



Heart of a Smuggler

Smugglers steered clear of the Daamens.

Except for this smuggler and her motley crew.

“Well, well,” she said gaily. “Finishing some business, I see?” She waved past Shamon at Simon, who, Shamon saw from a quick glance over his shoulder, didn’t know whether to laugh or frown.

To be fair, there was something about the wench’s tenacity and boldness that tickled the humour of the Daamens...along with annoying them at times.

“I don’t believe I’ve met you,” she continued, sticking out her hand to Torkra, who was staring at her. “I’m Gabie.”

Not knowing what else to do, and never one to embarrass a lass, Torkra gingerly engulfed her hand in his big palm and gave it a gentle shake.

“We’re in the same business.” She looked slyly at Shamon and Heddam.

“I strongly doubt that,” Shamon returned. “In fact, wench, I know ‘tis not true.”

“Why, you big joker, you!” She gave him a hearty smack on one massive bicep.

He’d sure like to return the hearty smack on a very pert bottom.

“He’s such a joker,” she informed Torkra.

“Ha,” Torkra said, totally at a loss.

“So...” Gabie eyed the loaded hover trays near the merchants with whom the Daamens were dealing. “Business is good, huh?”

“*Our* business is good.” Shamon eyed the bright-eyed wench with one upraised brow, torn between the desire to laugh or scowl, an emotion never far off when Gabie was around. The wench was outrageous. “*Your* business isn’t.”

What They Are Saying About

She has taken us to many worlds and fought many battles and yet she can still keep us on the edge of our seat and has us begging for more. I don't know how she does it as long as she keeps on doing it I don't care, I just want more. If sci-fi is your cup of tea, this story is one you cannot miss."

Lydia Funneman

[Writers Unlimited](#)

"...a book written a little differently from the others in the series. Before, there was some humor, some lighter than others, yet the darkness inundated them till the end. This time, Angela has used a decidedly lighter touch, and it serves her well. Simon and Gabie are not a pair you can really take seriously, they are both inherently lighthearted, and that is not lost in the telling. Once again, I found *The Heart of a Smuggler* to be an exceptional read, and one that I know I will go back to again and again."

Rose

[Romance at Heart](#)

"...is known for her futuristic adventure romance novels with strong characters, lots of action, and a mystery or two. *Heart of a Smuggler* has all that in spades! We also see a dash more of humor in this book than is usually found....has just the right formula for success with her *Heart and Soul* series. *Heart of a Smuggler* is a mighty fine example of the fact Angela's star is still on the rise and will continue in that direction for a long long time.

I'm loving every minute of the journey and hope the adventures in the *Heart and Soul* universes never stops!

"Kelley A. Hartsell
[ck2skwipsandkritiques](#)

Other Works From The Pen Of

Angela Verdenius

Heart of an Outlaw February 2003

An outlawed warrior saved by a Daamen trader. Love blossoms, a powerful enemy threatens. Passion, betrayal, bloody legends, and a shocking secret in a galaxy of enemies and friends.

Soul of a Mercenary May 2003

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For love, Maverk will follow the Reeka warrior into the nightmare reaching out for her.

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Twice the Heat, Obsession & Danger...where love and hatred exist... where the past claws into the present...and where murder is just one of the goals

Wings

Heart of a Smuggler

by

Angela Verdenius

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Dedication

My Mum, Doreen Verdenius, as always. For being there when I needed you.

To all my friends on the 'net and here in town...you made me laugh and were there when I needed to come up for air.

To my fur babies, who all had a hand in helping me write my books. I couldn't do without your fur clogging up the printer, and your paws putting strange words on my computer screen. Thanks!

And as always, Leslie Hodges for being my long-suffering editor yet again, and Richard Stroud for doing my cover once more.

And to my readers everywhere - thank you for your emails! I treasure them all.

One

Gabie squinted up at the dark sky. Clouds covered the moon, but still she didn't like it.

"Damned stupid idea," Olin muttered beside her. "Not a good night to be picking up goods."

"Not much choice, either," she returned. "It's pick-up now or forget the deal for another month."

"And you're not prepared to wait another month."

"And I'm not prepared to wait another month."

Paz, standing on Gabie's other side, stared morosely up at the dark ship approaching in the sky, a flicker of moonlight escaped the heavy clouds to shine off the hull. "We're doomed."

"We're not doomed," Gabie replied.

"We'll end up on Cardrak, the prison planet."

"And you'll be someone's favourite pet, sweetie," Misha's voice came through the miniscule communicators they all had hidden in their ears. "You'll have warm arms to snuggle into on cold nights. Big, brawny arms."

"That's not funny," Paz said.

"Don't fret. Just close your eyes and think of... well, there won't be any dinnos to think of, will there?" She laughed loudly, making Gabie wince. "Just rely on memory while some big lug is heaving and grunting over you and holding you *real* close."

Paz shuddered. "We're *doomed*."

"Don't worry," Gabie said. "I'll shoot you myself before I let the law take you."

"We're doomed."

Grinning, Gabie watched the big ship swoop low, hover, and finally land not far away. The ramp came down and shadowy shapes of the other crew appeared.

“Misha?” Gabie queried.

“It’s them and it’s safe... or as safe as it can be with Mazo.”

Jerking her thumb at her two crew members, Gabie ordered, “Let’s move.”

They walked forward, the dimness of their surroundings almost swallowing them up. Overhead came the rumble of thunder and a streak of lightning snapped through the sky to briefly light up the scene below them.

Gabie didn’t need the brief blaze of light to know her surroundings. It was one of twenty spots that she knew of to collect contraband. Harsh vegetation, rocky hills, and bad weather almost permanently. Good cover for illegal transactions.

It didn’t mean it was always safe and she didn’t want to hang around. Not only the vegetation could be harsh, but those she dealt with weren’t always the safest—or sanest—of people in the universe.

Precisely why Misha was in the control cabin with all space ship lasers primed and ready to fire at a second’s notice.

“I don’t like dealing with Mazo,” Paz muttered. “He’s unpredictable.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Gabie stroked the handle of the laser where it protruded from the holster at her thigh.

“Trying to stay alive.”

“And dull.”

“Dull but alive.”

Gabie laughed.

The men in the cargo hold of the other ship didn’t pause in their movements. Now that she and her crew were closer to the ship Gabie could see the hover trays being loaded. The dim light in the cargo hold was just enough to see by, dim enough to be safe from prying eyes.

A tall, thin man with a wisp of hair on his freckled scalp strode forward, a tiny disc in his hand which he handed to Gabie. “It’s all here.”

“Really? How sweet.” Gabie slipped the disc into the handtronic she drew from her jacket pocket and scanned the contents. “Aw, Mazo, you come up trumps again.”

“There’s no need to double-check it.” Mazo’s eyes narrowed. “It’s all here.”

“Of course it is. Never doubted it for a second.” Gabie pocketed both the handtronic and the disc. Rubbing her hands, she peered around his thin frame to the cargo being loaded. “Quite a nice load.”

“Top quality.” Mazo paused. “Sort of.”

Gabie laughed outright.

Paz and Olin stood by the ramp as the first of the hover trays descended. Paz led the first hover tray back towards Gabie’s ship, *Larceny*, and Olin followed with the second hover tray.

When one of Mazo’s men made to move with the third hover tray, Gabie shook her head and smiled sweetly. “Sorry, honey, you know the rules.”

“You’re paranoid, Gabie,” Mazo stated.

“Of course I’m paranoid.” Gabie tapped her fingers on the big crate and looked at the crew member. “Now back off, honey.”

He gave her a sour look before stomping back up the ramp.

Standing to one side, Gabie watched as Olin and Paz took the hover trays to their ship, scanned the contents for anything dangerous or anyone hiding within the crates—it wouldn’t be the first time a more powerful smuggler raided another smuggler’s ship from the inside by hiding in crates—and unloaded the cargo onto their own hover trays.

Gabie didn’t trust other smugglers—thieving lot of bastards, and she should know—and she didn’t trust their equipment, either. A smart move she’d learned a long time ago.

Rain started to patter down by the time all the cargo was unloaded and repacked into *Larceny*.

Gabie handed over the dinno chip that Mazo would later cash for the amount paid for the cargo. “As always, Mazo, a pleasure doing business with you.”

He stared at her long and hard and she smiled widely back. With a grunt he turned and moved back to his ship.

No fool, Gabie backed towards her own ship, never once turning her back on her fellow-smugglers. Gaining the safety of *Larceny's* ramp, she finally turned and strode up into the cargo hold, the ramp rising up and locking shut behind her.

Pleased, she looked around the cargo hold at the neatly secured stacks of illegal goods. She'd paid a lot for it but she'd get a darned sight more in the Lawful Sector. Feeling immensely pleased with herself, she went up to the control cabin.

Misha looked up from where she was scanning for other ships in the area. Her long braid flicked at her waist when she turned her head, the white mohawk riding high on her scalp. Her skin shone white in the cabin lights, her pale, pink-rimmed eyes studying her captain.

"Let's go, Misha." Dropping down into the captain's seat, Gabie kicked back, swung her heels up to rest on the console and crossed her ankles. Stretching her arms above her head, she bent them at the elbows and rested linked palms behind her head. "We've goods to sell!"

"Good deal, huh?"

"Mazo might be a psycho, but he deals in nothing but top-quality looking but bad-quality stuff." Gabie gave a sigh of contentment.

Misha rolled her eyes and flipped the controls that made the engines roar into life. The ship shuddered and creaked.

"This heap will fall apart one day," she shouted above the roar of the engines.

"Nonsense!" Gabie yelled back. "Top ship!"

"You think?" Misha's hands trembled along with the ship as it shuddered.

The cupboard door behind them fell off its hinges.

"Oops," said Gabie. "Must get Olin to fix that one day."

"He's already done it."

"Not well enough, obviously."

"The only thing left he can do is nail it shut!"

“My goodness, you do exaggerate.” Gabie held up one finger. “See? The engine is dying down—”

“It’s dying, all right.”

“Indicating we’re ready to go.” Gabie smiled widely as silence descended on the ship, the engines recovering enough to resume normal operations. “Let’s move it.”

Shaking her head, Misha steered the spaceship up and off into the night sky. Within minutes nothing but stars surrounded them, and the Lawful Sector was theirs for the taking.

~ * ~

Standing in the centre of the Trade Building, Shamon rocked back and forth on his heels, waiting while Aamun and Simon, his captain, finished sealing the trade with the merchant. Stifling a yawn, he glanced around.

The Trade Building wasn’t busy. The only ones there were the two merchants and his own fellow Daamen traders from Simon’s ship.

“Won’t be long now.” Heddham raked one hand through his shaggy fall of hair and stretched leisurely. “The last of the cargo is coming in with Mikal, Kel and Etol. Then we can head for the tavern for a hot meal and a cold drink.”

“Aye.” Torkra straightened from setting the last sack down on the bench. “And a warm wench.”

“Lust-crazed youth.” Shamon grinned in amusement and rubbed his close-clipped beard.

“’Tis just you old uns growing a little slower and softer,” Torkra retorted. “We young bloods have to keep up our reputation of wench-lovin’, brawl lovin’ traders.”

“Is that right?” Heddham winked at Shamon. “I reckon we can teach the *young bloods* a thing or two yet, don’t you agree, Shamon?”

“Oh, aye,” Shamon replied, flexing his bulging muscles. “And less of the old, Torkra, I’m only thirty.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Torkra shook his head. “Won’t be long, old friend, and you’ll need a walking stick.” He held out one arm. “I could help you across to the tavern?”

“I could help you see stars.”

“The old do lose their sense of humour.”

Shamon grabbed him in a headlock and they got into a scuffle, ending up with Torkra pinned down on the floor and Shamon holding him down with ease.

“You owe me an ale, lad,” Shamon informed him happily.

“Bully.”

Laughing, Shamon swung himself up, but the laughter died on his lips when he saw the wench striding through the huge, open doorway not far off. Bright-eyed, laughing, her gamine face alight with mischief, she was like a ray of sunshine on a dull day. Laughter bubbled in her voice. Even her stride was bouncy, full of energy.

Trouble. Trouble on two legs had just walked through the door.

“Hello.” Heddam stood beside Shamon and hooked his thumbs in his pants waistband. “Look who just walked in.”

Straightening up, Torkra caught sight of the wench. “Wow.”

“Don’t get too excited.” Shamon watched the wench approach a merchant. “She’s a smuggler.”

Torkra’s eyebrows shot upwards. “True?”

“True.”

“’Tis a mighty fine looking smuggler.”

Shamon had to admit to the truth in those words. The wench wasn’t only pretty in a gamine, mischievous way, but she had a figure to make his mouth water. She had a body a man could hold onto while sinking into feminine heat. Hourglass was the only thing he could think of when he saw her. All soft, round limbs, big bosom, pert bottom and a swaying walk that could cause a man’s tongue to fall out of his head.

Smuggler. A flicker of annoyance rippled through him when he saw a merchant approach the wench and start talking. She pulled a disc from her pocket and proffered it to the merchant, who took it and scanned it through his handtronic. He smiled widely and nodded.

The wench practically beamed at him.

Another sucker taken. Shamon shook his head.

“Did she just make a sale to that merchant?” Torkra’s jaw dropped in amazement.

“Aye.” A frown creased Heddam’s brow. “And more fool him.”

“But she’s right in the middle of the Lawful Sector,” Torkra protested. “Surely she cannot sell smuggled goods here?”

“She’ll sell it anywhere she can,” Shamon replied. “And trust me, the wench is a wily one and has never been caught.”

Right then the wily wench swung around on one heel, caught sight of the traders and laughed. Out loud. And strode across to them, her impressive bosom nestling snugly against her shirt.

Shamon’s mouth went dry for a second before he regained his senses enough to remember that this cheating wench was intruding on honest business.

Coming to halt right in front of the big men, she angled her head back to grin up in amusement at them. Not many smugglers would have been game to face-up the giant Daamen traders, Shamon knew. Just the thought of being in close vicinity with the towering, muscle-bound, seven foot and more giants was enough to make them swallow hard. The sight of their dangerous, roguishly handsome faces made many a wench’s heart patter madly, but the danger seemed to stand out more to those who crossed the traders. And those who made the Daamen’s black list included smugglers.

Smugglers steered clear of the Daamens.

Except for *this* smuggler and her motley crew.

“Well, well,” she said gaily. “Finishing some business, I see?” She waved past Shamon at Simon, who, Shamon saw from a quick glance over his shoulder, didn’t know whether to laugh or frown.

To be fair, there was something about the wench's tenacity and boldness that tickled the humour of the Daamens... along with annoying them at times.

"I don't believe I've met you," she continued, sticking out her hand to Torkra, who was staring at her. "I'm Gabie."

Not knowing what else to do, and never one to embarrass a lass, Torkra gingerly engulfed her hand in his big palm and gave it a gentle shake.

"We're in the same business." She looked slyly at Shamon and Heddiam.

"I strongly doubt that," Shamon returned. "In fact, wench, I know 'tis not true."

"Why, you big joker, you!" She gave him a hearty smack on one massive bicep.

He'd sure like to return the hearty smack on a very pert bottom.

"He's such a joker," she informed Torkra.

"Ha," Torkra said, totally at a loss.

"So..." Gabie eyed the loaded hover trays near the merchants with whom the Daamens were dealing. "Business is good, huh?"

"*Our* business is good." Shamon eyed the bright-eyed wench with one upraised brow, torn between the desire to laugh or scowl, an emotion never far off when Gabie was around. The wench was outrageous. "*Your* business isn't."

"Now don't be like that." She patted her jacket pocket. "I have a disc and all. This is legal."

Heddiam gave a snort of laughter.

"A doubter! I could show you the disc, but I am busy. Selling goods, of course, legal goods."

"Of course," Shamon said.

"Here comes my crew now, so I must toddle along." Gabie gave Shamon a saucy grin and strode off, a bounce in her stride, her glossy brown ponytail swinging jauntily across her shoulders with every step.

Shamon had never met any wench who laughed so much. Shame she was a smuggler, for she was someone who always managed to catch his eye. He didn't

see a lot of her, she'd only turned up on the scene about four years ago, but she bobbed up now and again on the outskirts of the Outlaw Sector and in the Lawful Sector. Selling goods that the Daamens knew for a fact were mostly smuggled, for they'd seen her conducting business with some very lowlife scum

In the four years Gabie and her crew had smuggled goods, the law had never been able to pin the smuggling tag on them, thereby outlawing them. Somehow, the wily wench flew under the radars and distributed her illegal goods.

And she laughed about it the whole time, Shamon had no doubt, and she took great delight in greeting the Daamens like old friends when she saw them, the cheeky chit. Many of the Daamen trading crews had crossed paths with her at some time.

"Tis her crew?" Torkra raised his brows.

"Aye. The albino wench with the mohawk is Misha," Heddham supplied. "The elderly gent is Olin, a one-time outlaw so I've heard. The youth there," he gestured to the thin, tall youth with the mournful face and heavy boots that only emphasized his skinny legs, "Is Paz. A sadder streak of misery you'll never meet."

Shamon watched as the crew brought in several hover trays piled high with crates and barrels. Shaking his head, he watched the eager merchant part with a dinno chip, which Gabie pocketed with a huge grin.

"All done." Simon moved up beside Shamon. "Ah, the little smuggler surfaces."

"And that merchant will be sorry he ever met her if the law sniffs her out," Aamun added, a twinkle in his eyes. "But knowing that wench, the law can sniff around as much as they like and they won't catch her."

"Twill be prison if they do," Heddham stated.

Prison. Somehow the thought of all that sunny brightness engulfed by the harshness of prison made Shamon shift uncomfortably. The wench might be on the Daamens' blacklist as a smuggler, but there was something just so damned likeable about her.

"They'll never catch her," Simon said, as though reading his mind. "Way too cunning."

Shamon certainly hoped so. He could only shake his head when Gabie looked up, spotted Simon, and waved cheerfully at him before rounding up her crew and

herding them through the huge open doorway, leaving the merchant with a load of illegal goods of which it would never be proven.

~ * ~

“Take this and ensure it gets to her.” The shadowy figure, breath rattling harshly in the dimness of the room, handed the sealed disc to the man.

Taking it, he slipped it into the pouch that hung beneath his shirt. “I’ll see she gets it.”

“The journey is dangerous. They will be looking for you.” The figure took a phlegm-filled breath, coughed and wiped her mouth. “You can’t be found.”

“I’ll travel fast.”

“It’ll be too late for me.” She coughed again, wiped the blood away with a pristine white cloth. “But make haste, make all haste.”

He bowed and left the room.

Lying back against the frilled pillows, she stared up at the ceiling. “Make all haste.”

~ * ~

“Those Daamens didn’t look too happy to see us,” Paz stated mournfully. “You know, one day they’re going to give us a good beating.”

Olin ignored him.

“Because they’re legal and we’re not,” Paz continued, turning his attention to Misha.

She ignored him.

“One day,” he predicted morosely, “We’ll cop it from them.”

Sharing the dinnos out between them all, Gabie laughed. “They won’t touch us, Paz, so rest easy.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Daamens don’t beat up on those smaller than themselves, or more helpless.”

“Are you saying we’re helpless?” Misha looked up, a gleam in her pink eyes.

“Against them, yes.” Pocketing her dinnos, Gabie rolled her shoulders and peered out the space shield. “So, shall we head into the settlement, get something to eat and drink, have a little fun?”

Olin roused himself from his half doze. “Sounds like a plan to me!”

Leaving the spaceship, they walked through the docking bay and towards the settlement. Gabie saw the Daamen’s big trading ship, the ramp down, but knew that no one would get aboard, not with the security shield in place. The only ones who could pass through the invisible barrier were those who had their body pattern entered into the computers. Anyone else who tried would set off the alarms and the security door would snap shut fast enough to take anyone’s head off. Not that she’d seen it done, but she had no doubt it was set to high speed. She sure would set it that way if it was her ship.

