasure and for a moment they stared at one another, Jack covering her, his arms propping his torso above her, Ana beneath him staring into his eyes. Such blue eyes.

Jack took a couple of deep breaths. "You feel so good Ana. So good."

"You feel good, too." It was the understatement of all understatements, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

"Just feel, Ana," Jack whispered. "That's all you need to do."

And then Jack began to move within her and that was all she could do was feel. Feel and move with him, straining with him to become closer.

It was good and then it was far beyond good. It was great.

Very great.

They made love, it might have been for hours, or just a few moments, but it was all feeling and wonder. It was beyond good, all the way to great and then beyond great to something else.

It was love, perhaps for the first time in Ana's experience, perhaps not for Jack, but she no longer cared about any of that. All she wanted was to enjoy herself in making love with this man.

Her next orgasm was fantastic, the one after that amazing, and then all she could do was feel and climax as he drove into her again and again. Ana writhed beneath him, her hands moving on his back, caressing and loving him and experiencing each rush of pleasure until she was nearly worn out from it. In just this one evening she was making up for six years of being alone.

Just when she thought she couldn't do it again, that Jack had wrung every bit of passion from her, he gave one more push, deeper than before. Then he stiffened and she knew he was coming, his cock pulsing inside her. It pushed her over the brink once more and Ana came apart underneath him as he cried out, in victory, triumph, or some such thing.

All Ana knew was that Jack clutched her close to him and she shook underneath him and then it was over, but not really.

Not really because while they were finished making love, Jack was still wrapped around her, holding her close like he was afraid she might leave him and he didn't want that. No, she didn't think he wanted that at all. He spoke soft words into her ear, whispering them, sometimes in the Traveler language that he knew and she didn't.

Words like the ones in the song they'd sung earlier that day.

Words of love, she knew that much just from his tone. And Ana smiled to herself because for the first time in so many years she felt loved, really loved.

Maybe having sex with Jack would turn out to be a mistake. But she'd be hard pressed to prove it to herself anytime soon.

Chapter Ten

On waking, Sonja found herself still in Ryan's arms. After they'd made love, he'd insisted on holding her close and with them sleeping in her secret spot she couldn't very well slip away as she normally did. Usually Sonja didn't like cuddling after sex but apparently Ryan did, or at least he did with her. It was all she could do to avoid a sigh.

This had been a mistake. She'd known for a long time that her shipmate had feelings for her beyond what was normal for compatriots who spent a lot of time together. The way he held her now, she knew just how serious he was about her. He'd implied last night that the little she was willing to give him, a night of what she had to admit had been pretty great sex, would be enough for him.

Now she doubted that was true and things would very likely become very awkward between them. *Damn it.* She hated when that happened.

For a moment she wondered how she was going to be able to even get out of the man's arms without a fuss. Thank goodness he was asleep at the moment ... maybe she could loosen his hold on her without waking him ...

The soft reverberation of a shuttle engine flying just over the top of her tree made her efforts to not wake Ryan futile. He jerked awake, eyes popping open, a startled look on his face.

"What was that?"

Every muscle tensed Sonja sprang to a kneeling position on the small platform beneath them and peered through the leaves that hid them from the air as much as from the ground.

The sound of those engines, fitted with some kind of silencing muffler. Not only did they belong to no vehicle she knew of on this planet, they were familiar. Familiar as in she'd heard similarly muffled engines before, sometime in her distant past. Sonja stared at the slow vehicle as it passed, noting the dark coloring that made it nearly invisible. There was something in its slow movement that struck her as deliberate. Whoever it was, was trying not to be noticeable.

They were also heading right for the village.

An unknown shuttle with quiet engines, flying low and undetectable to where a village of men, women, and children slumbered unaware after a night of intensive partying.

Sonja's mouth dried as she remembered where she'd heard where similar engines before. The night of the raid on her parent's farm when she and her sisters had been taken. That had been the sound filtering into her tree house, the sound that had woken her.

"Raiders," she said quietly to Ryan after the shuttle had passed, then grabbed her scattered clothes and began pulling them on. Ryan said nothing, merely followed her lead. As soon as they were dressed and booted, he followed her down the trunk of the

tree, where she'd cut small hand and footholds into the bark to create a secret ladder to her hideout. When they were both on the ground she led the way down the path toward the village at a full run. Maybe if they could beat the shuttle to the village they could warn the Travelers.

BUT AS SOON AS THEY WERE CLOSE TO THE VILLAGE EDGE SHE SMELLED THE STRANGELY SWEET SCENT SHE REMEMBERED FROM HER OWN ABDUCTION. GRABBING RYAN SHE PULLED BACK AND INTO THE SHELTER OF THE TREES. A SECOND SHUTTLE HAD COME A DIFFERENT ROUTE AND WAS ALREADY IN PLACE, HOVERING A FEW FEET OVER THE DANCE PLATFORM. SEVERAL DARK FIGURES, FACES MASKED AND CARRYING TANKS ON THEIR BACKS, MOVED BETWEEN THE FAR TOO SILENT HOMES.

Every here and there a body lay unmoving on the ground, bright-colored clothing marking him or her as one of the Travelers. Once in a while one of those carrying a tank would check on someone lying so still on the ground and appear to check their vitals. They paid particular attention to the women.

Sonja knew who they were, slavers looking for women to send to the illegal Gaian marriage meets. They were making sure that their gas didn't damage the merchandise.

In addition to the men with the tanks were several others carrying large, very illegal pulse weapons, watching the forest for signs of trouble. It made Sonja's fingers itch, seeing those guns, knowing hers were locked in the ship at Jack's insistence.

It just wasn't fair that the bad guys had guns and all she had was a knife for protection.

The wind shifted toward them and the gas smell increased and Sonja suddenly felt lightheaded in its wake. She swayed and Ryan grabbed her, tugging her backwards. Together they slid further back into the forest. As her mind cleared Sonja's thoughts raced as to what to do.

It was too late to stop them by warning the village. Everyone here was probably knocked out by the slaver's sleeping gas ... or worse. She knew they weren't the kind of men who would stop at murder to get what they wanted. So far she hadn't heard laser blasts so most likely the gas had taken care of everyone here.

Fortunately the gas they used would knock people out for hours, but not hurt them in the long term, at least as far as she knew. Her parents and younger siblings hadn't been harmed when they'd taken her and her sisters, so most likely everyone they didn't take would be okay ... physically, at least. How the families of the women they were planning to take would cope with their loss was another story.

The shuttles were the kind used for transportation from the ground to low orbit. No doubt the slaver's main ship was far above them where it hovered undetected. The men on the ground would load up the shuttles with the women they wanted and fly them up to the ship, but a shuttle like that could only carry ten women at a time in addition to the crew. Several trips would be needed if they wanted to take every unmarried woman in the village.

That gave Sonja and Ryan time to do something to thwart the slavers.

"We need to get back to our ship," Ryan whispered. "Maybe we can use the virus to disable the slaver's ship before they can leave."

Sonja nodded. That was the best plan they had so far. Neither she nor Ryan had more than a pair of knives on them and they faced more than a dozen bad guys with superior arms who were no doubt expecting trouble. Add to that the fact that neither of them had masks to keep them from succumbing to the sleeping gas—and a direct assault was clearly a poor choice.

Just as she nodded to him the shuttle that had passed over her refuge arrived at the village. They ducked as the ship passed close to them before settling next to the one on the dance floor. The door opened and several men came out, one of who went over to one of the men holding a gun.

“Everything going to plan, Harris?”

The other man nodded. “The charges are set?”

“They will be. Our man is setting them to go off in an hour.”

“I thought he’d be done already.”

“We hadn’t figured on Jack’s sister’s ship, so he has to improvise a second bomb. But don’t worry he’s good at what he does. Should be quite an explosion.”

Sonja thought Harris, the man with the gun, looked nervous. “Doesn’t give us much time, Wilcox.”

“Can’t leave it for long. He says that Jack is someplace out of the village. Not here and not on his ship. We don’t want to let the man find us.”

“I thought we were going to take him out now,” Harris said. Even through the mask Sonja thought the man’s voice had a distinct whine.

“We don’t have time to search the whole planet and Grant didn’t know where he was.”

If she’d thought Harris seemed nervous before now he fairly shook now. “Tru ... true enough,” he stuttered.

Wilcox gave him a steady pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry so much. We’ve got Jack right where we want him. He won’t dare interfere with us now that we have his sister to bargain with.”

A chill went up Sonja’s spine. That’s what these folks were after, in addition to the women the Travelers had. They were after a way to neutralize Jack, who’d been interfering with their operations for the past several years.

The names Harris and Wilcox registered now, as the men that Jack An Flena had been shipmates with back during the war. Once, when he’d been deep in his cups Jack had mentioned the pair of them. Wilcox, with Harris’ help had tried to rape Jack’s sister Mea. She’d been rescued by her now husband Kavath, but Jack hadn’t forgotten or forgiven his former friends.

In fact when he’d found out that the pair had gone into the procurement business for the illegal Gaian marriage market, he’d taken great pleasure in thwarting them as often as possible. Now it was apparently the other’s turn to give Jack a hard time, but unfortunately the Travelers and, especially his sister, were going to pay the penalty for it.

But it was mention of blowing up the ships that had her on her feet now. This man of theirs, Grant, was putting explosive charges on the *Wanderlust* and Jack’s sister’s ship, *Traveler’s Choice*. If Wilcox and Harris destroyed their ships, Jack and the Travelers would never be able to follow them and rescue the women.

There wasn't a moment to lose. Sonja grabbed Ryan's arm. "We've got to get to the landing and stop them blowing up our ship!"

Ryan didn't take time to do more than nod, only turned and raced down the trail at a dead run, followed closely by Sonja. One thing she knew he loved probably more than anything else, including her, and was *The Wanderlust*. Sonja prided herself on being an excellent runner, but she was hard-pressed to keep up with him. Ryan ran like a man motivated.

Of course, so was she. If the slavers destroyed the ships then she might be taken too ... not that she'd go without a fight. At the very least she wanted to get her hands on a respirator to avoid succumbing to the sleeping gas. They had some of those on the ship. They also had some very big guns that weren't actually legal to own even within the Outer Colonies.

They moved down the path as quietly as possible at first, but when they figured they were out of earshot of the village they slipped into higher speed. The forest rushed by until they arrived breathless at the edge of the clearing used as a spaceport. Here they stopped and hid behind the trees to observe the area unseen.

What they observed was nothing. No one moved in the clearing, no furtive figures lurking in the dark shadows of the parked ships. Sonja took charge, prodding Ryan's arm and pointing in the direction of the ships, around the edge of the clearing, then to the ground. They would move along the edge to the closest point to their ship then move to it, staying close together and keeping as low as possible to avoid detection. If the slavers' man Grant was still here he'd be hard-pressed to see them unless he knew where to look for them.

The Gaian ship, *Traveler's Choice* was between them and their ship and, as they grew close to it, Sonja saw someone heading toward them from the *Wanderlust*. In the dark shadows of the ships it could have been anyone, but as he passed into a moonlit spot she realized it was someone wearing the loose trousers and open shirt of a Traveler.

One of the village men was involved with the slavers? That put a different light on what was going on. Sonja waved Ryan into the shadows right away and while he looked at her with protest in his eyes, he obeyed. Sonja crept close enough to see the traitor was carrying something bulky in his arms, probably one of the bombs to destroy the ships. He'd have trouble getting to his weapon burdened down like that. She could simply charge forward and catch him off guard.

Of course if she did, he'd probably drop the box and if she was right about it being a bomb, they'd all be in trouble.

From his hiding place, Ryan hissed at her. Sonja hesitated a moment before following him, torn between caution and wanting to confront the man directly. She all but heard Ryan's sigh of relief when she joined him next to one of the Gaian's ship's fins. This business of letting him be her lover was going to get tiresome if he was going to get protective of her when she was taking any kind of risk. She was Jack's second and risk was part of her job. Ryan should know that.

But Ryan's response was second place to the fact that someone wearing Traveler clothes was heading in their direction carrying a small box that she was pretty sure wasn't a harmless fruit basket. Not unless the round "fruit" she could see in the box were on

very long vines that fell to the ground and led into the darkness behind him.

No, those looked far more like wires than vines, and she was reminded of Wilcox's comment about their bomb-expert Grant having to improvise. Most likely the man only had one real ship-killing bomb and as the other man said, had to find a way to make it take both ships out. The smaller devices must be attached to the bomb under their ship and would be set off at the same time.

The man stepped into a shaft of moonlight that illuminated his face. Sonja recognized him and the name Grant finally registered. It was the man she and Jack had taken off the *Bronda* just two days earlier. Apparently Fuller had been carrying one of Wilcox and Harris' men in his hold.

It was clear now how the slavers had managed to find their way to New Baile Na and the location of their runaway slaves. They'd slipped one of their men in among the slaves, probably wearing a tracking device like the one on her earring. With that they could track him right to where Jack had taken the slaves he'd liberated. In addition he'd probably been able to let them know just when the right time to strike was, like after a big wedding party when people would be off-guard.

Damn, but that had been a good plan, Sonja grudgingly admitted, but it gave her an idea as well. She reached up to touch her earring. Perhaps she'd be able to take advantage of that idea later on ... if it became necessary.

As he grew closer Sonja recognized the round "fruit" as concussion grenades. A couple placed near the fin of a ship could cripple it easily. A dozen dropped on the ground at their feet would do considerably more damage, and not just to the ship.

She sure hoped he was being careful with that box because if it dropped more than just the ships would be injured. She and Ryan were too close and Grant would likely take one or both of them with him.

Even so, Grant's plan had an easy way to be defeated. The grenades wouldn't go off by themselves. Take out the big bomb and the smaller ones wouldn't explode.

Sonja leaned over and whispered to Ryan. "Get over to our ship and see if you can't disable whatever they've done there."

"What about you?"

Sonja slipped her favorite knife out of its sheath and grinned with easy menace. "I'll see what I can do about Grant."

Grabbing her arm, Ryan shook his head. "Not a good idea. If he doesn't show back up at the village they'll know something is wrong."

"Let them think that."

Ryan pulled harder on her arm. "Sonja, think for a moment. This isn't the time to take action. We can't fight them directly; there are too many of them and they are too well armed. Even worse, they could kill anyone they don't need and that includes the village children."

Sonja stilled. Ryan had a point. "So we should let them get away from here and into space."

"You know it is the best plan. That way when we strike, they'll have fewer hostages."

She nodded. "Okay then. You go work on the other bomb. Disable it and

whatever Grant is doing won't be effective."

"You aren't going after Grant?"

She shook her head. "Not unless he gets in the way. I'll just keep watch."

* * * *

Ryan checked over the bomb one more time, with the same futile results. It would have to be one of the newer models that he'd never seen before, and as far as he could tell, completely impossible to disarm without cracking the case. He'd managed to remove from it the wires leading to the other ship, but that wasn't going to stop it from blowing up the ship it was still attached to.

He needed a way to get into the device, and the toolkit he kept in his pocket wasn't doing the job. There were better tools inside the ship, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to get to them in time. Instead he worked to free it from the fin. Maybe he could pull it to one side and at least keep the blast damage to a minimum if he wasn't able to get to the tools.

Sonja was keeping an eye on Grant near the other ship, watching make sure he didn't hear them. After a moment there was the sound of a scooter heading away and she came back. "He's gone, went back toward the village." She gave the partially disassembled bomb a long look. "Having any luck?"

"No. These bolts can't be undone." He pointed to the offending fasteners. "I just don't have the right kind of tools to crack the case. If I go further I'm likely to set it off."

"Do you have the ones to remove it from the fin?"

At his nod she shrugged. "Okay then, let's do that."

Between them, they managed to get the device free of the fin and pulled it off to one side of the clearing, then Ryan got his tools and set to work on the bomb in earnest.

"Maybe you should try and get hold of Jack," he said. "He's going to be furious if we don't tell him what's going on."

"I already tried, called both his minicomm and the unit in his caravan. No answer in either place ... as usual."

"Well, maybe you should try again ... or something. Don't just hang over my shoulder, you make me nervous."

Uncharacteristically Sonja didn't snap back at him. "Okay, I ... have something to take care of. I'll be back in a little bit." She disappeared into the ship, leaving him alone for a long time and when she returned she was even quieter.

Finally she tapped him on the shoulder. "I think I know how we can set up the slavers so we can follow them."

"Oh?" The edge of the cover cracked and Ryan eased it open. Now he could get to where the timing mechanism was and he saw on the timer how long they had before it went off. Not long at all, damn it. He needed to stay focused. "Can this wait?"

"No. Not really. If I'm to do this I'll have to act quickly."

Ryan gave up and turned to face her, and then his jaw dropped. "What are you wearing?"

Unlike her usual sleek dark pants and top, Sonja was dressed in a white Traveler blouse and of all things, a skirt. Ryan's jaw dropped as he perused her outfit, and then took in the fact that her blonde hair had been combed out of its usual tight bun and into

loose curls down her neck.

She looked completely unlike herself. She looked like ... like a girl!

"What do you think you are up to?" he asked when he found his voice.

"I'm going to sneak into the village."

"Like that? And without a mask? You'll get caught." Then Ryan figured it out and his heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. "Which is what you want, isn't it?"

She reached up and took off the earring that for years had dangled from her right ear and handed it to him. He didn't have to look at it to see that the tracking chip it held was no longer attached.

"Where did you put it?" he started to ask then realized he didn't really want to know. "Okay. So is it activated?"

Sonja nodded. "Yes, and Jack has the frequency. Just get the earring to him and he'll know what to do. I'm going to head for the village now before they finish loading. I've got to get onto their ship and they won't take me if they know who I am. No one will recognize me like this."

That was for sure. Sonja looking like an ordinary Traveler woman was the last thing the slavers would expect. Ryan doubted even the slaver's spy would recognize her.

"Ryan, you have to get the earring to Jack. He'll know what to do."

"I have to disable this bomb."

"It's far enough away from the ship right now. It can wait. I need you to go find Jack and let him know what is happening."

Ryan grabbed her hand. "I don't want you to do this."

Sonja laughed but the sound was bitter. "It will be fine. Remember, I've been on one of these ships before. They won't hurt me. I'm too valuable for that."

"Only if they don't suspect who you are."

"And they won't." She held up her hands. "Don't I look innocent?"

She looked wonderful and she knew it. "Grant might suspect. After all he's been in the village for two days and a girl as pretty as you are would have caught his eye. He'll wonder where you came from."

"I'll have to take that chance. I watched him set the bombs and he was looking pretty tired. All that drinking during the celebration, then meeting up with the slavers and now setting up explosives—he's had a busy night. I'm guessing that once he gets to the ship he'll head right for his bunk and not see me at all. And if he does—" she patted the side of her boot for emphasis. "I've got a couple blades with his name on them."

Shaking his head, Ryan almost felt sorry for the man. "You think I should head to Jack's now?"

After a moments hesitation Sonja nodded. "That would be best. They need to know what's happening. The ships are safe enough now."

Ryan stood up and faced her. "I don't like this. It's a mistake to underestimate these guys."

"I'm not underestimating them."

"Plus I don't like your putting yourself in their hands. That's just stu—"

"Stupid?" Sonja glared at him. "You weren't going to call me stupid, were you?"

"Boneheaded, irresponsible, and yes, stupid." Ryan glared back. "I love you, you

idiot and I don't want you in those men's hands."

She took a deep breath and once again Ryan saw the fiery little beauty in the softer Sonja standing before him. Fiery—as in about to breathe fire all over him.

"I am not stupid, I do know what I'm doing, and you will follow orders. I still outrank you Ryan. Take that earring and wake Jack and the widow up and inform them of the situation. You're going to need their help."

Ryan's heart plummeted again. Just like that, he knew that whatever relationship he thought he might have had with her was gone. Sonja didn't care for him the way he did her and he wasn't ever going to be more than an occasional lover to him. Stiffly, Ryan got to his feet and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Right away."

He started to move away, but she stopped him with a hand laid on his arm. She must have seen his disappointment and awkwardly tried to make it up to him. "Ryan, I do care for you."

"I know," he said and he did, he realized. "But just not enough and not the way I want you to."

"No. Not enough, I guess. I care about a lot of other things as well. And those are important. We have to stop these guys. Nothing we've built here, you, Jack, and me, will be worth anything otherwise."

He almost found a smile for her. "Yeah, I guess." For a long time he could only stare at her and know that he had lost her ... no, that wasn't really true because he'd never really had her in the first place. Most likely no man ever would break through her shell to the real woman beneath, not with what she'd been through.

Finally he touched her cheek. "You better get to the village or they won't 'capture' you in time."

She gave him a quick smile. "Tell Jack I'm counting on him." And with that she was gone, running toward the village. Ryan watched her until she'd disappeared through the trees before heading for the narrow path leading to where Jack's caravan was set. She was right in one thing—they'd need to hurry if they were going to keep the slavers from getting away with their spoils.

Chapter Eleven

Warm. Jack was warm and comfortable and for once this was in his own bed, in his own caravan. He was warm and comfortable ... and he wasn't alone. Not alone, but with a woman, who was sweet comfort herself.

Ana. A sweet woman of comfort and warmth and she was here with him, asleep next to him. Life didn't get any better than this. Jack tugged her closer, ignoring the soft complaint she made at his disturbing her rest.

His bed, his rules. When a woman slept in his bed, she slept as close to him as possible.

So it was a new rule. It was the first time he'd had a woman in this bed, so he'd just made the rule up, but that didn't matter. New rule or not, Ana was going to sleep in his arms.

Fortunately her complaint was short-lived and she snuggled closer to his chest, her hair soft under his chin, her breath a sweet whisper across his nipples.

Jack closed his eyes and reveled in the sensation. Oh, yes. Comfort and warmth.

He was so comfortable that he'd started to drift back to sleep, which made the sudden pounding on his door all the more irritating. Jack closed his eyes tighter, willing whoever was disturbing them to go away.

But the pounding didn't stop and instead got louder, as if who ever was out there was actually kicking the door. Again there was Ana's soft complaint as he extracted himself from the bed.

"Make up your mind," she said sleepily. "Either hold me or don't."

He couldn't help his chuckle. "Just wait here for me." Not bothering with any covering, Jack answered the door.

The sight of Ryan standing in the doorway, out of breath, made his humor disappear. The last person to disturb him in his caravan was his pilot so something was wrong. "What's happened?"

"Sonja, the slavers ... slavers in the village—" Ryan bent double, fighting for air.

"What are you talking about?" Jack grabbed the man's shoulders.

Just then an explosion in the direction of the landing made both of them turn. A huge fireball rose over the forest in that direction.

"Too big," Ryan said in horror. "I thought we'd pulled it far enough away."

"Thought you'd pulled what away?"

Just then two bright streaks of light took off from where the village lay and headed swiftly into the night sky. Bleakly Ryan stared after them. "They're getting away."

Jack grabbed Ryan and dragged him inside. Belatedly he realized he wasn't wearing any clothes, but Ryan seemed too shocked to notice. Between the commotion and the explosion, Ana had woken and was pulling on clothes on as fast as possible.

"Just tell me everything, Ryan." Jack told his pilot, making a grab for his own clothing. What's this about slavers, Sonja, and ... what just blew up?"

Speaking quietly Ryan began to explain, his words sometimes coming too fast to be understood, but eventually Jack managed to piece together what had happened. He grew grimmer by the moment, especially when he heard the names of his former comrades from the war and that they had bragged about capturing Mea.

"Harris and Wilcox. That figures. Why didn't you comm me ... oh never mind." Jack remembered his minicomm and how it was still tucked into his pants. Even as he spoke it gave a short vibration telling him he had a message.

He decided he didn't need to listen to it for content. Nor did he need to check the comm unit built into his caravan, which he could see flashing angrily on the wall, its audio alarm silenced as usual.

Starting right now, he was going to pay attention to when people were trying to get hold of him.

"So, we know they've knocked out the villagers and have stolen the women," Jack said. "Plus you heard them say they had my sister. What about that, Ana? Could they have taken her? Wasn't she sleeping on the ship?"

By now Ana had joined them. She looked paler than he'd ever seen her, her eyes wide with horror. "I don't know. The children were staying in the village tonight ... a slumber party had been organized for all of the village children to keep them busy while the adults were celebrating. Kavath and Mea might have stayed with them—" Her voice broke into a sob and Jack threw one arm around her.

"Perhaps they were wrong," he said. "They only saw Mea for a few hours a long time ago. I'm not so sure they could recognize her after all this time. Plus she's pregnant ... that changes a woman's face."

"That's true."

Jack sat and pulled on his boots. "We need a plan. As far as we know they've already left the planet. First thing we need to do is get to the ship and see if we can't follow them."

"Hopefully we have something we can use to do that." Ryan held out his hand and Jack saw something glitter in it. The other man dropped it into his palm and Jack held it up.

"Sonja's earring?" he guessed.

Ryan nodded. "Without the chip. She's got that hidden on her. And active. She went to the village before they left—"

The other man couldn't finish the sentence but he didn't have to, Jack knew what Ryan was going to say. In spite of her previous experiences with slavers, her fear of ever being in their hands again, Sonja had deliberately allowed herself to be captured.

Jack gave a low whistle, unable to contain a surge of respect for his feisty little second. "She put herself into harm's way just so we could track her? I'm not sure if I should give her a medal for bravery or fire her for gross recklessness. Maybe both."

Ryan grabbed his arm. "We can't let them keep her."

"Don't worry," Jack said. "We won't." He turned to Ana. "Let's get out of here and see if we can't catch up with them."

"They're already gone, haven't they?"

"Yeah, but it will take them a little while to off-load their cargo while in orbit and secure it. If they think our ships are destroyed then they won't be moving as fast."

"There is something else, boss." Impossible as it sounded Ryan suddenly looked even more worried.

"Okay, what haven't you told me?"

"They had a spy with us. That man, Grant. He was a plant, working for the slavers. He's the one who set up the bombs around our ships."

Grant, the man who'd been sniffing around Ana? Jack cursed. "I'll kill the bastard."

"Not if Sonja gets to him first. Last I looked she was sharpening her knife and looking his direction."

Jack almost smiled. "In that case, I guess we better hurry."

The three of them hit the trail for the landing at a dead run.