Laughing inwardly, she thought about the giant traders, but one in particular came to her mind. Wild, shaggy fair hair and a neatly clipped beard, built like all the giant traders and dressed in the sleeveless vest, rough linen pants and black boots that they all wore, Shamon was dangerously, rakishly handsome, as all the Daamens were, but there was something about him that drew her to him when she saw him. Maybe it was the disapproval she could feel, or maybe it was the normally merry nature of him. Whatever it was, there was something about him that called to her mischievous nature, and oh how she loved to stir him up. Or try to stir him up. The big trader didn’t rise to her bait often, but she’d seen the gleam of mixed annoyance and amusement in his eyes several times. And that just tickled her pink.

Maybe she had a death wish. Gabie laughed out loud.

Misha, Olin and Paz didn’t even blink, well-used to their merry captain’s sense of humour and enjoyment of life.

The settlement teemed with life, settlers and visitors rushing about their busy ways. Gabie pushed her way through the throngs until she found the nearest tavern. It was busy.

“Won’t be room for us.” Paz sighed.

“Course there will be,” Gabie assured him cheerfully. “Come on. I’m dying for a fresh meal.”

The tavern was crowded but they found a table near the back and sat down. A tavern wench came not long after, batted her eyelashes at Olin and Paz, took the orders from them all and flounced away.

Leaning back in the chair, Gabie looked around. She recognized a couple of lowlife scum, not bad enough to be wanted by the law but shady enough to be watched closely by the peacekeepers.

A couple of them recognized her and came over.

“Gabie.” The grubby, sly-eyed man greeted her.

“Link. How’s it going?”

“Fair enough, fair enough.”

“Gabie.” Ross, Link’s off-sider, nodded, his eyes greedily drinking in her features.

Gabie nodded briefly, feeling Misha shift beside her and knowing instinctively that her second-in-command had one hand on her laser. Ross was a lecherous bastard and insulting to boot. It wouldn’t take much of an excuse for Misha to shoot him in the foot. The fact that Link wouldn’t fight back was a bonus. Fighting was not on Gabie’s list of favourite things to do. In fact, it was on her things to avoid list.

Link jerked his head at Ross, and scowling, the man moved back into the crowd. Resting both hands on the table, Link leaned forward and smiled.

Those closest leaned back a little. The man was in dire need of a shower and dental hygiene.

“Seen you doin’ some business with the local merchants,” Link stated, not in the least offended by the not-so-subtle movements.

“That’s right,” Gabie replied, breathing shallowly.

“I have some stuff that needs shifting.”

“Hey, I don’t ‘shift stuff’. I trade.”

“Just shift this stuff to another place for me and I’ll pay you well.”

“Is that right?” She cocked one brow at him. “And why do you need to pay me so well? No one else will do it for you?”

Link held out his hands and shook his head. “No one trusts me.”

“No,” Misha said. “Really? Fancy that.”

Link’s smile was more a grimace.

“You got a disc with invoices for this ‘stuff’?” Gabie queried.

“Gabie—” Paz began, alarmed.

“Well, no,” Link said. “But it’s all legit, I assure you. If you’re caught—”

“Sorry, no covering disc, no deal.” Gabie smiled. “You know my terms.”

Link scowled. “Getting a disc done will cost me extra.”

“Get me the disc and if it passes my inspection, we’ve a deal. Depending, of course, on what this ‘stuff’ is.”

Muttering, Link stalked away.

“Good gravy,” Gabie said. “What does he think we are? Common smugglers?” She slapped the table and laughed in amusement.

Misha shook her head, Olin was half asleep already and Paz look so miserable one could be forgiven for thinking he was about to burst into tears.

Two tavern wenches came with trays and practically threw the plates of hot food and mugs of cold ale on the table. They were in a hurry and Gabie saw why when they made a beeline right for a table on the opposite side of the room. The gap in the crowd showed six big Daamen traders eating and drinking at a table. Two other tavern whores were perched on the knees of two of the traders whom she recognized as Heddarn and the older teenager, Torkra. Shamon was busy talking to Aamun, the oldest of the Daamens. Simon and Kel were quietly eating.

Gabie rubbed her jaw. Shamon really should get rid of the beard, he’d look even more devastatingly handsome, rather than simply looking like a rakishly handsome bear.

Shrugging mentally, she turned her attention to the food, which was delicious and hot. *Nothing like a good meal and good company.* Not that old Olin was much company, he was already looking dozy.

The barkeeper came across to Gabie's table minutes later, a frown on his red face. "One of the merchants upstairs wants to talk to you."

"Oh?"

"Something about business."

"I'll be right up."

"I'll come." Misha swallowed the last of the ale and banged her mug back on the table.

Paz looked at Olin, who was nodding off in the corner of the bench, his meal long finished. "Want me to come, too?"

"No, better keep an eye on Olin." Gabie grinned. "In case his burst of energy attracts all the tavern whores and he has more than he can handle."

Getting up, she and Misha pushed through the crowd and up the rickety staircase. The steps groaned beneath their boots.

"Maybe you need to cut back on the food," Misha commented.

"Maybe you need to give me some respect. I am the captain," Gabie returned.

"With all due respect, maybe you need to cut back on the food."

"That's not very respectful."

"No, but true."

About to answer rudely as they gained the upper floor, Gabie was distracted by the man standing near the door of a room not far off. He gestured to her and she crossed the space between them. Misha strode along beside her, and they came to a halt when the man held up one hand.

"You are Gabie?" he asked her.

"Last I knew."

“My boss will see you now.” He looked at Misha doubtfully. “You wait here.”

“How about I twist your arm up behind your back?” she retorted.

Misha was great with the tough talk. It had gotten them through a few tight situations.

“He only wants to see your captain.”

“Where she goes, I go.”

He looked at Gabie.

“What can I say?” She shrugged.

“You’re her captain.”

“I get no respect.” Grinning, Gabie waved expansively at the door. “Shall we?”

Muttering, he opened the door and stood aside.

Gabie strode inside and came face to face immediately with someone she hadn’t expected to see. Hadn’t wanted to see, in fact. She stumbled to a halt, the smile leaving her face, and Misha crashed into her back, throwing her forward.

“Oh crap,” Misha breathed.

Both women reached for their lasers, but it was too late. Four big brutes grabbed hold of them, two on each side.

“Steady on!” Gabie tried her hardest to look innocent, but it wasn’t her best look. “Brucie, baby, what’s wrong?”

The hard-eyed man weighed down with rolls of fat was no decent merchant. He was shady, calculating, and someone Gabie had sold a few things to in the past but had cut free of on her last trip. He was a leech and a user of the worst kind, and she suspected he was into more than just buying illegal goods.

“Let go!” Misha struggled in the grips of the two brutes holding her, but couldn’t escape their meaty grips.

Two lasers appeared, one pressed to Gabie’s temple, the other to Misha’s. Both stood extremely still.

“You see, Gabie...” Brucie heaved himself to his feet and with difficulty lumbered around the table. “I’m not happy with you.”

Wow. Fancy that. Gabie arched one brow.

He lumbered closer, the floorboards squeaking beneath his weirdly small feet. His long gown flowed around him, more like a huge tent than a gown. Stopping in front of Gabie, he shook his head. “You’re not very nice.”

“What’s this about, Brucie?”

“You sold me some engine parts a couple of months ago. Some very hard-to-get parts. Said they were good parts, came from a reputable dealer.”

“And of course, they were.” Gabie had a sinking feeling.

“They weren’t.” Shaking a pudgy finger under her nose, Brucie shook his head. “I was marooned in space, Gabie. Marooned. Do you know what that means?”

“You were marooned?”

Misha groaned behind her.

“It means I was prime pickings for a band of space pirates that came flying by.”

“Space pirates don’t operate this far in the Lawful Sector.”

“This band of bitches does.”

Whoops. Gabie had just the idea who that band was, too.

“Now, you can’t possibly blame me,” she protested. “Any part of your space ship could have failed—”

“One of the parts you sold me burned out.” His fat cheeks flushed. “You cost me a whole cargo load of expensive cloth!”

“Well, of course, I’ll take the part back to my supplier and get a refund—”

“I don’t want a refund!”

“You don’t?” Gabie didn’t like where this was going. She flexed her arms and the meaty hands tightened painfully on her upper arms. Oh no, she didn’t like where this was going at all.

Fury burned in Brucie's little piggy eyes. "No."

"I can't pay for your cargo," she stated, swallowing mentally. "You know we all take a risk when travelling with expensive things."

"It shouldn't have been a risk with new parts!"

"Now, now. Only one part burned out, remember?"

"Gabie..." Misha murmured warningly.

Brucie lumbered around the room, then turned and heaved his bulk back over to her. Stopping directly in front of her, he leaned forward.

Ugh. She leaned back a little.

"I've been the laughing stock of my friends, Gabie."

"I'm really sorry about that. What bastards."

"I want them to know I've dealt with you."

Uh-oh. "Now don't be hasty, I'm sure we can work this out—"

"Are you going to pay for my cargo?"

"I don't have that kind of dinnos."

"Then a little show so everyone can see I won't be fooled with." Brucie gestured to the hulks holding her. "Show her the way out."

Jerked to the side, Misha yelled her name.

Gabie didn't get a chance to call back before she was propelled backwards through the door, across the landing and pitched backwards right over the banister.

Never one to fall gracefully, she landed painfully on her back on a hard, wooden surface with a bone-jarring crash. For a few seconds she thought she was back out in space, because stars were flashing in front of her eyes.

"Gabie?" A concerned though incredulous deep voice queried.

Blinking, she became aware of the utter silence in the tavern. She was lying on her back on a wooden table, and six rakishly handsome, astonished faces looked down at her.

She'd landed on the Daamen traders' table.

"Sorry." Wincing, she came up on her elbows. Luckily the dishes had been cleared away or she could have been really sore. Landing on cutlery was never a good idea.

Several big hands reached out to help her up when a sound from overhead made everyone look up.

"You conniving, thieving bitch! This is your only warning, Gabie! Cross me again and you'll be very sorry!" Brucie shrieked.

Oh yeah, like she was going to forget that in a hurry.

"Here, return this for a refund!" Brucie yelled.

Gabie saw a heavy, metal engine shaft come hurtling over the edge of the banister.

"Oh *shit!*" she just managed.

Two things happened at once. She flipped over the edge of the table at the same time three pairs of big, calloused hands pulled her. She fell face-down across the laps of three Daamens just in time to avoid being seriously hurt by the heavy metal part that crashed onto the table she'd just vacated. It wasn't big, but it was damned heavy.

Instinctively she tried to push upright. Her elbow caught one of the traders in the groin as she struggled, her knee cracked another on his thigh and she flailed around like a fish.

Curses on benches. If they'd been sitting on chairs she'd have been able to get up straight away almost, but long benches didn't give anyone any room. Then two big hands came on each side of her and hoisted her upright. The room spun a little and then she became aware that she was sitting on someone's lap.

Turning her head she saw that Shamon was behind her, looking at her in concern and bewilderment. It was his lap on which she was sitting. Simon and Kel sat on

each side of him, with Aamun, Heddum and Etol standing on the other side of the table.

“What the hell just happened?” Simon demanded, a frown on his face as he looked from the part in the middle of the table, to Gabie on Shamon’s knees, to the now empty landing above him.

“Bit of a disagreement with a customer.” Gabie tried to still her thumping heart and looked around in alarm. “Misha?”

“Right here.” Misha appeared at the side of the table, looking a little rumpled and with an empty laser holster, but none the worse for wear. “Brucie, that stupid bastard! He could have killed you!”

“Are you all right, lass?” Shamon asked in concern, his brown eyes flicking over her face, one big palm running with disturbing gentleness across her back. “Are you hurt?”

The warmth of his palm on her back made her want to arch back into it, which surprised her. It also made her very aware of her position on his knees.

“I’m fine. Honestly.” Placing her hands on the table, she tried to wiggle sideways. “Could I get out, please?”

Simon stood up and with relief she slid off Shamon’s lap and onto the bench. Oh, and the bench was hard, looked like she had a bruise where she hadn’t had one in a long time. One buttock must have hit the table harder than the other side.

Maybe Shamon could rub that for me? Stars above, where did that come from? Her brains must be more rattled than she realized.

Simon helped her up and looked down at her in concern.

“Someone should get the peacekeeper,” Torkra said, eyes wide.

“No, no.” Gabie brushed some dirt off her top and straightened her jacket. “It’s fine.”

“Like your friend said, that silly idiot could have killed you.” Shamon slid out and stood beside her also, his gaze going back up to the landing. “I ought to get hold of that idiot and—”

“Oh, not a good idea.” Gabie laid her hand on his arm. My, the flex of muscle underneath that tanned skin was intriguing. Shaking her head mentally, she added, “It’s all sorted out now.”

Paz and Olin stood to one side, gaping at her.

“Sorted out?” Shamon arched one eyebrow at her. “I suppose, wench, you don’t wish the law involved because of your... business?”

“Now don’t be like that.” Proud that her steady hands didn’t betray the fact that her heart was still thumping all over the place, Gabie gestured to Paz. “Grab the shaft and take it back to the ship for a, er... refund.” *Not happening, by the way. Brucie, the fat slug, wasn’t going to see a dinno of refund.*

Besides which, no one playing in the smuggling business asked for a refund unless you were at the top of the food chain. Gabie had no illusions that she was at the top.

One of the bouncers appeared beside Misha and looked at Gabie with a mean eye. “You’re not causing trouble, are you?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

The bouncer just looked at her.

“We’re just leaving, in fact.”

“Good.”

“But we’ll be back later.” She smiled widely. “I just know you’re looking forward to that.”

The bouncer took a menacing step forward, only to be brought up short by Shamon stepping up beside Gabie.

“The lass would be the victim,” he rumbled.

That was so sweet of him. Gabie smiled up at him, which was a fair way because the top of her head only came up to his massive pectorals. “My hero.”

Heddam guffawed, then coughed and tried to look serious.

“Trust me,” the bouncer said, even though he looked warily at the frowning giant. “Trouble follows this female around.”

From the look on Shamon's face when he glanced down at her, Gabie could see that he wasn't going to argue that. She rolled her eyes and straightened her still trembling knees.

"Now don't sweat it," she began. "We won't cause any pro—"

Her words were cut off by Paz going so pale she thought he'd drop the shaft. Both she and Misha made a grab for him, but he rallied fast and slanted his eyes upwards several times.

Gabie glanced up and saw Brucie glaring down at her. The fat slug. If he were alone, she'd go up there and kick his fat arse for him. But he wasn't alone, so there was no way she was going to do anything about it.

At least, not right now. However...

Smiling widely, she patted the bouncer's arm. "We're going. I promise to be good if we come back. All right?"

"You be sure of that, else I'll have your arse in the Enforcement Building so fast your head will spin."

"You sweet talker, you." Taking several steps away, she turned and addressed the traders, who were watching her with varying expressions of amusement and concern. "Thanks for cushioning my fall, by the way. The table was hard, but being across your laps was a real thrill." She winked at Shamon. "My hero. You ever need anything, you come and see us, all right?"

Without waiting for a reply, just the stunned expression on his face was enough reward, Gabie led her crew out of the tavern.

"Now what?" Paz asked as they stepped out onto the veranda.

"Now I find a way to fix that Brucie's fat arse once and for all," Gabie replied.

"We're doomed," he sighed.

~ * ~

He slipped through the dark corridors, the sealed disc in the little pouch safely concealed under his tunic. Skirting the heavy furnishings, he finally came to the rear door and opened it. Peering out into the driving rain, he shivered, but not once did he think of delaying his journey.

Pulling on the long coat, he lifted the hood and stepped out into the rain. His figure was obliterated within seconds.

Two

“Is the merchandise all there?” Raznin looked up from the data sheet on the viscomm.

“All there.” Tason finished the calculations for the landing and stood up. “I’m going down to the hold to check that everything is ready and in place.”

Raznin nodded and watched his second-in-command leave the control cabin. Once Tason was out of sight, he moved over to the landing controls and double-checked the calculations. Never trust anyone, that was his motto.

After all, in his business, even he wasn’t to be trusted.

Smiling slightly, satisfied with the calculations, he returned to the data sheet once more, keying in the codes that would divide the merchandise up into safer loads. He didn’t want to risk anything going wrong on this trip.

~ * ~

Standing outside in freezing rain would dull most people’s enjoyment. Misha was a prime example, with her pursed lips and annoyed expression. Gabie loved the rain. It helped to wash away all signs of any... er... wrong doings.

“Why do we always end up doing most of our stuff in the rain?” Paz grouched.

“Just lucky, I guess,” Gabie replied, peering through the teeming water to see the planet shuttle that had docked minutes earlier.

“We’ll die of the cold one day.” Paz sniffed.

“Rest easy,” Gabie said. “You won’t die today.”

“Why?”

“Because I order you not to. You’re not to die when we’re doing business.”

Paz sneezed.

Misha took a step away from him.

“See?” Paz looked mournfully at Gabie from under his dripping hood. “Even Misha thinks I’m contagious with some dreadful disease caused by the rain and cold.”

“It won’t be long now.” Gabie peered through the rain, and sure enough another spaceship lowered its ramp. “Get ready, people.”

They waited as several furtive figures in long cloaks slipped through the pouring rain to come to a stop under the dubious shelter of the *Larceny*.

“Nice to see you, Gabie.” The woman drew a long, thin box from under her cloak and handed it to Misha.

Misha held the box while Paz lifted the lid and quickly counted the contents. He looked up at Gabie and nodded.

Gabie held out her hand and the woman placed a tiny disc in her palm. Slipping it into the handtronic, Gabie studied the readout under the shelter of her cloak, and nodded. “Very good.” She gestured back into the dimness of the cargo hold and a small hover tray with a barrel atop came down the ramp. “Nice little swap, I think.”

“Most assuredly.” The woman grinned, showing four gold teeth.

“Stars,” Misha said. “You could always sell your teeth if you ever need extra dinnos.”

“Got them in a trade.” The woman winked.

“I’d like to know what she traded them for,” Olin’s voice came through the communicator in Gabie’s ear. “Ask her.”

Not a chance. “Good doing business with you,” Gabie said.

“Same.” The woman gestured to her two companions. “Load the barrel and let’s go.”

In the distance came the barking of several hounds and a muffled voice. A light winked at the end of the docking bay.

“Time to retire for the night, I think.” Gabie stepped back. “Looks like the peacekeepers are doing a little tour of duty.”

“Because they know where you are, Gabie, there is likely to be some other smugglers.”

“We’re bad, all right.”

“No. They think they might be able to catch some *big* smugglers.” The woman laughed and faded back into the pouring rain.

“That wasn’t a nice thing to say.” Gabie walked up the ramp and into the dryness of the cargo hold.

“But true.” Misha shook out her cloak and hung it on the hook partway down the cargo hold.

“Our cover is being small-time,” Gabie began, and then laughed when Paz shook his head. “Who gives a vagrat’s arse whether we’re big time or small time? We make dinnos, we’re our own bosses—”

“You’re our boss,” Paz corrected.

“And damned lucky you are to have me.” Gabie hit the lever that raised the ramp, watching as it sealed shut, enclosing them in warmth and darkness. “Lights on.”

The cargo flared to brightness and she gestured to Paz. He brought the box over and laid it on the counter. Opening the lid, Gabie took out several of the delicate necklaces and held them up to the light, the beads winking their riches.

“All the way from the Outlaw Sector.” Misha admired a black sparkling necklace and held it up against her.

“Have it,” Gabie offered.

“Hey, a smuggler can’t be seen with this kind of thing on their person.”

“I’ll give you a receipt of purchase. Make it all legal.”

Gabie and Misha laughed loudly while Paz sighed.

Stashing the box in one of the metal cupboards, Misha engaged the locks and they all went up the stairwell.

In the dining cabin, Olin was already laying out steaming bowls of hot soup.

“Surprised you could stay awake long enough to make it.” Misha sat down and inhaled appreciatively. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“It’s already way past my bedtime,” Olin replied, dipping a chunk of bread into his soup. “You’re lucky I stayed awake long enough to keep watch on the surroundings while you lot conducted business.”

“You’re a good man,” Gabie said.

Olin was a good man, she thought as she watched him eat his soup and stifle a yawn. True, he was seventy-five years old and had lived a hard life as a two-bit outlaw, but he was loyal to a fault and always ready to fly to the defence of friends. That counted for a lot in her opinion.

Misha was loyal, too. She spoke her mind and didn’t mince words with Gabie, but then again, childhood friends had that advantage of knowing you really well.

Gabie peeked at Paz. Mournful Paz. She’d picked him up several years ago after she and Misha had saved him from having his head pummelled in by much bigger boys on the outskirts of the Outlaw Sector. An orphan, he was built like a reed and didn’t expect much from life. Gabie was the first person to have cared and he’d followed her ever since.

A fine crew. A motley one at times, true, but a loyal crew. Gabie sipped contentedly at her soup. She had dinnoes put aside and her savings were growing—and life was good.

~ * ~

The gurgling breaths weren’t so regular anymore as the worn-out heart stuttered to stay alive. Blood slipped from between the soft lips and the breaths grew fainter and fainter.

The woman bled out in the bed and no one knew until the next morning.

Her husband wasn’t happy. “Damn it all to hell!” Mellar glared at the bloodied corpse. “Now I’ll have to have all this stuff burned and new things brought in!”

“I will see to it.” His personal man, Cheran, appeared quietly by his side.

“See to it fast.” Mellar strode from the room. “Get the funeral arrangements made. I want her planted and this whole business over with!”

“Yes, Sir.” Cheran strode sedately by his side. “Something strange came up this morning on the scanning of the private computers.”

“What?”

“Someone has copied certain... delicate... matters onto a disc.”

Mellar stopped, his face like thunder. “What delicate matters?”

“Matters that could prove most uncomfortable.” Cheran paused. “For you.”

“Damn!” He yanked the door to his private offices open and stormed inside, kicking a chair out of his way. “That bitch! I knew it! I knew something was going on in that devious head of hers!”

Cheran waited quietly while Mellar brought his fury under control.

Taking a deep breath, Mellar sat down slowly. “Are you close to finding out who copied the disc?”

“No, Sir.”

“Then who is missing?”

“We’re checking all who live here and in the nearby settlement.”

“Good. Once you find the missing person, you’re to hunt them down with no mercy, do you understand?” Leaning forward, Mellar thumped his fist on the desk. “*No mercy!*”

Cheran bowed. “As you say, Sir. No mercy.”

~ * ~

Shamon and Heddham lifted the big crate and placed it in the cargo hold, ensuring it was settled against the far wall. Going down the ramp again, they passed Torkra and Mikal coming up the ramp carrying a small barrel each. The teenager brothers were arguing, as usual.

Well used to it, Shamon and Heddham passed them with grins.

“’Tis the last load here.” Simon gestured to the hover tray standing nearby. “Once done, we only have to wait for the merchant arriving in a few days and do the last trade with him quickly.”

“You just want to get this trip done so you can beat Des home.” Heddam winked knowingly.

“My lovely wife has some time off coming up, and I mean to be there to indulge in every second,” Simon retorted.

“Poor old, wed traders.” Shamon placed one hand on his chest and sighed. “Pining for their lasses when away, slaves to them when they’re home. Such a huge step down from being a care-free, single man.”

“Trust me, Shamon, ’Tis a huge step *up*.” Simon pointed at the cargo. “I’m wanting my little security officer, so let’s move it.”

“’Tis a sad time when a Daamen wants to hurry home.” Heddam sighed as he lifted a big barrel with ridiculous ease and balanced it on one brawny shoulder.

“Aye. He should be savouring the travel, the wenches, the brawls, the trading, the—” Shamon began, then caught sight of a ship landing nearby.

It landed with a screech of engines.

And he’d know that ship anywhere.

The traders all stopped to watch the ship land in the docking bay. The tortured screeching of airbrakes made Aamun, the engineer, shudder.

“Well, look who just about crash-landed.” Simon’s lips were quirked in amusement.

Shamon couldn’t stop the grin from curving his lips when the spaceship gave a shudder then whined down to a stand-still. Stealth was not the *Larceny’s* strong point. The ramp squealed down and smoke billowed out.

The grin of every trader was wiped away and as one they started at a run for the spaceship, just as Misha, Olin and Paz came staggering out of the cargo hold and down the ramp.

“I told you that blasted ship was a death trap!” Misha coughed.

Shamon looked up the ramp, fear clutching at him. “Where’s Gabie?”

“Right here.” Coming out of the smoke, Gabie waved, a cloth held to her lower face. “And don’t panic. The fire is out.”

“Fire?” Shamon was up to the ramp in several long strides. Grabbing her around her waist, he swung her down off the ramp and against himself, backing up to where the rest of the traders and her own crew waited.

Could the wench never stay out of trouble?

“I said it was out.” Gabie wriggled in his arms and he put her down. “I put it out.” Rolling her eyes at her crew, she added. “I don’t cut and run.”

“We were running for our lives.” Misha scowled at her.

“Gave me quite a turn when I woke up to the smoke alarm.” Olin wiped the sweat from his face.

“It was just a bit of smoke,” Gabie tried to soothe her crew.

Just the thought of the space ship being on fire was enough to make Shamon go cold inside. A fire in space could be lethal. He took a closer look at Gabie, but apart from a few smoke streaks, she looked fine.

Stars above, whichever man got saddled with this wench would age fast.

“When was the last time you had that death trap serviced?” he demanded.

“It gets done regularly,” Gabie smiled at him. “As regular as the sun rising and falling.”

“And you’ve been told a heap of times that you need a new space ship and this one is on its last engines.” Flinging her arms up in the air, Misha yelled, “And what do you do? You go *back* into this thing!”

“This is a top of the range ship.” Gabie patted one of the heavy iron arms that supported the ramp. “You just don’t understand it like I do.”

Misha rolled her eyes.

“It’s like flying in your own coffin,” Paz informed the Torkra and Mikal mournfully.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say it’s that bad.” Olin blinked and gave a little yawn.

“If ’tis that bad,” Shamon broke in before the motley crew could start arguing again, “Then you ought to send this thing to the salvage yard.”

“No need for that.” Linking her hands behind her back, she rocked backward and forward on her heels. “Top ship.”

“Gabie, the ship went on fire!”

“And I got the fire out.”

“Get a new ship. ’Tis a clunker that I’m surprised can even lift off the ground.” Shamon slapped the heavy iron arm and actually felt it slip its hinge a little. “See?”

Her green eyes sparkled with a touch of annoyance and amusement. “Here now, if you’d keep your ruddy great mitts to yourself, trader, instead of pounding on my ship, it would be fine!”

“Your ship is way past fine, lass.”

“Matter of opinion.”

“Of which she takes none.” Misha sighed.

“Besides, why are you worried?” Gabie smiled brightly.

“’Tis my business if you’d crashed into us, wench.” *And I wouldn’t want to see you hurt, smuggler or not.*

“Pshaw! I won’t crash.”

“No, the ship will,” Misha pointed out.

“Aye.” Shamon looked down at Gabie sternly. “You need a new ship. I’ll help you choose, if you wish.”

“Help me choose a new ship?” Finely arched brows shot up in surprise. “You?”

“You?” Torkra echoed.

Heddam’s mouth was hanging open and Simon was looking from Shamon to Gabie thoughtfully.

Shamon didn't like Simon's thoughtful looks. The man was too shrewd. But right now his concern wasn't with his friend and captain, but with the little smuggler flying in a death trap.

"Now look, lass, 'Tis a fair offer. This ship is a death trap, and I'll help you choose another. I can get you a good price..." *Oops, probably not the right thing to say, especially to a smuggler.*

Misha chortled. Olin grinned and blinked sleepily.

"You're risking your life and that of your crew every time you get aboard that space ship." Shamon folded his arms across his chest and looked sternly down at the amused, gamine face peering up at him, those bright eyes mirthful. He had to fight his own answering smile. The wench had to be made aware of the seriousness of what had happened.

"You don't know the first thing about my ship," Gabie replied. "And I would never risk the lives of my crew. So don't worry about it, honey, there's a good boy." She looked at her crew. "Come on, you lot of wussies. We need to check the cargo and ensure all is okay."

"You need to get your ship checked before you leave," Shamon insisted.

Gabie laughed. "Have you seen the servicing offered in this place? I wouldn't trust a salvage yard to them! No, I'll just have to do a check myself and—"

"Hope it lasts until the next decent stop," Misha put in. "Because sure as God made green apples, you're not much better at servicing than the jerks around here."

"Don't sweat it, honey," Gabie replied. "It'll get us to the next stop."

"Maybe." Paz looked mournfully at Shamon. "Last time we got marooned in space, right on the outskirts of the Outlaw Sector. It was only luck that the next ship that stopped was friends."

"It could have gotten nasty," Olin added, looking apologetically at Gabie, who rolled her eyes.

Just the thought of Gabie marooned and at the mercy of any of the scum near the Outlaw Sector had an icy chill running down Shamon's spine. He exchanged looks with Simon.

Gabie turned and started walking back up the ramp, her crew following with long-suffering sighs.

“Simon—” Shamon began.

“Don’t worry.” Simon stepped forward. “Gabie?”

“Don’t you start,” she retorted without pausing.

“I have a solution.”

That made her stop and turn inquiringly.

“How about if Aamun checks your engines, see where the main problems are?”

All hilarity fled to be replaced with genuine surprise. “Are you kidding me?”

Aamun moved forward. “Nay, lass. I’m one of the engineers. I’ll just check the engines and Kel will check the circuits. ’Twill be our pleasure.”

For the first time Shamon saw just how suspicious the little smuggler could be. She eyed Aamun closely then switched her gaze to Kel. He could practically see her mind ticking over.

Amused, he waited to hear what she was going to say, and to be sure, he was thinking it could be anything from this wench.

“Why would you help us?” she surprised him by asking, and not asking Simon but looking directly at Shamon himself.

“We’d not see you in trouble,” he replied. “You shouldn’t be risking your life and your crew’s by possibly being stranded in space. Or dead.”

He thought she was going to argue, but instead she exchanged a long look with Misha, who nodded.

Slowly, Gabie came down the ramp until she stood eye level with the traders. “You wouldn’t be trying to sabotage us, would you?”

“Pardon?” Simon blinked.

“You’re not exactly approving of our line of work—”

Heddam gave a snort of amusement.

She ignored him, her narrow gaze on Simon. “It would be a feather in the traders’ caps to sabotage a smu—private enterprise.”

Shamon frowned. “’Tis not the Daamen way to sabotage others, even those running a *private enterprise*. Simon offered services out of concern. ’Tis no trick.”

“Hmmm.” Gabie eyed Simon and then Shamon again, and then that smile lit up her gamine face. “Offer accepted, as one trader to another.”

Every trader laughed outright.

“So, how much?” Gabie asked again.

“Nothing, lass, ’Tis for nothing.” Simon smiled.

“Nothing?” Pursing her lips, she looked around at the traders before her gaze settled once again on Simon.

“Nothing,” he repeated.

Suspicion shone in her eyes once more. “What’s in this for you?”

“’Tis a suspicious little wench you are.” Chucking her under the chin like an indulgent brother, Simon looked at Aamun. “Do you and Kel have time to do the checks and servicing now?”

“Aye.” Aamun started up the ramp, Kel right behind him. “If someone could show us the engines?”

Gabie gestured to Misha and Olin. “Go with them.”

Amused, Shamon watched the two crew members scurry after his friends. They disappeared into the cargo hold and when he lowered his gaze again, he found himself looking down into bright green eyes that were studying him closely.

How interesting. The merry little smuggler had a suspicious streak a mile wide, and was obviously no one’s fool. Not that he’d ever thought the last, and he shouldn’t be surprised at the first. Smugglers trusted no one.

“I don’t like taking help without payment,” she told him bluntly.

“’Tis Simon you need to convince, not me,” he replied.

Hands on rounded hips—God she could make a grown man weak at the knees with a voluptuous figure like that—Gabie frowned up at Simon. “I don’t like being beholden.”

“’Tis not being beholden. ’Tis help we give, no strings attached.”

“I want to repay you with something.” She brightened. “I have some really nice cloth—”

A rumble of laughter swept through the traders. Shamon shook his head. The audacity of offering legal traders illegal goods was just the sort of thing the wench would do without any shame at all.

“I don’t think so, lass.” Simon was chuckling. “I wouldn’t touch your hot goods with a ten foot snarch.”

“I assure you, it’s all very above board. I have the invoice discs—”

That only made the traders laugh harder.

Shamon shook his head when she glared at him. The wench was unbelievable.

“If you don’t let me pay somehow,” Gabie snapped, the first real show of temper now on her face, “Your men will have to leave my ship.”

Shamon sobered. “Nay, lass. Your ship needs to be safe for you to travel in.”

“My ship, my law. My law is to take no help for nothing.”

Simon grinned. “Very well. You can buy my whole crew a meal at the tavern, how is that?”

“They eat like horses.” Paz broke his silence with a sad sigh. “Eat our profits, they will.”

Gabie rubbed her small, stubborn chin. “I think it’s an excellent idea.”

“We’ll be in the poor house.” Paz looked sadly at his big boots.

“Dinner tonight it is, then.” The spark of temper faded to be replaced with her normal merry expression.

They traders went back to their own ship, Shamon unable to resist glancing over his shoulder. She was moving under the ship, inspecting the hull with Paz by her

side. That pert bottom was sticking up in the air as she bent to look at a small area under the hull. He wondered if it was as firm as it looked. It had sure looked firm when she'd been sprawled across his lap the other day. *Mmmm boy, did it.*

It was late afternoon when Aamun and Kel returned. Shamon was waiting for them by the side of the ramp.

"How that wench ever got that ship to fly in the first place is beyond me." Aamun shook his head. "., 'tis a death trap."

Concern splintered through Shamon and he straightened from his leaning position against the ramp arm. "Then the wench shouldn't be in there."

"'Twill be safe enough now." Kel moved up beside Aamun, pulling the tie from his hair. "I've rewired some of the circuits and replaced a few of the conductors. Aamun serviced the engine and replaced a few parts."

"Where did the parts come from?" Shamon had an uneasy thought, remembering Brucie's accusations. "Not Gabie's illegal cargo, I hope."

Aamun laughed. "That wench is no one's fool, Shamon, don't worry. She has her own private stock of parts and good quality they are, too."

His friends went up the ramp into the cargo hold, but Shamon stayed outside, his gaze on the smugglers' ship. The wench was a worry, though he didn't know why he should care. She was an annoying little outlaw, but aye... there was something likeable about her. Sort of like a vagrat. Small, cute looking, but untrustworthy.

And she was buying the meal tonight. Grinning, Shamon went up the ramp. He had to admit that he was looking forward to the evening in the company of the gamine little wench. Knowing the enemy was a good thing, he decided.

~ * ~

Lungs burning, he ran through the undergrowth, hiding when he heard the voices grow nearer, creeping out to run again when the voices faded. Blood blossomed on the side of his tunic, coming through the rough bandage he'd managed to make from a torn piece of his leggings.

The searchers were thorough. They raked the bushes with swords, uncaring of injuring him, just wanting to stop his flight. They'd found him missing within a matter of hours, and even though he'd had a good head start, they had been hot on his trail ever since.

No doubt someone would have suffered enough to finally betray him. The choice of one over many. A harsh choice but the only one he knew they'd had. He didn't blame them for that.

His heart pounded when he spotted the little planet shuttle not far off. It had been left unattended while the searchers scoured the surroundings for him. If he could get into it, he could flee the province and try for freedom, and the chance to deliver the disc to the one with whom his mistress had been in contact.

Trying to ignore the pain of his wound, he crept closer to the planet shuttle while studying the surroundings. The voices were far off. This was his chance. But still he was cautious and by the time he finally settled into the seat and the shield slid securely over top of him, precious minutes had ticked past.

The engine came to life soundlessly. Keeping it in darkness, he trusted his instinct and memory to guide the planet cruiser off the surface and into the sky. The communicator crackled, and he heard the cry of alarm come through it within twenty minutes.

The searchers had found the missing planet shuttle. It was now only a matter of time before they locked onto his position and the sky pursuit started.

Tightening his lips, he thumbed the thrusters and the planet cruiser shot deeper into the star-sparkled sky.

~ * ~

Leaning against the side of the big trading ship, Shamon breathed in the evening air. The sun was still partially up and everything was bathed in a warm golden glow. From outside the docking bay came the sounds of a still-busy settlement. Overhead flew a couple of space ships, as well as Enforcer planet cruises doing a fly over on patrol. The docking bay was quiet, the only ships in there currently the Daamens' and Gabie's ships and two planet shuttles. More would be arriving during the night. A busy settlement never had almost empty docking bays for long.

Heddham came down the ramp, peering in the direction of Gabie's ship. "What 'tis happening over there?"

Shamon ran one hand through his shaggy hair. "Business. Very shoddy business, 'tis my guess. Nay, my knowledge."

Gabie was standing beside the ramp arguing with a seedy looking character, thin and not very pleasant looking. Shamon had been monitoring the situation, ready to step in if it looked like Gabie was in trouble. Though why he should care he had no idea. Nay, 'twasn't true. Like all Daamens, he couldn't bear seeing a wench hurt, be they smugglers or not. And especially not Gabie.

That was a thought he didn't want to examine too closely.

"The wench deals with some mean characters," Heddam observed. "'Tis that bastard, Link. He's not known for being nice."

"Gabie should be careful who she does business with." Shamon frowned, watching Link gesture wildly. Every sense he had went onto alert when Link took a threatening step towards Gabie, and Shamon straightened.

He needn't have worried. Misha suddenly appeared from the cargo hold, striding down the ramp with a laser in her hand. Shamon couldn't hear what was said, but Gabie was merely standing there with her hands in her pockets and in a very relaxed stance. The albino wench had the laser barrel pressed to Link's forehead and was saying something that made the thin vermin start to back away.

Right, the lasses were handling it, but he couldn't just stand there. Shamon started striding across the distance separating the ships, but before he even got to Gabie's ship Link had hurried away with a snarl on his face.

Gabie was still watching Link leave the docking bay when Shamon came to a halt beside her.

"Honestly," she said without looking up. "That man has cheek."

Misha holstered the laser. "He's pushing for you to take that load, Gabie. I don't like it."

"He's got two chances. None and buckleys. I'm not interested in any cargo he has without an invoice chip." Gabie glanced up at Shamon and winked. "Have to have it all legal, you know."

Shamon frowned after Link's receding figure. "You play with dangerous vermin, Gabie."

"All part of the job."

He switched his attention to her. "I don't like it."

“Why, you’re worried about me. How sweet!” She smiled widely.

The wench had a pair of enchanting dimples, one in each cheek just above that full, soft mouth. A very kissable mouth.

Stars, what’s wrong with me? Trying to rein in his thoughts, Shamon focused on the immediate problem. “One day you’ll work with the wrong people, Gabie, and you’ll get seriously hurt.” He glanced up to where Misha was watching him with those pink-rimmed eyes that gleamed with intelligence. “Your whole crew will get hurt.”

“I think it’s really sweet that you’re so worried about us all.” Gabie rubbed his arm in what he would have called affection, but coming from her just had to be teasing. “You can have a double helping of dessert for that.”

“Give up trying to talk sense into Gabie,” Misha drawled. “She goes her own way.”

“Then mayhaps you need to talk sense into her.”

“I happen to think she has very good plans.” Misha’s eyes gleamed in amusement, but she was looking past him.

Shamon glanced around to find Heddham, Aamun and Simon standing behind him. Simon had that damned thoughtful look on his face, Heddham’s eyes sparkled with laughter and Aamun was rubbing his jaw and smiling.

Now what had tickled their funny bones?

“So, gents.” Gabie stepped past him. “I’m starving. Are you all ready for something to eat?”

“Starving, lass,” Aamun replied, his amused gaze shifting from Shamon to the sprite striding past him. When his gaze flicked back up to Shamon, there was a very knowing glint in his eyes.

About to ask him what was so funny, Shamon was diverted by Olin and Paz coming down the ramp and falling into step with Misha.