* * * *

Ana ran as fast as she could after the men, cursing both her lightweight shoes and the skirt that caught on every bramble along the narrow trail. What she wouldn't give for her spacer fatigues and sturdy boots right now. She'd been right to say that gauzy garments were not practical for any kind of forest nymph.

Up to now she'd tried hard not to think too hard about what had happened, how in just a few moments the lives of everyone here had been thrown into jeopardy. The war between Gaia and Earth had given her some experience with how suddenly everything could change. Even what had happened with her husband had changed her life so fast ... but she couldn't think about that now. She had to stay focused on the situation.

The slavers had left the planet already and taken what they wanted with them. Young women, for the apparently highly profitable illegal Gaian marriage meet market. This is what the Travelers had been warning her about, describing women stolen from their lives and taken against their will. It was wrong and it should be stopped.

The slavers needed to be stopped. The illegal trade in women needed to be stopped. Using these women for a Gaian marriage meet made a mockery of everything her people stood for. She was offended to her very soul by it.

Even worse, the idea that these slavers not only intended to force someone into a marriage meet with men of her people, but had stolen her best friend to keep anyone from interfering with them went beyond offense.

For the first time Ana wanted to hurt someone. Hurt them very bad, in the worse possible way. She'd never been anyone to wish harm on anyone, but this time was different. She wanted them dead—Wilcox, Harris, the lot of them. Ana understood now why someone like Sonja could be as embittered as she was, because she, Ana, felt the same way.

She'd heard Ryan say that Sonja wanted to kill Grant, the man who'd betrayed them and for just a moment she felt resentful of that. For a moment she wished she could be the one to do the honors there.

Finally they arrived at the clearing that stood in for a landing site for this planet. She gazed out into it, fearful of the worse. Were the ships okay, or so badly damaged

that following the slavers would be impossible?

The clearing was filled with smoke, wood smoke from the smell and most likely due to the flaming trees on the other side of the clearing. The smoke cleared for a moment and to her relief she saw at least her ship standing upright and apparently unharmed. Ana breathed a great sigh.

"Oh, no," Ryan cried as the smoke cleared even more, his tone plaintive. "The ship!"

Looking again, Ana saw what he did, that the other ship in the clearing, Jack's ship, was on its side, blown over by the force of the explosion. Ryan ran forward before either Jack or Ana could stop him, heading into the clearing. After a moment's hesitation they followed him into the swirling smoke.

They went straight to the fallen ship to assess the damage. Two trees had been blown over by the explosion and had fallen into the clearing, one into the ship itself, a huge trunk that had landed against the ship's side and knocked it over. To Ana's eyes the damage to *Wanderlust* didn't look that bad, but it might take a while to make the ship able to take off. The biggest problem was that the door to the ship was now at least ten meters off the ground and they'd need some kind of ladder to reach it.

The ship she'd come in, *Traveler's Choice*, wasn't damaged at all, so they could use that immediately. She grabbed Jack's arm. "We can follow them in *Traveler's Choice*. What do you need to be able to track them?"

The look of shock on Jack's face over the damage to his ship cleared and she saw his eyes narrow in thought. "I have a handheld tracker that has the information off Sonja's chip. We set that up years ago with the idea that if something happened to her I'd be able find her. That was one reason she had the thing made into an earring, so she'd always have it with her."

"Where is the tracker?"

"Inside my ship ... assuming I can get into it." Jack glared up at the entryway, so far out of reach and partially blocked by part of the tree. "Once I have that I can plug it into a ship's computer and we can follow them."

"Assuming Sonja's with them and that they haven't found her tracking device," Ana said. "Both of which are big assumptions."

She headed for her ship and accessed one of the smaller hatches along one side. From it she pulled a small air scooter. At the sound of her activating the engine, Jack came running.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the village and check things out."

"Not alone, you aren't."

Ignoring him she swung her leg over the seat and prepared to take off. At the last moment Jack stood in front of her and grabbed the handlebars of her scooter. "You will listen to me."

"The slavers are gone, Jack. What danger is there?"

"We don't know that for certain. They may come back or they may have left someone behind to look for Grant. Besides, the gas they used might not have cleared yet. You'll need a respirator or you'll end up knocked out like everyone else."

There he did have a point. "Okay, I'll get a mask." Ana headed back to the equipment compartment where she'd collected the scooter. From a cabinet she grabbed a respirator, but when she turned around she saw Jack perched on the seat of her scooter.

He gave her a grim look and held out his hand. "Better give it to me."

"I thought you needed to get the tracker."

Jack shouted over his shoulder. "Ryan, get the tracker while I'm gone."

Ryan glanced up at the out-of-reach door to his ship and gave them both a long-suffering look. "Absolutely, Captain."

Ana narrowed her eyes at Jack. Arrogant man, but his presence might come in handy if there were still bad guys in the village. She grabbed a second mask, as well as a pair of stunners from the compartment then headed back to the scooter. It fit two barely but she wasn't about to let him go without her. She owed Mea and Kavath far too much to not verify what had happened to them and their children.

Pocketing both the masks and the stunners she settled herself onto the back of the scooter before Jack had a chance to object. She looked over to where Ryan was watching them. "There should be something you can use for a ladder in the equipment compartment of *Traveler's Choice*."

Brightening, Ryan headed for her ship. Ana leaned forward into Jack's back.

"Okay, you can drive. I've got what we need."

For a moment she thought Jack was going to argue but he just shook his head and powered up the scooter and headed for the village.

Neither of them said anything during the short trip, the scooter's speed making the nearly half-hour trip to the village go by in minutes. They saw no one on the way, ominous in itself, since the explosion would have normally brought most of the villagers out of their homes to see what was happening.

Instead as they reached the open clearing, they saw wisps of white mist floating through the trees and an eerie quiet. Jack slowed the scooter just within the trees. Before the mist could reach them, Ana reached for the masks and handed one to Jack, who hastily strapped it across his face while she put her own on. She then handed him a stunner and climbed off the scooter.

Jack grabbed her arm. "I'll go first," he said in a whisper.

Deciding not to argue, Ana followed him into the too quiet village. There was something comforting about having someone with her as they went past the empty dance floor that had held such life earlier.

They came upon their first body a few moments later, a man Ana recognized as one of the musicians. He lay on the ground, one arm holding his violin close to his side as if protecting it in his sleep.

Jack checked him, but Ana could see the man's chest rising in slow rhythm. The man would live to play his beloved instrument again.

Quickly they discovered that the same could be said of every person who lay quiet on the ground. Apparently the gas the slavers had used was designed to knock people out, not kill them. Mass murder had not been on the minds of their attackers ... at least that was one thing to be said for them.

But it was the only thing in their favor as Jack and Ana went through the village

and found the sleeping Travelers, all the men and children, and only a few of the women. From what they could see, only the older women and those clearly pregnant had been left behind. Even the new bride, Babette, was missing, they realized, when they discovered Tomas sleeping alone in the couple's caravan.

But it was when they found Kavath unconscious with Kavy and Morgan in the room where the bulk of the village children were scattered about on sleeping mats, that Ana saw Jack truly get angry.

"She's pregnant and as married as you can get," he said. "Meagan can't be used for a marriage meet. No way. They only took her to get back at me."

Ana knew that and touched his arm in sympathy. To her surprise he grabbed her and pulled her to him. For a moment they stood there arms wrapped around each other, providing a comfort that neither of them had expected.

Ana wondered at that. She'd been so long alone and she knew Jack had been as well, depending only on their own resources. She would have thought that neither of them needed anyone else ... but there was a lot of comfort in having another soul to rest on.

Leaning into Jack, she took comfort in his steady presence. The village had been ravaged, the women stolen, but the pair of them had each other at least right now. That was something.

And there was something else. "We haven't found Sonja," she pointed out.

Jack nodded. "I'm guessing they have her. She's exactly what they were looking for in age and appearance. If they didn't recognize her, and according to Ryan she'd created a pretty good disguise for herself, she'd be perfect for them."

"She made herself into perfect bait."

"Yes. Perfect bait." Jack let her go and stood back. "And that means we have a chance. Let's get back to the landing field and get off the ground as quickly as possible. We don't want those bastards to get any more of a lead on us than they have already."

"We'll have to take *Traveler's Choice*. Your ship is damaged."

Over the mask, Jack glared at her. "There is no 'we' here. Ryan and I will pilot it."

"Not on your life," Ana said, glaring back. "That ship belongs to my employers and since they can't pilot it then I will."

"Going after the slavers is too dangerous."

"And yet, that's exactly what Sonja did. Why do you think she can do something like that and I can't?"

"I wouldn't have allowed Sonja to do what she did either. But I don't have control over her."

"And you have control over me? I don't think so, Jack. I am my own person and I'll make my own decisions."

"Don't you understand, Ana? I don't want you put into danger."

She saw the concern in his eyes and part of her enjoyed the truth of it. Jack really did care for her. But she had a duty to fulfill as well, to Mea and Kavath. Whether or not Jack approved she had to go with him.

"I'm piloting that ship, Jack, or you'll not be able to take off. You need me just to

get inside and only I know the launch codes.”

She put her hand on his arm. “Listen, we both know we don’t have a lot of time. I know that ship far better than you do. I’m a good pilot. I know what *Traveler’s Choice* is capable of and how to get the best out of her. Besides, you need Ryan to get the *Wanderlust* back in operation. *Traveler’s Choice* can follow the slavers, but it doesn’t have the ability to stop them the way your ship does.”

She watched his furious glare over the mask, but he must have known that she was right. He didn’t like it, but finally nodded. “Very well. As you say, we don’t have time to fight each other right now. Let’s get back there before the slavers get too far away.”

There was one thing she had to do first. “One minute.”

Rolling Kavath onto his side, Ana began searching the unconscious man’s pockets. She knew he kept his minicomm activated and with him at all times. Fortunately it was easy to find, so once she had it in hand she activated its recorder and in terse words left a message telling him what had happened and what they were doing about it. She pointed out also that Jack’s ship, while damaged could probably be put in order quickly if he could get the rest of the Traveler men conscious enough to help.

When she finished, she set the minicomm to beep and vibrate every fifteen minutes and replaced it in his pocket, rolling Kavath back onto it so he lay directly on it.

“The gas is clearing,” she told Jack. “And this should help wake him up sooner. He’ll wake the others and they’ll head immediately to the landing to help Ryan.”

Through the clear mask she saw Jack’s lips twitch up into an approving smile. “Good plan,” he said. “But now we need to go.”

The trip back to the clearing went quickly and Ana had barely stowed the scooter back to its compartment when Ryan ran over with the tracker that Jack had told her about. Moments later she had them on the bridge and Jack was plugging the tracker into *Traveler’s Choice’s* guidance computer. He punched in a series of numbers and characters from memory and then they waited.

For a long time there was only the soft hum of the cooling vents in the cockpit as the tracker sat silent, scanning on the frequency that Jack had given it. Listening for Sonja’s chip to register its location.

It seemed to take forever and Ana’s patience stretched thin. Maybe they should simply blast off and confront the slavers ship in the sky overhead. They couldn’t have left orbit yet, not with so many women to move, shuttles to stow and so forth. It would be at least an hour before they were ready to leave, and she knew they weren’t in a hurry since they thought that that no one was going to be able to follow them.

Ana gripped the edge of the table so tightly that she wondered if she might leave dents in the metal. Then she felt Jack’s arm around her shoulder.

He pulled her into his arms. “Don’t worry, Ana. I know Sonja and I know what she’s capable of. If she got onto the slaver’s ship then we’ll see that tracker light up.”

“Maybe we should go after them now. Or maybe we should have attacked them while they were on the ground.” Ana stared up at him. “We have hand weapons on board this ship and I’m sure you have some too.”

Jack shook his head. “Four of us including Sonja against a couple dozen heavily

armed men, and they had a village of sleeping hostages, men, women, and children. I know these people and they wouldn't hesitate to kill everyone. We're lucky that they gassed everyone and only took the marriageable women, leaving everyone else to wake up. If they wanted to they could have destroyed the village before leaving ... and they might if they think we can go after them."

Ana's heart stuttered at that thought. "Destroy them from orbit?"

"If they have rockets on that ship of theirs, which wouldn't surprise me, yes. Or they could simply come back with the shuttles and use a different kind of gas, a deadly one. The only reason they don't is that they want to keep a low enough profile so that the Outer Colonies' government, such as it is out here, doesn't get involved."

"So you think we should wait here until they leave?"

"If we can track them, yes. Let them get away from Baile Na, then we'll take them on."

Too worried for words, Ana buried her head in his shoulder, not caring that Ryan was present. If they could track them, that being a big 'if.' It all depended on Sonja having managed to get herself among the prisoners, with her tracking device undiscovered. So many things could have gone wrong.

It felt odd being in Jack's embrace, with his arms strong around her, his hand on the back of her head a comfort during the long silence. When had she known comfort like this, even with her own husband? Not really. Loran and her relationship had been warm and passionate at first and cold and passionate later, but never comfortable. She enjoyed how he wanted to protect and keep her safe.

They watched the tracker and Ana willed it, prayed for it to beep.

And then it did, a soft ping, followed by a point on the screen. Jack activated a holo-display and there was the image of the planet they were on, their ship and the village—two tiny points of light on the planet. Then in the space above them showed another point, a small blinking beacon of bright red with coordinates streaming from it.

Jack smiled as the coordinates fed into the guidance computer. "Not too high an orbit. We could catch them there if it weren't for the village and the women on board. They have too many hostages."

Ana moved to the ship's scanner and copied the numbers to it. Now that she had a location, she could pinpoint that location. "Looks like a fairly large ship. Bigger than a standard freighter."

"Much bigger." Jack was looking over her shoulder. "Probably pretty well protected."

Ana ran the configuration through her ship catalog and whistled softly as a match came up. "You're right. An Ares 6-5-A, superclass. Probably decommissioned Earthforce military. Unregistered ... not much of a surprise, given its activities. That kind of ship most likely has air-to-ground weapons. It will have ship-to-ship as well," she added, glancing up at him.

Jack looked over at Ryan whose face showed both euphoria and concern. "What do you think?"

"Standard virus attack would work," Ryan said, "but I don't think we have the time to rig this ship up for it. I'd have to move the entire tactics computer. We'll need

our ship.”

“How long until *Wanderlust* can lift?”

Ryan shook his head. “The ship got hit pretty hard. I checked the hull and there are a few things to patch. One of the engine cones is bent, and there are problems with the antennas ... I have to check for debris in the import vents—”

Jack cut him off. “I wasn’t asking for a list of repairs. How long will it take?”

Ryan shrugged. “Several hours, if I have to do it all myself. Maybe even a day.”

“Then we both should work on it at least now.” He turned to her. “Ana, you get this ship ready to fly, but don’t do anything that will attract their attention. We want them to think both ships are dead on the ground. I’m guessing we’ve got about an hour before the slavers leave so I’ll help Ryan. As soon as they start to move, signal me and I’ll come running.”

“And then we’ll follow them,” she said. “But what will we do when we catch them, Jack? This ship doesn’t have the firepower theirs or even yours does.”

“What will we do then?” Jack and Ryan shared an almost humorous look.

“We’re going to follow them until they start getting close to a jump point. Then we’ll play some games to delay them until Ryan can catch up.”

“Games?” Ana wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that.

Jack grinned wolfishly and Ryan, as worried as he seemed to be, even cracked a smile. Jack leaned over her and chucked her under the chin. “Oh, yes. Games. You’ll see. It will even be fun.”

Fun? Ana didn’t know what had gotten into Jack and Ryan, but both of them left the cockpit with a bounce in their steps. She turned back to the blinking red light on the holo display.

Fun and games. That’s how Jack planned to deal with the slavers. Shaking her head, Ana took a deep breath and began running take-off diagnostics for the ship. Someone was clearly going to have to be an adult in this group and strangely enough it looked like it was going to have to be her.

Chapter Twelve

Sonja opened her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. The light, dim as it was in the metal room around her, hurt her eyes. Not that it surprised her that her eyes hurt. Everything else about her body ached, limbs, tongue, and the tip of her ears, so why shouldn't her eyes ache as well?

Hell, even her teeth hurt.

Of course she knew what it was. Anyone ever exposed to the business end of a stunner had suffered from the same symptoms, the result of over-stimulated nerves jerking on muscles not used to being jerked quite that way. Sonja had been stunned frequently enough in the past to know the symptoms even if she didn't immediately recall how the stunning had happened.

Well, so much for her brilliant plan to walk into the village, slip into a pile of women being taken and allow herself to breathe enough gas to fall asleep. Oh, no, she'd been spotted by one of the men carrying weapons. She barely remembered a shout of "One's getting away," before her muscles all cramped at once and her head seemed to explode.

She tried opening her eyes again and this time managed to keep them that way, the pain receding as she looked around and realized she'd managed her goal after all.

This wasn't how she'd planned on getting on board the slaver's ship, but it had its advantages. The after-affect of being stunned wasn't a pleasant experience, but she'd woken up faster than she would have with the gas. Strapped around her into the tightly packed racks of narrow bunks were the bodies of women, unmoving and obviously still unconscious.

When she and her sisters had been gassed she'd estimated they'd been out for at least several hours, while stunning only worked at the most for an hour. It would be several hours before anyone would expect the women to come to and so they most likely not check on them.

It was even possible that they'd forgotten that she hadn't been gassed at all and so they wouldn't expect anything from her for a while. If she could get free of the straps binding her to the bunk, she might be able to get loose on the slavers ship before anyone noticed she was missing.

The straps were tight but had some give. Sonja managed to work her hand down to her belt where her knife should be. And wasn't, which didn't surprise her. It was too much to hope that the slavers would be so stupid as to not take her weapons away.

However, her boots were still on so maybe they weren't infallible. Working with the slack she'd already created in the straps Sonja twisted until she was on her side, one arm and hand stretched behind her. She bent her left knee so her foot came close to her hand. It took some work, some twisting and for a while she thought she might dislocate her shoulder in the process, but in a few moments she felt the heel of her boot brush the

tips of her fingers. A little more and she managed to press the side of the heel, sliding open the hidden catch, then the tip of the embedded knife pricked her palm.

Grimacing against the pain, she grabbed the blade on its side and worked the short knife out of its hiding place. Not more than six inches long total with a four-inch blade, it was still a formidable weapon in the right hands. Sonja's hands were right enough.

She worked the knife up to where the straps held her down and began sawing away. In a moment the straps holding her down gave up and she was free of the bed. Dropping to the deck Sonja moved quietly through the room. She tried not to look at the faces of those around her, knowing she would see those she knew. She didn't have too many friends among the villagers, particularly women friends, but the few she did had to be here. There were too many women for the slavers to have only taken the unmarried ones.

They weren't on one of the shuttles. The cabin was too large for that, plus she could feel the artificial gravity of a much larger ship, so they must have already been transferred to the slaver's mother ship. She searched for the cabin door and found it near a set of bunks built into the wall of the cabin itself.

She also found something else. The bodies on this side of the cabin had been 'prepared' already for their new life as slaves. They must have been on the first shuttle coming up so their captors had had time to work on them while unconscious. Their clothes had been stripped off and replaced with the bright pink jumpsuits she remembered from her days of captivity. To this day that shade of pink made her livid.

But it wasn't the color that hurt the most this time it was the woman wearing it. Sonja came closer and a surge of anger filled her. Babette, the Traveler bride whose marriage they'd celebrated tonight, was the one strapped onto the bunk.

She no longer wore her colorful wedding dress but was wearing one of the short-sleeved bright pink jumpsuits and a small bandage on her upper arm. They must have known from their spy she was a new bride and totally devoted to her husband and yet the sons-of-bitches had stolen her. Sonja knew from experience that a new bride would be completely unmatchable at a Gaian marriage meet and yet they'd taken her, anyway. This was revenge on the Travelers, and Jack, for all the times they'd rescued women from their ships. Revenge pure and simple.

Poor Babette's fate would be something else, probably one of the brothels that Sonja's captors had occasionally threatened her with when she'd fought against being sent into yet another marriage meet.

Sonja's hands clinched at the thought. Revenge. That's what taking Babette meant. These men were bent on revenge.

She could do with a little revenge herself and she wasn't afraid of taking it. Her first act would be to make sure that Babette got back to her husband safe and sound. Reaching into her sleeve Sonja pulled from a pocket sewn into the seam the tracking chip she'd taken from her earring. Carefully she fingered the small chip. It was active and would lead Jack and the others right to whoever had it.

Her original plan had been to keep it herself, but if she was captured it was certain to either be discovered or lost when the bastards took her clothing. The small bandage on Babette's arm gave her another idea, though.

Carefully she peeled the small bandage off Babette's arm, revealing the small incision in her skin where they'd put a similar chip. With her knife she cut through the sealant they'd used to close the incision. Gritting her teeth and grateful that the other woman was unconscious, Sonja managed to dig the small chip out, then just as carefully she slid hers in to replace it.

The wound only bled a little, which she used the edge of her skirt to mop up. No worries about infection ... if she knew the slavers they'd already pumped enough antibiotics of one sort or another into the young woman. Slavers were always careful about the health of their merchandise. She couldn't seal the wound again but that also wasn't a problem. Once Jack and the others found Babette it would only make it easier to get the chip out and in the meantime the bandage would hide her handiwork.

Sonja grinned as she dropped the slaver's chip into the pocket of Babette's jumpsuit. If they checked for it using a scanner all they'd see was that it still seemed to be on her and it would take a while before they caught on that it was in her clothes not in her arm.

She couldn't help patting the young woman on the cheek. "Don't worry, we'll get you home safe. I promise."

For a moment, though, her smile faltered. She'd said the same words before, to her sisters long ago and she'd been unable to fulfill that promise. Someday she'd hoped to get back to the Gaian mining colony where they'd been left, married to men without their permission or family's approval. She'd promised each of them she'd get them home and she'd failed.

Jack had told her that someday they would go into Gaian space to rescue her sisters but all they'd managed to do so far was stop the slavers from taking others. Perhaps they'd be able to chase them further this time.

There was no reason to believe that this group of women was going to the outer limits of Gaian space, or to where her sisters had been left. That was years ago, after all. Maybe the slavers had moved their base of operations.

But maybe they hadn't.

She shook her head. Right now her goal was to make sure that these women got back to Baile Na and that's what she intended to do. After that

Well, after that, perhaps after all this time she'd be able to work on her even longer standing goal. Jack wouldn't like it, but he didn't have to go with her. In fact if she guessed right, he might be a little too tied up in the near future to risk his life helping her recover her sisters.

Jack and Ana made a nice couple and frankly she was hoping for the best between them. She'd said before he deserved some happiness in his life. Ana would give that to him. She was the kind of woman who could give him a family and a reason to live beyond making life uncomfortable for his former shipmates.

She knew how much he hated what they'd done, how they'd turned the shortage of Gaian ladies to their advantage by kidnapping women across the Outer Colonies. Jack had taken it as a personal affront and while he'd never said anything directly, he'd apparently vowed to stop them at the risk of his own life.

Without a good woman of his own, Jack would most likely continue on that way

until his luck ran out and he was finally killed. Sonja owed him too much to let that happen. She wanted him happy and settled like his sister.

That reminded her, though. Sonja made a more careful examination of the room, but could find no sign of Meagan among the quiet sleepers. Given that she'd heard Wilcox and Harris boasting of having her, she must be someplace else on the ship.

That gave her another goal. She'd better find Mea or Jack's peace of mind would be in jeopardy with or without Ana around. That meant she'd better get out of this room and to work.

Sonja moved to the door and pulled from the hidden compartment of her other boot the small electronic lock pick she'd brought with her. After a few seconds work she unlocked and opened the door to the corridor and, after checking both ways, moved out of the cabin. Time to see what mischief she could get into on the slaver's ship.

* * * *

"Fun and games? Are you sure that's wise?" Ryan looked at him with disapproval from his side of the engine cone they were hammering back into shape, an unusual look to find on his usually loyal pilot's face. But Jack had to admit this wasn't a usual sort of situation and Ryan's viewpoint was scarcely unreasonable.

Truth be known, it was a viewpoint he happened to share, but unfortunately he couldn't change the situation. Ana had pretty much tied his hands by pointing out that without her he wasn't going to be able to follow the slavers with her ship. She had the launch codes and without them *Traveler's Choice* wasn't going anywhere.

The defeat hadn't sat well with him, though. Frustrated, he took his anger out in fixing his ship. Wielding his hammer with all his strength, he banged even harder at the outer edge of the engine cone to smooth it back out into its original ellipse.

"That's what's needed," he told Ryan in between strikes with the hammer. "Fun and games to keep them busy until you can bring the *Wanderlust* into battle. We need the virus attack ... it is the only way to assure a victory that doesn't end with a bunch of dead hostages."

"It will be dangerous, Jack, especially with a ship you aren't familiar with. You sure you want to do this with Ana along?"

"It's not like she's given me a choice, Ryan. It's her decision to go and I need her ship. If she insists on going along, that's what she's in for."

Shaking his head Ryan gave the cone another hard rap. "I don't think she knows what she's in for."

"Nor do I." Jack sighed and shook his head. "I took a look at the weapons display on their ship. They have some small cannons and a couple of auto-firing lasers but other than that, we're going to be playing the game more with speed and agility."

"It will be a pilot's game then."

And Ryan was a good pilot, but he was needed here. "Ana says she's a good pilot. I'm better than good so if I have to I'll take the helm from her."

"You're a better gunman. I wish I were going."

"So do I." And not just because he knew Ryan could out fly any other pilot he knew. The truth was that Jack wanted Ana safe. But she was insistent and he knew better than to argue with a woman once she got that look in her eye. He'd seen that look

too often on Sonja to discount what it meant.

There were other looks that he'd rather see on Ana, looks like the one she'd had last night, when he'd entered her, and her face got that glow of astonished pleasure. He understood the pleasure part, but the astonishment still had him for a loss. She'd been married, and to a Gaian and from what his sister had intimated, the Gaians were well suited for lovemaking. Maybe she'd been astonished that he was as good as one of her people.

Or maybe her husband hadn't been all that great in bed. Whatever it was, she'd been screaming her pleasure by the end and purring a long time afterwards.

The look of pleased satisfaction on the woman's face was one look he thought he could never get enough of. The memory of it on Ana's face made him want to have it for more than just a few days.

More than a few days ... but was that possible? He knew Gaian's mated for life. He didn't think that Ana saw him that way, but she had gone to bed with him. Did he have a shot at keeping her? She still didn't really know him, or what he'd done. But it wasn't like he had to tell her the truth. She didn't need to know about his crimes ... about Carras. Maybe she'd never find out.

Jack's tried his best to believe that but knew it wasn't really possible. He was considering a commitment to her that would keep Ana with him for the rest of his life. How could he believe that something like Carras could be kept hidden forever? It would remain under the surface for as long as he lived to someday become visible and destroy all that he valued. It was a poison that could ruin everything.

He valued Ana too much for that. He didn't want her to ever find out about his involvement, never wanted to see the horror that would fill those warm brown eyes of hers, the shock of knowing he was essentially a war criminal. It would be better if he didn't try for something longer than the spurious relationship that they'd fallen into. She didn't seem to want anything more so he didn't need to worry about her finding out anything about his past for the moment. In a few days, maybe a week she'd leave with his sister and be gone and he'd never have to worry about her finding out.

THAT DIDN'T COMFORT HIM MUCH, THOUGH. IMAGINING ANA NO LONGER AROUND PUT A BIG EMPTY HOLE IN HIS CHEST. HE TRIED TO WORK THAT EMPTINESS OUT BY POUNDING ON THE CONE AND STRAIGHTENING OUT THE SIDE UNTIL IT WAS NEAR PERFECT, PUTTING INTO THE SWING OF HIS HAMMER ALL HIS FRUSTRATION.

His minicomm chirped loudly spoiling his contemplation.

"They're on the move, Jack," Ana told.

"Be right there." He turned to Ryan, watching him from the other side of the cone, which had through their efforts regained most of its useful shape. "You know what to do."

"Yes, boss. Get this thing airborne as soon as possible."

Jack nodded. "We'll be waiting for you."

He was halfway to the other ship when Ryan shouted after him. "Hey Jack!" He turned to see Ryan grinning at him. "Don't forget to have some fun."

Even in his present mood Jack couldn't help but grin back. "Yeah sure. Fun and games. See you up there."

Chapter Thirteen

On the bridge of *Traveler's Choice* Ana and Jack watched the slow movements of the ship they'd nicknamed "Slave 1" on the holo-display as it moved away from the planet. A small blinking red light in the middle of the ship told them that Sonja's tracking device was still active and on the ship itself.

As soon as the other ship was a half-klick away, Ana ran to the seat in front of the helm and started the engines. Jack held up his hand. "Don't take off quite yet. It wouldn't surprise me if they are watching the planet for us."

Tensely Ana watched the blinking light move further out into space. "How far away can they get before we can't track them?"

Jack chuckled. "A lot further than you'd expect. They could be to the closest jumpgate and we'd be able to spot them."

That was a relief. Ana relaxed into the chair. "In that case, why don't we take off and move along the tree line and rise just beyond the horizon? They won't be able to spot us at all that way."

Jack looked impressed. "Good idea." He picked up his minicomm and spoke quietly to Ryan, and then nodded to Ana. "Give him a moment. He'll get in the ship to avoid the backwash."

Backwash? What did he think she was, a total fledgling? Without waiting and all but rolling her eyes, Ana thumbed up on the lift controls and gently eased them up into the air, only a faint rumble coming from beneath their ship as they moved higher. Looking out the viewport into the clearing, Jack's eyebrows drew up in surprise as the ship left the clearing with no wash of engine flames at all.

He looked over at her, clearly impressed. "How did you do that?"

Ana couldn't help feel a surge of pleasure. "Practice, Jack. Used to pilot inter-city transports and the narrow pads don't allow for any kind of backwash. You learn to take off easy."

With similar ease she settled into a path along the treetops, just skimming them on a path to the horizon where the sun was rising, a bright ball that would mask any trail they'd leave. When she was at least a thousand kilometers away from the village she bore off and up into orbit. If Slave 1 was still watching, they weren't going to see anything but a blip on the edge of the world and far away from where they'd expect trouble to come. Most likely they'd see nothing but the sun rising over the planet.

Once in orbit she fed in the coordinates from the tracking computer into her helm, and the ship sped after the slavers at the same speed. Not to catch up with them, but to keep them close.

Jack was over by the navigation console. "It is about five hours to the nearest jumpgate in the direction they're going. We'll want to catch up eventually but let's give them lots of room so they think they're safe."

Five hours gave them plenty of time to talk about stuff, including what they were actually going to do. Activating the autopilot, Ana turned to Jack. She leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms, giving him her best steady glare. "So tell me what we're going to do when we catch up with them. What is 'fun and games'?"

From his post by the navigation console Jack, cast her a long searching look. "I'm not sure I should tell you."

"Why not?"

"Well ... it might upset you."

Ana couldn't help bursting into laughter. She laughed until there were tears in her eyes. "My best friend in the universe has been kidnapped by slavers intent on making her pay for her brother's actions. I've had to leave her husband and children unconscious while I've taken their ship without permission so I can follow them with only the barest hope of getting her free of them alive. What makes you think that I'm not already a little upset?"

Jack didn't look at her, only studied the back of his hand. "Well, put that way ..."

"That's the way I'm going to put it." She leaned forward and stared at him. "So tell me, Jack, what are we going to do?"

He took a deep breath. "Fun and games."

"You said that before."

"Yeah, I know. We're going to play games with the slavers."

"Games," she said dubiously.

"Yes," Jack affirmed. "Games. They are going to reach the nearest jumpgate long before *Wanderlust* can make it off planet and once they are through it they'll be difficult to track. Not impossible but much harder. This means we have to keep them from going through. Delay them in this area until my ship can catch up to us. We have a weapon on *Wanderlust* that has always taken out our opponents. They know that which is why it was their first target."

Curious, Ana leaned forward. "What kind of weapon?"

Jack seemed reluctant to tell her and for a time simply watched the steady blinking light in the holo-display of the ship in front of them. "It is a secret, Ana."

She understood secrets. "I promise not to tell anyone ... and anyone who knows a Gaian knows that they keep their promises."

Jack continued to watch the blinking light. Finally he looked at her, his gaze serious. "I hold you to that, Ana."

She nodded. "Tell me, Jack. I need to know."

"The weapon is a computer virus. We slip it into what seems to be an ordinary transmission, but as soon as it gets into the communications computer it takes over the system. It is similar to what the Gaians used during the war, but we came up with it ourselves."

"We," Ana said. "Who is 'we'?"

Jack stared at her. "I'm not going to answer that since it isn't something you need to know right now. Let's just say that those who wrote it knew what they were doing."

For a moment she wanted to balk, but he did have a point. There was only one thing she really needed to know.

"It does work," she asked.

"Oh, yes. It works very well."

Ana nodded. "Then I don't need to know more about it."

At her words, Jack visibly relaxed, but he stiffened again at her next comment.

"But what games are we going to be playing with the slavers?"

"The game is a variation on 'hide and seek.' Basically we let the slavers see us and make it irresistible to chase us. Once they've committed to that, we make it as difficult as possible for them to catch us."

"Okay," Ana said. "I see that. We make ourselves difficult to catch. But how do we make it irresistible to chase us?"

"The trick is that they must assume that they can catch us, otherwise they won't bother to chase us in the first place. So ... " Jack's voice trailed off.

Ana took the bait. "So what?"

He grinned at her. "So we must make sure they know who we are and make it look like we're a lot slower and weaker than they are. The weak part won't be hard. This ship doesn't have the firepower theirs does and they most likely know that."

"But we're likely to be a lot faster."

"Yes but they don't know that. That's where good piloting comes in. We have to look desperate so they believe we're going after them in an inferior ship."

Ana bristled at his characterization. "*Traveler's Choice* isn't an inferior ship!"

"You know that and I do. They do not."

Ana considered what he'd told her. Jack's plan could work if everything went according to plan. "So we tell them who we are and make it possible for them to chase us. Since they think we will be easy to catch they'll fall for it and spend time here instead of going through the jumpgate. I pilot the ship so it is just barely beyond their reach, or if they fire at us then I move to avoid it. That's the game."

Jack agreed. "That's the game."

She looked at him. "So where is the fun?"

He laughed. "Getting away with it, Ana. That's always where the fun lies."

Jack was too outrageous, but instead of saying so Ana joined him in his laughter. Clearly this was something he'd done many times before and his continued existence stated that it had worked. One thing Ana knew was that you didn't argue with success. If Jack thought the plan would keep the slavers on this side of the jumpgate then that's what they would do.

"Okay, Jack. We'll play your game. And I hope we have fun."

For a long moment he studied her, his amusement fading into something else. Ana grew warm under his steady gaze.

Finally Jack moved closer. "There is more than one kind of fun we could have up here by ourselves. We've several hours before we catch up to them. The ship's autopilot could keep us on course for a while."

Ana watched him, knowing what he implied and recognizing her own reaction to the suggestion, the sudden want and desire sliding down her belly and heating her core. After all this time without passion, how quickly she'd grown to crave the touch of this man.

"I suppose it would be wise to get a nap," she said.

"A nap?" Jack moved closer. "Are you tired?"

She was, but she wanted him more. "Not that tired."

Jack pulled her into his arms, one hand resting on her back sliding possessively over her backside. "Oh, I see. A nap. Well, I could use some rest myself. Why don't I join you?"

Why not, indeed? She leaned into him and tilted her face up to his. "Kiss me, Jack."

He grinned down at her. "Happy to, Ana."

His lips descended, met hers and they kissed. It was a different kiss from the ones they'd shared before. Their first kiss back in the clearing had been new and exploring, the next kiss, all passion.

This was a kiss of familiarity between two people already at ease with being with each other. When Jack drew back there was a look of appreciation on his face as well as a small hint of alarm and she knew why.

She felt the same way. She too appreciated how comfortable it was to be with Jack, but it was alarming at how fast that comfort had happened. How had she fallen for this man so fast? On Gaia, one pretty much fell in love with your partner as soon as the man attached to you, or so she'd been told. Her relationship with her husband hadn't happened like that, but she'd always known there was something wrong.

But Jack made it easy to be with him. Easy to kiss, easy to slide into his arms and hold him close. Easy to appreciate his smell and how suddenly safe she felt with him. She tilted her head to stare into his face, seeing the want she felt reflected in his eyes.

"Let me show you my room, Jack."

With the helm set on automatic there was nothing to keep them both on the bridge. Ana pulled Jack down the short corridor to where her small cabin was. He gave a short laugh when she opened the door and let him inside.

"Not much bigger than my caravan, is it."

She gave the room a rueful glance. "I guess we're both used to living in tight quarters."

"I think we're both used to living alone. I'm not so sure that's a good thing." Jack nuzzled her hair. "I like being with you, Ana."

She didn't know how to answer that so she let her kiss answer for her. Drawing his head down to hers she opened her mouth under his. Her lips moved over his and drew his response, which Jack gave easily. His tongue slipped into her mouth, tasting just a little before pulling back.

His response was still so tentative and she wondered why. "What is it, Jack?"

"I'm wondering if perhaps you really do need to rest."

"Do you need rest?" she countered.

"I'll be fine," he assured her.

She played with the fastening on his shirt. "I'm not particularly tired at the moment. I think if you really want me to take a nap, you should make certain I'm exhausted."

Jack cracked a smile. "Exhausted?"

"You know, completely worn out. Too tired for anything but sleep."

"Ah. You need to be exhausted to sleep. Hmm, I'll have to remember that about you, that you are insatiable."

She'd gotten his shirt undone and slid it off his arms revealing his chest. Once again she noticed how beautiful it was. It was her turn to smile. "When it comes to this, you better believe it."

Jack's smile turned into a grin. "I've created a monster."

"No. Just unleashed one."

Chuckling, Jack lifted her and carried her to the narrow bed. Ana made a mental note that she needed something larger next time, just before he descended upon her. After that she didn't want to think about anything.

Their clothes went quickly, and then they were naked again, and together. Jack lay next to her and stroked her face and her breasts. "I could never get enough of this."

"I'm not sure I could get enough of you." And she meant it. Jack's smile in response seemed a little sad but he didn't say anything. Instead he slid down her to tease her sex with soft kisses that left her panting in response. Finally she pulled him up even with her, his hardness again even with her.

"Make love to me, Jack," she said breathlessly.

One small surge and Jack was inside her once more filling her completely. They moved together and it was different from the first time back in his caravan. Their lovemaking seemed less frantic, less needy, but no less important.

Ana smiled up at him. Jack was watching her for something and she gave a short laugh. "I'll never get tired this way."

"I only hope you never get tired at all, then." But he took her challenge and moved faster, Ana responding, lifting her hips to meet each of his thrusts. Their joining was better than before, sweeter and edgier, and she couldn't help but wonder how much of that was that they were no longer completely new to each other.

Or maybe there was a darker reason for the edginess, and almost bittersweet nature. Perhaps it was they both knew that there was a non-trivial possibility they could both die.

This wasn't the time to worry about that though or anything else, not when a climax was rapidly building within her. She felt the same in Jack, that sweet tension and felt it when he went over the top and stiffened, shouting into her ear. Something, he shouted, her name perhaps.

She knew it was his name she cried when she came seconds later.

When it was over they collapsed and the short sleep she'd had earlier was suddenly too little for the extent of the day they'd had. Ana couldn't help yawning.

Jack laughed. "Looks like my work here is done. You are exhausted."

Jack was right. They'd both need rest to out-fly the slavers later. She didn't object as he left her, but snuggled into her pillow as Jack grabbed his clothes and dressed.

"I'll take first watch while you get some rest."

"You'll wake me, right? You'll need sleep, too."

Jack didn't seem that concerned. "I'll get some dozing time in the cockpit. But I'll wake you soon."

He sounded completely believable and Ana knew he meant well. Even so, she waited until he was gone before she turned to the crono by the side of her bed and set the alarm for two hours from now. Two hours would be enough to give her some rest and she'd still be able to function.

She didn't trust that Jack would wake her when he'd promised. As she'd already noted, he'd mean well ... but he wasn't going to take her dedication to Mea and Kavath seriously. He was already probably regretting allowing her to come on this mission. Not that she'd given him any choice in the matter, but still he should take her seriously now that she was here.

No matter. She'd get some rest then surprise him on the bridge. He wouldn't be able to pull anything over on her.

Chapter Fourteen

Sonja crouched in the narrow space between two shuttles in the ship's landing bay and pondered what to do next. So far she'd managed to slip relatively unnoticed around the ship, thanks to liberating a set of loose fatigues and a cap from an untended storage locker and changing her clothes. If the men didn't look too carefully, they would only see a small figure moving purposefully about the ship, not an escaped prisoner, and since most of the men she saw looked tired, no one was looking carefully.

It wasn't the first time she'd managed this trick of not being noticeable. That was how she'd gotten away from her original captors in the first place.

Her plan was to get to the ship's engines and sabotage their jump accelerator to keep them from using the jumpgate. Kept on this side of the gate, Jack should be able to eventually catch up with slaver's ship so the *Wanderlust* could take them out with the virus.

The trick was to get to the engine room where her presence would most likely be noticed ... unless the fact that the clothes she'd found hadn't been too large for her suggested she wasn't the only smaller person on board.

Sonja considered that possibility, which left a bad taste in her mouth. Often ships employed children as engineering drones to work in the cramped confines of their engine rooms where their slighter figures made it easier to fit between the massive drives.

Between potential radiation leaks and the problems of being around heavy machinery it was hard and dangerous work for a child, but unscrupulous ship owners often did it. Slavers like these were exactly the kind of people who would do that.

Sonja made a mental note to check once Jack had taken control over the ship and make sure that if there were kids on board they were there legally, willingly, and weren't slaves. The only way that would happen is if the kid's parents were also slavers and she wasn't about to make any bets as to the likelihood of that.

That being said, it did present a problem if she wanted to go to the engine room. Adult slavers she'd have no trouble taking out, but kids? No way would she be able to hurt a child.

Which meant that going to the engine room was out. She wouldn't be able to keep a kid quiet without hurting him or her and she wasn't going to hurt a kid. She needed a Plan B.

As she was deliberating what to do Plan B arrived. Behind her another shuttle entered the landing deck and Sonja ducked to make certain no one saw her. The shuttle docked and the door opened, and from it came a familiar voice that caught her attention. She couldn't resist peeking from her hiding place as a large familiar form emerged, blustering as he always did.

Captain Denn Fuller stepped onto the deck, his sidekick Kwam right behind him. Sonja's hand instinctively went for the knife she had strapped to her ankle ... Jack had

said that the next time the man was caught slaving, she'd get a piece of him and she itched to do so. But then behind the pair came another couple of men with drawn weapons, and it became clear that they were the ones Fuller was protesting to. Sudden curiosity had her easing off the knife.

"I don't know what you expect to achieve by bringing me here. I told your boss, and I'm telling you, Harris. I'm out of that business. No more transporting slaves. It's too expensive. We have legitimate cargo waiting for us at Space Station Blue."

The man he was talking to, Harris, was one of those with a weapon, a slight man with bright red hair. He shook his head. "Wilcox isn't my boss, he's my partner. It has only been expensive because of An Flena taking your cargo and that's something I still think you could have avoided if you'd tried harder."

He gave Kwam a dismissive look. "Or maybe hired some competent help."

The other man's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing, apparently respecting the blaster Harris held, if not Harris himself. He looked like if he had the opportunity he'd enjoy taking the weapon away from the sneering red head.

Harris looked oblivious to Kwam's anger. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. We've got An Flena exactly where we want him. He won't dare attack us now that we have his sister."

Fuller stopped dead in his tracks and Sonja heard him gasp. "You've kidnapped his sister? But ... but ... that's"

"That puts him in our power." Harris sounded smug. "He won't dare to attack us so long as we hold her."

To Sonja it didn't look like either Fuller or Kwam agreed with Harris' evaluation of the situation, but the fat man said nothing and his second man kept his silence as well. Still at blaster-point, the pair was herded through the door and into the passageway, leaving Sonja alone with her thoughts.

Thoughts and plans. So, Harris and Wilcox were forcing Fuller and his ship to be part of their abduction of the Traveler women. It even sounded like Fuller was against the idea, as well he should be. Harris might think they had Jack in their power, but all they'd done is piss him off royally and a royally pissed-off Jack was a frightening concept even Fuller understood.

Plan A wasn't going to work but her new Plan B might have a chance. In fact Plan B might work out even better for what she'd been thinking about earlier, taking up the hunt for her sisters again. Fuller and Kwam might be just the men she needed to make that happen.

Sonja waited a moment then slipped out into the corridor to follow Harris, Fuller, and their entourage and see where they were going.

* * * *

The chairs on the bridge of the *Traveler's Choice* might be comfortable as bridge chairs went, but they were not meant for napping. Jack realized that about half an hour after he'd left Ana sleeping in her incredibly comfortable bed, the bed he probably could have been sharing if he'd had half a kilo of sense.

Which he clearly didn't, because he was on the bridge in one of those uncomfortable chairs instead of lying in her comfortable bed. Yes, it was a good idea for

someone to be on the bridge while the ship was in motion. But it wasn't mandatory given the fact the proximity alarms would have alerted him if there were any problems coming up and that her bed wasn't more than a couple of steps down the hall.

A couple of steps between them, but it did give him a moment to think. Jack leaned back into the hard back of the navigation chair and wondered what it was he thought he was doing with a woman like Ana.

It wasn't like there hadn't been women in his life. He'd had dozens of women ... maybe more if he really thought to keep track. Many women over the last many years, all of them lovely and charming and equally forgettable.

None of those who'd come before had had the impact that Ana had on him. And that bothered him.

What did he think he was doing with a woman like Ana? Jack brooded over the question, not the first time he'd asked it of himself in the past couple of sleepless hours. They'd started this affair because it was something they both wanted. So he'd taken her to his bed, and then to hers. In the normal scheme of things he should be well on his way to being over her.

But he wasn't. When he should be focusing on chasing down the men who'd stolen the women of his village and his sister, he was fantasizing about Ana's beautiful long legs and sweet smile and itching to get his hands around her waist. He was even thinking about sneaking back into her room and sleeping with her and not just because she had a soft bed.

He wanted to actually *sleep* with the woman.

They had no future together. He knew it and suspected she did as well. Ana would be leaving once all this was over and return to a planet he'd never be able to set foot on. He had nothing to offer a woman like her, but he did think about what he might be able to offer her, as if she was going to be around permanently. Because he wanted her around that long.

Which he did. At least right now he did, maybe next year he'd wake up to decide that he didn't want her around any more. But the idea that she might be around in a year, something that would have spooked the hell out of him a few days ago didn't spook him at all right now.

In fact, the idea had more than a little appeal.

But it couldn't happen. If nothing else he knew that his past, what he'd been responsible for during the war, would always stand between them. If he had his way about it Ana would never know he'd been one of those who'd destroyed Carras. If she did, any feelings he knew she had for him would be instantly gone.

He didn't think he could stand that, to have Ana hate him. He didn't ever want to see that sweet light she had in her eyes when she looked at him disappear.

There was nothing to be done about it, Ana would have to disappear first. There could be nothing long-term between them no matter what he wanted or she wanted. She deserved better than him and he didn't deserve her at all. They would need to part ways and soon. Before anything more happened between them.

Before she'd become so close to him that removing her would remove something vital inside him.

Of course all this would be a lot easier to implement if she weren't sleeping barely four steps away.

"Did you sleep?"

Or perhaps not sleeping at all. Jack raised his head to see the object of his musings standing in the doorway, hair tousled from her pillow and looking incredibly sexy. She'd dressed in baggy pants and a loose top and all he could think about was the lovely body they covered.

Ana yawned and even that was sexy. Jack suddenly had the urge to grab her and haul her back to bed, and not to sleep.

She grinned at him. "If you can hold on here a little longer I'm going to make some javi. Want some?"

Javi was the Gaian equivalent of coffee, apparently made from some kind of native root vegetable, of all things. Mea had raved about how good it tasted and Jack had always wanted to try it for himself. "Sure, thanks."

On her return the smell preceded her onto the bridge and Jack perked up at the mouthwatering aroma. Like most Travelers he'd grown up drinking tea rather than coffee since it grew better in the hydroponics they used to grow food on the space station that had been his home the first nineteen years of his life. But during his term in Earthforce he'd become fond of coffee and drank the rich-tasting beverage whenever he could, particularly when he needed to stay awake. Like now.

Gratefully he reached for the cup she offered him and took a tentative sip. It tasted as good as it smelled and he let out a satisfied sigh. When he looked up at her Ana was watching him.

"You like it?" she said.

"It's good," he told her. "Better even than the coffee I had in Earthforce. That took some getting used to, but this is delicious."

"You didn't drink coffee before you were in the military?"

Jack shook his head. "I drank tea, like most Travelers. It grows better in a hydroponics tank than coffee."

Seeming lost in thought Ana sipped from her own cup. "I didn't notice any ground crops near the village. Do your people still use hydroponics to grow food instead of planting in the ground?"

"Mostly."

"Why is that? The ground on Baile Na looks fertile."

Jack shrugged. "Old habits die hard. Hydroponics are what we're used to. Most of us still have a problem with having open sky overhead rather than either solid walls, or a plastisteel canopy. Probably one reason no one has built a permanent structure in the village and instead use caravans. Even if we've called it our home, the planet is more a place to assemble and build strength again than where we want to put down roots."

"You named it after your old home."

Jack nodded. "We wanted to make it our home, but the truth is I don't think we're really suited for living on the ground. Basically we're still space nomads at heart, even though we're grounded now." He took another sip of his drink, feeling the jolt of caffeine rush through him. "Even before this attack there were those who wanted to

leave the planet and find a place in space we could inhabit the way we did our old home. Most argued against that because it was thought we'd be too vulnerable in the sky. But now ..." Jack gave a humorless laugh. "It is clear that isolation can be a vulnerability too."

Ana sipped from her own cup, clearly thinking about the problem. "Keeping the location of your planet secret did work against you. If the ships had been destroyed you could have been marooned for years. But that doesn't mean you need to return to space."

"Unless we want to go back into the business we were in before, being a trading post and the fix-it shop for the galaxy."

Now Ana was nodding. "Before you had the old mining platforms. Could you build something like it?"

Jack considered the small swirls of steam coming off his cooling cup. "Humans established the Outer Colonies almost a hundred years ago. Certainly by now there must be some wreck of an old platform or possibly an old colony ship, the kind that carried thousands of people off Earth floating about somewhere."

"Weren't those normally taken apart?"

"Only if they reached their destination," he said darkly. "And many of them didn't. If we can find some and tug them back close to Baile Na, we could set up another space station like the old one we had. We're located very close to a major jump point and there is no other repair station anywhere nearby." Jack let his voice trailed off as he considered the possibilities, barely able to control his excitement. "We could do that, create our own space station where we could put to good use our skills as repair workers to use. Create something more like our old home was, a repair port and trading station."

He'd known all along that his current occupation wasn't what he truly wanted to do, but hadn't really understood what it was he did want. Rescuing people on their way to slavery had been a goal, and one he'd become very good at, but it wasn't a long-term ambition.

A man needed to build something within his lifetime, something that would last into the future. Something to leave his children, if he had any.

Jack broke off that thought as it turned so suddenly to awareness of the woman sitting with him, sipping from her cup with only occasional soft glances at him. Not making any demands, not even insisting on talking to him. They'd promised each other the moment and no more than that ... was that really enough?

He thought it had been. After all, why would he be looking for a woman to share his current occupation? Pirates, even well-meaning ones like him didn't have wives. But a man living on the kind of space station he was thinking of, a replacement for his home of so many years—yes, there a man might raise a family with a wife. If that woman was a little Gaian sweetheart of a lady, that shouldn't matter, should it?

So long as she never found out the truth about him. Again he considered that. Could he keep a secret that long, for the rest of his life? Could he expect that she'd never know that he'd been among those who'd destroyed a girl's school? If she did find out, would she accept that he had honestly not known the target and that his only crime was not questioning his orders?