Shamon caught up with Gabie easily, Simon, Aamun and Heddham walking with Gabie’s crew.

“The rest of your mob in the tavern already?” Gabie asked him without pausing.

“Aye.” Shamon didn’t think he should mention that undoubtedly Torkra and Mikal would be with some of the tavern wenches, slaking their youthful desires.

He also didn’t want to examine too closely just why he wasn’t happily in bed snuggled up to a warm, willing wench. Normally when in the settlements, once their business was done and they were relaxing, the single traders sought out female company for a few hours or even a night.

He loved wenches, the more voluptuous ones especially. The fact that he hadn’t sought out a pretty wench for the last week during the trading was something he wondered about himself. He just wasn’t... interested.

Damn, when had that ever happened before? Shamon squinted up at the sky, seeing the first star appear faintly. Only when he’d been too sick to care, which was very rare. Apart from that, he had a lusty appetite. Mayhaps he should get one of the Daamen medics to check him over when they went back to Daamen, make sure he wasn’t sickening or something.

Misha had moved up on Gabie’s other side and they were talking quietly, their words swept away as they moved into the crowded street.

Shamon followed, Heddiam striding along beside him, the others bringing up the rear.

They drew abreast of a tavern and Kel was waiting outside for them. “The other taverns are crowded,” he informed them. “But this one saved us some tables at the back of the room, if ’tis okay?” He looked down at Gabie.

“Fine by me. Lead on.”

They entered the tavern, the smell of bodies, ale and cooking food assaulting Shamon’s senses. It was crowded and immediately they were almost squashed together. Kel and Simon led the way in, the crowd giving way to their broad bodies as they moved forward.

Finally they were all seated at the tables that had been pulled together along the back of the wall. The rest of his friends were already there, and they greeted Gabie and her crew pleasantly.

Shamon found himself sitting at one end of the tables, Gabie directly opposite him. He had time to observe her while the tavern wenches took their food orders. The wench was no fool. While everyone gave their orders, she was looking around

the room. She looked relaxed, but her eyes were suddenly serious, watchful, scanning the crowd for trouble.

How interesting. Though he shouldn't be surprised, for she'd not made her living as a smuggler by being a fool. And the more time he spent in her company, the more interested in her he became... and 'twasn't that a joke on him?

He glanced around the tables. Law-abiding traders sharing a meal and time with a motley little crew of smugglers. Shamon shook his head mentally. The Daamens had been in some strange company in their time, but this had to be the strangest.

Although, wait... there were the space pirates they mixed with when they crossed paths with them, and the bounty hunters—grudgingly. Not that they mixed with the bounty hunters, merely gave them a tight nod if they saw them. There was history between the traders and one pack of bounty hunters in particular that went back awhile.

“Something funny?”

Shamon's attention was brought back to find Gabie gazing at him inquiringly. “Just private thoughts.”

“Mmmm.”

Resting his forearms on the table, Shamon leaned forward slightly. “So, lass, what brings you to these parts?”

That ever-present amusement gleamed in her eyes. “Business. How about you?”

He laughed. “Silly question, aye? Let's try something different.”

Picking up her mug of ale, she took a sip and eyed him over the top of the mug. “Let's.”

“Where are you from?”

“It depends.”

“Oh?” It seemed a perfectly straight forward question to Shamon.

“On whether it's purely an interest question or information gathering for certain legal parties.”

“You're a suspicious little wench.” Shamon grinned broadly.

“Careful, I’d say.” Picking up a biscuit from the one of the three plates scattered along the table, she bit a piece off.

“Purely interest,” Shamon said, watching as she licked a crumb off her full bottom lip.

Stars, he could lick that off for her. He blinked and forced his thoughts back on track. *Shooting stars of Cyran, mayhaps I really do need to find a buxom tavern wench later.*

“Oh, in that case I come from Ceron.”

“The Lawful Sector?” Shamon was surprised.

“Ah-ha! You thought I was from the Outlaw Sector, didn’t you?” She laughed delightedly.

’Twas no husky laugh, but a light, tinkling sound that had several of the tavern patrons nearby smiling as well. Shamon found himself smiling before he even realized it. The wench’s laugh was infectious.

“I confess the thought had crossed my mind.” Shamon picked up one of the biscuits and nibbled a piece of it, only to grimace.

“What’s wrong?” Gabie looked from him to the biscuit.

“’Tis nuts in it. I’m not fond of nuts.”

“Oh, you big baby. Give it here.” Reaching out, Gabie plucked the biscuit from his hand and took a big bite out of it. “Perfectly fine,” she said, managing with admiring grace not to spray crumbs all over him.

“I’ll take your word for it.” Amused, he looked back down at the plate of biscuits, wondering if there were any there without nuts in them.

“I could just lick them all for you first,” Gabie suggested. “Take a bite. Any with nuts I’ll eat, those without you can have.”

“Please, I couldn’t ask it of you. Too big a sacrifice.” Choosing a chocolate biscuit, Shamon took a bite and closed his eyes, sighing blissfully. “’Tis more like it!”

“I thought you tough traders ate steel for snacks,” Gabie teased. “Instead, I find chocolate lovers.”

“I love all things sweet.” Opening his eyes, he looked straight at her. “And I love surprises.”

“I just bet you do.”

For a second they looked at each other, and Shamon wondered if she suspected his double entendre. He was surprised to hear it himself, though truth be told, he was sort of getting used to the little surprises popping up in his thoughts around her.

Uh-oh. I'm attracted to her.

Don't panic. You've been attracted to pretty wenches before this. She's just another pretty wench.

But a dangerous one.

Don't be a fool. 'Tis just a wee wench.

In a dangerous occupation and openly flaunting the law.

'Tis not my problem.

You're attracted to a smuggler.

Pushing the thoughts firmly out of his mind, Shamon sat back as the tavern wenches started placing the plates of food down on the tables. The rich smell of meat and vegetables wafted through his senses and he settled down to eating and chatting, determined to keep the conversation between them light.

Glancing around the table, he saw that his friends were chatting quite happily amongst themselves as well as to Misha, Paz and Olin. Typically, once they'd made a friendship of sorts, even though not close, they were relaxed and enjoyed themselves.

Misha was in a light-hearted argument with Etol and Mikal about the merits of *private enterprise* versus legal trade. Paz was mournfully filling in poor Torkra with his tales of woe and hardship, and Olin was chatting to Aamun and Simon about, of all things, gardening.

Shamon forked up more food. Stars help him if he ever turned into a wedded man talking about *gardening*, of all things!

Gabie was talking spaceships with Heddam, who was sitting beside her, and Shamon listened. The wench was surprisingly well informed of spaceships, considering the death trap she travelled in, but Shamon found out why she had such an attachment to the ship. It had belonged to her father before he'd died in the crossover of a laser fight on the outskirts of the Outlaw Sector.

The ship had sentimental ties.

He'd crossed paths with Gabie quite a few times, but he'd never spent time in her company and he found he was quite enjoying it. She was like no other wench he'd ever come across. Fun-loving, thumbing her nose at the law, barely scraping under the radars, and openly enjoying crossing verbal swords with giant traders who could easily snap her in two if they were that kind of people.

Fearless. And fearless could be dangerous. Anything could go wrong during smuggling.

Pushing his empty plate away, Shamon looked around the room. There was a mixture of everyday settlers and rougher elements in the tavern. And two peacekeepers who were heading over in the direction of his table.

They came to a stop at the end of the table, their hard gazes raking over the mix of traders and smugglers.

"Surprised to find you here," one of the peacekeepers said to Simon.

There was no doubt what he meant. Law-abiding traders in the company of motley smugglers.

Green eyes sparkling with mirth, Gabie leaned back against the chair and smiled widely up at them. "Just a bunch of traders passing the time together, Michel."

The peacekeeper's expression didn't alter. "It's you I want to see, actually."

"No. Really?" Gabie beamed. "I'm so touched."

The wench was begging for trouble. Under the table, Shamon nudged her shin with the toe of his boot in warning not to antagonize the law.

He nearly swallowed his tongue when her booted foot skimmed up the inside of his leg in reply and she lodged her heel on the edge of his chair between his thighs. He could almost feel a hot flush go through him.

“So, what can I do for you, Michel?” Gabie looked earnest, but the devilment dancing in her eyes was plain for all to see.

“I want access to your spaceship.”

“But of course.” She did everything but bat her eyelashes. “Olin will take you aboard. I’m sort of in company, if you get what I mean?” She winked.

Michel’s expression didn’t waver. “I want your cargo disc invoices.”

Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew the disc and handed it to him. “It’s all there, honey.”

Honey? Shamon looked at Heddum, to find all his friends watching the exchange with avid interest. Misha merely looked mildly interested, Paz looked like he was resigned to life in prison, and Olin smothered a yawn.

“I’ll be keeping this until I’ve checked your cargo.” Michel slid it into the small handtronic he pulled from inside his jacket and scanned the disc. “Interesting cargo, Gabie.”

“Oh, you know me, Michel. I like the unusual.”

“Yes, I know.” His gaze raked over her once more. “I know only too well.”

The tone in the peacekeeper’s voice had Shamon studying him anew. The man was medium build and height, with sandy blonde hair neatly trimmed and a pleasant face. Handsome, some of the wenches would no doubt think. He carried an air of authority easily. Shamon caught sight of the badge partially concealed by his jacket and realized that Michel was none other than the Head Peacekeeper of the settlement.

And Michel was no one’s fool.

“Olin.” Gabie gestured to the older man, who got to his feet sleepily. “Go with Michel and show him our cargo. You never know, there might be something there he’d like to buy.”

Stars above, the lass was poking a very sore wound, going by the expression on Michel's face.

Resting his hand on the back of Gabie's chair, Michel leaned down until he was hovering not far from her face. The action held a threat and Shamon stiffened, looking for any indication that the lass was worried.

Far from it, she merely looked even more amused.

"I do hope I'm not going to find anything illegal on board, Gabie," Michel said quietly, and the warning in his voice was clear for all at the table to hear.

"Perish the thought, honey," she replied cheerfully.

"I don't want to be slinging you and your crew into the Enforcement Building cells."

"Don't sweat it, Michel." She smiled even wider and patted his chest with a familiarity that didn't go unnoticed by Shamon. "Everything on board is legit."

He stared down at her for several seconds and she winked at him. Swearing softly, Michel straightened up and stepped back. With one last warning look at Gabie, he and his peacekeeper swung about on their heels and followed Olin from the tavern.

"The man's going to give himself a stroke one day." Picking up her mug, Gabie swallowed the last of the ale.

"You know him well," Shamon stated.

"Grew up together," she replied. "Michel always was straight-laced."

"Hence you two never stayed together," Misha added.

Heddam looked from her to Gabie. "You two were lovers?"

Shamon felt a nasty little *something* curl through him at the words and managed to squash the feeling before he could examine it too closely.

Too late. *Jealous!* A little voice deep inside shrieked gleefully.

Refusing to acknowledge it, he kept his gaze trained on Gabie.

“Me and Michel?” Gabie laughed. “No. We didn’t always see eye to eye, and as we grew up, the eye to eye thing was more and more uneven. He went into law, I went into,” she coughed, “private enterprise.”

Shamon stroked his beard thoughtfully. The little nasty something deep inside him uncurled and disappeared. “He’s worried about you.”

“Michel would love to sling my arse into gaol, no doubt about it,” Gabie stated cheerfully. “He’d love to make me sweat for a few days.”

“You could end up in Cardrak, have you considered that?”

“I doubt Michel would let that happen. He’d have me branded outlaw and claim me.”

That nasty little something snapped right back to attention inside Shamon. *Not before I claimed you, lass.*

“He’d love to have me for his personal slave, running around cleaning his Enforcement Building, scrubbing the cells, bringing him drinks and food and polishing his precious badge. Telling me he told me so, over and over and over again.”

“Not to mention polishing his beloved planet cruiser,” Misha added.

“For life,” Paz said mournfully. “A slave for life.”

I could think of much better things for you if you were claimed by me, and it certainly wouldn’t be as a cleaning slave. Oh, aye, Shamon could think of much more carnal things to do with Gabie.

“Pfft!” Drawing out a pack of cards, Gabie slapped it on the table. “Forget old Straight Lace. He’s no fun.” Her eyes gleamed as she looked around at the traders who were watching her with amusement. “Come on, people, who’s up for a game of poker?”

The game started with most of them, but as the time passed the traders started folding and backing out, as did Misha and Paz. Finally it left only Shamon and Gabie playing against each other. The small piles of dinnos in front of them were almost even. Most of the other traders had drifted off with the exception of Simon and Heddham, who were talking idly between themselves, a tavern wench perched happily on Heddham’s lap and running her hand through his long, shaggy hair.

Misha was dancing not far off to the sound of the heavy music coming from the jukebox in the corner. Paz danced with her, his skinny arms and legs poking out every which way as he threw himself into the beat with more abandon than skill or grace.

He really was a wonder to watch, but Shamon was more focused on the sprite sitting opposite him. The gleam of battle was in her eyes, challenge in the way she eyed his pile of dinnos, then him.

Gabie, Shamon realized early on in the game, could play a risky game. She was shrewd, cunning, and bet with bad and good hands alike. She had a poker face to rival the best players and a skill for unnerving her opponents.

“Come on, Shamon.” Gabie grinned widely. “How about it?”

He eyed her with one arched brow.

“You’re not going to back out now, are you?”

“Wench, I’m not so sure about taking your dinnos from you.”

“My dinnos? Pshaw!” She laughed outright. “Don’t you sweat it, honey. Now are you playing or not?”

Her lips were soft and full and moist and pink. He wanted to taste them so badly it was a wonder he could even think straight. Those green eyes sparkled with the joy of living, and those bountiful breasts pushed enticingly against her shirt as she leaned forward over the table.

He just bet those breasts would be a ripe handful. And he wanted to test that theory out.

“I tell you what, Shamon, how about we make this a little more interesting?”

“How?”

Her grin was totally wicked. Pulling a pair of dice from her jacket pocket, she weighed them up. “A final toss of the dice for chance.”

“Dice? What’s wrong with cards?”

“Pooh. Cards is nothing but a poker face and being willing to gamble on bluff. Dice, now, that’s a real game of chance.” She flipped the dice up in the air. “I say we toss the dice. The highest score gets all the dinnos.”

Thoughtfully he scratched his beard, intrigued by the sheer devilment dancing in her eyes.

Stars, he could just imagine that living with this wench would be nothing but hair-raising and fun. He had no doubt she’d be a delight in bed. His gaze dropped to the dice she was tossing. *Chance*. He looked slowly up at her, an idea forming. Could he do it? *Hell, aye*.

“Well, Daamen?”

“How about we make it more interesting than just dinnos, lass?”

“Ooohhh, now that excites me. What else are we playing for?”

He smiled slow and easy. “You decide your prize and I’ll decide mine.”

“All right.” Leaning her forearms on the table, she studied him thoughtfully, her gaze running over his face. The smile that crept across her face would have sent foreboding through a lesser man. “Your beard.”

“Pardon?” He was caught off guard.

“I win the toss, you dissolve that atrocious beard.”

“My beard?” His treasured beard? Shamon stroked the neatly clipped hair. He’d had his beard for years. Could he gamble it away? *Hell, aye*. Because if he won the toss, he was going to get a whole lot more. A beard he could always regrow. “Done.”

“Really?” She was delighted. “Fine. What’s your prize?”

Oh boy. Without hesitation he crooked his finger at her and leaned forward. Curiosity bright in her eyes, she met him halfway across the table. Brushing his lips across her cheek, he felt her start slightly but she didn’t move. His cheek caressed her softer one, and he breathed deep of her light, sweet scent. His gut clenched and desire surged hot and deep.

He breathed the word into her ear so only she could hear. “You.”

There was silence for a split second, then she spoke in a hushed whisper.
“What?”

“You. In my bed. One night.”

Three

There was silence between them before she slowly drew back and looked at him. Their faces were only inches apart, he could feel the warm moistness of her breath on his own lips, and it took all he had to not move forward and claim her mouth and lick deep.

Her green eyes were enormous, surprise reflected deep inside. He could just about see her brain ticking over as she digested his words. Shamon half expected her to haul back and slap him one, but he refused to hide the desire he knew was flaring in his eyes.

“Well?” he breathed.

“Deal.” Pushing back, she dropped into her chair and handed him the dice. She looked at him and smiled. That he could see, she wasn’t mad at him. A little disconcerted but not raging mad.

That had to be a good sign. Mayhaps she was attracted to him, too. She had to be, to take him up on his offer. Gabie wasn’t the kind to fall into just anyone’s bed over a game of chance, he was sure.

Heat sizzled through him, desire uncurling. If he won, she’d be in his bed this night. He’d rent a room and she wouldn’t be leaving it until morning.

“Come on, honey.” She purred the words. “I want to see that beard come off.”

And I want you beneath me. He didn’t say the words aloud, knowing that Heddam and Simon were watching him and Gabie closely, but he knew she got the silent message when her cheeks went a faint pink.

Misha came to stand by the table as Shamon rattled the dice in his fist, his gaze never leaving Gabie.

“What are you doing?” Misha queried.

“Game of chance,” Gabie replied. “Big prize.”

“Oh, I do like chances.” Misha swallowed the last of the ale in her mug.

Shamon tossed the dice and all eyes watched as the pair rattled on the table and finally came to a stop. A five and a six. Looking across at Gabie, Shamon smiled slow and hot. Within minutes he’d have the lass to himself, up in a room, a big bed beckoning. Not that he needed a bed, he could do the deed a dozen different ways, but he wanted to stretch her out before him and indulge in some leisurely tasting first.

Heat flared through him and he didn’t bother to hide it from Gabie.

Pursing her lips, she eyed Shamon and then the dice in her hand. Biting her lip lightly—God, he couldn’t wait to do that himself, then lick it soothingly—Gabie rattled the dice and threw.

Dimly Shamon was aware of Misha muttering a curse as her mug dropped to the floor. She went down and crawled under the table, he felt her bump his leg, but again he hardly noticed it. His gaze was focused on the pair of dice as they rolled and twirled on the table.

They slowed, twisted and dropped suddenly. A pair of sixes.

Bugger. Shamon looked up to see the gleam of victory in Gabie’s eyes. But all wasn’t lost. He was here, she was here, and a bed was upstairs. Opening his mouth to suggest they go and have their own roll, he was diverted by Gabie leaning across the table and crooking her finger at him.

Leaning forward to meet her, he watched as she smiled deeply, those lush lips making a heaviness fill his loins.

“When I see you in the morning, Shamon, that beard will be gone.” Reaching out, she stroked one finger down his cheek to his jaw, curving her hand around the strong lines. “And this is to let you know what you missed out on.”

She kissed him. Her lips were warm, her tongue stroking across his lips lightly.

Hallelujah! Shamon opened his mouth, more than ready to sweep deep and discover her honeyed depths, but she let his jaw go and drew back, wagging one finger at him teasingly.

“Oh no, you don’t. You didn’t win the prize, you don’t get more than a tiny taste.”

“But—” It couldn’t end like this!

Standing up, she swept his pile of dinnos to join hers and dropped them into a pouch she produced from her jacket pocket. Giving him a cheerful little wave, she stepped back from the table.

“It’s been a pleasure, gents,” Gabie said. “However, we must be getting along.” She gave Shamon a wink. “A *real* pleasure. Catch you around, honey.”

He could only watch open-mouthed as the wench and her albino friend disappeared into the crowd. Paz noticed them going and took off after them, sharp elbows digging a pathway through the patrons.

“What just happened?” Heddham finally broke the silence.

“’Tis what I’d like to know,” Simon said, his thoughtful gaze on Shamon.

Sitting back gently, Shamon tried to ease the discomfort of the partial erection in his pants by shifting subtly. Just the thought of bedding the wench had been enough to make him hard, but not being able to relieve it by burying himself in her warm depths was a pain in the... “I lost the dice toss.”

“Aye, ’Tis so,” Heddham agreed. “But what did you bet? I heard you bet your beard. Stars, you have to dissolve your beard!”