If he allowed himself to fall in love with Ana what would be the result? Earlier

he'd thought he must let her go, since he didn't dare keep her. The risk was too high. But that was when all he had to offer was his ship, his too small caravan and a village under siege. If there was more, if he could offer a place in the new world he now imagined—would Ana like that?

There was risk in pretending there could be a future between them. But there was risk in everything a man wanted and those who didn't take chances didn't often get what they wanted. He knew how to take chances. Had risked everything he had more than once in the past.

Everything but his heart. Maybe he should risk that as well.

Of course perhaps he should test the lady as to how she felt about it. Hesitantly he cleared his throat.

"It's interesting how people meet. Take my sister and Kavath. They were space fighter pilots on opposite sides of a war with no possibility of ever getting more than a passing glance at each other. Who could have predicted they'd land on the same planet and have to learn to get along?" He took another sip. "They've made a good marriage out of it though from what I've seen."

"Yes. A very good marriage." Ana seemed wistful. "I've never known a happier couple."

"Different backgrounds, different attitudes but they match somehow. Perhaps their differences make them fit together."

Ana was watching him now, a slight smile on her face. "Maybe those differences aren't that important as we give them credit for."

"True enough. But there is the war, as well," he added.

Ana's smile turned puzzled. "What about the war?"

He gave an elaborate shrug. "Just that things happen in war. Bad things. You being a widow, for example. That could color how you might look at a man from the other side who was responsible for the death of your husband."

"But I told you he didn't die in the war."

"But it happened shortly afterwards, right? So the war must have been part of the reason."

Ana stared right at him and blinked several times. "In a sense, but not the way you are thinking." She took a deep breath. "You believe I might hold something against you for my husband's death. But no one in Earthforce was responsible for that."

Leaning forward she met his gaze. "I'm the one to blame."

Chapter Fifteen

“What are you talking about?” Jack asked, feeling shocked and confused. “How could you be responsible for anyone’s death?”

Ana perched in her chair and blew some of the steam away from her javi. “Loran died after the war, but the story actually begins much earlier. We’d only been married a few days when the war began. Everyone was so shocked over Carras and that Earth had actually attacked us without warning. No one knew what would happen next and everyone was so angry and so frightened. General Garran sent out a call for all men to enlist ... Loran, my husband was one of those who did. I’d barely gotten used to being part of a couple and then he was gone, part of the new Gaian military.”

“That must have been hard, being left alone.”

Oddly enough she didn’t seem to want his sympathy, as if she didn’t deserve it. “I wasn’t the only one. Many of the men were gone, leaving behind their wives and jobs. My situation wasn’t that different from anyone else.”

Jack still felt confused. “So what did you do?”

“As I said, the men were gone, but their jobs were still there. Someone had to step in ... so we did, me and the other young wives. Emergency schools were set up to train us. Up to then most women didn’t consider becoming pilots, but with the men gone they were needed to run the freighters and transports. I’d planned on becoming a mother right away, but with my husband gone that wasn’t going to happen. So I learned to fly instead.”

A brief but genuine smile curved her lips and her whole face lit up. “It was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I found out that I loved to fly.”

Now Jack understood at least part of what Ana was telling him. He’d wondered what his feisty sister Mea had ever found in common with this quiet, shy woman and now he knew. Mea had been born to soar the heavens ... apparently so had Ana.

“We did our part, the women who stayed behind. We ran the factories and farms, and transported the goods. We weren’t allowed to fight, but we made the star fighters and weapons that the army used. I felt useful then.”

“You felt useful during the war. But not afterwards?”

Ana stared into her cup. “The war ended and Loran came home. For a few days it was wonderful. We still didn’t know each other very well ... we’d barely known each other to begin with.”

Jack couldn’t help a surge of jealousy, even though the man was dead. Ana had clearly cared about her husband.

“He told me about his plans for the future. He wanted to learn more about electronics so we’d have to move to the city so he could take classes. I told him that was fine, that I could get a job flying there ... and then he said ‘no.’”

Jack started. “He said what?”

"No. He said that I wouldn't be getting a job. He wanted me to stay home and get pregnant right away. I didn't want to do that and I said so. We fought ... it was a terrible fight. That's not something Gaians do much."

Jack sat and stared. He couldn't imagine a man ordering a woman to give up something she loved that way. No Traveler woman would have stood for it and he couldn't imagine Ana doing it, either. "What happened then?"

"Loran got so angry he rushed out of the house and flew off on his hover bike ..." Ana's voice caught for a moment. "He didn't get far. The bike needed work. No one had flown it since before the war and he was too angry to notice the brakes were faulty. He ran into a tree and was killed instantly."

Ana looked at him and he saw the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes. "So you see, it was my fault. If we hadn't argued, or if I'd checked his bike while he was gone, he would still be alive."

It took a while for Jack to find his voice. "It was an accident. And only a fool would have assumed a hover bike left in storage for years would be operational."

"Loran's family didn't see it that way. As far as they were concerned their son survived to war only to come home to be killed and I was responsible. They never forgave me for that." Ana shook her head. "My family agreed with Loran's and since Loran didn't own anything for me to inherit, I didn't have much to live on when his family threw me off their estate. My job had been taken over by one of the men who'd come back from the war. I was pretty desperate for a while until I met Mea."

"How did that happen?" Jack asked.

"It was funny. I went to an exhibition of fighters that had been used during the war. One was an Earthforce Starbird with two sets of owner marks, connected rings and green stripes. It caught my eye so I wandered over to it. Mea was standing in front."

Jack smiled. "I heard about that ship. It was Mea's, but Kavath used it to return to his people."

"That's right. She was staring at it with a funny wistful smile and I asked about it. She explained that her husband had marked the ship with his mark after he'd taken it off the planet they'd been on, claiming her ship the way he eventually claimed her. She took me to lunch and told me the whole story. Then I told her my story and she didn't even hesitate. She offered me a job as a pilot in the new freighting line that Kavath and she were starting ... didn't even ask how good a pilot I was."

Ana gave him a steady stare, her chin lifted in the air. "And I am that good, so I didn't hesitate taking her up on it. I've been with them ever since. I owe her, and her family for giving me a chance after mine abandoned me. That's one reason I insisted on coming with you. I won't let these bastards who took her get away with it."

Jack remembered his doubts as to how good a pilot she was and regretted them. Clearly Ana was a fine pilot or his sister would never have allowed her to pilot a ship with her children on board.

Most likely Ana would do a fine job during the games he planned on playing with the slavers, but he'd better teach her just what was needed. He put his cup down and leaned forward to meet her resolved gaze. "So, you ready to learn how to play a game?"

She studied him carefully. "Aren't you sleepy? You could rest for a little while."

“Not after this.” He motioned to the cup. “I’ll be fine.”

Ana nodded and put down her cup. “In that case, sure.”

Jack smiled at her determination. “Very well. Let’s get started.”

* * * *

Kavath woke slowly, his head aching. For a moment he lay in silence, wondering why his head hurt so badly since as far as he could remember he hadn’t had that much to drink that night. Opening his eyes he realized it was still very dark.

Very dark and very quiet. Disoriented he managed to sit up and get a feel for his surroundings. He was where he last remembered being, in the large room where the children had been sent during the wedding festivities. Morgan and Kavy had wanted to spend the evening with their new friends so he and Mea had gone with them to supervise.

He remembered being in the room. He just didn’t remember lying down to take a nap.

He could see the children lying on mats along the floor, still sound asleep. Here and there were a few adults lying among them, but not on mats, lying on the floor. Male adults, Kavath realized when he had a chance to look closer. No women.

Frowning, Kavath managed to get to his feet and moving slowly prowled the room. He found his children, Morgan with a group of older children, Kavy next to a small blonde girl she’d met earlier. But the last time he’d seen the other child she’d been with her mother who seemed intent on not letting her daughter out of her sight ... and yet now the mother was nowhere to be seen.

Nor were there any women in the room except for a couple of very old ladies with visibly grey hair. None of the younger women ... nor even some of the older teenagers. No sign of Mea either.

He looked harder, searching for his wife until he heard a soft buzzing noise and a vibration from his pocket that he recognized as his mincomm. Pulling it he saw a message had been left. He unlocked it and played the message, recognizing Ana’s voice immediately. For a moment he couldn’t quite understand her meaning, and he realized that he must have been drugged as she’d said.

So he played the message again, listening harder this time. And then he let out a cry of horror that woke the rest of the room and in moments his children were locked into his arms, crying for their mother.

For the second time in his life Kavath wanted to kill someone ... the first being when Mea had been hurt and nearly raped by Wilcox back on the planet where they’d met.

Now if he understood Ana correctly that same man was responsible for taking Mea and the rest of the women here. It was all Kavath could do to restrain his anger.

Twenty minutes later, Kavath was still furious as he led the rest of the Travelers to the landing site, tools and weapons in hand.

There was a ship to repair and women to rescue and one thing Traveler’s knew how to do was repair things. Kavath would help them do both. He’d rescued his woman before and he’d do it again.

* * * *

Denn paced restlessly the floor of the small room where he and Kwam had been

placed, his bulk and the size of the room making the trip a short one. It seemed he no sooner left one wall but hit the next one. He wished he could sit down the way his crewman was, perched cross-legged on one of the narrow chairs in the room, but none of them would accommodate his size, something he was certain their captors would have been well aware of.

Besides he hated being trapped like this and moving helped keep his mind off it. He wasn't even hungry for once, the small table of food his former partners had provided unappetizing. Kwam had tasted it and said he wasn't missing much and anyway Denn couldn't seem to swallow with his stomach tied in knots the way it was.

Odd thing, he mused suddenly. Maybe he'd even lose some weight if he kept this up, exercising and not eating. He glanced down at how his stomach hid his feet and reflected that might not be such a bad idea.

That train of thought was interrupted by the sound of the door unlocking and both he and Kwam came to attention as it slowly slid open. Perhaps their captors had finally decided to come to terms.

But instead of it being either Wilcox or Harris, an unknown person entered the room, small of stature and wearing the kind of spacer fatigues you'd expect to see on an engineering drone. For a moment Denn stared at the newcomer in confusion until he noticed two things. The first was that the interloper was a grown woman and not the child he'd expected it to be.

The second was that the person held a wicked looking knife and was someone familiar to him.

Denn's heart sank into his toes as he recognized his arch-nemesis Sonja, armed, dangerous, and in the same room as he was without Jack around to keep her from slitting his throat or cutting off his balls as she'd so often promised.

In sheer panic, he held up his hands. "Sonja, honestly this isn't what it looks like. We were trying to fly to another place and get out of the business, but Harris and Wilcox caught up with us. They took my ship, and forced us here." He tried for as honest a look as he could manage, helped by the fact that for once he was telling the truth. "I had nothing to do with the raid on Jack's people or stealing his sister."

She said nothing and he pleaded with her.

"Please ... I'm on your side. I'll do anything you ask. Just believe me."

For a long time Sonja stared at him, and for an instant Denn thought he saw a bit of amusement in her face. Then she nodded slowly. "Actually I do believe you. I saw them drag in you and your buddy here."

"You did?" Denn nearly fainted with relief and from the corner of his eye he thought he saw Kwam say a quick prayer.

She nodded at him. "Yeah, I did. So you're off the hook ... for now," she added ominously and Denn stiffened, knowing he was still in danger.

"As it happens, I have use for you," Sonja said.

"So," Denn spoke cautiously. "What is it you want?"

The petite blonde stared at him, juggling the knife between her hands. Denn could almost feel the edge of it against his throat as she continued to contemplate. Then she caught the knife and stuck it into her belt and without thinking Denn breathed a sigh

of relief. Whatever her use for the knife, this time it wasn't going to be his throat or balls against that no doubt very sharp edge.

Sonja tilted her head to one side and for a moment Denn almost thought she looked cute ... in a lethal kitten kind of way. She smiled and the image of a sharp-toothed cat was complete.

"What I want is something I'm sure you'll be happy to give me," she said. "There might even be a bit of profit in it for you."

Denn and Kwam exchanged matching looks of intrigued interest and both men leaned forward to give Sonja their complete attention.

Chapter Sixteen

“Not bad,” Jack said and Ana couldn’t help feeling a surge of pride at his praise. For the past hour she’d followed his instructions, directing her ship in a set of twists and turns designed to make it difficult to follow, much less shoot a hole in the side of the ship. They’d even practiced a couple of short hyperspace jumps, hopscotch jumps that took them short distances away.

She wiped perspiration from her brow, but enjoyed how the ship responded to her, and how the man beside her responded.

For the first time she was seeing Jack in his true element, captaining a ship, and it was an eye-opening experience. Gone was the nonchalant and sometimes uneasy manner that he affected back on Baile Na. Jack was alive up here in space. This was his true home, not dirt-side on a planet.

He’d been born in space as he’d told her, and it was apparent that was where he felt the most comfortable. And even though she had been born on Gaia and was through heredity tied to a planet-born existence, at this point she felt like she belonged here with him.

If Jack asked her to stay with him in space she’d do so, without any further consideration. That is, if he wanted her with him.

Earlier he’d been hinting around about how disparate people formed relationships like his sister and her husband. It was possible Jack was referring to their relationship as well, which was a little confusing. From the beginning he hadn’t talked of anything but a simple physical relationship so she hadn’t thought he wanted anything more.

Maybe he was reconsidering that position.

If so, how did she feel about it? Ana smiled to herself. The truth be known, she felt just fine. If Jack wanted to make a long-term relationship out of what was between them, she could handle it. In fact she’d even welcome it.

Of course the long-term would have to be based on surviving the next several hours. The small blinking red light on the tracker plugged into their navigation display was a constant reminder of why they were here and the danger they faced.

She and Jack needed to keep that light on this side of the next jump gate so that the repaired *Wanderlust* could catch up to them and they had no idea when that was likely to happen. That was the goal.

Ana had no illusions about how dangerous the game Jack intended to play was. They were going to be baiting an adversary with much better firepower and one false move would leave the *Traveler’s Choice* in ruins, and her and Jack dead or captured. All they had on their side was a faster ship and a good pilot ... her.

She hoped her skills were worthy of Jack’s confidence. A lot was riding on it. Ana tried to shake the sudden chill that went up her spine. She didn’t need to start doubting herself now.

Glancing over at the tracking display Ana noticed how close the small red dot was to the gate. “Jack, I think we need to speed up. They’re getting too close to the gate.

Lifting his head, he looked at the display and shook his head grimly. “We’ve got bigger problems as well. It looks to me that they’ve found some friends. The *Bronda*, for one. That’s the freighter we’ve caught hauling slaves for Wilcox and Harris more than once. And there’s another ship as well, the *Cathay Sun*. That’s Wilcox’s private yacht.”

“So we’re up against three ships and not just one?” Ana folded her arms and fought her dismay.

Leaning back from the display he rubbed his jaw. “The *Bronda* isn’t a problem. We’ve run her down plenty of times and even without our usual weapons we can manage her. But *Cathay Sun* is newer and fast and I’m sure armed to the max. I don’t know what we can do about that.”

“Three against one. Doesn’t seem quite fair. However, that doesn’t leave us much choice. We can’t let them leave.”

“No, we can’t. But we do need another strategy. I thought to have just the mother ship chasing us, but maybe we could get *Cathay Sun* to do it instead. Wilcox wouldn’t let anyone else pilot his ship and he won’t let the big ship leave without him.”

Ana sighed. “So all we have to do is get a faster ship that is armed to the teeth to chase us. That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“No, that part won’t be hard. The hard part will be keeping away from it.”

For a moment Ana didn’t say anything, just thought of Kavy and Morgan and how they would cry if they lost their mother. Leaning forward Ana gave Jack her bravest smile. “Sounds like fun. Let’s go shoot at her.”

Jack didn’t smile back. “You’re sure? This isn’t going to be easy.”

“Nothing in life ever is, Jack. I say we give it our best shot. At the very least we’ll keep them busy until Ryan gets your ship to come to the rescue.”

Jack wished he had her confidence that *Wanderlust* was repairable and Ryan would be here soon. If it weren’t for his sister being one of those taken he’d be sorely tempted to pull Ana away from the controls and haul off out of there. But he’d probably have to lock Ana into her cabin to do so, and besides, he owed it to his sister to try and rescue her even if it risked his life.

He just wished he wasn’t risking Ana’s life as well.

Once more he regretted not giving in to his first thought of leaving her back on the planet. If she’d only not been the one with the access codes to operate the ship he would have done just that. In fact he still could have dumped her out of the ship once she’d gotten it operational but he hadn’t. Truth was he couldn’t operate this ship alone and perform the maneuvers needed. He needed a good pilot.

He’d rather it was Ryan sitting there, but Ana was proving to be as competent as she’s promised she was, at least in the tests he’d given her. Now if she could do the same under pressure ... well, there was no hope for it. Either she did well or she didn’t.

Jack waved in the direction of the blinking red dot and the ships near it. “Okay, Ana. Let’s get close and personal.”

She gave him another of those sweet smiles of hers, then with a touch of her

hands the engines of the small freighter roared to life and they shot forward.

* * * *

Denn hauled himself over to the communit on the wall and pounded on it. After a momentary pause there was an answer. "Yes? What is it?"

The big man took a deep breath. "I want to talk to Wilcox."

There was a moment's lag and he heard someone shouting in the background. Denn practiced breathing very softly, in and out, while waiting for his old partners to materialize. He needed the practice since Sonja, his new self-described partner was just a step or two away, still armed with that deadly little knife of hers and listening to everything he intended to say.

Even if he wanted to betray her, he wouldn't get away with it.

Wilcox's voice came over the comm. "What do you want, Fuller?"

Denn took another deep breath. "I've been thinking about what you said. About An Flena's sister."

"What about her?" The other man sounded impatient and Denn decided he didn't like that. After all, he'd been dragged into this situation against his will. The least the man could do was answer his questions and the fact that Wilcox didn't think he needed to do that irritated him.

"I think I need to see her." Denn's newfound annoyance put a little spirit into the demand. "If she's our way of getting past Black Jack, I want to know we really have her."

There was another annoying pause as his perfectly reasonable request seemed be discussed and Denn decided he really had had enough of Wilcox and his high and mighty antics. Even if Sonja wasn't holding a knife on him he knew where his loyalties should run.

The slavery market had been dead for a long time, even without vigilantes like Jack and his crew to mess things up. A man needed a better purpose in life than dealing in the misery of others.

Maybe he'd start hauling cattle or something like that. Anything but human beings.

"All right." Wilcox's voice through the comm broke into Denn's musings. "I'll send someone there to take you to her. Then you can see for yourself we have the upper hand."

"I'll look forward to it," Denn said, and to his surprise he really meant it. It would be an honor to meet the sister of the man who'd pretty much sent him into ruin. He closed the comm connection and almost immediately felt the prick of a knife at the back of his neck.

"You better not be planning anything, Fuller."

Denn held up his hands. "Please. If it is one thing I know, it is a dead horse when I see one."

"A dead horse?" Sonja looked puzzled.

"An old Earth reference. Essentially it translates to 'There is no point in beating a dead horse.' A dead horse isn't going to move no matter how hard it is beaten."

She wrinkled her nose in confusion and Denn had to fight his smile. The little

woman actually looked cute. "I can see how beating a dead horse isn't very effective. But how is this a 'dead horse'?"

"It is a dead horse because it is useless to do anything but accept things as they are. Wilcox and Harris do not have my interests at heart. You, on the other hand, do have a use for me as you've explained. Therefore my best chance at continued survival rests with you ... and your survival."

The impudent wench grinned at him and slipped her knife into a pocket. "I'm glad to see we understand each other, Fuller."

He couldn't resist grinning back. "Oh, we do." He shook his head. "It is a sad thing, you know."

"What's that?"

"It is a sad thing when one can trust one's enemies more than one's purported allies."

Sonja laughed. "Well, Denn, that's what comes from being on the bad guy's side. Us good-guys are usually trustworthy."

Denn shook his head. "So I am finding, to my dismay."

After about five minutes there was a soft click as the door's lock released, and then a set of guards led by the redheaded Harris opened it and ushered Denn into the hallway.

As they progressed down the hall, Denn noticed out of the corner of his eyes a slender form dressed in engineering fatigues open the door after they were nearly to the first bend of the corridor and run quickly in the opposite direction. He made no comment, deciding that his new alliance was likely to be more profitable than his past one.

He knew that Sonja had her own plan to set into motion. She headed toward the engine room where she'd told him she suspected there would be a group of young people, barely more than children, working to keep the great machines that powered the ship running.

If these children were anything like the ones she'd met in the past they'd be more than willing to participate in her plans for liberating the women the slavers had taken ... particularly since it would mean their freedom, as well.

Denn believed her. Sonja had a way of making people believe what she said.

In the meantime Denn was led to a small room far forward of the ship, near to where he expected the bridge to be. Once Harris unlocked the door he saw a dark-haired woman sitting in one of the small chairs that were the only type of chairs this ship seemed to possess. Her face reminded him of his nemesis Jack. This must be the man's sister and her position near the bridge indicated that they wanted to keep her close by.

Clearly Wilcox and Harris intended to make sure they could present her as a hostage as needed. After only one look at the woman, Denn knew he'd made the right decision. Her face was slightly rounded and he noticed her belly matched. Jack's sister was pregnant.

It was all Denn could do to not groan aloud. Wilcox and Harris had abducted a pregnant woman, and one married to a Gaian? His former partners had clearly lost their minds.

Then he looked in the woman's eyes, clear, intent, and furious and was reminded that Jack wasn't the only member of the An Flena family who'd been in the military.

In spite of the situation, it was all Denn could do to not gloat. He'd clearly picked the winning side. All he had to do ensure a profitable future was to make sure they win.

Harris gestured to the woman. "So you can see we have her."

Jack's sister narrowed her eyes. "And who would you be?"

Denn stepped forward. "The name dear lady is Fuller. Denn Fuller, and I'm a business associate of these gentlemen. I am happy to meet the sister of Jack An Flena, but I'm afraid I don't know your name."

She crossed her arms and continued to glare at him. "Meagan An Flena Terrell. Mea to my friends, which you are not. And I'm not pleased to meet you."

"No, I imagine not under the circumstances." Denn gestured to the narrow bed in the corner of the room. "Would you mind if I sit down?" he asked plaintively. "I'm afraid my quarters aren't equipped with anything that will support me." Patting his belly he put on his most apologetic look.

The woman blinked in astonishment. "If you like."

Denn beamed at her. "Thank you." He lumbered over to the bed and sat for the first time since leaving his ship. Just getting the weight off his feet was such a relief that he sighed aloud. He rested his back against the wall and smiled at her.

"You have no idea, dear lady, how good this feels." Then he opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Or perhaps you do. It is hard to carry extra weight when you aren't used to it."

Jack's sister wasn't stupid. She leaned forward to study him, picking up something wasn't as it seemed. "What do you want?"

"Actually all I wanted was to meet you. I've known your brother for a long time and his assistant, Sonja."

"You're the slaver whose slaves he freed just a few days ago," she said.

"I'm not a slaver, I'm a trader. I transport goods between the stars, not unlike you and your husband I understand."

"My husband and I do not deal in slaves," Mea said flatly.

Denn gestured broadly. "I didn't say you did ... only that we were both traders. I'm under contract to carry goods for certain men—"

Harris spoke up. "Fuller works for me and Wilcox and he hauls what we tell him to haul. He is here because he wanted to see that we really have you." He turned to Denn. "And now he has, so there really isn't any point in an extended stay."

Denn didn't have to feign a reluctance to leave. "But this is the first time I've been comfortable since arriving."

Harris rolled his eyes. "You've made your point, Fuller. I'll have a bed moved to your room. Maybe you should consider losing some weight."

It took a moment for Denn to get up. He shuffled about on the bed, digging his hands onto the surface and even under the pillow to get a firm purchase before hauling his bulk to his feet. After the exertion it took him a while to head for the door, and turn to Mea.

"I am still very glad to meet you, my dear. Perhaps someday you'll be happy to

say the same. I hope that time is soon ... Mea."

She narrowed her eyes again. "I told you only my friends call me Mea."

Denn shrugged. "Well you know what they say about people with common enemies. Perhaps what I mean to say is that I hope that someday we can be friends."

At Harris's insistence Denn moved into the hallway. After the door closed behind them Mea looked over at the bed, now rumpled from Denn's struggle to get onto his feet.

Someday they'd be friends? What was it that the strange man had been trying to say?

On a hunch, Mea went to the bed and straightened out the covers, smoothing them up under the pillow.

There she found a pair of objects, a minicom and a slender knife neither of which had been there before the fat man had made his appearance.

Keeping her back to the door she took a glance at the minicom and noticed it was set for silent receive. She'd have to resist using it until she was by herself and not under observation. The room she was in no doubt had some sort of surveillance and it wouldn't do to get caught now so she slipped the minicom into her pocket.

Still keeping her back to where she knew there was most likely a camera she turned her attention to the knife. A Traveler-crafted blade made to slip into a boot, with a single letter engraved in the shaft, an ornate 'S.'

Slipping it into the top of her boot, Mea smiled to herself. Only one person would engrave her blades that way and if that person was working with Denn, then perhaps she and the fat man were friends after all.

Chapter Seventeen

The small glowing mark on the display that showed where Sonja's tracker was located looked more like a beacon now that they were closer. Jack turned on the three-dimensional holo-display and against the dark background that represented the space around them was a distant ship growing larger with each moment they moved toward it.

It was big enough now and they saw just what they were fighting. Ana couldn't help feeling a chill as she understood just how powerful their enemy was. They were definitely under-armed with respect to weapons.

Another chill went up her side when the name of the ship appeared in the viewscreen. They'd named their ship *Vengeance*.

The name didn't seem to bother Jack. "Ares category, just as we expected. And just as we expected, heavily armed. Some of their laser cannons have such a long reach that I doubt that any of them are even legal. They'll make space junk out of us if they get a clear shot." Jack peered at the display. "But maybe there is something we can do to fix that."

He pointed to a slender array of web-like tubing protruding from the top of the ship, with tiny red blinking lights along its edges. It was too fragile to survive landing through atmosphere, but with a ship this size that would happen rarely enough to allow them to collapse it and pull it inside.

Jack's smile turned wicked. "That's most likely their navigation and radar antenna. Without it they'll be partially blind, only able to use visual means to shoot at us. Plus they can't jump without it. Repairing it will delay them considerably."