Shamon rubbed one hand reflectively over his jaw. He’d gladly trade his beard for one night with Gabie.

“Mind telling us what your prize was going to be?” Simon queried. “Or is my guess correct?”

“I bet ’twas correct.” Heddham nudged him and grinned. “The way Shamon was looking at the lass, I thought he was going to take her then and there on the table. I was about ready to drag them both upstairs and toss them into a room away from shocked eyes.”

Simon leaned forward, eyes shrewd. “Gabie was your prize.”

Shamon sighed. “Was. I lost.”

Heddam guffawed.

“However, ’tis not the last of it.” Shamon reached for Heddam’s mug of ale and drained it in one gulp. Slamming it back onto the table, he looked at the empty space across the table. “That wench may have won the dice toss, but it comes with a price.”

~ * ~

“How much did you win?” Paz asked, gambolling along beside Gabie like a young colt whose legs were way too skinny and ungainly.

“A fair bit. I’ll share it out back on board the ship.” Gabie took a deep breath of the cool night air, glad that no one could see her hot cheeks in the darkness.

Cripes, Shamon had wanted her. *Oh God!* She couldn’t believe it. A roguish hunk like him wanting a piece like her. Gabie had no illusions, she was no real beauty and her figure was by no means graceful. Voluptuous was the kindest anyone could say.

But that giant hunk of testosterone plus had wanted *her*. His brown eyes had burned with sexual desire. Just his look had almost set her clothes smouldering. It sure as stars had made dampness between her thighs.

But Gabie was never one to simply sleep around with whomever she found attractive. It wasn’t her way. No sir. There had to be more than just attraction. There had to be a special something, and so far she’d never found that special something with any of the men she’d met.

“One day,” Paz said, “you’ll lose at the dice.”

“No chance. My secret weapon was by my side.”

“I was watching, don’t you worry, Paz.” Misha patted the pocket of her pants. “I had everything under control.”

If Misha hadn’t been there, no way would Gabie have agreed to such an outrageous bet. She played for big stakes with dice, but never without her secret weapon. She’d be a fool to play for what she did by chance alone.

~ * ~

“What do you mean she isn’t interested in taking the cargo?” Raznin scowled up at Link from his reclining position in the chair.

“She refuses to take anything that doesn’t have a disc.” Link sneered. “As if the discs are legit, anyway. They’re simply a cover.”

“Gabie’s no fool. It’s how she’s managed to be able to smuggle goods almost in plain sight of the law.” Raznin steeped his fingers and gazed over them at Tason. “She doesn’t take chances. That’s her secret to success.”

“And the reason she never makes wealth,” Tason stated.

“She’s not greedy.” Raznin looked at Link. “What about her crew? Can they be persuaded to talk her into it?”

“That lot are loyal to her.” Link grimaced. “If I even tried to talk them into it, Misha would shoot me without a qualm.”

Lifting his steeped fingers to his face, Raznin tapped his fingertips against his chin. He needed someone else he could trust to take some cargo through the Lawful Sector. Gabie was the ideal choice. There was no one else he could think of that he’d trust enough for this job.

Gabie was ideal because the law sometimes let her pass, knowing she’d have all documentation for her goods. Illegal goods and fake documentation, but there nonetheless. Where she got such good fake discs he didn’t know, no one did, but it was something else he meant to find out about from her.

In fact, maybe he needed to have a little chat with Gabie himself. Push the issue of working for him, and find out where she got the discs.

“Tason,” Raznin said quietly. “I want to chat with Gabie.”

Tason nodded.

“When we land in the morning, find her and issue an invitation to meet me for business.”

Tason nodded again.

“Be sure she knows who I am.”

Tason inclined his head.

“And if she needs some persuasion to come, do it discreetly.”

“Consider it done.”

~ * ~

Out of fuel, the planet cruiser landed jerkily, crashing through several bushes before coming to a halt. He climbed from it painfully, stumbling and falling to the dirt. He'd lost a lot of blood and could feel himself growing weaker by the minute.

There was a settlement nearby, he could see the lights. He needed to get the disc to one person only, one person who could do anything about what was happening. And he wasn't even on the right planet. A sob slipped out, quickly hushed.

Breathing harshly, he stumbled through the bushes towards the light. Coming to the outskirts of the settlement, he wondered where he should go, who he should turn to. He needed to trust someone, but who? It couldn't be the Peacekeepers, couldn't be anyone law-abiding, yet it couldn't be outlaws, either. Someone might recognize him, and he would be worth a lot of dinno from the right source.

His gaze wavered, darkness threatening to drag him down into oblivion.

Forcing himself onwards, he staggered through the back alleys, dodging drunks and a few lowlife scum who avoided him after seeing the blood coating his side. Trying to scout out the settlement, he frantically gathered his thoughts.

The Enforcement Building? Should he go there? Would one of them be in cahoots with Mellar? And if he went there, they'd see his mark anyway and notify Mellar.

Whoever saw him would know, and that couldn't happen. He couldn't give the only chance they all had now, not when he was so sure she was dead and had died for them all. He couldn't waste her sacrifice like that. He couldn't do that to her, or his family, or the others who were counting on him, even though some of them didn't even know what he and that courageous woman had planned.

His vision blurred and he staggered against a wall, leaving a smear of blood against the rough stone.

Time passed in a darkening haze and then suddenly he was out in the open. Fear shook him, the vulnerability of his position snaking through him with icy fingers. He wavered, trying to run for cover, but his legs gave out. He crawled through the

dirt, dragging himself along painfully. If he was discovered, all could be lost in one look.

Desperate, he clasped the wall he reached and dragged himself up. In a blur he saw the ships, two of them. A docking bay. There might be another planet cruiser he could steal.

Hand on his side, he did a staggering run through the darkness and then the dim lights. Unable to see properly, he stumbled and fell against something hard. Darkness came down ruthlessly as pain exploded through him, and he fell.

Stay awake! I must stay awake!

Voices approaching, but he couldn't make out the ones they belonged to. A laugh reached him, light and tinkling. It stopped and suddenly hands were touching him, running over his chest. Voices low.

"I think we better get the peacekeepers."

"No!" He gasped it out, one hand flailing weakly.

"It's all right." A hand caught his. "We'll get help—"

"No. No, I can't be caught." He drew in an agonised breath. "I beg you."

"Caught?" Another voice joined the soothing tones. "I think he's an outlaw, Gabie."

"What are we going to do?" This voice was a youth's, a slight break in the tones.

There was silence for several seconds.

"Please," he whispered, weakly squeezing the hand holding his. "*Please.*"

"Help me get him inside." The hand shifted, releasing his.

Inside. Not the peacekeepers. Maybe. Who was it?

"If they come looking for him we don't have a disc, Gabie." The other female voice held a touch of irony.

"Cripes, where's your sense of adventure?" the one called Gabie replied. "Come on, give us a hand. Mister, this may hurt but if you keep quiet we'll get you into cover and see to your wounds, okay?"

“O... kay...” he managed.

Pain scoured through him as hands came under his armpits and hauled him up. Definite female bodies came either side of him, arms around his waist, and his arms over their shoulders. He was moving but he couldn't see properly, just managing to stay conscious.

Up a ramp, into a spaceship. A torturous climb up some stairs that seemed to last forever. A stumbling, though supported walk, down a corridor of some kind, he would guess. And then he was lowered onto a soft mattress.

“Thank... you...”

“Hey, you haven't felt Olin's dubious first aid methods, so keep the thanks until later,” the one called Gabie replied. “Speaking of which, Paz, go wake up Olin. Get some hot una into him and get him down here fast.”

The yawning pit of oblivion was pulling at his shattered senses, but he had to ask, had to plead just once more. “Please. No... law. No... one...”

“You got it,” Gabie replied.

He fell headlong into the pit and it closed over him, sucking him down deep into darkness where there was no pain, and no hope. Nothing.

~ * ~

Gabie checked the man's clothes for identification, but there was nothing. She walked across the cabin and looked over Olin's shoulder, but she didn't look at the wound. Wounds were icky, which was why Olin had the job of first aider. Instead, she studied the man.

He was about thirty-five years old, with short, dark hair and an angular, pale face. Blue eyes. Lean of build, but with strength in corded muscles. What surprised her was the softer look about him, he didn't look like the outlaw his brand proclaimed him to be. It marked his thigh and was one of the first things that Paz had come bounding out of the cabin to tell her. She'd had to learn it second hand, because Olin, the old fuddy-duddy, had dragged Paz in to help him undress the man, stating that no female should see a naked man she didn't know, to which Gabie had replied that she knew both Paz and Olin but she didn't want to see them naked, either. Olin had shut the door in her face and wouldn't let her come in until the man was decently covered by a sheet.

Misha hovered behind her. “Will he live, Olin?”

“He’s lost a lot of blood but the volumizer I’ve put up will help.” Olin finished putting the self-adhesive dressing over the torn flesh. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

“We’re in trouble if he winds up dead,” Paz fretted. “Michel won’t like it.”

“Michel won’t know any of this,” Gabie replied. “No one will. Nothing about this man goes outside this ship.”

“If he dies—”

“We’ll wait and see.”

“He’s an outlaw. We’ll be in trouble for harbouring an outlaw.”

Gabie ignored him. “Olin, what’s next?”

“He’ll need observing.” Standing up with a creak of his joints and Paz’s helping hand, Olin picked up the bag of rubbish and the bowl of water. “Take the medi-kit, Paz.”

Paz obeyed.

“Twenty-four hour watch?” Gabie queried.

“Probably not, but for the first few hours, yes.”

“We better do it in shifts, then.” Gabie glanced at the timer on the wall. “Four of us...” She looked at Olin and changed her mind, especially as he had bags under his eyes a traveller would envy. “Three of us.”

Misha said, “I don’t sleep much. Why don’t I take this watch through the night and we can decide tomorrow what’ll happen?”

“Done.” Gabie started for the door. “Wake me if you need me.”

“And what are you going to do?” Olin asked grumpily.

“You’re right. Wake Olin instead.”

Grumbling, Olin went out the door with Paz scurrying after him.

In her cabin, Gabie went straight to the bathing cabin and stripped off her clothes, tossing them down the washing chute. Stepping into the shower, she groaned in pleasure as the warm soapy water sluiced over her. While she washed her hair, she thought about the mystery man in the cabin down the corridor. A branded outlaw begging for mercy. Nothing new about that, but a branded outlaw who was on the run could bring a lot of problems, such as who he was on the run from, what his crime had been, what he'd done to escape, and how badly he was wanted.

She shrugged. There was nothing for it now but to wait until he awoke and then try to get some information from him. To Gabie's way of thinking, a decision had been made to care for him until he was well enough to answer questions. If he didn't satisfy her with his answers, she'd turn him over to Michel without batting an eye. If, however, she believed whatever he would tell her, she'd help, but only if it didn't bring problems to her crew and herself. Everything depended on what he'd say, and as he wasn't saying much now, she didn't see any point worrying about it.

Touching the button that switched off the soap, she rinsed herself with warm water and finally turned it off. Drying quickly, she slipped a nightgown on and combed her hair, before finally heading for bed. It had been a most interesting day.

Grinning, she snuggled down under the covers. She couldn't wait to see Shamon without the beard. And he'd dissolve it never knowing it had been a con job all the way. He'd be without a beard for six months.

A sudden thought struck her. He'd always had that beard since she'd first seen him four years ago. It seemed from the gossip she'd caught from smitten tavern wenches that he'd had it for years. Yet he'd been willing to give it up for one night with her.

Cripes, that did make a little tingle go through her. Giving a little squirm of pleasure—hey, why deny it?—Gabie closed her eyes and drifted into sleep.

~ * ~

Mellar was furious. Stalking across the richly decorated room, he pivoted and glared at the viscomm. "You better find him, Cheran! You better bloody find him and get that disc back!"

"We will, Sir." Cheran's expression remained calm.

“If that falls into the wrong hands, I’ll be taking you down with me!”

“We’ll get the disc and we’ll kill the man.”

“No, bring him back alive. I want to find out who else is in on this little scheme. I’ll have the answers even if I have to flay him alive!” Storming back to his desk, Mellar dropped into the chair. “And God help anyone who aids him.”

~ * ~

Misha was stretched out in the chair, her bare feet crossed at the ankles and propped up on the little table. A plate of cake crumbs was on the table along with an empty jug of juice. She was snoring softly, her long, white hair trailing over her shoulder to pool in her lap. Her mohawk was as neat as always, though Gabie doubted a mohawk could be messy at any time.

The man was lying quietly and breathing steadily.

Walking softly up behind Misha, Gabie tapped her briskly on the shoulder. “Oy!”

Misha jerked upright and nearly fell off the chair. Awake within seconds, as was her habit, she scowled over her shoulder at Gabie. “Damn it, Gabie!”

“Good to see you alert on the job.” Grinning, Gabie crossed over to the bunk, folded her arms and gazed down at the man. “Has he stirred?”

“No.” Grumpy, Misha got up and joined her by the bunk. “He’s slept all night. Well, once he started groaning, so I roused Olin and got some painkillers for him, but apart from that he’s been quiet.”

“Olin must have loved you.”

“He’s a crotchety old fart.”

“Yeah.”

They both gazed down at the man.

“So, what do you think?” Misha broke the silence.

“I think he’s an escaped claimed outlaw who is unconscious and wounded.”

“Oh my, do you think so?”

“That would be my guess.”

“You amaze me with your powers of observation.”

“I know, but someone has to be the brains of this outfit.”

Misha rolled her eyes.

“So has Olin checked him yet?” Gabie angled her head slightly.

“Yes. Says he seems stable at this time. No further blood loss, vital signs a little weak but nothing to worry about yet. By the way, does he look any different from that angle?”

“Surprisingly, no. And when you roll your eyes, does anything look different for you?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I’m sure. Well, I’ll get Paz to relieve you on observation duty and you get some sleep.”

“What are you going to be doing?”

Gabie grinned. “I’m off to see the result of my winning that dice toss.”

Paz was in the cargo hold taking inventory of the items and securing them in sections inside the big metal cupboards that lined the walls of the cargo hold. Gabie was of the opinion that out of sight was out of mind for fellow smugglers. Maybe. Anyway, it helped stop temptation. At first glance her hold always looked empty.

“Where are you going?” He looked up from the handtronic.

“To check out my prize.” She skipped down the ramp eagerly.

“The trader won’t be happy,” he predicted.

“Probably not but he’ll honour the agreement.” Striding towards the big Daamen trading ship, Gabie grinned.

Findel, Mikal, Etol and Heddiam looked up as she stopped near the ramp of their ship.

Eyes twinkling, Heddham placed the big barrel down next to the ramp and straightened up. “Good morn to you, lass.”

“Hello.” She gazed past him. “Don’t tell me Shamon is too embarrassed to show his beardless face outside, the big baby?”

“Not at all.” Heddham grinned. “He’s lurking up in the dining cabin, still breaking the fast.”

“Cripes, he’s a bit of a slug-a-bed, isn’t he?” Rocking back and forth on her heels, Gabie surveyed the traders in amusement.

They looked back at her with equal amusement.

“He’s not an early riser by nature,” Etol informed her. “And he had a restless night last night, hence he’s a bit tired this morn and rose later than the rest of us.”

“Worried about losing his precious beard, was he?” Gabie grinned wider.

Mikal rested his arm against the side of a big crate. “Losing the beard didn’t seem to worry him as much as something else. While he slapped the dissolving gel on it last night I overheard him muttering to himself about,” he looked slyly at Gabie, “a certain wench winning impossible odds.”

“Game of chance, dear boy. Game of chance.” She looked up the ramp. “Go and get him for me, will you?”

Mikal shook his head. “Sorry, lass. Shamon said if you came to crow over your prize, you’d have to go up and see him.”

“Pshaw. He is such a big baby!” Twining a loose strand of hair around her finger, she raised a brow at Heddham. “Won’t Simon mind me coming aboard?”

“You being a smuggler and all?” Heddham shrugged. “He doesn’t appear too worried. Just told us to make sure you don’t stop and inspect the cargo.”

“That man has no faith in private enterprise.”

“Especially *your* private enterprise.” Heddham’s eyes twinkled.

“So, where do I go?”

Mikal straightened up. “I’ll drop you off. I need to go to the control cabin to see Simon anyway.”

Giving the remaining traders a cheerful wave, Gabie followed the brawny teenager into the ship.

The cargo hold was half full of crates and barrels, and several locked containers. No doubt the Daamens had a fortune in trade goods. The traders were well known and desperately sought by merchants everywhere, including in the Outlaw Sector, for they traded fairly and honestly.

Joining Mikal on the platform lift, she had to grab hastily for the wall when it lurched suddenly before ascending.

“Sorry, lass.” Mikal was all concern, reaching out to steady her. “I should have warned you. I guess we’re so used to it, I didn’t think.”

“Don’t worry. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve nearly been thrown from a moving lift,” she replied cheerfully.

“’Tis a dangerous business you’re in.” Mikal looked faintly worried.

“Any form of space travel is dangerous at times.”

He still looked worried, but didn’t say anything further. The platform moved past a long corridor with a narrow entry and what looked to be a control cabin at the end where the corridor widened.

The lift clattered to a stop at the next floor, and Mikal said, “’Tis the dining and sleeping cabins. Shamon’s in the dining cabin on the right. He’ll bring you back down, all right?”

“No worries.”

With a nod, Mikal pressed the button and descended out of sight.

Gabie looked around, the ship was quiet. The walls were lined with pale grey tiles, and the floor was white. Everything was clean and neat. As she walked down the corridor towards the dining cabin, she noted the cabins of the men. One bunk in each. Some of the cabins were tidy, several messy. Each trader had his own domain. There were more but she didn’t see them because she’d drawn level with the dining cabin and the sleeping cabins continued down on both sides.

Peeking into the dining cabin, she saw that it was empty. She could either look for Shamon, who could be anywhere on this ship, or wait for a few minutes. He was bound to come once he knew she was onboard waiting for him.

Gabie chose to wait. Entering the cabin, she glanced around. A long, wooden table was on the right with stools situated evenly around it. On the right was a bookshelf containing electronic and paperback books, a huge sofa and two big, sturdy armchairs facing each other with a low table between them. A food storage cabinet stretched against the far wall. Everything was fastened to the floor for safety.

Moving across to the table, Gabie saw a handtronic lying on it. Picking it up, she saw that it had an electronic book programmed in, and she read a couple of lines. Intrigued, she decided to keep reading for a few minutes while waiting for her prize to appear.

Perching up on the table, she swung her legs, but as she got more engrossed in the story, her legs stopped moving and she started nibbling on a nail.

She was so engrossed in the story that she didn't hear anyone enter the dining cabin or approach until two hands suddenly appeared to thump down on the table either side of her thighs. Startled, she looked up to find herself gazing at a devastatingly handsome face.

For several seconds she wasn't entirely sure who this trader was leaning down towards her. The brown eyes held a hint of heat as well as amusement, and his fair hair was tied back at the nape.

Shamon.

Cripes.

Gabie blinked in surprise. But this was Shamon without a beard. His lips had an unmistakable masculinity, his cheekbones were cut strongly and his jaw was hard and determined. His features were strong, that was the only word to describe them. And to think he'd hidden that clean cut, devastating handsomeness under a beard all these years. It was a crime.

Leaning forward on his arms, the bulging muscles flexing with every little movement, Shamon quirked one brow. "Well, lass?"

"I... wow." Without thinking, she reached up and traced one finger down his cheek, feeling the smoothness. "You sure do clean up good."

"Glad you approve."

He leaned forward a little more, his movements easy and slow, yet somehow predatory at the same time. Gabie's heart started to pound a little faster.

Thick lashes swept down as his gaze drifted lower, over her face and down further, and she could almost swear she felt the burn of his scrutiny through her clothes.

When those thick lashes lifted, she found herself gazing into hot brown eyes. Carnal eyes.

"Shamon..."

"Aye?"

"I—I have to go now." Placing one hand on his chest—*his naked, warm, muscular chest*—she pushed him back gently. Or tried to. He didn't budge an inch. "Shamon—"

"Nay." He leaned forward a little more.

She was trapped on the table, his arms caging her in each side, his magnificent body in front of her. A faint clean, totally masculine scent drifted through her senses, and she found herself staring at his lips as he moved closer. Full lips that were sinfully male.

He was pure testosterone on two muscled legs, and she wasn't entirely certain her oestrogen could take all that testosterone, though it looked like she didn't have much choice unless she started fighting. And then only if he let her go, for she had no doubt that once Shamon decided to latch onto something—or someone—he wouldn't release them let go until he was good and ready.

"Shamon, what are you doing?" She was dismayed to hear how breathless she sounded.

Those sinful lips smiled slightly and heat flared in his eyes. "Collecting my consolation prize."

Alarm bells sounded inside her head but it was too late. Shamon closed the tiny gap between them swiftly, and then those sinful lips were upon hers and... stars, the kiss was sin itself!

No sweet introductions here, no sir. Shamon's tongue swept across her lips, demanding entrance, sweeping inside to plunder the depths of her mouth. It was a

kiss so carnal that she had to either grab onto his shoulders or fall backwards. And she needed something to cling to while her mind whirled out of control.

Sensations burst upon her. Heat, maleness, the heavy bulges of muscle under her hands, the total mastery of the kiss. He licked deep, demanding everything, giving no quarter, taking everything she had with a skill that kept her thoughts whirling.

Caught up in delicious heat, Gabie kissed him back, tasting him in turn, demanding more in turn, giving him everything he demanded and wanting the same back.

When they finally parted, Shamon leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, drawing in deep breaths.

She was feeling a little breathless herself, not to mention weak. Cripes, if she stood now she was sure her knees would give out and she'd end up on the floor.

A full minute passed before Shamon drew back a little to smile at her. *Stars, a hot smile!* "Well, little wench, you are full of surprises."

"Me?" She sought to steady her voice and to keep from reaching for him again.

"Aye. You can be quite demanding in the kissing department." His voice lowered. "What say we test out how demanding you can be in bed?"

She blinked. *Oh no. No, no, no. That wasn't in the plans.* "Oh, no. I won the prize, you didn't." Dragging in a deep breath, she added, "Though I don't remember any consolation prize being agreed upon."

His smile was lazy, belying the concupiscence glow in his eyes. "'Twas there, just never discussed. You named your terms, I named mine."

"That's cheating."

"I'm so bad. Want to punish me?" Hot humour gleamed in his eyes.

Mentally Gabie fanned herself. "I think not."

"Shame." Leaning forward, he brushed her cheek with his as he breathed warmly into her ear. "Want me to punish you instead?"

Now *that* provoked all kinds of kinky thoughts a good girl like herself should never think about. Placing her hands against his chest, she gave him a push. "No!"

“Shame.” He didn’t move an inch and she jumped when his lips grazed her ear. “Shall we just go straight to the loving then?”

“Loving?” If she wasn’t careful, she was going to melt into a puddle right on the table. “There’ll be no loving, trader! That was your prize, but you lost.”

The smile on his face when he drew back to look at her was totally decadent.

“And,” she added, straightening up, “I won, not you, and lovin’ wasn’t part of my prize.”

“So let’s just forget the dice toss and go to bed anyway.”

The man really was outrageous. “You’re a sex fiend.” Feeling a little more in control of herself, Gabie arched one brow and looked at him. “So unless you intend to try and force me, I’m wanting off this table.”

“I’m not into forcing wenches.” Grabbing her suddenly about her waist, Shamon hoisted her off the table with ridiculous ease, making her gasp, and held her up to eye level. “And one day, little smuggler, I will have you in my bed.”

Cripes. Gabie stared at him, her mouth dry, her heart pounding. Feet swinging well above the floor, she swallowed. “In your dreams.”

“Oh, you’ve started invading my dreams, little wench. ’Tis made the nights so delicious.” Carnal heat was still burning in his eyes, but the promise that gleamed in them was like a banked fire. Slowly he allowed her to slide down his body. “I’ve got plans for your luscious little body.”

She swore she could feel every hard swell of muscle, every dip of hard plane, as she went down. By the time she was on her feet, she was looking at his massive pectorals, the skin so warm and tanned and beckoning between the lapels of his sleeveless vest.

Looking up, she saw that Shamon was no longer smiling. The usual humour was gone, the easy-going trader seeming to have faded. His face without the softening beard looked almost dangerous now in its handsomeness. Piratical with that long, shaggy hair and that small, silver hoop that glinted in his earlobe.

Pure prurience was reflected in his hot, brown eyes. The man was walking desire.

“I have to go.” Straightening her shoulders, Gabie took a deep breath and sidled away from him.

He didn’t stop her, but she halted at the door when he said her name in a low, deep voice that just ran over her skin like silk. “Gabie.”

She closed her eyes. “What?”

“I won’t apologize for wanting you.”

Warmth crept through her and she gulped mentally.

“One day you will be in my bed.”

Good God, was he coming closer? Her skin prickled with awareness.

“And you will enjoy it.”

Oh yes, he was closer. She could feel the heat of him at her back, even though he wasn’t touching her.

“You might have won the dice toss, little wench.” His breath was warm on her ear. “But I don’t leave what I really want to chance.”

She took a step forward, her heart hammering in her ears, trying to ignore the sudden wash of dampness at the apex of her thighs.

“One day, little smuggler, you’ll be screaming out my name.” The promise was accompanied by the brush of firm lips against her nape.

That did it. Gabie left fast while she still had her wits about her. She was lucky she remembered where the platform lift was, her thoughts were in such a muddle. She was still stepping onto it when she reached around and hit the descend button. As the lift lurched, an unknown force dragged her gaze back up, and she saw him.

One brawny shoulder leaning against the door frame of the dining cabin, Shamon had his arms crossed, his biceps bulging mouth-wateringly. He looked the picture of complete relaxation, and anyone would be fooled by it, except for the hot promise in his eyes as he looked at her and the hard bulge in the front of his pants.

The man wanted her and he meant to get her.

Oh God. Be still my pounding heart.

The platform lowered and the disturbing sight of a sexually aroused and determined Shamon was gone from sight. Gabie took several deep breaths, managing to don a carefree expression before the lift rattled to a halt in the cargo hold. It wouldn't do for the traders to see her so rattled.

Mikal looked up from where he was kneeling and fastening cables around a crate. "What did you think, lass?"

I think I'm about to go up in fire. I need a cold shower. "He scrubs up very well," she replied cheerfully. "I must remember to bet more on the dice next time."

He laughed. As she left the ship, Heddam, Etol and Findel gave her a friendly wave from where they stood at a hover tray loaded with more crates and barrels.

Gabie didn't have to look up to know that Shamon was watching her every step as she forced herself to walk sedately back to her spaceship. She could practically feel the lick of fire from his heated gaze.

"Gabie!"

She looked up.

Paz ran up to her, skinny legs eating up the distance. "Our visitor is awake."

"Really?" Glad of the diversion, she forced the tingling experience with Shamon to the back of her mind. "Then let's see what he has to say for himself."

She found their visitor lying in the bunk, his head and shoulders propped up on a pillow. His face was ashen but he was sipping from a mug of hot soup and looked a bit better than when she'd seen him earlier.

Misha was sitting in a chair nearby, studying the man over a glass of juice.

"Hello." Gabie perched on the end of the bunk. "Who are you and what happened?"

The man didn't look too happy.

"No messing around, now," Gabie said cheerfully. "Or I'll toss your arse to the peacekeepers, outlaw."

He took a deep breath. "You saw the brand."

"Yeah. Care to tell me about it?"

“The woman who claimed me has... died. I didn’t want to be passed on to her kin.”

“Really? And who would this woman be?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Okay. Paz!” Gabie called towards the door. “Call the peacekeepers!”

“No!” The man sat up quickly, his gasp of pain echoing in the cabin, the soup slopping over the edge of his mug. “Please!”

“Hold that order, Paz!” Turning back to the man, she arched one brow. “Let’s start again, first with your name.”

“I’m Emet.” He eased back slowly against the pillow. “And I risk capture and being returned to the kin.”

“Paz!”

Paz appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Gabie?”

“Check on the claiming list for Emet. Bring me the information on the handtronic.”

Paz nodded and disappeared.

“Please, you won’t notify anyone?” Emet looked at Gabie desperately.

“Well, that all depends on your story, Emet. Did you murder your mistress?”

“No! No, I would never hurt her.” He wiped at his mouth with a trembling hand. “She was kind to me.”

“Where are you from?”

She knew he didn’t want to tell her but he really had no choice.

“Once I find out from the claimed outlaw register, Emet, I’m going to know anyway. So spill your guts, there’s a good lad.” Gabie leaned forward. “I have all the odds on my side and you have zilch. So you don’t really have a choice, do you?”

He looked at Misha, who raised her brows at him.

“We’re not exactly running on the law side,” she informed him.

“Private enterprise.” Gabie smiled. “Nothing illegal about that.”

Emet frowned for a few seconds, and then his face brightened a little. “You’re the smuggler, Gabie.”

“We’re famous,” Gabie remarked to Misha. “How about that?”

“And we do prefer the term private enterprise,” Misha added.

“This ship is the *Larceny*, isn’t it?” Emet glanced around.

“That it is,” Gabie said proudly. “But enough about us. Tell us all about yourself, Emet. Where are you from?”

He looked at her for several seconds before replying quietly, “My mistress was Shona of Breyton. Her husband is Mellar. I carry a message from Shona, though she was dying when I left. I know she is dead by now.”

“You don’t like Mellar?”

“Mellar is... a cruel leader.”

“Who is this Mellar?” Gabie scratched her head, turning to look at Misha. “I seem to have heard his name somewhere.”

“Mellar is a settlement leader, I think.” Misha leaned back in the chair and grinned.

“Really?” How intriguing. “Being on the run from a settlement leader could bring some interesting people looking for you. So, Emet, what is this message you carry and who is it for?”

“I-I’d really rather not say.”

“And I’d rather you did, especially if we’re harbouring you on our ship.” Gabie looked up as Paz entered. Taking the handtronic from him, she studied the information and found that so far Emet was truthful in what he’d told her. Except for one thing.

And oh boy, that was *really* interesting.

Gabie rubbed her chin thoughtfully with the edge of the handtronic. “You’re not reported missing, Emet. Now why is that?”

He was bewildered. “What?”

“You’re a claimed outlaw, wounded and on the run, scared of being turned in to the law and returned to Mellar. Yet you’re not registered as escaped and being on the run. Now I find that strange. Don’t you find that strange, Misha?”

“I find it strange. How about you, Paz?”

“Oh my, yes.” Paz nodded energetically. “I find it strange.”

“Thanks for concurring.” Gabie smiled at Emet. “Your turn.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you find it strange that you’re not registered as missing?”

“Is this true?” Emet stared at the handtronic.

“See for yourself, honey.” She tossed the handtronic on the bunk near his hand.

Picking it up, Emet scanned the contents on the screen. When he finally returned his gaze back to Gabie, she could see that his bewilderment was no act. The man was genuinely puzzled.

“Yep, it’s totally strange.” Leaning on one arm, she gestured into the air. “Mind you, I reckon most settlement leaders are a couple of brain cells short of any kind of intelligence. So, Emet, the question is, what message do you have and for whom?”

“I... I...”

“Come on, it’s not such a hard question, is it?”

“It is.” His blue eyes had a haunted look about them, the dark shadows beneath lending him a washed-out look. “If I tell you and it gets back to Mellar or anyone in his employ, then it’ll mean the possible death of a whole settlement.”

Gabie digested this bit of information in silence for several seconds. She looked at Misha, who shrugged. Getting up, she paced slowly around the room, running her fingers across the desk and the back of Misha’s chair. Stopping before the mirror, she gazed at the reflection of Emet lying in the bunk.

Was he lying? What if he wasn't? How much did they want to get involved in all this? The fact was, he was a claimed outlaw running around wounded, yet he wasn't registered as missing. And she remembered something on the galaxy news about someone called Shona being dead.

The only thing that was true was that he was a claimed outlaw, he was wounded, he had been claimed by Shona of Brcyton, and Shona was now dead. If he'd killed her and run, why hadn't he been registered as on the run and a murderer?

Emet was no murderer, not according to the claimed outlaws register. Emet had been claimed at a young age by Shona after being caught stealing from the palace and branded by her husband, Mellar. Only a real arse would brand a ten year old boy.

Mellar and Shona had no children, so it was likely that Shona had treated Emet more like a son. Maybe.

But it didn't solve the mystery.

Turning around, she asked bluntly, "Why won't you tell us?"

"I don't know if I can trust you."

Okay, fair enough. He didn't know them. They didn't know him. And Gabie didn't really want to get involved in anything shady that might jeopardize her private enterprise. But neither could she turn a wounded man away.

"All right, Emet, here's the deal." Gabie walked briskly to the doorway and stopped. "You don't know if you trust us, and I sure as hell don't trust you right now. However, something doesn't smell quite right so I'm not going to turn you over to the law just yet. You have two days to recover and then you can take a hike away from my ship. Two days, Emet. Understand?"

Face pale, Emet nodded. "Thank you."

"Yeah. No worries. However, if you bring trouble to me and mine, I'll pin your arse to the outside of my ship and take a flight into space with you flapping in the breeze. Understand that?"

He nodded. "If you tell no one I'm here, nothing will happen."

"Okay then. You're confined to this cabin. Take one step out of it and we'll know. So sit tight and get better and all will go well."

Emet nodded again.

Leaving the cabin, Gabie stretched and headed to the control cabin. She had some contacts to make in regards to her goods and now was as good a time as any to get some things done.

~ * ~

Shamon studied himself in the mirror. He was still getting used to being without a beard, but Gabie had seemed to like him just fine without it.

Gabie.

Suns, he couldn't believe he'd lost it over her. One look at her sitting on the table chewing her fingernail, and he'd come over all hot and bothered. His libido had cranked up a hundred knots and if the wench had been willing he'd have dragged her off to his bunk without hesitation.

He could still taste her mouth. Sweet heaven, it had been like hot honey. And the wench had kissed him back quite enthusiastically.

Shamon quirked a brow at himself. Right, he could be as shocked as he liked over his dominating behaviour, so unlike his normal easy-going, happy self, but damn, he wasn't going to lie to himself. He wanted her. He wanted her under him, on him, bent over for him. He wanted her a hundred different ways, and then he wanted to start all over again.

"What 'tis wrong with you?" He rubbed his brow with two fingers.

Never before had he gotten so fixated on a wench. And to be fixated on a cheeky smuggler who enjoyed thumbing her nose at the law and baiting men almost twice her size was madness. The man who got tangled up with that lass was going to spend most of his life getting her out of scraps.

I'd like to be that man.

Oh nay! Nay, you do not. One night in her bed and you'll have her out of your system.

Not happening. That wench is in your system like poison. She's an effect that will last forever.

Not thinking about it. Not thinking about it.

Shaking his head, Shamon strode from his cabin to the platform lift. One night in his bed, that's all he needed of her. One night to work her out of his system once and for all. He wanted her, and by God, he'd charmed any wench he'd wanted into his bed within minutes. She'd be no different, and then they could both go their merry ways.

Aye, that would do it.

Right.

Stepping out into the cargo hold, he saw Simon, Heddam, Mikal and Torkra standing near a crate and chuckling. Curious, he strode over to them.

"What's so funny?" he asked cheerfully.

His friends looked at him and chortled even louder.

"What? What did I do?"

"I found Gabie's dice in the dining cabin." Torkra held them up. "They must have fallen out of her pocket."

"How do you know they belong to her?" Shamon took them, almost fancying he could feel her warmth on the dice.

He'd sure like to feel her warmth somewhere else.

"No one here has dice and I found it right after she'd left." Torkra couldn't suppress a guffaw.

Uh-oh. Had they seen him kissing Gabie?

"You know how you lost the dice toss?" Heddam chortled.

"Aye." *Damn it.*

"You didn't."

"Huh?"

"The wench cheated."

"Cheated?" Puzzled, Shamon looked at the dice. "How? We both threw the dice. I didn't see her cheat."

“Watch this.” Mikal took the dice from him and walked over to the bench in the corner. Shamon followed, Simon, Heddham and Torkra gathering around as well.

Mikal threw the dice and they rolled to land on a two and a three.

Shamon looked questioningly at him.

“Now watch.” Mikal nodded to Torkra, and threw the dice again.

It rolled, but as he threw Torkra slipped his hand beneath the table and the dice spun and clattered down onto double sixes.

“How did you do that?” Shamon looked at the brothers.

“It’s a trick.” Torkra withdrew his hand from under the table and held up a little electronic wand, no bigger than a matchstick. “It sends a signal to the dice and rolls it onto double sixes every time.”

“But Gabie kept her hands above the table at all times.”

“Misha didn’t.” Mikal laughed. “When Heddham told Torkra and me about the toss I remembered the trick. We asked a few more questions and right at the moment Gabie threw the dice, Misha went under the table.”

“That cheating wench!” Shamon felt a flicker of indignation. “My beard!”

“Aye, you lost the beard and it won’t grow back for six months thanks to that dissolving gel.” Heddham nudged him. “But you probably won the toss.”

“Probably?”

“Actually,” Mikal informed him, “If she cheated, she forfeits the toss. So you did win by fact of her cheating.”

“That little—wait a minute. Win?” Shamon stood stock still. *I won. I won. That means...*

“Didn’t you bet your beard against her?” Heddham nudged Simon this time while still watching Shamon.

“Aye.” Aye, he surely had. Swinging around on his heel, Shamon stared over towards the *Larceny*. “Aye. And that means I won her.”

“Good luck with the claiming of your prize,” Simon laughed. “I doubt she’s going to make it easy.”

Oh aye, he’d be successful all right. Shamon felt that heat wash through him, topped nicely by eagerness and determination. That wench had forfeited the toss and he’d won her. In his bed. For one whole night.

Four

Coming down the ramp, Gabie caught the sound of laughter coming from the Daamen's trading spaceship, and she glanced curiously across to see Mikal, Heddam, Torkra and Simon looking at something in Torkra's hands.

They saw her and laughed harder.

Men and their small minds. Gabie shrugged and strode through the docking bay to the settlement beyond.

Paz walked beside her, his steps big and ungainly. Olin meandered not far behind. Misha she'd left behind to guard Emet.

She had a couple of last cargo loads to pick up and then it was time to leave for the next destination, which just happened to be near the Outlaw Sector. She had merchants waiting, merchants who weren't too fussy from where their goods came.

Entering the settlement, she elbowed her way through the throng of people that were already crowding the streets. Paz used his own sharp elbows to the accompaniment of curses from the unfortunate recipients. Olin ambled along behind, yawning.

Coming to a stop at one of the warehouses, Gabie looked up at the number. It was the right place. These merchants were solely into honest trade. Nothing like a challenge.

"Olin?"

"Yes?"

"How about you go and order some fresh stores for the *Larceny*. Paz, you might as well go and organize the fuel tankers and fresh water. If my deals go well this

day, we may be able to head out the day after tomorrow. We need to get our orders in soon or we could leave it too late.”

“No worries.” They both left and went their separate ways.

Going inside, the glare of the sun was replaced by the cool shadows of the building. Two men waited to see her. Otherwise the warehouse was empty.

“Gabie.” A lean man with a moustache nodded at her.

“Tason?”

“Yes.” He nodded to someone behind her and the door clicked shut.

Surprised, Gabie glanced around. Two men stood in front of the closed door, watching her closely.

“We wanted a little bit of privacy,” Tason said easily. “To discuss business.”

“Oh?” *Cripes, this doesn't sound good.*

Tason crossed over to her, the other man following and stopping to the side but still just behind him.

Oh shit, this doesn't look good at all.

“I’m told that Link has approached you to carry cargo for him.”

“Yeah.” She eyed him closely, shifting her stance a little so that her fingers brushed the laser holstered at her thigh. “I told him no.”

“That’s what I was told, too.” Tason looked at the floor for several seconds then angled his head and looked up at her, a disconcerting look. “Now I’m here to tell you that Link works for us.”