Ana saw the plan immediately. *Traveler's Choice* didn't have big guns, but with pinpoint accuracy firing, one of their small lasers could rip away the other ship's antenna. "So we take it out and they won't be able to fire on us with the bigger guns with any accuracy."

"They'll have to chase us with one of the smaller ships which I doubt are ready to go." Jack pointed to the smaller shapes nestled next to the side of the *Vengeance*. "Both *Bronda* and *Cathay Sun* are docked and powered down. It will take time to get them free and engines up to go after us. That will give us a good head start."

Ana eyed the narrow base of the array. It would require a very good shot to separate it from the *Vengeance*. "Are you sure you can hit it, Jack? If you missed it they'll be able to use their heavy weapons on us."

All the confidence in the universe was in his smiling eyes. "You get me close enough, I'll take it out, Ana. Don't fear."

Shaking her head but hopeful anyway, Ana moved to the ship's controls. "I'll get us close enough, never you fear."

She opened the engines wide up and they shot forward. "Just be ready on the laser."

Still grinning, Jack moved to the console and slid into his seat. "Dive very close then on my mark, turn ninety-degrees, x-axis."

Using her console as well as the visual display Ana directed their small freighter directly towards the slavers. The *Vengeance* grew until it filled their viewscreen but Ana remained focused on the delicate-looking antenna on its hull until she could easily visualize the slender rod attaching it at the base.

Jack watched, too. She spared him a quick glance as they shot toward the bigger ship. His face was grim and there was something in his eyes she hadn't seen before. A determination, the will to succeed. If it were possible to sever that rod and disable the *Vengeance*, then Jack would do it.

She returned her attention to the controls until Jack spoke. "Almost there. Five seconds. Four, three, two, one—turn now."

Twisting the controls Ana made the turn and Jack fired. They now were heading back into space away from the slavers. Ana counted to ten then made another turn to run parallel alongside the *Vengeance*. If Jack needed another run at the array she'd give it to him.

For a long moment Ana wondered if they'd missed it. The array still stood in place. But then she noticed the red blinking lights that had marked its extensions no longer blinked and after a moment the array wobbled slightly, and then seemed to lift away from the ship, caught in some slight drift of space dust sliding over the top of the ship. It continued to slip away from the ship, no longer part of it, no longer a threat.

Jack had made the shot. With a shout Ana jumped to her feet and Jack joined her in a brief victory dance around the bridge.

He grabbed her, hugged her, and then clapped her on the back. "Nice piloting."

Ana gazed into Jack's jubilant face. "Nice shooting," she replied with a grin.

For moment she thought he was going to kiss her but the moment passed. With a look of real regret Jack let her go. "We should get back to business."

Ana retook her seat. Jack was right; they had better things to do right now than kiss. Sad as that was to say.

Jack turned on their communit. "Time to announce our presence. They've probably had time to notice their antenna is gone." He spoke into the comm. "Hello *Vengeance*."

Tensing, Ana waited for the other ship's response. She didn't have long to wait. After a moment's pause, their communit crackled to life. "Who is this?"

Jack moved closer to the comm. "Oh, I think you know, Wilcox. You should have been expecting me by now."

"Jack!" Wilcox sounded almost cheerful. "Long time, old friend."

"I'm not your friend. That ended a long time ago."

"Not so long, Jack. But you've been far too busy involving yourself in my affairs."

"Oh, you noticed?"

"Yeah, Jack. We noticed. Harris and I aren't happy with you."

Jack's expression turned grim. "Is that why you attacked my village? Because you weren't happy?"

"Part of it. And partly because we have orders to fill which you made hard for us to do. A lot of the women we took from your planet we owned in the first place."

"You can't own a person, Wilcox," Jack said. "That's slavery."

"That's semantics. We have contracts that gave us the right to transport them to Gaian marriage markets."

"Some of them, maybe. But you didn't just take those women."

Ana could almost imagine the man shrugging. "And how could we tell who was who in the dark? The rest will be returned once we sort them all out ... maybe." An oily sound filled Wilcox's voice. "Maybe the others will like being Gaian wives."

"Unlikely."

Wilcox gave a short laugh. "This is a business we run, Jack. And the way we figure it, we owe it to Gaians. After all it was partly our fault they're in this fix, needing women. You know that."

Ana saw Jack's jaw clench so tightly it was a wonder his teeth didn't break.

"That's a ridiculous argument, Wilcox. You are profiting from someone else's tragedy."

"And who are you to tell us differently?"

"Who am I?" Jack almost bit the words out. "I'm your worst nightmare, Wilcox. I'm a Traveler with a ship, weapons, and the will to use them. You should not have attacked our village; you should not have taken our women ... I'll see you and your men destroyed because of it."

"And what about your sister?" The words came out in a whisper. "We seemed to have accidentally picked her up as well." Through the comm they heard him tell someone to go get Mea.

Jack looked like he was fighting for control. "Yes. I figured that would come up. Well, if you're coward enough hide behind a pregnant woman who has done nothing to you, there isn't much I can do."

"Coward, *hide*?" Wilcox sounded irritated. "What makes you think I'm hiding?"

Leaning forward, Jack spoke directly into the communit. "You have a ship, Wilcox, a ship with weapons. You could fight me, man to man. Once upon a time you thought you were a pretty good pilot, but I guess those days are gone. After all, you run a business now and skills like that get rusty."

"I'm still a good pilot," Wilcox said, clearly irked by Jack's suggestion.

"Oh really? Well, I think I have a better one now. Big surprise, she's even Gaian."

"The nanny? She's your pilot?" Ana became annoyed at the laughter in the man's voice. "What makes you think she's that good?"

"Well for one thing, have you noticed anything about your long-distance navigation display?"

There was a momentary silence followed by more off-comm commands. Then Jack grinned at her as a stream of cursing came through the communit. He leaned closer to the comm. "I bet you didn't even see us come in to take it out."

"I see you now, Jack. And I've had enough of your interference." Wilcox sounded furious. "This is the last time you get in my way. You say you want us to come out and fight. Then that's what we'll do and we'll end it now. Harris, let's go," he

shouted away from the comm.

"You'll have to catch us," Jack said before shutting off the connection. Turning to Ana he gave her a devilish grin before heading for the navigation chair. "That went even better than I expected. Let's get moving."

She nudged the controls and they flew swiftly away from the damaged *Vengeance*. "How long do you think we have before they catch up?"

"In the *Cathay Sun*? Probably fifteen minutes to get into their ship and undock. By then we'll be pretty far away, so we maybe have an hour before they're sitting on our tail." Sitting back in his chair Jack stretched his hands over his head. "Then we start playing games."

He closed his eyes and for an instant Ana wondered if he'd gone to sleep. Jack cracked one eye open. "You'll be sure to tell me when they get close?"

Given the circumstances she almost laughed at his nonchalant attitude. "Oh, you'll be the first to know."

* * * *

On the *Vengeance* things were progressing pretty well in Sonja's opinion. She'd found the engineering drones, three boys and a girl who wasn't more than ten years old, all eager to help her in exchange for their freedom. With Sonja's help they'd managed to overcome the two regular crewmembers. The men were now gagged and tied up in one of the engine room storage closets. As soon as they were secured Sonja pocketed the key.

She left the boy with the deepest voice near the engineering communit to deal with inquiries from the bridge and instructions to lock the door after them, Sonja led her troop of diminutive warriors through the corridors to where the kids were sure at least one weapons stash was kept.

As she'd expected the ship was actually pretty quiet. Most of the men had bedded down after the long night on the planet and only a skeleton crew was working. There were few people in the hallways and they were easily evaded.

Only once did they have to silence someone. A crewman came around the corner just as Sonja was working on the weapon's locker door with her electronic lock pick. He took in the four of them near the locker and charged forward.

"What are you doing?" he said.

The two boys stared at him, but the girl, Heather, grabbed from her companion one of the stunners they'd taken from the engineering crew and fired. Her aim was good and the man collapsed in front of them.

Heather stared at him and then at Sonja with first alarm, and then triumph filled her eyes. "I got him."

She ruffled the child's hair. "You sure did," she said with a grin. "Nice work."

Leaving the kids to stand guard over the unconscious man, she went back to work on the door. With one final click the locker door slid open to reveal a large array of small arms.

"Perfect," Sonja said in quiet satisfaction.

They'd brought with them several large bags from engineering and filled them with stunners and several of the longer laser rifles until they could barely lift them. Then

they tied up the still unconscious crewman and shoved him into the now empty locker to keep him out of sight.

If all went as planned they'd be in control of the ship before he woke up, anyway. Hefting the heaviest of the bags, Sonja led her troop to where the Traveler women had been stowed.

They should be awake by now and unless Sonja missed her guess, pretty pissed off at what had happened to them. She grinned to herself. Wilcox, Harris, and their crew had made a big mistake this time, but they weren't going to know what hit them until it was too late.

Pissed-off Traveler women carrying small arms and free to move about on the ship. Life for the men on this ship was about to take a very sudden change for the worse. Sonja headed down the hall. The damn shame was that if the rest of her plan worked out as she wanted, she very likely wouldn't be here to see it.

* * *

Mea wasn't surprised when the door opened this time and a man stuck his head inside. She was surprised that she recognized him from the village.

"Aren't you Grant?" she asked. "You were one of the men freed from the *Bronda*." And from what she'd seen, not a very nice man at that. She'd seen Grant manhandling Ana at the wedding dance and had been willing to step in to help when Jack had done the job instead. Then he and Ana had left together.

That thought still made her smile. It looked like trying a little reverse psychology on her brother had worked. She'd thought all along that Ana and he would be perfect for each other.

Grant grunted and Mea saw him rub his shin where Ana had kicked him. "You Travelers are too trusting. Not everyone is who they seem to be."

Thinking about the fat man and his present made her nod agreement. Nope, not everyone was who they seemed to be ... including her, the helpless little pregnant woman.

Mea crossed her arms over the bulge of her stomach. "So what are you doing here?"

He gestured toward the door. "They want you on the bridge."

"Then I guess I should go to the bridge." Getting to her feet, and making it clear that her pregnancy was hampering that by staggering a bit during the process, she walked as slowly as she dared to the door.

He didn't seem to think anything of it, just waited for her. "If you think you're being pregnant will make anyone feel sympathy for you, that isn't going to work. You are Black Jack's sister and Wilcox and Harris have a score to settle with him."

Mea just gazed evenly at him. "I've met the men before and have no illusions about them." Slipping by him she entered the hallway and waited for him to catch up. "No illusions whatsoever."

Chapter Eighteen

Jack was having a dream ... a really great dream. In his dream he was naked, lying on a bed built into a wall ... a metal wall, not like the wooden one of his caravan on Baile Na. This wall was like that of his cabin on the Wanderlust, but it wasn't the Wanderlust he was on. No this place had a bigger feel, more gravity, heavier air, like that of a space station.

A Traveler Space Station, a home like their old one near Earth. This was a spaceport where they could ply their trade as tinkers, a repair shop for space ships of all kinds. This was the perfect place to build such a station, deep inside the Outer Colonies, on a major trade route, and with the planet they currently held nearby for raw materials.

The Travelers had rebuilt their home in the stars.

But that wasn't the best part of this dream. The best part was the woman on the bed with him, also blissfully naked and even more blissfully making love with her mouth on his engorged cock. Oh, yes and that was bliss also, having this woman work her lips around the tip, and down along the shaft, licking him from tip to balls. Just perfect.

Ana was so good at this, as she was at everything she did.

He ran his hands down her back, the smooth skin, and then to the front. Her breasts were large, even larger than he remembered. As was her belly, round and beautiful and full. Full because her belly held his child.

Jack ran his hand over the bulge on Ana's stomach, over his child sleeping within. His child

In his dream he smiled. "Ana, love."

She pulled her mouth off his cock and smiled back. "Jack ..."

He tried to push her head back down. "Don't stop, Ana."

She resisted him and spoke louder. "Time to wake up, Jack. Jack ..."

"Jack," Ana's voice broke through his sleeping haze and he startled awake in his seat. He looked across the bridge at Ana, but she wasn't looking back. Instead her gaze was fixed on the viewscreen. He looked there as well, but saw nothing there.

"Why did you wake me?" he asked.

But then in the distance middle of the screen Jack saw a sudden flash and Ana twisted the controls, sending their ship into a spin and at an angle to the direction they'd been heading. Through the screen he saw a bright light stream through the space they'd been about to occupy.

Comprehension was sudden and swift. "You're dodging laser blasts?"

"Yes," she said as another flash happened and she twisted the controls again.

All memories of that wonderful dream fled as Jack's hands flew to the navigation display. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I've been shouting at you for the past five minutes, Jack." Ana's voice was deadly calm, but her knuckles were white on the controls. "I'm going to need jump

coordinates. We need to hopscotch out of here and lose them for a least a little while.” She favored him with a sharp glance. “The next time we have a quiet time and I say you need to get some real sleep, you will lie down and sleep.”

As fast as he could Jack worked through the numbers. “The next time we go after slavers,” he countered, “who’ve taken all the women of the village prisoners, so that we end up playing games with Wilcox and Harris, I’ll do just that. Coordinates for jump ...” he rattled off jump coordinates to her and she fed them to the controls.

“Jump in three, two, one, now.” She pressed the jump control and the world outside the viewscreen spun briefly into the silver-laced black of hyperspace. It wasn’t a long jump, just enough to give them some distance. A hopscotch jump as Ana had called it. When they arrived back in normal space their adversary was a small dot in the background.

“It won’t take them long to hop to where we are,” Ana said.

“I’m working on the next jump now.” Jack opened navigation program he’d set up earlier with a set of straight runs, turns, and hopscotch jumps. Even with that first unexpected jump they were far ahead of those following them, which gave them some leeway. Enough to give him a chance to think about his dream and the one thing that haunted him about it.

Jack looked over at the woman who in two days had managed to slip past his defenses to the point that she now populated his dreams. “Ana, are you using birth control?”

She started and turned an astonished face to him. “What? Are you kidding?”

He shook his head. “Just answer the question. When we made love before, were you using birth control? I know the Gaians have medication they give women before marriage meets, and I know that married women use control.”

“But I’m not married and it has been a couple years since my last meet.” She stared straight at the navigation display. “Don’t you think we could discuss this later? We have incoming—” She was interrupted by the sudden appearance of an ominous red dot near where the display showed the tail of their ship.

“Jack, coordinates,” Ana said but he’d already sent them to her computer. Following the path he’d laid out, she twisted the controls and they moved through space in a dodging pattern, first a turn, then a long glide, then another turn. At one point they twisted to face their opponent and Jack fired the lasers, scoring a hit near the other ship’s gun ports. One of the ports gave off a satisfactory puff of gas, indicating damage.

“You hit it!” Ana’s face burst into a smile.

“One gun down,” Jack said trying not to celebrate the small victory. “If only they didn’t have five more. Next jump coming up.” Again they hop scotched away from the scene, leaving the damaged *Cathay Sun* behind. With their hull damaged they’d have to jump more cautiously. That would delay their pursuers, but it wouldn’t stop them coming after them.

Once they were back in normal space, Jack returned the question worrying him. “About that birth control.”

“Jack!” Ana stared at him, eyes and mouth wide open. Then she shut her mouth and he saw the resolution in her face. “All right. Yes, I took some before I left for the

wedding. I didn't plan on last night happening but I wanted to be sure, if it did."

Jack thought about his dream and his vision of Ana bearing his child and he wasn't sure if he was relieved or not. "I'm glad," he said anyway.

Ana stared at him. "You don't look glad."

"But I am. It wouldn't be right ... that is, you and I aren't prepared to have a child."

"I guess not."

Ana didn't sound at all convincing and now it was Jack's turn to stare at her. Was it possible that she was thinking of having his child? "Ana, do you want to have a baby?"

Her startled face suggested he was on the right track, but then she returned her attention to the display. "Jack, they're here again."

He didn't need the warning as he was already sending her the next set of twists and turns. They corkscrewed around their adversary in a set of maneuvers that Jack thought might even make Harris sick as Wilcox tried to follow them. He had to admit, as a pilot Wilcox was pretty good, even occasionally anticipating one of their turns. Fortunately, Ana was a brilliant pilot and they leapt out of the other ship's superior fire power whenever it came towards them.

Jack watched them follow and got an occasional shot off but outside of scoring some hits on the other ship's skin, didn't do any major damage. The next hopscotch jump took them back in the direction they'd come from and behind the *Cathay Sun*. Jack managed to score a shot on the other ship's engines and then they jumped away again.

As soon as they were out of hyperspace, he turned to Ana. "How much did Mea tell you about our father?"

She frowned, looking confused over the apparent change of topic. "That he was captain of a long-distance freighter and wasn't around all that much. He'd stop by Baile Na when his ship passed through on the way to Earth and that eventually he stopped coming around at all. That hurt her, I think."

Jack nodded. "What my sister doesn't know is why he stopped coming. He did care about us, me and my sister and our mom. But he was something of a free spirit, and my mom didn't question it or ask to make their relationship formal. When I got out of the service I decided to find out what happened to him ... maybe even I thought I'd confront him and ask why he abandoned us."

"Did you find him?"

"In a way," Jack grimaced. "I found out he'd been killed in a ship collision out here in the Outer Colonies, an accident that took out his crew and left his ship barely salvageable. Since he had no formal record of next of kin, no one ever reported it to the Earth authorities."

Ana looked thoughtful. "So in a sense, he never really abandoned you."

"No, but his actions set up what happened." Jack gave Ana his hardest look. "I swore then that I wouldn't be like him. I wouldn't leave any children wondering if their dad cared about them or their mother. If a woman is going to have my child, I want that woman to be my wife."

If he'd thought she'd looked surprised earlier, now Ana was frankly astonished. "Jack, are you asking me to marry you? You've only known me two days."

As far as he was concerned two days was more than long enough. "How long do Gaians usually have to make up their minds?" Jack asked.

"Not normally that long." With a sigh, Ana returned her attention to her console. "We really shouldn't be having this discussion right now."

And just like that, Jack knew. Ana was more than a soft sweet woman he liked to hold. She was a woman who would stand by those she cared about and was strong enough to do so. She was exactly the woman he needed in his life, someone who'd be a companion as well as lover. It didn't matter how little time they'd had together so far.

He wanted the rest of his life to be spent with her.

Unfortunately as their adversary caught up to them again, that was beginning to look like it wasn't going to be that long a time. This time when the *Cathay Sun* appeared its guns were blazing and *Traveler's Choice* took several fortunately non-lethal hits before Ana was able to pilot them away.

When they arrived to a temporarily safe piece of space they both looked at each other a long time in silence. Then Ana began laughing uncontrollably and after a moment Jack joined her.

Finally she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "I tell you what, Jack. If we live through this, we'll have a nice long discussion about marriage. But let's stay focused on staying alive for now."

He had to agree. "Good plan, woman. Just remember I want to marry you."

She chuckled. "And I want your baby. So we do have something to discuss."

"That we do." He turned his attention to the next part of his flight plan, scrapping some of it to make it more difficult to follow. The fact that their adversary was catching up to them quicker meant he was getting too predicable. Finally he finished his adjustments.

"Next coordinates," he began and looked up to see Ana smiling at him, her fingers poised over the controls. Jack couldn't help but grin back.

She chuckled. "You know, this is fun."

His smile grew wider. "I told you it would be."

Ana laughed. "Let me have the data."

"My pleasure."

* * * *

Mea didn't think much of the *Vengeance's* bridge, but she hadn't thought much of the rest of the ship, the crew, or the men who led them either. She'd served on several Earthforce military ships and to her there was a lot of sloppiness in the way these people did things. The *Vengeance* was a former Earthforce vessel, but there was little left of the spit and polish the military ship had once boasted. Like the rest of the ship, the floor was dirty and it looked like half the lights on the panels were malfunctioning.

Not that she was going to complain about that. As it happened the slavers' sloppiness was only going to work in her favor. The bridge was set up to be manned by at least four people but only half that number were present. There was also no sign of either Wilcox or Harris. Not that she minded missing out on seeing either of those two, but it was interesting that they'd sent Grant to fetch her only to disappear before she'd reached the bridge.

Grant seemed surprised, as well. He glanced around then stepped over to one of the two men on the bridge and asked where Wilcox was. They gave her a sharp look, and then talked quietly.

After a moment Grant came over and took her by the arm, pulling her over to one of the unmanned communication's chairs. "Sit here and behave."

"What's wrong? Where is everyone?"

He looked amused. "Sorry, but it looks like you won't be able to say goodbye to your brother after all.

Mea's blood ran cold. "Is he dead?"

"No, but he decided to follow us in your ship. It's out there now with Wilcox and Harris in hot pursuit. Oh, and get this, your brother has that nanny of yours piloting."

Mea fought to keep her expression neutral. "Ana is piloting?"

"Yeah," Grant shook his head with mock sympathy. "A shame about that since once they catch up they'll probably just destroy your ship rather than take prisoners. She was a pretty, little thing ... and I know how hard it must be to get good help."

Mea worked to keep her face schooled into impassivity. Grant was clearly trying to provoke a reaction out of her, anger or sorrow. When he turned away looking satisfied she knew he thought he understood how she felt.

What he didn't know was that the reaction she was hiding was a satisfied smile. First of all if there was one person she thought could pilot *Traveler's Choice* better than she or Kavath, it would be Ana. The woman was highly skilled.

The other thought was that Jack was with her. *Jack and Ana working together—wasn't that interesting!*

Chapter Nineteen

Two hours later, Mea still sat in the chair at the empty communications station, watching the men on the bridge. Grant had decided to keep her nearby assuming she'd be needed as a hostage to help negotiate Jack's surrender. Since it was far more entertaining sitting on the bridge than in her room, Mea hadn't objected.

The time had dragged on and apparently her presence had fallen into the back of their minds. After all, she must look as dangerous to them as an Earth kitten. Keeping quiet, Mea watched and waited. If anyone looked at her she put on a face of studied worry that she didn't feel at all. It was always good to let your opponent underestimate you.

During the time since she'd arrived on the bridge the atmosphere had changed a lot. When she'd arrived the men there had been confident that their boss and his partner would soon capture Jack. Now they looked at each other with worried glances and Mea saw the frustration in their attitudes. When Grant snapped an order at the other two men they either argued or ignored it.

Better and better, she thought. The slavers weren't getting along.

One problem was that somehow communications within the ship had been impacted. Some of it was the damage Jack and Ana had apparently done to *Vengeance's* outside array, forcing Grant to send a team of men in spacesuits out to fix. So far they'd reported slow going as they'd first had to rescue the communications array from where it had drifted away from the ship, and then find a way to reattach it. They still hadn't finished the job.

That had been bad enough, but now the internal ship comms were also being impacted. During the past hour Grant had tried contacting the engine room several times, but no one was answering and when he'd finally decided to send a man to check it out, he hadn't reported back yet. The same thing happened in the main hanger, and then Grant hadn't been able to get through to the crew quarters. All over the ship, communications were being cut off.

Something was wrong on the ship, but they didn't know what it could be. Mea tapped the side of her boot where Sonja's blade nestled next to her ankle. She bet she knew what the problem was.

* * * *

Pausing in the corridor, Sonja looked back at her troop of women and kids, including little Heather. After freeing the Traveler women from the room they'd been locked in, a couple of the women had suggested leaving the children behind, but Sonja had vetoed that idea. She didn't want to leave anyone where the slavers could find them. They'd even swung by Engineering to collect the boy they'd left there to throw off inquiries from the bridge. At this point it didn't matter what the bridge thought was happening.

During the next couple of hours, Sonja and her crew had moved methodically through the ship, taking out the slaver crew whenever they found them. With so many people holding weapons, that made the safest place on the ship wherever they happened to be.

Safe, that is, for the women and children, not the slavers they were encountering. So far it was sixteen men down and zero casualties amongst her crowd. Nineteen, she added, remembering the two men in engineering and the crewman that Heather had stunned. She glanced over at the child, who still held the stunner she'd claimed. No way was anyone going to get that away from the child, not with the death grip the little girl had on the weapon.

Sonja didn't blame her. After what that little girl had undoubtedly been through, keeping a firm grasp on a weapon was the least she could expect.

They were moving toward the medical lab where several of the women had already spent time, although they'd been unconscious at the time. Babette was first behind her, her fury over her interrupted wedding night making her especially tense.

Sonja couldn't help sympathizing with the woman. From what Babette had told her she must have been making love to her husband when the gas bombs had dropped on the village. They'd taken her from her husband's arms naked and unconscious, and thrown her into a shuttle.

When Sonja had opened the door to the cargo room where the Traveler women were being held, Babette had been trying to use her fingernails to remove the tracking chip from her arm. Only Sonja explaining that Jack would be using the substituted chip to track them had kept the Traveler woman from ripping the skin off her arm with her bare hands.

Now the injury to her arm gave Babette a particular interest in seeing justice done to the men who'd taken them. That justice had already been done nineteen times but the Traveler women weren't going to be satisfied until every man on this ship had paid the price of their attempted enslavement.

They turned a corner and yet another male member of the *Vengeance* crew stood before them, his jaw dropping at the sight of so many women bearing weapons.

Hit by no less than a dozen stunner rays he collapsed, barely made a noise as he fell. The Traveler women celebrated the man's downing with slapped hands and wicked smiles.

Sonja made a mental note to keep Captain Denn Fuller and his crewman Kwam out of sight and to get them off the *Vengeance* before the other women found them. Otherwise they'd suffer the same fate as the slavers and that wouldn't at all fit in with her plans.

She turned and addressed the women behind her. "This isn't efficient. We can't all keep firing at them at the same time." Moving along the line she started counting. "One, two, three, four, one, two, three, four ..." pointing to each woman and assigning a number. "From now on, the first man we see, only the ones fire, the second, the twos, and so on. Do not fire out of order."

The women held up their weapons and nodded agreement. To Sonja's satisfaction, the next man they saw only got hit by a quarter of the women. Sonja could

have cheered at their cooperation.

Stars, with a little practice, might actually turn this motley crew into a military unit.

On reaching the door to the medical lab Babette rushed forward. "Let me go in first, Sonja."