“Us?”

“Raznin and me.”

Uh-oh. She knew of Raznin, and he was bad news. He was also high up on the smugglers’ food chain, and if what she suddenly feared was true, he was about to snack on Gabie and her crew.

She kept her expression blank. “I see.”

“You refuse Link, you refuse Raznin. Now see, Raznin would like to talk to you himself.”

“Oh really?” With a sinking heart Gabie knew she had to make a stand of some kind. If she let the big sharks snack on her now, they’d never let her go. And why the hell pick on her now? She was small fry.

“So, if you’ll kindly accompany us...” He gestured to the loading door at the back of the warehouse.

Oh yeah, that would be asking to be fried up and served with garnish. Not happening.

“I’d really like to,” Gabie said. “But I have people waiting—”

“This isn’t really just an invitation you can refuse.” Tason smiled, but there was no humour in his cold eyes. “If you know what I mean.”

“I think I do.” *Oh crap*

“So step right this way.”

“Now really isn’t a good time—” She reached for the laser.

Two big hands clamped onto her arms, one each side, and she was shoved forward.

“No need to be hasty!” Heart thumping, she started to struggle. “I just want to organize another time!”

No one was listening. The cargo loading doors loomed closer, and as one of the men slid it open she sucked in a deep breath. A hand clamped over her mouth before she could shout and she was bundled straight into the planet shuttle and forced down onto the floor, a heavy weight pinning her there as the shuttle lifted and soared away from the warehouse.

This was not how she’d planned her day. In fact, this was one of the things she’d avoided. Gabie’s heart pounded in her chest. Sometimes life just sucked.

~ * ~

Mellar studied the data sheets but his mind was only half on the information. No one had caught Emet yet, but the planet cruiser he’d escaped in had been found

abandoned near a settlement on Moutern. Blood had been on the seat. Emet was injured, and someone was going to find him soon.

Lips pursed, Mellar pushed back from the viscomm and tapped the fingers of one hand idly on the desktop. He would be found, and then what? An outlaw, branded, claimed. If Mellar didn't register him as missing, then questions might be asked.

Questions were going to be asked anyway if Emet had that information and it was discovered by the wrong people.

Swivelling the chair around, Mellar stared out the window. Should he register Emet as missing? Should he wait a bit longer, see if Cheran found him? Yes, he would wait another day. No one would blame him for not noticing a missing claimed outlaw. He was meant to be mourning his stupid wife's death, after all.

Blowing out a deep breath, Mellar swung the chair back around, intending to recommence studying the data sheet, but instead he simply stared unseeingly at the screen.

He'd worked so hard, covered his tracks, done everything the best way. Hired the best people. Now it could all come crashing down if Emet wasn't found before he parted with his information.

"You stupid bitch," he breathed, looking at the photo image of his wife.

Picking it up, he made to hurl it across the room but remembered just in time that that kind of thing would be wrong. A mourning, loving husband didn't trash his wife's photo image.

Placing it down carefully onto the desktop again, he stared broodingly at it for several seconds, then gave a sigh of disgust and turned back to the data sheet on the viscomm screen.

~ * ~

Walking back from another meeting with a couple of merchants, Shamon, Simon and Aamun were discussing the favourable outcome when Shamon noticed Paz and Olin standing outside one of the warehouses, a frown on their faces. Or rather, Olin was frowning, Paz looked like he was going to cry.

Curious, Shamon looked again at the warehouse. The big door was open but inside was dark and empty. Was Gabie in there somewhere, working on another

illegal smuggling deal? It wouldn't surprise him, the wench just never stopped. Though it didn't explain why Olin was frowning, unless the agreement was becoming heated.

"I'll catch up with you," Shamon told Simon before stepping down into the street and crossing to the other side. Coming to a stop beside Olin, he glanced into the shadowed depths of the warehouse. "Trouble, friend?"

"Huh?" Olin jumped nervously. "Uh... no."

"Gabie inside doing a deal you don't approve of?" Simon looked at Paz.

"She should be," Paz muttered.

"Shut up, Paz," Olin said gruffly. "No, she's not in there."

Something in the way he said it made Shamon glance sharply at Paz again. Now he could see the worry stamped onto the youth's face.

That only made his own concern flare up. If two of Gabie's crew were worried, then something had to be wrong. Without another word he strode into the warehouse, fully expecting to find Gabie in a heated argument or worse with some low life scum.

The warehouse was empty. Nothing stirred. No cargo was inside, no people. No merchants and no little smuggler.

Turning around slowly, Shamon scanned the big room, trying to spot anything that might give him a hint of what was causing the pair outside such concern. Unable to find anything, he strode back outside. "She's not in there."

"We know," Olin replied tightly.

"What's wrong, then?"

"Nothing. Gabie must have left after securing her deal." Olin stepped back. "No doubt she's waiting for us back at the *Larceny*. Come on, boy."

Paz looked miserably at Shamon and scurried off after the older man, his knobby knees sticking out beneath the tight pants he wore.

Shamon watched them go.

"Trouble?" Simon came up behind him.

“I don’t know. Olin and Paz are worried about Gabie, ’tis for sure.” Hands on his hips, Shamon glanced around the street, and his gaze fell on Michel, the Head Peacekeeper.

Going by Michel’s stance, he’d been standing on the opposite side of the street for a while, watching the goings on of the settlement.

Or watching for Gabie. “*He’d love to have me for his personal slave...*” Had Michel been waiting for something to happen so he could catch her in the act, have her branded outlaw and claim her for himself?

’Tis never going to happen as long as I live. Shamon glared at him and then a sudden thought occurred to him. Did the peacekeeper already have Gabie in custody? Michel returned his glare with a cool look of his own and stepped down off the veranda. As he walked across the street the settlers made way for him. The man was obviously respected by the law-abiding, but that didn’t make Shamon feel any better.

The traders watched as Michel stepped up onto the veranda and approached them, his eyes assessing. Aamun turned and perched on the railing, ignoring the ominous creak it gave under his powerful weight. Simon leaned against the wall of the warehouse. Shamon faced the peacekeeper, his feet braced apart and hands on hips.

“Traders.” Michel nodded coolly.

One had to respect a man who didn’t cower in front of men who towered head and shoulders above him.

“Peacekeeper.” Shamon nodded back at him.

“This warehouse is getting a bit of attention just lately.” Michel didn’t remove his level gaze from Shamon. “Considering it’s been empty for two days awaiting a new shipment that’s a little curious isn’t it?”

“Aye.” Shamon watched him closely.

“Mind telling me what your interest in it is?”

“I thought someone I knew was in there. I was wrong.”

“Ah. Gabie. Yes, I noticed Olin and Paz here earlier.” Michel’s face remained expressionless. “They were looking a bit concerned.”

“Aye.”

“But Gabie wasn’t in there. Interesting.”

Shamon waited for Michel to say that he had her, but instead the peacekeeper kept looking at him.

Finally Michel asked, “Do you know where she is, trader?”

“Nay.” Shamon sure as hell wished he did know.

“Mmm. If you do see her, let her know I wish to have a word with her.”

“Aye, I’ll do that.”

With a nod the peacekeeper strode away, his steps sure, his boots thudding on the wooden veranda.

“Curious.” Simon watched him walk away then switched his gaze to Shamon.

“Aye.” Aamun stroked his jaw. “I wonder what the wench is up to this time?”

“Whatever ’tis, seems she hasn’t told her crew.” Shamon looked at the warehouse once more. “And I’d say ’tis something she doesn’t do often, going by their concern.” He turned to Simon. “If you don’t need me, I think I’ll have a walk around, see if I can spot the wench.”

“No worries.” Simon nodded. “I’ll head back to the ship and get these trade items logged in with the Daamen Trade Base.”

“I’ll amble around as well,” Aamun said, getting up off the railing. “’Tis another set of eyes to spot the troublesome little smuggler.”

They split up, Aamun heading in one direction, Shamon in the other. When they met up near the edge of the settlement an hour later, neither had seen Gabie.

Silently they strode back to the docking bay. As they entered the gates, they saw Misha, Olin and Paz standing near the ramp of the *Larceny*. They stood close together, their expressions intense. Misha looked grim, the albino’s pretty face tight with concern. Paz was chewing his nails and Olin was rubbing his brow tiredly.

About to veer in their direction, Shamon was stopped by the sight of Gabie coming from another direction of the docking bay. Stepping down from a small

planet shuttle that had just landed, she started walking towards the *Larceny*. What alarmed Shamon was the fact that her normal carefree bounce was missing from her steps and her features were set. He'd never seen her without at least a touch of merriment on her pretty face.

"Now what has happened, do you think?" Aamun murmured.

"Something not good, 'tis my guess." Shamon watched Paz, Misha and Olin descend on Gabie, the relief more than apparent on their faces.

He had to fight his urge to walk over, sling an arm around her shoulders and ask her what 'twas wrong. To put the merry smile back on her face.

It wasn't his business. He couldn't interfere. She was a smuggler, and smugglers didn't always get away with things. Obviously whatever deal she'd been working on had turned sour. But it wouldn't stop him from keeping watch on her ship to make sure no one came with lasers firing.

Gabie and her crew returned to the ship, Gabie speaking quietly. She didn't look once in his direction as they strode up the ramp and disappeared into the *Larceny*'s cargo hold.

Drawing to a stop near the ramp of the big trade spaceship, Shamon found Simon watching the *Larceny* thoughtfully. His captain and friend gave him a quizzical look.

"The wench wasn't in the settlement that I could see," Shamon replied. "Obviously she had a meeting elsewhere."

"Obviously. She didn't look happy."

"A smuggler's lot 'tisn't always a happy one." Shamon looked across at the spaceship. And he hated to see Gabie unhappy.

Mayhaps he'd pay her a little visit later, see what he could find out.

The rest of the morning was spent unloading crates of pottery for a local merchant. As they loaded the crates onto the hover tray for him, Shamon kept his eye on the *Larceny*. All seemed to be quiet.

They'd just finished loading the hover tray with the last crate when he saw Michel enter the docking bay and without hesitation go straight to the *Larceny*.

Gabie met him at the bottom of the ramp. Michel handed her the disc and she laughed.

Shamon was relieved when it was the same tinkling laugh of old. She said something to Michel and he saw the frown appear on the peacekeeper's face. He said something back to Gabie and she grinned widely. Her face lit up with mischief and she gestured towards the cargo hold, no doubt inviting him in for another look.

The more sharply Michel spoke to her, the wider her grin became, until he finally gave up in disgust and stalked away.

Pocketing the disc, Gabie swung around and caught sight of Shamon watching. She waved cheerfully at him and disappeared into the depths of her ship.

Whatever had been troubling the wench 'twas sorted, and relief filled him. Turning, he went up the ramp and into the cargo hold.

"She'll push the law too far one day," Heddham commented from where he leaned back against the bench on the far side of the hold.

"The wench pushes everyone too far." Shamon's gaze fell on the pair of dice sitting on the bench beside Heddham. "She'll cheat once too often and then there'll be trouble."

Grinning, Heddham palmed the dice. "She has been found out."

And she was in trouble. The wench just didn't know it yet. Anticipation filling him, Shamon smiled. He'd be paying the wench a little visit later, all right. He just needed to get her on her own.

~ * ~

In the shadows they watched, waiting. Nothing bypassed their attention. They knew. They tracked and brought down with no mercy. Suspicions aroused, they were tracking now. And if what they found was not to their liking, they'd be bringing down their prey without mercy or fear.

~ * ~

"Tell us what happened," Misha demanded as soon as they were in the dining cabin of the *Larceny*. "You disappear and then return in a planet shuttle. Something's up."

“Something is up.” Gabie poured a glass of icy berry juice and slumped down at the table. “The sharks are circling.”

Alarmed, Olin, Paz and Misha looked at each other.

“Who is it?” Misha queried.

“Raznin.”

“Bugger me!” Olin was aghast. “What does he want?”

“And where did you meet him?” Paz was white.

“He was lying in wait for me at the warehouse. It was a set-up.” Gabie took a long swallow of the juice. “They bundled me into the planet shuttle and took me to Raznin’s little hideaway in the hills.”

“He has a house?” Paz’s brows shot up.

“No. His spaceship was in the hills. I was escorted politely aboard and into the presence of the great shark himself.” Gabie traced wet circles on the table with the condensation running from the glass. “Seems Link works for him.”

“Aw, no.” Misha shook her head in disgust. “So when Link was asking you to carry goods for him...”

“He meant carry goods for Raznin.”

“Bugger me!” Olin repeated.

“Yeah. So refusing Raznin didn’t go down too well.”

Misha’s mouth tightened. “What happened? What did he do to you?”

“He told me if I don’t agree to carry his goods through the Lawful Sector, then he’d be making an example of me.” Gabie stared at the far wall.

That was putting it mildly. She could still see Raznin sitting in his chair, a plate of food before him, picking at the salad. His eyes had a dead look about them, his mouth a cruel slash beneath the thin moustache.

“What did you tell him?” Olin asked.

“I told him thanks but no thanks, I was quite happy doing small time smuggling. It was all we could handle.”

For once Misha didn’t argue. “And how’d he take that?”

“Not too good.” Gabie rolled her shoulders, still feeling the imprint of the hard hands that had forced her to her knees before Raznin. Her back still ached from the position of being on hands and knees and having her head pulled back by a fist in her hair, so she could see the shark watching her dispassionately while he chewed on a leg of chicken.

“He beat you up?” Olin was indignant, his voice rising.

“Not this time. This was just a warning.” Gabie took another swallow of juice. “He’s given me two days to think about it.”

“So what are we going to do?” Paz was scared. “Gabie, if we let them use us now—”

“We’re not going to be used.” Gabie frowned at him. “We might as well just throw ourselves to the law right now if so. Raznin has cargo that’s highly illegal, I don’t know what, but whatever it is he doesn’t want to risk his own people shipping it through. And if it’s too risky for a shark, there’s no way in hell we’re touching it.”

“But how are we going to avoid it?” Misha traced an imaginary figure on the table top. “And live?”

“I’m working on it.” Gabie drained the last of the juice and stood up. “We have two days to come up with a plan of some kind.”

“Two days isn’t long enough,” Olin muttered.

“We’re dead.” Paz heaved a sigh. “Dead as dead can be.”

“Now come on, it’s not that bad.” Gabie smiled at him.

“It’s not that good, either,” Misha said sourly.

“We just need to do a bit of brainstorming.”

“Then I say we get close enough to his ship, plant a bomb and blow it up.”

Gabie looked at her.

“It’s the only way,” Misha declared defensively. “While he’s running around we’re dead meat.”

Paz groaned.

“I’m thinking it’s not such a bad idea.”

“Huh?”

Gabie leaned back against the food counter. “Raznin has never been linked openly to smuggling, because he’s never been caught with anything onboard. But his ship is in hiding which means he has illegal goods on board, and I know where his ship is hidden. We need to disable the ship and get Michel to come and pick him up. Anonymously, of course.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Misha stared at her.

“Hey, I don’t hear any better ideas.” Cupping her hand to her ear, Gabie angled her head to one side. “Nope, just the sound of silence and defeat.”

“So a noisy bomb isn’t going to make him flee?” Olin queried ironically.

“Not that kind of bomb. Something to quietly short circuit his electronics so it brings his shields down and disables his engines.”

And just where are we going to get a disabler like that?”

“That’s your department, Olin. You’re the ex-outlaw. I’ve no doubt you’d know where to look.”

Muttering, he subsided in his chair.

“This is insane,” Misha declared.

“So is working for the shark.” Gabie rubbed her hands together decisively. “Come on, it’s a fact. Unless Raznin and his men are out of the picture, especially Raznin and Tason, we’re going to be made an example of if we don’t comply. I certainly don’t aim to be under his control for the rest of my life, which could be very short if we’re caught with highly illegal goods.” She shrugged. “Oh yeah, and he knows we have discs made to cover our own goods. He thinks we can get discs made for his illegal goods.”

“Can’t he take the discs in exchange?” Paz looked hopeful. “He has some discs and leaves us alone.”

“Tried that already.” Gabie shook her head. “No go. He wants the discs and us.”

“Why us?” Misha queried.

“Because the law has never caught us smuggling. Even when we’ve got illegal goods onboard, we have our little discs with the false invoices. Raznin thinks there’s a good chance we’ll slip past the law without inspection, which we’ve done before when the law is overloaded with trade inspections.” Gabie looked at her friends. “Whatever Raznin wants smuggled, it’s possibly a one-off huge haul of something we don’t want to be caught with.”

“What’s the cargo?” Olin asked.

“I don’t know and he wouldn’t say.”

“That’s bad.”

“Even worse, if we make it through once he’ll have his teeth into us and never let go. We’d be too valuable.”

“And if we get caught, we ride the long shuttle to Cardrak, the prison planet,” Paz said grimly.

“And he won’t do a damned thing to free us,” Misha added.

They were all silent for a few minutes. The timer on the wall ticked the minutes past.

Gabie chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully and then smiled slowly. No mistake, she wasn’t hugely happy, nor was she scared witless. Her father had brought her up with gumption and a spirit that refused to lie down and die under what would seem insurmountable odds.

She’d been amazed that Raznin had even let her go to think about things. That was a big mistake, thinking he could make her sweat for two days and finally come crawling back to him, too scared of losing her skin to refuse him. His arrogance was his downfall. There was no way in hell she was going to allow herself and her crew to be his fish food. There was only one thing to do, and that was to disable him and put him out of the picture without the suspicion coming back to her.

Olin was obviously thinking along the same lines because he looked at her and nodded. “I’ll see what I can find out. Tonight would be better, those in the know will be out and about.”

“Good. Misha can go as your back-up.”

“I don’t need back-up.”

“If you’re going into shady territory, you’re not going without back-up.”

“Misha would be better off staying here with you—”

“Nothing is going to happen to me on the ship, Olin. We have two days, he won’t come looking for me until then.” Gabie straightened. “Misha goes with you tonight.”

“And meanwhile we’ll try to think of a way to disable the ship without being discovered,” Misha said.

“That’s the spirit.”

“How can you be so cheerful about it?” Paz asked gloomily.

“Paz, sweetie, we have two days. That’s a chance. It gives us time. I’m not about to start mourning my death before it comes.”

“That doesn’t give me comfort.”

She patted his thin shoulder as she passed him to the door. “If we don’t come up with an idea to get rid of Raznin ourselves, then we might have to come up with another plan.” She grinned. “I have a few favours owed to me.”

“Favours that won’t bite you in the arse?”

“Hey, Paz, I do have some friends, you know!”

He sighed.

“Speaking of which, I want you to go with Misha and Olin tonight. While they’re looking for Olin’s goodies, you case the joints for signs of friends.”

“Be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Don’t be like that, Paz.”

He sighed again.

She might have to do some strong bargaining, but at least she knew some who would help her for the right price. But first they had to try and deal with it themselves. The less who knew what they had done—if they could do it—the better off they'd be. Knowledge was a dangerous thing, and *that* could always bite her in her ample arse later. Nope, much better to try it themselves first.

Meanwhile, she wanted to do a last check of the cargo to make sure it was all secured in case of a last minute, unplanned flight at a faster speed than normal.

It always paid to be prepared.

Walking into the cargo hold, she looked across the docking bay. The planet shuttle was gone, a good thing. Things were looking up already. And to make her day even brighter, Michel was heading in her direction.

She met him at the bottom of the ramp.

"Michel," she greeted him cheerfully. "What a pleasure."

"Your disc." Michel handed it to her, his face set in lines of disapproval. "All in order."

"Did you expect anything else?"

"Did you?"

Stepping back, she gestured to the cargo hold. "You want to have another look?"

"Gabie, one day you'll make a mistake."

"Oh, honey, you're worried about me. That's so *sweet*."

"Damn it, Gabie, I've known you since you were a puking babe in your aunt's arms—"

"Hey, I might have been puking, but you were wetting your nappy."

His mouth tightened. "One day, Gabie, you'll get caught. I just hope I'm the one there at the time."

"To protect me?" Gabie beamed at him. "You sweetheart! You do care!"