Sonja hesitated, but then stepped back. The young woman clearly had some issues to work through. Better that she did it here and get it out of her system.

A smile that was pure wickedness appeared on Babette's face, then she pushed the button and the door slid open. Rushing inside, she fired her weapon in a fanning motion. Behind her came three of the other ladies, then the three boys from Engineering. Heather hung back next to her along with the rest of the women.

From the sounds inside the room, their presence wasn't really necessary. After a few moments only silence came from inside. Sonja peeked around the doorway to see men's bodies littering the floor and the women moving between the tables, checking out the inert forms resting there. When she'd liberated the Traveler women from their quarters several of the beds that had earlier been filled were empty, indicating women had been taken to the medical lab for "processing."

That had prompted them heading for the lab rather than the bridge, to make certain no one was in slaver hands when they finally took over the ship.

Babette came over to her and waved her hand at the tables. "I think these are the women we were missing—so everyone is accounted for, Sonja. The only woman we can't find is Jack's sister, Mea."

Lifting her weapon Sonja checked the charge. Even with all the use it was barely half empty. "I think we'll find Mea on the bridge. Wilcox took her to hold her hostage against Jack."

Babette smiled. "Well then, I think we need to go to the bridge."

Sonja agreed with a nod. The bridge was definitely their next destination.

* * * *

Traveler's Choice arrived at the end of another hopscotch jump, shuddering to a stop. Ana listened approvingly to the engines as they automatically powered down. So far they'd held up well under the strain of the frequent and rapid jumps.

She leaned back in her chair, watching as Jack, too, took advantage of the momentary calm to catch his breath. For several long moments they exchanged longing looks then Jack rose from his chair, stretched, and came over to her.

He took Ana's hand and pulled her to her feet. "I've been meaning to do this for the past two hours," he said before kissing her full on the lips.

Ana opened her mouth to him and moaned then went on the attack, her arms wrapped around his neck. He was so tasty, so sexy. So male. Only the thought that their pursuers couldn't be more than a few minutes behind them kept Ana from dragging him back to her cabin.

This must be what was meant by danger enhancing the desire to reproduce, to have a child as a means to keep going. She'd heard that Earth people often engaged in sex even with a total stranger as a means of coping with imminent peril. Gaians would rarely fall into that situation, given that they didn't have sex with anyone but their chosen

mate, and mated pairs rarely went into danger together.

This was a novel experience for her, being exposed to the phenomenon of potential danger as an aphrodisiac. It must be why she felt so strongly. At least that's what she told her brain.

All her body wanted was to drag Jack off and make passionate love to him. Too bad their opposition was so good at tracking them, giving her no chance to operate on her inclination.

They'd set up the proximity alarm to sound as soon as anyone showed up within their vicinity and just the kissing was getting good it sounded. Jack gave her a reluctant kiss in the forehead. "Back to work sweetheart."

Ana kissed his chin and let go of him, watching him head for the navigation chair. Sitting down she took hold of the pilot controls. "Let me know when you have coordinates."

It took Jack a moment to get to his seat and Ana poised to use the evasion tactics she'd used earlier when he'd been asleep and the *Cathay Sun* had been firing on them. Now the ship was here again, but to her surprise, they didn't open fire right away. Instead Wilcox's ship rested a mere kilometer away from them, not approaching and with guns silent.

Ana watched through the viewscreen and wondered at their silence. The fact that she and Jack had avoided capture for so long must be beyond frustrating for Wilcox and Harris. They'd come out here expecting to take out Jack, Ana, and *Traveler's Choice* within minutes and instead they'd been playing games with the slavers for more than two hours.

Two hours that had given Kavath and the Travelers time to recover from the gas and help Ryan repair the *Wanderlust* to the point of making it fly. Eventually the other ship would arrive on the scene and that's what they were counting on.

Traveler's Choice, as fast and agile as it was, did not have the firepower to stop the slaver, it could only delay them and that's why they were playing the game, to keep the slavers from leaving. It would take Ryan and the rest to rescue the women.

But what were Wilcox and Harris doing wasting so much time in this fruitless sport? Were they really that angry with Jack that they'd risk everything, including their lives in stopping him from interfering any longer with their business?

And why were they sitting so quietly, not shooting, not moving against them now that they'd caught up? What were Wilcox and Harris up to now?

The communit blared to life. "*Cathay Sun* to *Traveler's Choice*. Jack, you there?" The voice was Wilcox's and he sounded tired.

Jack barely looked up from his calculations. "Yeah, Wilcox, I'm here. You giving up yet?"

"Jack, what are we doing fighting like this? After all, we were shipmates for a long time. There is no reason for us to be trying to destroy each other. Why is this happening?"

Jack shook his head and continued feeding numbers into the computer. "You know why. You attacked my people and took my sister hostage. What am I supposed to do?"

“You can’t outrun us forever. You know that. I have to admit, your pilot is good, even better than I expected. But she’s getting tired, I’m sure. One mistake and the pair of you are dead. And then where will we be?”

Ana listened and wondered if he wasn’t right. She was tired and Jack even more so. How long could they keep this up without a fatal mistake?

Wilcox seemed to be able to anticipate her. “You dead, your woman dead. I don’t want to see it end that way, Jack.”

“And why would that be?” Jack asked with a distracted air. He seemed intent on keeping Wilcox talking, to buy himself working time on the nav computer to find the best way to elude them.

“Jack.” There was a note of disappointment in Wilcox’s voice. “We were friends once, before Carras and that unfortunate business with your sister. I’d like to believe what we were meant something.”

Ana stiffened, every muscle going still. Carras? What did Jack and Wilcox have to do with the destruction of the Gaian girl’s school? Why did Wilcox mention it so casually as if knowing Jack would know what he was talking about?

She turned her attention to Jack, who also seemed to have frozen in place, his hands no longer dancing across the keyboard but hovering over it. He raised his head to stare at her as if waiting for her reaction.

Waiting for her to realize the truth.

That’s when she knew. Ana suddenly knew what Jack’s secret was, why he hated Wilcox and Harris, his former shipmates. It was for more than their engagement in the slave practice.

She understood also why Kavath disliked his wife’s brother, Kavath, a man who disliked no one, but who’d lost a sister at Carras. She knew what Mea had meant when she’d said that it was time to put the past behind them. There was something in that past that had kept Jack from the only family he had.

At the beginning of the Earth-Gaian conflict Earthforce had destroyed Carras and somehow Jack had been one of the men involved along with Wilcox and Harris. She’d fallen in love with a man who not only wasn’t a man of her people, but who had been involved in the greatest war crime committed in the past century.

Jack stared at her as if waiting for her reaction, his face unreadable. Ana wasn’t sure if she should scream or cry. All she knew was that she had to do something. They had to get away.

Ana didn’t wait for any preprogrammed numbers from Jack’s computations. Instead she fed in a set of random numbers that made no sense and then reset the jump computer. She stared at Jack, noting, but not caring about the sudden look of anguish on his face.

“Jump in three. Two, one, jump.” She twisted the controls and they hop scotched to where she didn’t even think the devil himself would be able to find them soon.

Chapter Twenty

After they came out of hyperspace Jack stopped to take a couple of deep breaths before staring in astonishment at Ana. She sat at the controls so still that for a moment he wondered if she was even breathing.

Finally he managed to find his voice. "What were you thinking doing a jump like that, without decent coordinates? We could have ended up anywhere, inside a planet or another ship."

"Not many ships around here or planets," she said. "I figured we were safe enough." There was an unnatural calm to her voice and it pushed his uneasiness to the edge.

"Ana, what's wrong? Why did you do that?"

"We needed to get away, Jack. We needed ..." she stopped for a moment and he thought she stifled a sob. "We need to talk."

These were not words any man wanted to hear. "About what?"

Ana looked at him and her eyes were wide and hurt and it was all he could do to not go to her, but he knew that wouldn't be a good idea. Ana didn't want his comfort; she wanted an explanation, one that was going to be very hard to come up with. She wasn't going to like the only excuse he had.

Jack took another deep breath. "What do we need to talk about Ana?"

She gazed at him with those tragic eyes. "When were you planning on telling me about Carras?"

"What about Carras?" he asked, but he already knew the answer.

"You were there, weren't you? With Wilcox and Harris." It wasn't even a question. Ana stated it as a fact. "That's what you did during the war—you destroyed a school and killed thousands of girls."

He closed his eyes, not wanting her to see how the accusation wounded him. Wounded him, not because it wasn't true but because it was.

"I didn't know," he whispered.

"What?" Ana sounded confused.

He spoke again, louder this time. She had to hear him and understand. "I said I didn't know. I didn't know what the target was only that it was militarily important. Only a few knew what Carras really was, the pilots of each ship. Wilcox knew, Harris and I didn't. The rest of us were told it was a munitions factory and that a preemptive strike would make the war shorter."

"A munitions factory?" She stared at him. "You thought the Gaians were making weapons?" Her voice was filled with disbelief.

If possible that disbelief hurt him worse than anything else had. He needed Ana to believe in him and know he wouldn't lie about something like that. "It was what we were told Ana, and it was a plausible explanation at the time. I know now that Gaians

weren't likely to be working on weaponry, but this was a long time ago. Very few people on Earth knew much about Gaia and even fewer cared to find out more."

"So you were ordered to remove what you thought was our ability to make war and killed young women instead?"

At the contempt in her voice he felt sick inside, the same sickness he always felt when he remembered what he'd seen as their ship had come in close. The memory of that day rose to the surface of his mind, a memory he hadn't experienced in years. The initial bombing was complete and their ship came in close to finish the attack. His job on the ship was weapons control and he had been firing short-range lasers using a targeting scope when he realized what he was seeing.

Through the scope he saw a figure run along a grassy slope away from the flaming building, the form hidden by loose clothing. But then the figure had stopped and turned to face the ship coming at her and he'd seen her face. A slender face surrounded by short dark curls and large dark eyes.

It had been a young woman, barely more than a girl, eyes wide with terror, a defiant lift to her chin. He'd stopped firing, staring at that face. With her hair and coloring and particularly with the attitude she might have been his sister. He'd pulled back from the scope and stared at his companions.

"They're women," he'd said. "We're killing young women."

He remembered their faces, the disbelief on Harris', but Wilcox's expression didn't change at all.

"They're targets," Wilcox had replied. "Your job is to neutralize them."

Harris at navigation had looked at both of them, glancing between them with wide eyes. Jack saw the redheaded man pale, but Wilcox didn't change expression, keeping his attention on piloting the ship across the school. Jack remembered staring at him, realizing that the pilot had known all along what the target really was.

Over at navigation Harris had acted. He took his display and pulled up additional maps on it, local maps, lying them over the tactical chart they'd been given for the mission. He'd run his shaking fingers along their path and pointed to their location.

"Carras, school for girls," he'd read aloud. "My god, he's right."

Harris pallor went from white to green and then he'd left his post to run to the head. Jack heard him retching through the open door.

"Get back here," Wilcox had shouted, but Harris was in no shape to take his post. Without a word Jack took Harris' place at navigation and turned to face his captain. The two men stared at each other.

A proximity alarm sounded, warning them of incoming ships. The Gaians had finally launched a counter attack. With no one to work weapons, they had no further reason to be there so with a curse Wilcox had pulled their three-man fighter up and out of the battle.

On the *Traveler's Choice* Jack remembered how angry Wilcox had been at both he and Harris. The other man had smoothed things over with their leader, but Jack never had, and that led to this time where Wilcox seemed intent on destroying him and Ana.

He turned to Ana. "I stopped firing as soon as I saw what we were doing and Harris got ill. We ended up leaving early and we weren't the only one. Not even Dark

Angels were prepared for that kind of activity.”

Ana’s brown eyes turned thoughtful. “Isn’t desertion something they punish in Earthforce?”

“That’s where things got interesting. There was never any official action taken against those who left before the school was completely destroyed. Apparently Earthforce hadn’t wanted any publicity about the willful destruction of a girl’s school.”

Even privately no one spoke of it. The Dark Angels never talked about what they’d seen that day, but Jack had never forgotten the expression on that young woman’s face. Fear for certain and yet, in the presence of almost certain death, she’d shown defiance.

He’d known then that Earth was never going to win the war. They’d given the Gaians too much to fight for. All that was left was how long it would take for them to lose.

Jack looked at Ana’s still stricken face and again knew that he’d lost, but this time it was something far more important to him than a war he hadn’t wanted to be involved with in the first place. No, this time he’d lost Ana, her warmth and trust.

He’d expected it. Knew that if she found out he’d been involved she’d stop loving him, but even so it hurt more than he’d expected it to. It hurt because he knew what it meant that he cared so much. Somehow he’d fallen in love with her. He wanted her by his side, bearing his children and growing old with him.

And now it wasn’t to be. It was all he could do to keep the pain from showing on his face. He wouldn’t let her know what her hatred meant to him.

“Ana, I don’t expect you to understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

“Explain what?” Jack was tired of apologizing for something he’d had no decision in. “It was war. I was a soldier. It isn’t like I had a choice ... the military isn’t like that, you don’t pick and chose your assignments.”

Ana glared at him in outrage. “It was a war and you were a soldier assigned to kill women barely more than children? That’s your explanation?”

Something snapped inside him. “What do you want me to say, Ana? That I’m sorry? God knows I’m sorry about it. I’ve regretted it every day of my life.” He felt his voice catch and hated that weakness. For a moment he just breathed, hoping that would give him the calm he needed. He needed to stay calm right now.

“You’re sorry. Do you know what Carras did to us?”

“Yes, I know, Ana. I also know what Carras did to me. I know what Carras is still doing to me. It wasn’t my fault, Ana. I was twenty years old, my home was destroyed, my people scattered and most of my family was dead. All I had left was my sister.” He stopped and took a ragged breath. “All I had left was my sister and because of Carras, because she fell in love with a Gaian, I lost her too. I haven’t loved anyone the way I did her, not in the years since. Not until—”

He broke off and looked away. Ana was silent for a long time and when he finally dared look back at her she no longer looked angry. Instead a strange look was on her face as if she didn’t quite know what to think.

“Not until what?” she said.

Jack stared at her, confused. "What?"

"You said, you hadn't loved anyone until ... now?"

His confusion cleared up. Of course, up to now they'd talked about marriage, but not love. "Yes, now. I love you. That's not something I said to any woman before; it's not something I've even thought about saying to a woman. I love you and because of Carras I'm going to lose you as well."

She opened her mouth as if to say something then stopped. Opened it again, but no words came out. Closing her lips she finally looked at him as if seeing him for the first time.

Finally she leaned forward in her chair, still studying him with that uncertain regard. Jack stood steady, wondering what she was thinking and why she was having such trouble with what she wanted to say. It seemed like she struggled for a long time before finding the words.

He thought she'd talk about his declaring love for her, but again she surprised him.

"You say you know what Carras did to us," Ana said, "but I'm not sure you do. The destruction of Carras changed Gaia, Jack, and it changed the Gaian people permanently." She hesitated. "Not all of that was for the bad."

Jack's attention was caught. This wasn't the blanket condemnation he'd expected to hear from her and that gave him hope. Maybe, just maybe, Ana wasn't as lost to him as he'd thought she was.

"First of all," Ana said, "we had to bring in women to replace those we'd lost. They brought new ways and ideas. We had to become less detached from the rest of the universe, both because of the new women and because we realized we couldn't really survive alone."

"There was something else that became clear," Ana said. "When there were fewer women we found that more of the men had problems fitting into our society. There have always been men who simply could not cope with attachment and broke under the strain. They got violent at the marriage meets and would fight when they'd attach to the same woman. When that happens they have to be removed from the meet. If it happens more than once then they are banned. Banned forever," she emphasized.

Jack shook his head. "I'm not sure what that means."

"Suppose you could never feel passion, Jack. How would that make you feel? Gaians don't do casual affairs, it just isn't in us to do so. A man who isn't attached simply lives in limbo, not capable of wanting a woman."

Jack tried to imagine how that would be and after a moment gave up the effort. Suppose he was incapable of making love to Ana or any woman. It was just too hard to picture. "What do men like that do?"

She shrugged. "Some accept it and they find ways cope. Those become regular members of our society. But remember that most of the men I'm talking about have felt at least brief desire for a woman and those often don't accept their fate. Many of them leave Gaia and go to work someplace else. Many left to work the colony mines on the planets that border Gaia. There is little law there, very few women and almost none who aren't already attached."

She took a deep breath. "I believe that's where the women these slavers are intent on having are destined for. An unattached Gaian man living in the mines would do almost anything to have a wife, pay anything for the chance to attach. I can see now Sonja was right about those illicit marriage meets where the men buy their wives. Miners make quite a bit of money and it would be lucrative. That's why your old friends are so interested in stealing women for them."

"They aren't my friends."

He said the words automatically but Ana raised her hand in acknowledgment. "I know that, Jack," she said softly. "I doubt they'd be trying so hard to kill you if they were."

Ana didn't look angry at all anymore and again Jack felt an irrational surge of hope. After they rescued his sister and the Traveler women there would be time to discuss it further and maybe Ana wasn't quite as ready to abandon their relationship as he'd feared she'd be.

It was a long shot but much of his life had been spent in successfully negotiating his way through long odds. He might still have a chance with her ... assuming they lived long enough.

"Ana, I said I loved you. I meant it."

Her lips twitched. "I heard you."

"And?" Jack caught his breath. Would she still be his to love once this was over? Did she love him as well?

She gave him a long steady stare, but he thought he detected a little bit of humor in her face. "I'll let you know later."

Ana intended on torturing him. Fine. He'd be happy to accept that if it meant she was still speaking to him. Letting his held breath out into a long sigh, Jack checked the navigation display. They were a long way from their last location, but with effort and some magnification he found their adversary moving swiftly in their direction. Ana's random number jump had been too crazy a maneuver for Wilcox and Harris to copy and so they were following at light speed. Even so, they would catch up with them soon at the rate they were going.

But that gave Jack an idea. At this point Wilcox wouldn't be expecting them to jump to their location. The small lasers on the *Traveler's Choice* weren't much of a threat, but when he used them against the *Vengeance* he'd been able to partially cripple the much more powerful ship. It was possible he could do the same thing and take out something vital on the ship chasing them, if he had time for accuracy.

It could be dangerous, but the whole operation of keeping the slaver's busy and on this side of the jump gate was chancy at best. This could be the opportunity they needed to take out Wilcox's ship. Still he didn't want to risk Ana's life, at least not without her explicit approval.

"Ana, I have an idea," he began and was gratified that she gave him her full attention as he explained the scheme. When he was done she was nodding slowly. Then a tentative smile took over her face.

"Sweet Gaia, Jack. That sounds like real fun. Let's do it!"

Jack turned his attention to programming the computer, but a small part of him

considered how Ana was so close to the perfect woman for him. He better be able to keep her with him because the stars knew he would never find anyone as compatible with him as she was.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ana's hands tightened on the controls while Jack finished his calculations and fed them into her station. All they needed now was for him to ready the lasers before counting down to perform the jump.

The plan was simple. They'd jump to just behind their adversary and before they could react Jack would use the lasers to seal off the other ship's propulsion jets. As he'd explained it, the operation was risky, but it had a high chance of success if his aim was true.

She'd witnessed first hand how accurate he could be when they'd taken out the communications array on the *Vengeance*. Ana had no concerns that Jack would miss this time.

Ana watched him prepare, adjusting the laser to maximum distance and strength, setting it up so all he had to do when they arrived in normal space was aim and fire. They wouldn't get more than a couple chances to hit the *Cathay Sun*. Wilcox and Harris would realize quickly their arrival and take steps against them. She would have to jump away again because, even with their jets blocked, the other ship could still fire weapons.

They might even be waiting for a move like this, Jack had told her. That was the biggest risk, but if this gamble was successful they'd disable or at least cripple the *Cathay Sun* and the game they were playing would be over.

If they failed and their adversaries got a shot off, they could be the ones who were crippled. They could be captured or even destroyed. It was a dangerous game they were playing, but after two hours of non-stop runs, turns, and jumps, Ana was tired and becoming worried about how much longer she could do this without a mistake.

They had to do something, soon and this was their best chance. All she had to do was trust that she'd be able to get them to exactly the right place, which would be easy if Jack's calculations were good, and that when they arrived, his aim with the laser would be true.

All she had to do was trust Jack. Until a few moments ago that would have been easy. Now that she knew the truth about him and what his role had been in the war, trust was a little harder to come by.

She felt hurt, like he'd betrayed her in some way. Taken advantage of her ignorance. If she'd known about Carras she certainly wouldn't have been so quick to get involved with him. Of course she'd known he'd been in Earthforce and most likely responsible for the deaths of some number of her people. As he'd said earlier, that was inevitable and there was something almost honorable about the fighting a battle against other soldiers.

There was nothing honorable about Carras and although he'd said he'd not known what the target was how did she know Jack was telling the truth? Right now he could say anything and she had no way to verify it. It wasn't like she could trust him, not right

now, not that she knew what he'd been hiding from her all this time.

Had he ever planned to tell her? She doubted it. He must have told Kavath and Mea, or they'd found out somehow and it had poisoned his relationship with his sister's new family. After that, would he have trusted her reaction to be any different? Unlikely.

Clearly he loved his sister and being separated from her for so many years had hurt. She doubted Jack would risk rejection like that again so he'd most likely had intended to keep it a secret.

But he'd been talking about marriage, and children. Did he really think that she could have become his wife and not seen that darkness inside him? Even without knowing what the trouble was she'd seen how he avoided personal relationships, reducing the women he knew into categories, "Crew," "Village," and even worse, "Cargo." He'd admitted to having sex with women he'd meet in space station bars and similar haunts, women who asked for little more than a good time. Ana wondered what classification he used for them and decided she didn't want to know.

Somehow she'd gotten past his method of compartmentalizing women and making up excuses for not developing a relationship with them. In spite of everything he'd told her, he'd taken her to his bed.

Maybe that's why he'd fallen in love with her. She just didn't fit into any of his categories.

Did she want to be in a relationship with him? Had she known from the beginning that answer would have most likely been 'no'. But now? She just didn't know. Jack was the first man to make her feel like a woman in so many years. He'd managed to get past her fear of being close to a man, to the point she was actually thinking of marriage. If not to Jack, then maybe she would look into another marriage meet.

But even as she thought about it a small wave of queasiness passed through her. Ana stared at Jack, still working through his calculations, making certain everything would be right. She again felt that sense of rightness of being with him, in spite of what she knew now.

It was more than just the fact that he could touch her. Even now, knowing what he'd been involved in, Jack made her feel safe. She knew Jack would do anything in his power to protect her and anyone else he cared about.

Maybe that was more important than something he hadn't had any real choice in so many years ago.

Finally Jack looked up, satisfied with the settings on the lasers. "I'm set, Ana. Are you ready?"

She wasn't so sure she was, but she nodded anyway. Time to get moving. "On my mark," she said. "Three, two, one, mark."

The jump went smoothly and they arrived back in normal space just where Jack had wanted them to, *Cathay Sun*'s ample stern well within the limited range of their lasers. Ana slid their ship into a gentle turn that took them even closer and gave Jack the best advantage for shooting. He went to work immediately, running the lasers over the other ship's drive ports while she prepared for their next action, the jump away to safety. With the other ship's drive ports sealed they would be unable to move, or even jump.

Hyperspace jumps dumped a lot of energy through the same exhaust ports the

regular engines used. A ship that tried to move to hyperspace with sealed exhausts would most likely explode either here or in hyperspace.

Only a madman would attempt it and Wilcox might be many things, but crazy wasn't one of them, or so Jack had explained to her. Once the other ship was disabled, the *Cathay Sun* would sit peacefully until Ryan could arrive with the *Wanderlust*.

That was the plan anyway and the first part was going smoothly. They'd reckoned on needing no more than a minute to close off the ports before Ana would jump them away. She'd done the jump maneuver so many times now it seemed like second nature to perform the action. She paused over the controls waiting for Jack's go.

"A few more second," he told her. "Get ready—"

From the back of the other ship came a blinding light. Shocked, without thinking Ana flinched away from the controls. Jack began shouting immediately, but she was so dazed by the blast, Ana couldn't understand what he was saying.

"Jump, Ana. Go now!"

Ana's hands flew to the hyperspace control, trying to activate the jump, but before she could the entire side of the ship shuddered. All over the interior of the bridge panels erupted with bright lights, smoke, and electronic screams coming from every station. The blast from the other ship must have knocked out most of their electronics.

She tugged on the pilot's controls, but all that happened were more angry squeals, this time from her own console. She tried again and shock ran through her hands and she jerked them away from the handle.

Ana abandoned the jump and instead tried the standard engines. Those controls responded and *Traveler's choice* moved away from the *Cathay Sun*, but not at all as fast as she wanted. She tried again switching to hyperspace but whenever she tried to jump, all that happened was another blast of electronic complaints.

They were barely a hundred meters away when another blast from their adversaries caught them. From the back of the *Traveler's Choice* Ana felt a jerk and then there was silence instead of the steady rumble of the ship's engines.

She and Jack had come to disable their opponent. Hopefully the shot's Jack had fired had done the job because now it seemed they were well and truly disabled themselves. All their hopes of keeping the slavers from leaving were gone. Even worse, after the chase they'd given Wilcox and Harris, the other men would waste no time in destroying them.

Jack had depended on her to pilot them to safety and she'd failed. The strain of the past hours caught up with Ana and she felt her eyes water and a tear trickled down her cheek. Stricken Ana turned to Jack staring hopelessly at her from his station.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was too late. I should have jumped as soon as I saw the light."

Jack stared at her as if uncomprehending what she'd said. Then his face changed, and he was on his feet. Quickly he crossed the bridge and pulled her from her chair, wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "No Ana, don't blame yourself. Please don't."

"I let you down."

"No. You aren't battle trained and even the best pilots freeze under fire like that."

As it is you did manage to get us some distance away. They won't be able to board us."

"They've knocked the engines out. We can only drift and can't maneuver. We've failed."

"Hush, Ana," Jack murmured. He lifted her chin and she saw the warmth and admiration in his eyes. "No point in this. We've done what we set out to do, delay them leaving this sector. With the *Cathay Sun* disabled, Wilcox and Harris won't be able to get back to the *Vengeance*. It will have to come here to pick them up. That will take time, hours probably. Enough time for Ryan and the others to come after us."

"But they'll destroy us."

Jack chuckled. "They can certainly poke holes in us but to really destroy this ship means they'd risk getting caught in the explosion. We're too close and they can't move away. At the speed we're going they'll have to wait at least an hour for us to drift far enough for safety. That's why they haven't fired again."

It was funny how Jack managed to make things seem better. "They'll have to wait for the *Vengeance* to arrive to finish us off?"

Jack nodded. "The only other thing they could do is contact the *Vengeance* to send the *Bronda* after us. I'm actually surprised they haven't done that already. I think Wilcox wanted the honor of destroying us himself, but now they don't have a choice."

Ana couldn't help it. She had to laugh at his upbeat attitude. "So we have a few minutes to wait."

Jack hugged her closer. "If I have to wait for imminent destruction, there is no one I'd rather be waiting with than you. Besides, you never know. Ryan could have my ship back in working order and be on his way right now."

* * * *

Kavath scowled from his seat at the pilot's station of the *Wanderlust*. "Is there any way I can help get this ship there faster? Maybe it would help if I got out and pushed."

Ryan gritted his teeth and counted to ten. Kavath had insisted on piloting, pushing Ryan to the captain's chair which, since he was the only official crewmember aboard the *Wanderlust*, made sense in some ways. Unfortunately Kavath had done nothing since taking over the role as pilot but complain about how slow the *Wanderlust* was.

The *Wanderlust* wasn't a slow ship and only the fact that Ryan knew just what the man's real problem was kept him from relieving Kavath from duty and then bashing him in the head. Or maybe doing it in the opposite order. Considering which to do first helped relieve his frustration.

Ryan knew he couldn't hurt Kavath anyway. After all, Kavath was already hurting with a pain greater than anything he could inflict. The woman the Gaian man loved, the woman who loved him and who'd born his children had been taken, and that made him crazy beyond reason.

Ryan sympathized with the man. He himself cared for Sonja, who had also been taken, and wished she were his. It made him crazy to think of her in the possession of the slavers.

Almost as crazy as Kavath was making him. It made Ryan a little more

understanding of what Jack went through when he and Sonja gave him a hard time.

As soon as he caught up with Jack, Ryan intended to see that the man was properly installed back into his captain's chair. He had now seen his boss' job and no, he did not want it, thank you very much. As soon as Ryan could take back his pilot's chair he'd be doing so.

In the meantime all he had to do was rescue the boss, the boss' sister (thus making his current pilot happy), and the Gaian nanny, Ana. Ana, who in addition to being heavily involved with his boss, was at the moment his boss' pilot.

This whole thing was getting far too complicated but at least they were on their way. Thanks to a village full of Travelers and one very upset Gaian man, Ryan had the *Wanderlust* back together and in the air. Thanks to Sonja and her tracking device they knew where the slavers were, still on this side of the jump gate. Most likely that was thanks to Jack and Ana and their activities.

He and the rest of the rescue team were moving as fast as they could after those who'd dared take their women. Wearing grim expressions, Kavath, the bridegroom Tomas, as well as several other Traveler men whose women were missing crowded the bridge. Every man here wanted a piece of the slavers.

Ryan leaned back in the captain's chair. The tracker showed that the slaver's ship was positioned very close to the jump gate, but it hadn't moved in the past several hours. He was guessing there was a very good reason it was so stationary. The men on this ship might want to take revenge, but he was betting they were going to be a little late to do so.

* * * *

Something was up. Mea watched as Grant talked quietly to the two other men on the bridge in a heated whisper. They looked over at her nervously and she didn't like the way they played with the hand stunners they had clipped to their belts when they stared at her.

She had no way of knowing for sure, but her bet was that they were no longer able to communicate with any other part of the ship and that they were no longer thinking it was a matter of faulty communits. Unless she missed her guess Grant and his comrades had figured out they'd been invaded and, while it was unlikely they were going to figure out who they were dealing with in the near future, they were thinking of how to deal with it.

Apparently she fit into their plan and if she didn't do something soon, she was going to end up a hostage. Being a hostage of desperate armed men was not a safe place to be. One misfire could stun her and stunners had unpredictable effects on pregnancy. While she was too far along to simply miscarry, she didn't want anything to happen that could possibly hurt her baby.

Which left her with one possible option. She needed to get out of the reach of these men before there was any reason for them to act against her. The question was how.

She was considering her options when the minicomm in her pocket that she'd found under her pillow after Fuller's visit started to vibrate, once, then twice. An incoming message she figured. Mea didn't dare look at it with the men watching her. She needed to get somewhere private to examine it.

Fortunately she had a great excuse to be in another room.

Sliding her feet onto the floor Mea rose from her chair. After several hours of inactivity she didn't need to exaggerate how awkward she was. Grant was at her side immediately, hand on her elbow steadying her, but there was nothing solicitous about his manner.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She pointed to the doorway on the far side of the bridge. "I need to use the head."

Grant glared at her. "You can't hold it?"

Mea patted her belly. "I'm afraid not. I'm like this when I'm pregnant. Have to go all the time."

Grant looked like he wanted to argue, but after a moment he grudgingly let go of her arm. "All right, make it quick, though."

Still moving awkwardly Mea moved to the sanitary. The door slid shut after her, but unfortunately there was no lock on the inside. That wasn't so good but at least she had some privacy. From her pocket she pulled the minicomm and opened the message it had received.

The message held a clock that activated as soon as she opened it up. It started at a minute and began counting down, 59, 58, 57, numbers flashing in succession.

The fact that the clock started when she opened the message meant that whoever had sent it wanted to know when she got it. That meant they were planning something and wanted Mea to know it and keep out of the way. The minicom vibrated and she noticed it had just passed the forty-five second mark. Seconds later it vibrated again at the thirty seconds mark.

As she watched it continued. 28, 27, 26

Where she was would be the safest place to be. Mea looked about the tiny room but saw no way keep the door closed if someone wanted to open it. The minicom vibrated again and she saw it had past the fifteen seconds mark. 14, 13, 12, 11

Quickly Mea pulled the knife from her boot and stuck it into the edge of the door, hoping that would be enough to jam it shut. She tried to open the door from the inside and was gratified that it seemed sealed.

The clock continued. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Then a single word appeared on the display.

DUCK!

The space around her suddenly shook with the force of an explosion coming from the room next door. Through the door she heard the sounds of shouting and the whine of lasers. After a few moments there was silence.

Then there was a knock on the door. "Mea?"

Mea let out the breath she'd been holding at the sound of Sonja's voice, recognizable even though muffled on the other side of the door. "Yes?"

"You alright in there?"

"I'll be out in a minute."

"What's wrong?"

Laughing Mea leaned against the door. "Nothing. But it seems I do need to use the facilities after all."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Emerging from her sanctuary Mea found herself in a sea of pink. She blinked at the sight of so many women crowding the bridge, some still in Traveler clothes, but many of them dressed in short-sleeved bright pink uniforms and bandages on their upper left arms. All of them carried a formidable array of weapons including the few children she saw.

They were also sporting big smiles due to the fact they'd completed their takeover of the slaver's ship. Everywhere that Mea looked she saw a celebration, women laughing and hugging. Well, everywhere but the corner where the three men who'd held her hostage on the bridge had been put. Grant lay stunned and unconscious and the other two men were barely able to sit up. Two women stood guard over them with stunners drawn.

Normally Mea liked pink, but this particular shade was too intense even for her. Sonja approached and Mea noticed she wasn't wearing one of the jumpsuits, but was instead dressed in a drab olive colored uniform that did a great job of hiding her femininity. Behind Sonja were four children dressed the same, including one girl who couldn't have been more than twelve, holding a stunner in her hand with a fierce grip.

Mea eyed the child and looked questioningly at Sonja, but the small blond didn't offer an explanation. Instead she grinned at Mea. "Glad to see you're all right."

"Glad to see you, too." She looked around at the rest of the jubilant women. "Looks like we've won."

"So it does. We just need to figure out how to get one of these men to pilot this ship back to Baile Na." She turned in the direction of their captives. "Unfortunately that may take a while."

"You can't pilot it?"

"No. Never learned how. Jack and Ryan pilot our ship."

Mea couldn't help grinning. "If you'll excuse me," she said and headed for the central pilot's chair. She sat down and pulled the console closer.

Sonja followed her over. "Mea, you know what you're doing?"

With a few button pushes the ship vibrated to life. Mea smiled in satisfaction.

She looked up at Sonja. "That would be Lieutenant Meagan An Flena, formerly of Earthforce and I was trained to fly anything they had. This," she tapped the console, "is a former Earthforce ship ... therefore, I can fly it."

She looked over at the now watching women on the bridge. "I'll need an engine and a bridge crew, and it would be best if we have patrols to watch out for stragglers. Who knows how to run the engines?"

Four of the women raised their hands, as did the kids. They chatted briefly and deferred to the woman who looked the oldest. "We'll take the engine room," she said and led her crew from the bridge.

Another three volunteered to manage the bridge duties, and Sonja led the rest off

to the side and split them into to armed patrols. They followed the new engineering crew, checking weapons as they went. Mea watched them go and hoped they wouldn't run into any real trouble. But then again, they'd just got through taking over a ship full of slavers, how much worse trouble could they face?

Sonja came over and mock-saluted Mea. "Glad to have you on board, *Captain*."

"My friends call me Mea. You want to be second-in-command?"

"I already am on your brother's ship."

Mea pointed to the communication's station that was still inactive. "We need someone to fix that."

Sonja saluted her again, but this time it didn't seem quite as mocking. "I'll get right on it, boss," she said and headed to one of the consoles. It wasn't a surprise when a few minutes later the communit at the captain's chair came to life and trilled, indicating a new connection.

It was a bit of a surprise that the first call the unit received was from the titular owner of the *Vengeance*, John Wilcox. The good news was that he didn't sound the least bit happy.

"*Vengeance*, this is *Cathay Sun*. Are you there?" Mea's eyes narrowed at the man's voice, which she'd heard several times already while sitting on the bridge. Every hour or so Wilcox had called to growl at his men about how Jack had eluded him, but stating it would only be a little while until he'd caught up with them.

At first this news had filled Grant and the other men with satisfaction, but as time had gone by without any sign of success, and as Wilcox had grown more and more surly, the attitude on the bridge had changed. Grant had grown tenser with every call from his boss until he'd been fairly jumping at the sound of the communit's trill. Wilcox's frustration had leaked through, his voice angrier with each report. The fact that the men on the bridge had looked so worried spoke volumes. Clearly the men had suffered in the past when Wilcox was angry.

With the men on the bridge lying stunned or at least partially unconscious there was no one to answer but her. Mea took a deep breath and pitched her voice as low as she could. "*Vengeance* here."

"Grant, is that you?" Wilcox sounded suspicious. "You don't sound like yourself."

During her stint on the bridge Mea had heard enough of how Grant talked to his employer. She coughed into her hand. "Something in my throat. It's getting late, boss. What's the news?"

Apparently reassured, Wilcox continued. "We finally caught up with him." He sounded more that satisfied. Mea had to fight her instinct to scream. All around her on the bridge the women stopped what they were doing and listened.

She took a deep breath and managed to grind out a response. "Oh? Is Jack dead?"

"No, not yet but we've disabled his ship."

Another deep breath but this was one of relief. She knew her brother and if Jack was still breathing then there was more than a little hope. "That's good news, boss."

"I need you to come pick us up."

“What?” Surprised, Mea almost forgot to keep her voice pitched deep. “Why do you need us there?”

“Before we disabled him he got a shot off. Sealed off our engine ports. We can’t move.”

“So you’re disabled too?”

“Yes. But we still can out-gun Jack. The only reason he’s not breathing vacuum is because we don’t want to get caught in the backwash when his engines explode.”

It was all Mea could do to control the sick feeling in her stomach. She had no doubt that Wilcox fully intended to destroy his former shipmate. “Okay boss. We’ll be there as quick as possible.”

She disconnected and turned to stare at the rest of the women on the bridge. All signs of celebration were gone now with the knowledge that Jack was in trouble. They all knew that Ana and Jack’s efforts had kept the slavers where they were and had given the women the time to overcome the men on the ship.

As she met their eyes she saw the same determination she felt. “You heard the man. Let’s get this ship moving and head for the rescue.”

Mea didn’t have to mention just which ship it was they’d be rescuing.

* * * *

On the *Traveler’s Choice* the air was tinged with the scent of burning wires, most likely the result of the system damage they’d taken. Jack realized it was a testament to how compromised their life support was that the smell hadn’t cleared already.

He shook his head. After all the times he and his crew had burned out another ship’s controls, it was somewhat ironic that he was now a victim of the same ploy, if not through the same means. Unfortunately it would take more than a simple antivirus to fix the mess their opponents had made of the guidance systems. From the odor more than one circuit was completely fried and the only way this ship would be moving again other than the drift it currently had was if someone towed it.

His sister and her husband were not going to be happy with him for damaging their ship. He just hoped he got a chance to let them yell at him. Right now he’d even be happy to see Kavath arrive on the scene, and he’d take whatever punishment the man wanted to dish out, provided the Gaian also rescued Ana.

One thing Jack regretted was that Ana was here with him and likely to suffer the same fate as him. With everything he’d done to the man over the past few years Wilcox had good reason to want him dead. Trouble was he wouldn’t hesitate to kill Ana as well, and she didn’t deserve to die just because she was with him.

Once more Jack regretted allowing her to come with him. She thought she’d forced him to bring her, but it wasn’t true. He most likely could have found another way to get the launch codes from her, but the truth had been that he’d wanted her with him. Having her beside him made him feel alive and invincible.

But he hadn’t turned out to be invincible and she was going to suffer for his mistake unless he could figure out a way around it. He didn’t have long to think about it though. Wilcox had no doubt sent word to the *Vengeance* that they needed to be picked up and the big ship would be there soon to help the injured *Cathay Sun*. Once on the *Vengeance* Wilcox could destroy them without risking his own life.

They'd been waiting an hour already and the *Vengeance* couldn't be that far away. Before they got here Jack had to find a place of safety for Ana.

They were leaning against her pilot's console with Jack holding her close. From the beginning he'd declared her to be a nice little bundle to have in his arms. She still was, and in spite of everything she still seemed be his to hold. His to love.

His to take care of. Jack glanced down at the pilot's controls and noticed the array of buttons to one side and their markings. His lips twitched. That was the answer.

"We have time to wait, sweetheart," he murmured into her hair. "Let's head back to your quarters."

She leaned back and stared up at him, disbelief in her face. "You want to make love now?"

"It's a thought. Staying here just means that Wilcox can call and taunt us. No point in giving him the satisfaction."

She chuckled, but it sounded forced. "Good point."

Ana led the way down the corridor, Jack right behind her. He tugged her to a stop at one of the hatchways and pulled into his arms once more. "Ana, I think I've fallen in love with you."

Her chuckle this time didn't sound at all forced. "So I'm not in any of your categories then. Not cargo or crew."

He smiled. "No, not either of those. If things were different I'd want you to be my family."

"I've been proud to serve as your pilot, Jack. And anything else."

"I know. That's why this is necessary." He kissed her once more, a hard bone-melting kiss. When he stopped and pulled back Ana's eyes were closed and she was truly smiling.

Jack took a couple deep breaths, and then reached behind her and pushed the hatch controls. It opened to reveal a small cabin, which he pushed Ana into. She landed on the soft cushioned interior and startled, eyes blinking open to stare about in confusion.

Then she smiled. "You want to make love in the escape pod? Kinky, but I like it." She held out her arms to him. "Come here."

Jack stayed in the doorway. "Great idea ... but I can't leave with you. Someone has to keep Wilcox busy, love. But give my best to my sister and the rest."

Pushing back, he closed and sealed the hatch, then rushed back to the bridge. The auxiliary controls for the escape pod were on Ana's console, and still glowed a bright green. That was the one circuit that hadn't been fried by Wilcox's blast.

He reached over to push the button, but before he could the communit lit up and Ana's voice came through loud and clear. Jack was impressed at how fast she'd activated the control from inside the pod. His sister and her husband must have run many escape drills for Ana to be so familiar with the controls.

She sounded angry. "Jack, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm saving you."

"By sending me off in an escape pod? Did I ask to be saved? Did I say you could eject me from the ship?" Her voice was beyond angry now and over the comm he heard her banging on the inside of the door. "Let me out of here."

His hand hovered over the button. "Ana, this isn't up for debate. I won't let you die because of my past. Wilcox and Harris are my problem, not yours."

"And what if I want to make them my problem? You asked me to be your wife, Jack, and that means your past is my problem. All of your past, your enemies, your people, even Carras."

Jack froze. "What about Carras? That has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with you, Jack and that makes it mine to deal with as well. You've isolated yourself because of what happened there, afraid someone would find out. Well, I found out and the first thing you asked me to do was accept it. And I did. That experience made you the man you are, the man I fell in love with. So don't tell me your past isn't my concern because it is."

Jack closed his eyes, his heart wrenching. Part of him wanted to head back down the hall and free her from the pod, if only to hold her in his arms and kiss her senseless. But the other part knew he couldn't sacrifice her life. She meant too much to him for that.

"Ana, I love you."

"I love you too, you arrogant man. Now let me out of here or I swear I'll make you regret it!"

Jack smiled slightly. "Sorry, darling nymph. I'll tell you what, though. If we both live through this I'll give you the rest of our lives to punish me." He pushed the escape pod eject button and a few seconds later felt the slight bump as the pod's small engine fired, pushing it away from the ship.

* * * *

In the pod Ana cursed as she was thrown against the cushioned interior. Struggling against the force of the ejection she grabbed a loose harness and managed to fasten herself onto a bench. After a few moments the initial rocking ceased and the ride settled out so that while the pod was still very much in motion it no longer was difficult to move around inside.

Inside the now calm interior, Ana was anything but calm. She couldn't believe he'd really gone through with it. Of all the things she'd expected from Jack, jettisoning her from her own ship was the last. Freed from the harness, she hit the communication's link but the direct one to the bridge had been severed when her pod ejected. She needed to fire up the broadcasting communit to reach the ship now and that would take time.

Time, which she now had plenty of—stuck as she was in an escape pod. The good news was that it seemed that the electrical problems they'd had on the ship had not transferred to the escape pod. She had plenty of power in the dormant fuel cells, life-support, and once she got the communit working would be able communicate with other ships. She could even control her small engine now that the initial burst was over.

Still muttering deprecations about arrogant men, she got to work on the limited controls.

Jack was going to have a lot to answer for, even if he did claim to love her. It was a good thing that he'd shared that news, though, because it made her happy enough so when she got her hands on him, she wouldn't hurt him too badly. Just badly enough.

Chapter Twenty-three

The commlink on *Traveler's Choice's* bridge trilled to life and Jack cringed at the sound. It was probably Ana calling to yell at him. He'd figured that it would take Ana at least ten minutes to get the escape pod's communications up and running, but it had only been five since she'd been jettisoned and apparently once again he'd underestimated her.

He was wrong. "*Traveler's Choice* ... this is *Cathay Sun*." Wilcox's voice oozed over the commlink, oily as ever. Jack felt unclean just listening to the man.

Unfortunately that didn't stop Wilcox from talking. "So Jack are you there? Or did you run away in that escape pod we saw you fire?"

If Wilcox thought he was on the pod, he'd probably destroy it. That was why he hadn't gone with Ana, sending her off by herself.

Jack sprang to answer the comm. "I'm here, Wilcox."

"So you are. Well then, why did you fire an escape pod? Something in there you care about Jack? Or someone? Maybe it was your pilot you sent off. The Gaian nanny. Grant had said you were pretty friendly with her."

"I sent her away because she has nothing to do with this, Wilcox. This feud is between you and me. No one else should get hurt as a result."

"But others have been hurt, Jack. Many others. Have you forgotten the women from the village? Your own sister?"

No, Jack hadn't forgotten any of those others and he saw what Wilcox was doing. This was more than revenge for all the times Jack had thwarted the other man's plans. Wilcox was out to destroy him and anything that meant something to him.

"I don't think that it is just this woman's innocence that moves you to protect her," the other man continued. "I think you care for her. I think you care for her a lot more than you're willing to admit."

Jack's gut clenched tight. It would be just like Wilcox to take revenge by killing Ana. He put all the indifference he didn't feel into his voice. "When have I ever cared that way for anyone? She's just another woman."

"Is she?" Wilcox sounded skeptical. "Then you won't mind our having a little target practice."

The inside of the bridge had cooled off with life support at a minimum, but a fine line of sweat broke out on Jack's face anyway. "Don't do it, Wilcox," he growled.

"Why not?"

"So far you haven't killed anyone and that's why the Travelers have held back. How many times have we taken the *Bronda* and not hurt Fuller or his pilot? But you aren't dealing with Gaians, Wilcox. I'm a Traveler, as are the rest of my tribe, and we will not let you kill and get away with it."

"The Travelers are grounded and we have their women. What can they do to us?"

"Are they on the ground, Wilcox?"

“What do you mean, Jack?” Through the commlink Wilcox suddenly sounded hesitant.

“I mean that when I left Baile Na, this was the only ship space worthy, but *Wanderlust* wasn’t damaged that much. While Ana and I kept you busy an entire village of Travelers have been working on repairing it. Travelers that you gave a really good reason to go after.

“Unless I miss my guess my ship will be here soon and if you aren’t here, or even I’m not here, that won’t matter. They will find you Wilcox, they will search you out to the end of the galaxy and destroy you for what you’ve done.”

There was a long, long silence as if John Wilcox was considering the situation. Jack waited for the man’s response, hoping that he’d see reason and give up this insane vendetta he was on.

After a long time, Wilcox finally responded. “Then I really don’t have anything to lose by destroying the nanny, do I?”

Jack’s heart sank. The man was going to do it, kill the woman he loved just to get back at him. “Why are you doing this? Just what is it that makes you hate me this much?”

“Why do I hate you?” Wilcox gave a long hard laugh. “You were always the good man on the team, Jack. The ‘boy wonder,’ ten years younger than me, but promoted into the Dark Angels anyway. You could out-fly me, out-gun me, without hardly trying. And the stories you told, about your family, your sister, the folks who loved you. I was the last son of one of the best families on Earth and you were nothing but a tinker and yet you had more people give a damn about you than I ever would.”

“You hate me because I had a family?” Jack couldn’t keep the disbelief from his voice. “Half of them were dead and my tribe had been scattered to the Outer Colonies.”

Wilcox’s fury was palpable even through the commlink. “They cared about you Jack and always would. I didn’t have that and it just wasn’t right.” There was a pause. “But you’re right, that’s not the entire reason.”

“Oh?”

“No, Jack my boy. It was more than your family.” Something else was in Wilcox’s voice, deadly anger. “The truth is thanks to you, my career was ruined.”

“What?”

“It happened back at Carras. You and that damned moral code of yours. When you figured out what our target was, you stopped firing and told Harris what we were doing.”

Confused, Jack couldn’t help himself. “I don’t understand.”

Old fury poured from Wilcox’s voice. “We had to leave the battle, Jack. When we got back I had to explain why to my superiors. It was your fault, but I was in charge. They told me I couldn’t handle my men, that it was my fault we left the battle.”

“I didn’t think there were any repercussions from that.”

“Nothing was ever said ... directly. But I was never promoted, not like the captains of the other ships, those who stayed to finish the job. The military was all I had. I didn’t have a people to return to or a family, just Earthforce and that was gone. Your action ruined my career and it was all I had. You destroyed it.”

Shaken, Jack clung to the edge of the commlink's console. There was reason behind Wilcox's madness after all and there might actually be some truth in it, although Wilcox's behavior over the years particularly with the women in Earthforce would have most likely doomed his career, anyway. Jack's sister hadn't been the only woman Wilcox had attacked over the years. But no point in trying to change the man's mind after all this time.

"And now you want to destroy me. Do it then, Wilcox. Kill me and be done with it."

"Not good enough. I want you destroyed, not just dead. So first I'm going to take away from you something you love—I'm going to take your woman."

In the background Jack heard the man shout to someone, "Prepare to fire," then the link went dead.

Jack tried to reconnect but there was no answer on the link. He was about to give up when it trilled again. Jack jumped on it, hoping it was Ryan coming to save the day with his ship. They needed the *Cathay Sun* immobilized with the virus before Wilcox could fire on Ana's capsule.

It wasn't Ryan. "Jack, you bastard. I can't believe you ditched me!"

Almost as good as Ryan to the rescue though. At least now Jack could warn her. "Ana! Take evasive action."

His frantic tone must have gotten through to her because Ana's tone changed quickly. "What?"

"Use your jets, start tumbling, anything," Jack said. "Wilcox is going to fire at you."

He heard her grumbling through the commlink, but then there was the welcome sound of engine noise coming through the link. Finally Ana was back and yelling at him again.

"This was your idea of sending me to safety?"

She had a point. Ana would have been safer staying with him. "I'm sorry. I underestimated him. Just stay alive and you can punish me later."

"You stay alive too. I'm not finished with you." Ana disconnected from the comm.

Jack shook his head. The chances he'd be able to obey her were pretty unlikely, especially given what he intended to try next. He couldn't wait for Ryan; he had to get this ship capable of some kind of action. It was a last resort, but he was down to last resorts now.

With a quick prayer he rechecked the lines into the lasers. They didn't have circuits that could be blown, unlike the targeting computer. Jack didn't need that ... he just needed the lasers themselves working and if he could get power to them they'd be functional. Once he had them activated he could target them himself.

However, to do that, he would also need some way to see what was going on. Having the viewscreen off meant he was virtually blind. Again that wasn't something that had a blow-able circuit so again all it needed was power. To get functional lasers he needed a power supply that was not compromised.

Unfortunately there was only one thing on the bridge other than the emergency

pod whose power source had not been completely damaged, and that was the emergency life-support system. It was the one part of a Gaian ship that was on a protected circuit and the reason he still had air to breathe and why the ship hadn't yet frozen up inside.

Compromising what was left of his life-support would most likely mean he'd be dead in less than an hour. Better him than Ana, though.

Jack got to work tearing apart the consoles and rewiring. The first thing he did was activate the viewscreen so he could see what was going on. He directed one of the exterior cameras in the direction he'd sent the escape vessel and now he could see Ana's pod twisting and turning as if driven by a mad-woman. She'd clearly set up the pod's tiny jet to fire randomly and at odd angles so it pitched about. Jack was sure the ride must be horrible for Ana, but it made the pod a very difficult target to hit.

This was good because when he directed the second camera at the *Cathay Sun* and set the viewscreen to show both images, he saw flashes of laser fire coming from the direction of the *Cathay Sun*. Wilcox was clearly trying to keep his promise to kill Ana first.

So far he'd missed, but the pod's fuel wouldn't last for very long the way she was using it. Eventually the pod would run out of fuel and stop jerking around, or Wilcox could get lucky and hit her anyway.

With new purpose Jack returned to activating the lasers, ripping out the last of the power cables that kept air pumping into the bridge and hooking them into laser's controls. The red glow on the laser's display showed him it was active now and then as he watched the display flashed from yellow to green. Active and fully charged.

Carefully he aimed the now live laser. He needed to pinpoint hit the spot where his opponent's weapons broke the surface of their hull. It wouldn't be obvious from this distance but Jack had one advantage ... the other ship was firing often enough to give him something to aim at.

One more flash. He made one more adjustment to the manual controls and then holding his breath Jack opened fire.

Life support power cables were never intended to take the power drain of a laser, something Jack had known going in. He'd also expected that using the cables that way would burn out the laser's controls and send a small electrical surge through the bridge that would spark through all those electrical components still operational, including the emergency lighting and the commlink. The last thing to go was the jury-rigged viewscreen, which nearly blinded him when it flashed bright before settling into darkness.

But the abused equipment lasted just long enough for him to see Ana's pod still tossing about and the smoldering dark hole in Cathay's Sun's hull where their laser array used to be. Wilcox wouldn't be shooting at anyone anymore.

In the pitch darkness of the small bridge Jack sat back in his chair and smiled. His Ana was safe.

* * * *

After Jack's warning Ana had set the pod's jet to fire randomly until the fuel ran out, figuring that it was better to keep moving than to be left a sedentary target for Wilcox's next blast. Unfortunately there wasn't that much fuel in the pod and all too

soon she heard the jet falter, and then fall into silence as the last of the reserves were used.

As the ship stopped tumbling she managed to make her way to the small viewport built into the side, hoping to see something. Either her ship, *Traveler's Choice*, or their enemy, *Cathay Sun*. She needed to see them and know that she wasn't alone.

If Wilcox was going to kill her she at least wanted to see the laser blast coming to do the job.

What she saw took her breath away. The *Cathay Sun* was there, but a black hole pierced its side and it wasn't firing at her anymore. Somehow Jack had managed to get the laser repaired and had used it to disarm their opponent.

But that wasn't what made her heart clench in her chest. It was her ship, *Traveler's Choice*, sitting silent and dark against the blackness of space. No lights or even emergency lights pierced the darkness around it. It sat derelict and still, adrift in space.

It looked dead and Ana could only hope that didn't mean that Jack was dead as well. She tried to raise the ship on the commlink. "*Traveler's Choice*, this is life-pod one. Jack, it's Ana. You there?"

There wasn't any answer. Most likely the communit was out, she told herself. Jack was probably okay. But the darkness of the ship bothered her. Even with the worst damage there should be some lights, connected into the life-support system. Unless ...

Unless the life-support was also out. But that was impossible she told herself. On a Gaian ship life-support was the most protected part of the ship. It had a dedicated power source, with back-ups to keep those on the ship alive. This was in keeping with Gaian rules, that human life was the most important thing to preserve. The only way a Gaian life support system could fail is if the ship was completely destroyed.

Or, she realized, if someone deliberately compromised the integrity of its protections. Like by rewiring the bridge to provide power to weapons.

Ana took a ragged breath. That was most likely exactly what Jack had done. The lasers hadn't been operational when she'd been shoved into the life pod, the power circuits out. Jack had to have found the power for them somewhere.

And she knew where.

"Jack," she said under her breath. "You promised me you'd stay alive. Just you wait until I get my hands on you."

For a long time she stared at the too-quiet ships on the horizon until she felt a sharp clank on the outside of her life pod and it rocked slowly. Ana fastened herself back onto the padded bench, recognizing that someone had snagged the pod with a tractor beam and was towing her. She was pointed the wrong direction to see who it was through the small viewport. Eventually she passed through a portal and a door slid down, blocking off her view of the two injured ships, *Cathay Sun* and *Traveler's Choice*.

Ana braced herself, wondering who'd picked her up. She could only hope that if it was the *Vengeance*, she could persuade them to rescue Jack rather than killing him.

In a moment the hatch slid open and a familiar voice spoke. "Sweet Gaia, Ana. You want to tell me what you and Jack did to my ship?"

Ana threw herself out of the pod and grabbed Kavath's arms barely noting Ryan

standing just behind him. “We have to get over there! I think he blew out the life-support and took out Wilcox’s ship.”

Both men looked at each other. Ryan spoke. “Unfortunately we have other problems to deal with. Their big ship is heading our way and I don’t think we have time for a rescue before they get here.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ana chased Ryan and Kavath to the bridge, her mind working faster than her feet. “The *Vengeance* is coming?” she said. “We’ll have to act fast then. Maybe we can tow the *Traveler’s Choice* out of the way.”

Ryan shook his head. “We don’t have that kind of towing capacity, Ana. Best thing for us to do is launch the viral attack we usually use. That means we need to get the *Vengeance* to answer their comm.”

“Haven’t they been answering?”

“No and that’s odd. I would think they’d want to brag about what is going on.”

Ana considered that. “Wilcox would be the one to brag and he’s not on *Vengeance*, he was chasing us. Have you tried contacting the *Cathay Sun*?”

“What good would that do? That ship is helpless now.”

“Perhaps, but he’s still in control of his other ship. Perhaps we can find out what they are up to.”

Ryan opened the commlink once more. “Hello, *Cathay Sun*. *Wanderlust* here.”

After a few moments there was an answer. “Hello, *Wanderlust*.” Ana recognized Wilcox’s voice from before. “Enjoying trying to raise *Vengeance* so you can send them that pesky virus of yours?”

Ana and the others exchanged glances and her heart sank. Clearly their adversary was onto their scheme.

“It isn’t going to work this time,” Wilcox continued. “I’ve given that ship strict instructions not to open their commlink until they are ready to fire. You won’t be able to infect them. If I were you, I’d start heading for another part of the galaxy.”

“And leave our women behind?” Kavath practically shouted into the link. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Better to lose a few women than your own lives.” Wilcox paused. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m Kavath, and you took my wife, Meagan.”

“Ah, the Gaian. You’re the one married to the Jack’s sister. She should be on the bridge of the *Vengeance* right now. Do you want her to see you die?”

Kavath let loose a low growl. “I won’t let her see me run from the likes of you.”

“Brave words. Stupid, but brave. You Gaians always are too idealistic for your own good.”

“If we weren’t you’d have died a long time ago, Wilcox, when you attacked Mea.”

“Attacked her? You mean on the planet where she crashed, how would you have gotten to me then?” Wilcox’s laugh rippled through the link. “Oh, I see. I was right, there was something funny about that set-up. You must have been there too. That’s why she and Jack were able to overcome us. You must have stunned us.”

“And I’d do it again in a heartbeat. You are scum, Wilcox.”

“Hear that, Harris? We’re scum. But we’re alive and very soon, you won’t be. Check out your viewscreen.”

All three of them looked and saw hovering just in the distance the massive slaver ship, *Vengeance*. It moved slowly towards them, growing in size by the moment.

“Maybe we should jump away,” one of the other men on the bridge said. “What good would it do to get ourselves killed?” His words were greeted by hard stares from the others, including Ana. The man glanced about nervously and held his peace.

Ana stepped forward and put her hand on Ryan’s arm. She thought she saw Kavath startle, but didn’t think about why. “Can we at least get closer to *Traveler’s Choice*? Maybe we can protect it somehow.”

“We can get close enough to send someone over there in a suit,” Ryan told her. “Even if we can’t tow it, we could still get Jack off.”

“Let’s do that,” she said.

After a glance at Kavath, Ryan nodded. He headed for the captain’s chair in the center of the bridge, leaving the helm to Kavath. “Take us over, pilot.”

Ana watched as they eased toward the dark and silent ship. It looked dead and she only hoped Jack wasn’t equally stricken. She needed him, alive, to be with her.

Wilcox came on over the commlink again. “So, sticking around, are you? Going for a rescue? We’ll see about that.” His voice grew distant and Ana could tell he was talking into another link, probably a dedicated line to his other ship.

What they heard him say was, “*Vengeance*? Fire on *Traveler’s Choice*!”

Ana gripped the console in front of her, anguished at her helplessness. Ryan looked like he felt the same and even Kavath was pale and Ana knew it was more than because it was his ship in danger. He might bear a grudge against Jack, but he didn’t want to see the man die.

The large ship moved faster and into position. On the bridge everyone tensed and Ana fought tears. She was going to see Jack die, right there in front of her. For a long time no one spoke, the big ship hovering to one side.

The time passed, and Wilcox was heard again. “*Vengeance*, what is wrong? Grant, you hear me? Open fire! Destroy them!”

Finally a new voice came through the link. “*Cathay Sun*, this is *Vengeance*. I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Ana gaped at Kavath, who seemed at first to be as surprised as she was. Then he smirked as the significance of the voice became evident.

“Why not? Who is this? Where is Grant?” Wilcox’s voice was strained with fury.

“To answer your questions, Grant is taking a nap on the floor, so he’s left me the helm. As to why I can’t fire on the *Traveler’s Choice*, my husband and I just finished getting the engine overhauled and he wouldn’t like my messing it up. As to who I am ...” she chuckled. “I’m Meagan An Flena Terrell and I and the Traveler women are now in charge of this vessel.”

Through the commlink, they heard the sounds of women cheering and laughing. Mea’s voice broke with laughter as well. “You see,” she continued. “*Vengeance* is

ours.”

On the *Wanderlust*, cheers also broke out as the news spread from the bridge to the men crowding her decks. Ana leaned against the console, staring at the still too silent ship where her love still waited for rescue.

She hoped.

Over the celebrating Ana heard the commlink chime again. “So, you think you’ve won,” Wilcox said.

Ryan held up his hand and everyone quieted again. “Give it up, Wilcox,” he said. “We’ve got your ship, your men, and your private ship is too damaged to go far.”

“It can go far enough.” Wilcox shouted something that sounded like “prepare to jump.”

Jump? Ana headed for the comm. “You can’t jump, Wilcox. Your ports are sealed. Jumping will put an overload on the engines and you’ll explode.”

“So, I’ll explode. As you say, I’ve lost, but I’m not going alone. If *Cathay Sun* explodes, it will take *Traveler’s Choice* with it. I want Jack dead, one way or another.”

“It’s suicide!”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps we won’t explode. But I’m willing to take that risk.” Over the commlink, she heard the engine’s whine as they were put into jump-mode. She tried to shout over it, but the commlink suddenly went silent.

All eyes watched through the viewscreen at the two ships sitting far too close to each other, both damaged. The *Cathay Sun*’s ports were away from them, but a small trail of vapor shot out the back. Too small, Ana thought, the damaged ports weren’t letting enough of it escape. The ship seemed to shiver and then there was a bright flash that momentarily blinded everyone.

Cathay Sun had jumped ... or exploded.

It took a moment for Ana’s eyes to refocus. For a moment, she couldn’t raise her head to see. If both ships were gone, then Jack would be dead. She wouldn’t look, wouldn’t know the truth.

Ana couldn’t breathe, her chest felt tight. What would she do if he was gone? Tears filled her eyes. If Jack died, she’d go on, but inside her something would always be as dead as he was. The rest of those on the bridge were quiet. An arm went around her shoulders. Ana looked through her tears and saw it was Kavath.

He smiled at her. “It’s okay, Ana.”

For a moment she couldn’t believe him. She blinked at him and wiped her eyes, then looked for herself. There was no sign of *Cathay Sun*. It had either jumped or exploded. For the moment she didn’t care which.

What she did care about was that *Traveler’s Choice* still occupied the same space it had before, still too quiet, but intact. There was a chance Jack still lived.

* * * *

On the *Vengeance* Sonja pointed her patrol down one of the long corridors. “You go down that way to the engine room,” she told them. “I’ll catch up later.”

They nodded, hoisted their weapons and headed off. Sonja watched them go, then headed back the way they’d come, towards a door that was locked from the outside. She unfastened it and peeked in. “You ready?”

Minutes later she was leading a completely different group toward the docking bay, where she'd prearranged for there to be no patrol. Kwam hurried after her while Denn Fuller lumbered behind them huffing under the strain of keeping up. Sonja had to bite her tongue not to yell at the man as he slowed them down, but she could see the sweat on his brow and realized he really was doing his best.

Desperate as she was to leave, she slowed her pace and allowed him a moment to catch his breath. For her plan to work, she needed the overweight man, alive and functioning. It would never do for him to have a heart attack now.

Sonja did make a mental note to take over control of the *Bronda's* galley and make sure Fuller lost at least some of that weight before they reached their destination. Not only would it improve the chances of her plan's success, but it would distress the man as well. That would be her revenge on Fuller, shutting off his access to dessert.

The docking bay was quiet and unoccupied and it took them just a moment to slip on board the *Bronda*. Sonja went to work releasing the docking clamps while Kwam activated the engines. With a heartfelt sigh Fuller settled into his extra large captain's chair and watched.

"You make a good crew," he told them approvingly.

Sonja shook her head. "Just remember, Fuller, this is just temporary."

He held up his hands. "I remember our bargain and I'll keep it. I just want to know why you're doing this."

"Why?" Sonja returned to her task. "Let's just say I made a promise a long time ago ... and it is time to deliver on it."

Fuller stared at her and then nodded slowly. "Good to know you keep your promises. You'll also keep the one about not using that knife of yours, right?"

She grinned at him. "Not to worry, Denn. I never cut up people who are on my side."

"Then I'll endeavor to remain on your side, Ms. Deens." He gestured to his other crewman. "Are we ready?"

Kwam nodded vigorously. "Yes sir."

"Then let's go."

The *Bronda* eased away from the dock and slipped under the ship, moving such that they avoided the physical viewports of the bridge. With the exterior communications array still un-repaired after Jack and Ana had taken it out, no one would be able to see them leave.

A few moments later the *Bronda* moved to the jump gate and slipped through, apparently unnoticed by all.

Chapter Twenty-five

Suited up, Ana and Kavath headed for the too quiet *Traveler's Choice*. They'd moved as fast as they could, using one of the fast small shuttles from *Vengeance*, but Ana was still afraid of how long it had taken. Too much time had elapsed since Jack had taken out the emergency life support system to keep Wilcox from firing at her.

Without heat the ship would have cooled to the point where human life could not exist. Without filtered air, Jack wouldn't have been able to breathe.

Once inside the airlock, she knew conditions were as bad as she'd feared. The usual ship noises were gone. The thump of the engines, the soft hum of electronics, and the whistle of warmed air through the vents, silenced, and it was cold. Frost was thick in places on the walls—frozen condensation from the thin air.

From the airlock she and Kavath moved quickly to the bridge where it became clear that her guess as to how Jack had powered the lasers was correct. Conduits ripped from under the consoles lay in burned ruins on the no longer pristine deck.

Kavath looked grim at the damage, but he nodded approvingly. "Just like his sister, and the way she cannibalized her ship on the planet."

"He saved my life, Kavath."

"I know that. This was the only way to do it I suppose.' A touch of gallows's humor entered his voice. "I just hope he's around to help us put it back together or I'm really going to be annoyed."

There was no sign of Jack on the bridge. Ana had been concerned he'd gotten caught up in the electrical storm that must have run through the equipment when the lasers shorted out, but if that had happened he'd still be here. He wasn't on the floor or in any of the chairs.

It was bitter cold and her sensors told her that the air on the bridge could barely support life. "Maybe he found a place to hole up."

"Couldn't use the life pod. He'd already ejected that."

Yes he had, and with her in it. Once more Ana felt an irrational surge of anger at the man. He'd been trying to protect her, she told herself, but it didn't help. If she'd stayed they could have used the pod together.

It would have been very cozy with the two of them drifting about, all those padded surfaces to make love on.

Ana suddenly realized where Jack might have gone. She headed for her quarters, Kavath right behind her. The door was shut, but she got it open. When she did, she let out a gasp of surprise.

The bed was piled high with coverings, blankets, sheets, and rugs from the other cabins, even some clothes. It must have been two meters high. Immediately Ana moved to the pile and began to dig through it.

At the bottom they found Jack, curled up in a ball, and Ana could have cried when

she saw the respirator mask he'd slipped over his face.

Kavath pulled out and activated the self-heating blanket they'd brought and covered Jack with it, while Ana used a medical reader to try and to get a read on his vitals. Her hands were shaking too hard to see the readings so Kavath took it from her and instead she knelt on the bed next to Jack, touching his too-pale face. His hair felt frosted and almost brittle, and even through her gloves his skin felt like ice.

But then his eyelids twitched and after a few seconds they blinked open. Jack stared at her for a moment then behind the clear mask his lips tweaked upwards into a smile.

"I guess I must be alive," he whispered, his voice harsh.

"Why is that?" Ana was too overcome to laugh or cry.

He lifted his hand and tapped on the faceplate of her suit. "Because if this were heaven, my sweet nymph, there wouldn't be two masks between your lips and mine and then I could kiss you." He winked at Kavath. "Good thing this is a Gaian ship. Always know you can find a respirator on a Gaian ship."

Ana gave a short laugh, and then tears welled up in her eyes. All of her fears had turned out to be for naught. "I thought you might be dead. You could have died here with the life support off."

Something showed in his face ... the warmth of love in his eyes. "No," he whispered. "I couldn't. Not when I had you to live for. Besides," his gaze included Kavath, still using the scanner to read Jack's vitals. "I knew you Gaians would come for me. That was enough to keep me alive."

Saying so much seemed to exhaust him. Jack closed his eyes and appeared to go to sleep.

Kavath was suddenly looming over her shoulder. "Let's get him to the shuttle. The sooner we get him warmed up, the better off he'll be." Brushing Ana aside, he hoisted the man onto his shoulder and carried him from the room, feet forward, leaving Ana to follow as fast as she could.

On the way Jack stirred and raised his head. He stared first at Ana walking behind, and then down at Kavath's butt. He turned his head to speak into Kavath's ear. "I didn't think you cared, brother-in-law."

"I don't care that much," Kavath said. "But your sister cares, and Ana cares, and even my kids seem to think you are some kind of a hero. So it's worth it to me to make sure you survive. Besides" Kavath's voice broke off as he ducked into the narrow and low ceiling of the docking tube leading to the shuttle.

"Besides what?" Jack said.

Kavath didn't answer until he had Jack stowed in one of the shuttle's bunks and had tucked the warming blanket tight around him. Jack gazed curiously up at him after he finished.

"Snug as a bug, as they say. You do a good job."

Ana thought Kavath flushed a little. "Long practice at tucking my children in."

"I see." Jack watched Kavath carefully. "So what else besides your children, my sister, and our dear Ana here makes you think I should survive?"

Kavath seemed to study the man for a long time. "My sister said it had been too

long since we'd seen you, and I think she was right. You aren't the man you were when Carras was destroyed, just like I'm not the man I was when I met your sister. We've all changed and the universe has as well. I can see you're one of the good guys, Jack. If you weren't before, you've made yourself into one now. I've got to respect that."

Jack stared at Kavath and Ana thought she saw the smallest glimmer of tears in his eyes. "I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Yeah, well." Kavath stared back for a moment, and then his eyes twinkled. He slapped Jack on the shoulder. "And besides that, I need my ship repaired after all you did to it, something you Travelers are good at. I think you owe it to me to make that happen."

Tucked tightly in the blanket, Jack laughed. "That's a deal."

Kavath left to seal up the ship and pilot them away. As soon as she knew she could, Ana removed her mask and suit and settled onto the bed next to him. The blanket was warm beneath her and it was comforting.

"And how is my sister, and the rest?" Jack asked.

Ana filled him in on how the Traveler women led by Sonja had taken over the slaver's ship and how Mea had piloted it into the battle against *Cathay Sun*. As she finished that part of the tale Jack was laughing softly. "That's what they get for messing with Traveler women. You can bet Wilcox will think twice about doing that again."

"I'm not sure Wilcox will be doing much of anything anymore." She told him about the flash as Wilcox had tried to jump away with his ship's ports blocked. "We think his ship's engines exploded just as they went into hyperspace."

Jack frowned. "Was there any debris?"

"Not very much. A bit of hull that could have fallen off when you blasted the lasers."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't count on them being dead then. Wilcox has been too slippery for far too long. I won't assume he's dead until I see his body. So is everyone else accounted for?"

"Well" Ana's voice trailed off. This was the one thing she'd dreaded having to tell Jack. "Sonja has disappeared along with one of the ships."

Jack startled. "Which ship?"

"The *Bronda*."

"The *Bronda*. What about Fuller and his crewman?" Jack started to sit up, dislodging the blanket, but Ana pushed him back onto the bed and replaced it around him.

"They're gone as well. Mea said she'd seen them on the *Vengeance* and that Fuller had given her a knife and a minicomm in secret. He seemed to be helping Sonja out."

"What about her tracking device?"

Ana shook her head. "It was the first thing we tried. We found it placed in Babette's arm. She told us it was Sonja's. The only explanation that makes any sense is that Sonja didn't want us following her."

Jack relaxed back onto the pillow. "It isn't likely she'd have been taken prisoner by Fuller so I guess she must be with them by her choice. I wonder what she has

planned.”

Ana thought for a moment. “She told me about her sisters. Maybe she hopes to find them.”

Jack didn’t like that answer, but after a moment he shook his head. “That does make sense. She has her own path to follow. I hope she finds what needs along it.”

“So do I.” She reached out and took Jack’s hand. “I’m sure we’ll see her again someday.”

He squeezed her hand and drew it to his face, only to be blocked by the mask. “Do I need this now?”

“I suppose not.” Ana pulled the respirator from his face. “Now, about that kiss.”

She leaned in to cover his mouth with hers and their lips moved and slid against each other. It was another new kiss for them. A kiss of welcome home—a kiss that spoke of the future.

Jack was smiling again after Ana finally pulled back.

“Ah, little nymph. That will do for now, but later you’d better be prepared for a lot more.”

“I’ll be happy to share your bed again,” Ana said with a smile.

His smile turned wicked. “That will fine, but I’ve more in mind than that. I want a life with you, Ana. I want you to be my wife.”

She lay next to him on the narrow bunk, her arms around him. “I’ll be ready when you are.”

Chapter Twenty-six

“I think you’re just about ready now.” Mea adjusted the wreath on Ana’s head and stepped back to examine the result. She smiled in satisfaction at her handiwork. “You look just like a Traveler bride should.”

Ana stared at her reflection in the mirror on the caravan wall, something she decided she needed to install in Jack’s and her caravan. Babette and Tomas had lent Ana theirs in the village to change in for the ceremony, saying it was too far to walk from Jack’s near the lake or the landing place where *Traveler’s Choice* was landed. In truth it wasn’t that far, but Mea had then told her everyone had been worried about Jack and Ana getting “distracted” on the way to the ceremony. No one had wanted to have to delay the wedding because they were having too much fun in the bushes.

Ana had laughed at the comment. It was true she and Jack were often distracted on the few days they had together.

Now she admired how she looked as a ‘proper’ Traveler bride. She wore her colorful skirt and embroidered blouse, suitable for the Gaian claiming ceremony of a marriage meet, when the newly wed couple would remove their masks and show their wristbands. But then she also wore a wreath of flowers, like that of a Traveler bride. A mixture of both cultures and she hoped a promise of the future.

When Jack had fired her off in the life pod he’d promised she’d have the rest their lives to punish him. Ana smiled. After several weeks apart from him, punishing Jack was the last thing on her mind. Maybe she and he would have gotten distracted and been late to their own wedding.

Jack and the Travelers had spent the last month repairing their damaged ships, *Wanderlust*, and rebuilding *Traveler’s Choice* until it was better than new. They had then used the *Vengeance*, now renamed *Traveler’s Hope*, to find several derelict colony ships and drag them into orbit near their planet. With these to start with construction of the new Traveler space station had begun.

Jack’s dream of a place for the Travelers to live among the stars was coming true and it was even showing a profit. In just the first month they’d had two ships show up for repairs and there would soon be more as word spread. The years of the tribe keeping a low profile and avoiding notice were over.

Isolation hadn’t saved them from attack. Becoming a needed part of the Outer Colonies infrastructure should work better, if only because there would soon always be a few other ships around to deter attackers.

A new purpose infused Jack’s people as they realized they could once again be part of a thriving space community, just as they had been before being routed from their old home near Earth.

Jack had been concerned that Ana wouldn’t want to live on the new station having been raised on a planet, but she’d spent the last several years out in space and looked

forward to having the stars beneath her feet once more.

They would always have his little caravan near the lake when they wanted to be planet-side. In fact that's where they intended to spend their honeymoon for the next couple of days before returning to the space station. With Williams chieftain here on Baile Na, Jack had assumed command of the station and couldn't be spared for too long.

Just long enough, Ana decided, for them to enjoy a few days alone, and when he returned to the station she'd go along as his wife.

Ana smiled to herself. Jack's wife, wife to a man who loved her for herself, and not just because his biology drove him to do so.

A knock on the caravan door pulled her from her thoughts and she turned to see Mea smiling at her. Ana went to the door to open it.

With his wicked smile firmly in place, Jack stood at the base of the steps dressed in his red shirt and tight black pants, just as he'd been at that earlier wedding, the night she'd fallen in love with him.

She paused to take a brief look at the scene beyond him, the clearing set up for a wedding, Babette and Tomas doing the honors of singing the wedding song. Everyone looked expectant and happy and waiting for her and Jack to say their vows. After this she'd be a Traveler in reality as well as spirit, a member of their tribe.

"Are you ready, Ana mine?" Jack said softly and held out his hand.

She smiled and put her hand in his and let him help her down the steps. "I think I've been ready all my life. Let's go."

The End