Michel was practically breathing fire. “This isn’t funny, Gabie.”

“Oh now, come on, honey. Why don’t you come in and have a nice cuppa with us? A hot mug of una to soothe your shattered nerves, or an icy glass of berry juice to sweeten your disposition?” She grinned widely, enjoying the frustration that crossed her old childhood friend’s face. “Or maybe you’d like to buy a trinket for your lady love? I have some gorgeous necklaces back here in the—”

Michel threw up his arms and stalked away in disgust.

Laughing, Gabie went back into the cargo hold. Yep, she felt a whole lot better.

~ * ~

Keeping an eye on the comings and goings of the *Larceny’s* crew, Shamon saw his chance when Olin, Paz and Misha left the ship and headed into the settlement. That meant Gabie was alone on board. *Perfect.*

Heddam grinned as Shamon strode past him down the ramp. “Want company?”

“I can handle her.”

“If you get scared, just contact me and I’ll come to the rescue.”

“That little wench is no threat, trust me.”

Heddam gave him an odd look. “Are you sure?”

“Aye. However, if I get scared I’ll scream, and then you’re free to come to the rescue.”

Crossing the docking bay, Shamon noted that four more spaceships had docked. All was quiet, the ramps down but invisible security shields no doubt locked into position. Only the crew’s body pattern was locked into the ships’ security shields, and no one else could enter the ship unless their body pattern was entered into the security system. It was an effective method.

He felt the resistance of the *Larceny’s* security shield as soon as he came to within a foot of it. As expected, the little viscomm camera just inside the cargo hold slid out on a small lever and swivelled around. Coming to a stop on him, it dipped slowly up and down as though weighing him up, a move not needed at all. No doubt Gabie was operating it.

He should have guessed. Amused, he grinned at the camera.

“Well, Shamon. What could you possibly be wanting?” Gabie’s cheerful voice came over the communicator. “Here to buy some goods? Do a bit of trading?”

“Oh, I’m here to discuss business with you, ’tis right.” *Oh aye.*

“Really? My heart pounds.”

The wench had no idea. Shamon smiled calmly up at the camera.

“Look, I’m a bit busy—”

“’Twon’t take long, lass.” *Just all night. And if not tonight, then another night very, very soon.*

There was silence for several seconds and then she said, “I’ve entered your body pattern into the security shield. Come on up. I’ll be in the dining cabin.”

Entering the cargo hold, Shamon cast a quick glance around. Everything looked so neat, so empty, but the cupboards he just knew held contraband. Taking the steps three at a time easily, he soon came out into the main part of the *Larceny*. Nowhere near as big as the Daamen trade ship, it had a big cargo hold on the bottom, and the second floor housed the control cabin, dining cabin and crew’s cabins. Very plain layout, like a thousand other spaceships, but the décor was a little more intriguing.

The control cabin was the usual at the front of the ship, he saw as he came out of the stairwell. Console before the space shield, the rollback shutters open. Two chairs before the console. Radar screen and galaxy map on the wall, the little lights different colours for different planets, possibly according to what Gabie did there. From the roof in the middle of the cabin hung a trinket of some kind. A photo image of a half-naked, mohawked, albino male was fastened on one wall. Someone had drawn a moustache and little goatee on his face. In the corner to the left of the door was a photo image showing Gabie and her crew arm-in-arm with a load of peacekeepers. It was more than obvious a fake, whoever had made the image hadn’t even bothered to fade out the adding-lines. Someone with dubious artistic talent had used a marker to change the grim faces of the peacekeepers to huge smiles.

Shamon shook his head and continued walking.

From the control cabin a corridor ran, the tiles a soft grey. A line of pale pink, almost white, tiles bisected the grey halfway up. Photo images were hung here and there on the walls, mostly people and animals. The people looked to be different family members, he could see the resemblance to some of Gabie's crew in a couple.

The crew's cabin doors were opened onto the corridor, except for one near the end. The cabins were basic—bunk, little table, chair, built-in robe and a door in the back leading to private shower and toilet. But the rooms reflected the occupants.

Paz's was easy to spot. The first on the left, it had photo images of shapely wenches scattered on the walls, and a huge world globe spun in the centre of the room. Handtronic games were scattered on the table. Several model spaceships hung from the ceiling. His bunk was unmade.

Olin's cabin on the right was comfort personified. Big pillows on a bunk which was piled high with covers in odd shades. On the table were several books and a mug. On his wall was a photo image of a group of some kind. *Family, mayhaps?*

Misha's cabin was next on the left, recognizable from the photo image of two older albinos, mohawked people taking pride of place on the side wall. The close resemblance shouted 'parents'. The scent of incense wafted from the room, and he recalled that she always had a scent of incense about her. A rich red satin quilt covered her bunk. On the little table stood something strangely vase-like, from which a curl of scented incense floated.

Next to her cabin was another one, the door partially open, and opposite that cabin was a fifth cabin with the door completely shut. He didn't get to study inside them, which was a bit of a disappointment because one of those cabins was undoubtedly Gabie's.

But disappointment slid away when he looked into the dining cabin on the right. Like so many spaceships, it had a table on the left with fixed chairs, and on the right was a relaxing area equipped with a big sofa—*interesting*—and several armchairs. Instead of a low table, the sofa and the armchairs had individual little tables attached to the sides, which were now folded down against the sides of the chairs. A medium-sized screen was built into part of the side wall. It was a game screen. No doubt Paz whiled away quite a few hours there during flights. And the others, possibly.

Shamon noted it all in one glance around, for his main attention was focused on the figure partially bent over a bench near the wall on the left. The panel on the

wall above the bench was open and Gabie was typing onto the tiny keyboard set within the panel.

Her back was to him but he had a good view nonetheless. Up on tip-toe and with one hand leaning on the bench, her other outstretched as she looked up, she continued typing, the lines of her body from the back his to study as he moved forward silently.

She was all soft curves. The shirt she normally wore untucked was lifted at one side, baring to his eyes an indented waist before the swell of hips that led down to shapely legs encased in pants which were tucked into low-heeled, black boots that came up to just below her knees. Her bottom was rounded and he itched to trace his palms over the ample curves. He did like a voluptuous wench.

Muttering to herself, she bent down to study the screen of the handtronic lying on the bench in front of her. That enchanting ponytail bobbed with every movement. So caught up in what she was doing, Gabie had no idea he was in the dining cabin yet. How nice. Anticipation curled through Shamon. This would be fun... in so many ways.

Coming up behind her, he looked down upon the shiny hair, imagining how silken it would feel against his bare skin. His loins tightened. *First things first.*

He moved fast, leaning down over her and slapping his palms down on the table one each side of her own hands. He was big enough that he could lean over her without quite touching her, but the warmth from her body seeped through into his, and her faint sweet fragrance tantalized his senses.

Shamon sure felt her when she jumped and tried to straighten up, her back thudding against his chest and her generously curved bottom pushing back against his groin, making thick heat swirl through down from the pit of his stomach to curl low around his groin. He sucked in a breath and nearly got a mouthful of hair as that cute little ponytail brushed across the lower part of his face.

Unable to straighten Gabie tried to turn quickly but was unable to do so with his body caging her in. She was almost a little panicky, and Shamon was about to step back and apologize for scaring her when she caught sight of him and rolled her eyes. Leaning back on the table, she continued to gaze over her shoulder at him. Not an ounce of fear was reflected in those bright green eyes now.

“Cripes, you need to learn the proper way to approach people, Shamon,” she chided him. “This is not the way to discuss business.”

Relaxing again, keeping her caged in his arms, he raised one brow at her. “No other wench has every complained before.”

“I’ve no doubt, but I’m not an *other wench*.”

Shamon was more than aware of that little fact. No other wench had made him so hot and bothered, and he’d certainly never pursued one as he did Gabie. “So I see.”

“So if you could just let me up.” She gave his abs a little jab with her elbow. “We can discuss business. Though goodness knows what you Daamens would want with me.”

“Only one Daamen wants to talk business with you, lass, and ’tis me.”

“Really?” She grinned. “Wanting to join my crew?”

“Correction. I’m *waiting* to join with *you*.”

She stared at him for a few seconds while a delicate little pink blush filled her sweetly rounded cheeks. Shamon’s gaze dropped to her lips, which had parted slightly in surprise, and heat flushed low at the thought that he’d won the right to explore the moist warmth beyond at his leisure. And he would... thoroughly.

She blinked. “You’ll be waiting a long time. Like forever.”

“’Tis right?” Oh, satisfaction was a smug feeling. Smiling slowly, he shifted one hand slightly to reveal the pair of dice that had been lying beneath his palm.

“Hey, that’s my dice.” Picking them up, Gabie rolled them in her palm. “I couldn’t find them. Where were they?”

“Torkra found them in the dining cabin after your visit.”

“Oh, when I came to crow over my prize?” There was definite mischief in that full-lipped smile.

“Aye. Now, you’re sure ’tis your dice?”

“Absolutely.” She weighed them in her hand.

“No doubt?”

“I know my own dice, trader.” She tossed them onto the bench and they rolled and fell onto a four and a two.

The wench had just trapped herself with her admission.

She eyed him a little suspiciously. “What are you grinning for?”

“Anticipation.” He couldn’t help it, he shifted his hips closer, his groin brushing against the generous curves of her bottom. Was it his imagination or did her bright green eyes just go a shade darker?

Her voice was steady, however. “Cripes. Look, trader, I won that dice toss. My prize was you dissolving off your beard.”

“True. And if I won, you agreed to give yourself to me. In my bed. One full night.”

“So?”

“Do you always stand by your word, little smuggler?”

“Of course.” Her eyes flickered slightly, a slight tension in her body as she shifted closer to the table, seeking to remove contact with him.

Ah-ha! Now she was wondering. Bending his arms slightly so that his chest came a little closer to her back, he smiled slowly. He could just about see those little wheels turning in her head.

Reaching into the small pocket slitted on the inside of his vest, Shamon removed the tiny electronic wand and stroked it across the back of her hand before placing it down on the bench.

“This goes with the dice, lass.”

Her face might have been expressionless, but he felt her suck in a breath. When she made to step back, she came hard up against the front of his body, back to his chest, bottom pressed against his groin, ponytail tickling his chin. ’Twas the sweetest torture. He couldn’t wait to bury his nose in the silken strands and inhale the fresh scent.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said steadily.

“Oh, you do.” Lowering his head slightly, he let his breath ruffle the silken strands near her ear and had the satisfaction of feeling her jump slightly in his caging arms. “You’ve been a naughty little smuggler, Gabie.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Oh, aye, you do understand. You cheated on the dice throw, Gabie.”

“What? How?” She did the puzzled innocent so well.

Picking up the electronic wand, Shamon shifted his hand under the bench and moved it near the dice, which obligingly rolled around the surface and fell onto double sixes. Putting the electronic wand down on the bench again, he shifted his hand to rest on her waist.

The wench might be tense, but her body was so soft and warm.

“I don’t know anything about it.” She also did the outraged really well. “Are you accusing me of cheating?”

“Stated fact. Misha helped you, but you didn’t get away with it, Gabie.”

“Really, I don’t—”

He leaned forward totally so that she was pressed between him and the bench, though he was careful not to crowd her so much that she hurt herself on the bench. “Let’s not lie about this. You know you cheated, I know you cheated. I *know*.”

For several seconds there was silence. Stars above, that brain of hers was working overtime. Shamon chuckled inwardly.

“So what?” Gabie finally said. “You lost your beard and it won’t come back for another six months. By the way,” she glanced from the electronic wand back to his face, which hovered not far from hers over her shoulder. “You look heaps better without the beard. I did you a favour. You owe me.”

The cheeky sprite. He guffawed out loud, his chest pushing against her delicious, curvy little body, which was all his for the taking.

“So, business finished, could you back off? I’m busy.” Was that a touch of breathlessness in her voice?

Reigning in his humour, Shamon eyed her in amusement.

She frowned back at him.

“Business between us is far from over, lass.”

“I don’t see how. It’s quite simple. Your beard is gone.”

Oh, how he loved the satisfaction that just poured through him touched with molten heat. “I won the toss.”

“What? You did not.”

“You forfeited the game by cheating.”

That had the wench speechless.

“And so saying, I won.”

Gabie stared at him over one shapely shoulder. “No...”

“Rules of the game, *honey*.” His gaze dropped to her mouth and he didn’t bother to hide the heat in his eyes when he met her wide eyes again. “I won.” Sliding his hand from her waist to her stomach, he angled his palm up and slid it neatly between the generous breasts pushing against her loose shirt. Pressing firmly against her chest, Shamon straightened, bringing her easily with him so that she was standing full against his body, back to his chest, perfectly aligned. Bending down so that his mouth brushed her ear, he stated huskily, “You. In my bed. One night.”

Five

The heat of his body was unbelievable against her back. Muscular thighs braced behind her bottom, and there was an undeniable firmness pressing into the small of her back. It didn't take a genius to know that Shamon was partially aroused.

It didn't take a genius to know that she wasn't so unaffected herself. That broad palm between her breasts was like a brand of exotic sensation, especially when his thumb brushed against the curve of her breast.

Shamon was muscled hardness behind her, his brawny arms enfolding her against him. His other hand was splayed across her stomach and stars above, that big palm almost covered her gently curving belly.

And when he rubbed gently, she felt her knees go weak and had to lock them to stop herself sagging in his arms.

Sensations spiralled through her. His clean, masculine scent filled her senses. The feel of his body against hers made all sorts of weird things go off in her system, like little sparks of fire that seemed to scatter throughout, carried by her heating blood.

Cripes, and he was only holding her!

"What say you, little smuggler?" His lips, so firm yet oddly soft as well, brushed against the side of her throat, making her breath suck in.

You. In my bed. One night.

His words resounded in her head. Oh God, she'd forfeited the game only because dumb luck meant her cheating had been discovered, and Shamon was now here to claim his prize.

She should be screaming her lungs out, lying through her eye teeth, or trying to escape. So why didn't she?

Gabie turned her head to look back up over her shoulder, only to find his face disconcertingly close. He was so rakishly handsome, and his eyes, though hot, had a gentle light in them. A caring light. The big palm slid up from her belly to run slowly up her throat, and her breath caught at the sensation of the calluses abrading her skin lightly. She couldn't say anything, trapped in the gaze of a man who wanted her. Desired her. It was plain to see and she marvelled at it.

Sure, plenty of men had wanted her. Not the right kind of men, though. None had interested her, and none had made her heart stammer or her insides go liquid warm when they touched her. Unlike Shamon. His touch made the warmth inside her go sluggish, turn thick, curl through her.

Resting his fingers against the side of her throat, he laid his forefinger against her jaw line, tipping her head back slightly. His thick lashes dropped over his brown eyes as he studied her lips, and slowly he moved towards her.

She could have stopped him. She knew one word from her, one show of resistance, and he'd let her go. He was honourable, kind, good natured. A Daamen trader known for their kindness and gentleness with wenches.

But she didn't stop him. Couldn't. She wanted to taste him. Wanted him to kiss her. And when his mouth came to hers, she parted her lips, inviting him in.

He didn't kiss her hard, didn't give her the show of strength she expected. His kiss was light, gentle, teasing. A brush of sensitive skin on sensitive skin. A flick of his tongue across the seam, barely entering. He moved to the corner of her mouth, and then slowly moved across her cheek.

His finger at her jaw angled her head more to the side, giving him access as he trailed his lips down the side of her throat, leaving a warm, moist path in his wake. Little splinters of fire licked along her veins, and when his lips fastened on her pulse and he sucked lightly, a spark ignited deep inside her and with a soft moan she reached up with one arm, curling her hand around his nape, the shaggy yet silken fall of his long hair sliding through her fingers.

Gabie felt the path of his hand going from her chest to her belly with clarity. A shift of material and then that broad, warm palm was on her bare skin. Fingers kneaded lightly, one dipping into her belly button making her squirm and catch her breath.

"Shhh." The deep whisper against her damp skin made a hot flash pump through her.

It was all he said, but it was enough for her to still, even relax a little. Until that warm palm slid lower, the tips of the big fingers sliding beneath the waistband of her pants.

Her heart started to pound all over the place. Little flickers of heat were already starting to sparkle through her body, and Shamon had only been touching her lightly. Cripes, if he did anything else she was likely to go right on fire.

Unconsciously she leaned back into his greater strength, his big body bending over her protectively, and she heard his murmur of approval against her throat as he shifted his mouth higher again. A little lick across her stammering pulse, an almost not there nip at the base of her jaw, a trailing of masculine lips across her cheek.

Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the sensations. Cradled in his arms, supported by his strength, Gabie gave herself up to the moment. She couldn't help it, her body reacting as it never had to any other man.

Those strong fingers slipped from beneath her waistband and dragged up her side, making her shiver, and the husky laugh against her cheek was warm amusement and desire mixed, deep and dark.

There was nothing amusing about those fingers shifting, that broad palm flattening on her sternum and moving upward. Shamon encountered her bra—what the Daamens called a support garment, Gabie hazily thought for no reason—and he traced the lacy pattern, finding the bow in the centre. His fingers played with it, stroking the tiny satin ribbon.

“Pretty,” he murmured against the corner of her mouth. “I can't wait to take it off.”

Hoo boy, that just had her temperature soaring, but that was nothing to the way it spiked when his palm suddenly cupped over one breast. There was no groping, just a gentle weighing, an exploring of the generous globe beneath the lacy bra cup. And when he pressed lightly against her nipple, massaging it, any last inhibitions Gabie had shattered.

She wanted more.

“Enough teasing.” Her husky words held a demand, an order, but she didn't care. A faint throbbing had started between her thighs, and her skin felt like it was

too confined in her clothes. She wanted them off, wanted only the heat of Shamon's big body against her.

In her.

Hell yes.

Turning her head, she met his lips and wasted no time in claiming his mouth, her hand at his nape prepared to tighten if he made a move to shift away.

He didn't move away. Instead, he welcomed her, deepened the kiss almost immediately, allowing her to claim his mouth and lick deep, but it wasn't long and he was taking control once more.

Within seconds it changed, the mood darkening, becoming more aroused. The firmness at her back hardened, and he pressed forward against her, encasing his rising erection between them.

A cry of pain sounded dimly. Gabie barely heard it, but when the crash sounded followed by another cry of pain, it broke through the haze of desire, forcing the curtains of desire to part reluctantly.

Shamon lifted his head. "'Twas that?"

"I'm not sure." Gabie was surprised she could hear anything over the blood singing through her veins.

A shuffle sounded in the corridor followed by a thump.

Instantly Shamon's stance went from would-be lover to protective. He turned towards the door, placing Gabie at his back as he faced whatever was approaching.

Placing one hand on his arm, Gabie looked around. Her thoughts weren't exactly straight, and all she wanted was to press up against his back, slide her hands under that vest and explore every dip and swell of his muscled back. But self-preservation was made of stronger stuff, and she blinked as common sense forced itself to the fore.

He appeared in the doorway, slumped over, his steps unsteady. Blood trickled from under the patch on his side. The sheet was around his waist, and he clutched it closed with one fisted hand. Dark shadows ringed his eyes, and his face was flushed.

“Emet.” Stepping around Shamon, Gabie hurried forward. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“They called to me. Shona was there.” Emet started to slump even more as he tried to move forward.

“Shona’s not here, Emet, remember?” Moving close, Gabie tried to support him, feeling the heat of sickness scorching his skin.

“I have to leave. She gave me the disc.” His eyes, over-bright with fever, seemed to look through her. “I’ve got it, Shona. I’ll be back soon, I promise.” He tried to focus on Gabie. “I just have to escape unseen.”

“Emet, you’re running a temperature. You’re not well.” Catching him under the arms, Gabie nearly buckled when his full weight came down on her.

Shamon was suddenly there, moving in to take the smaller man’s weight, and Gabie shifted back in relief. He didn’t try to just support Emet, but without effort swung the man into his arms and strode out into the corridor. “Which cabin?”

Hurrying ahead, Gabie led him into the cabin which had previously been shut. “Just put him back on the bunk.”

Laying Emet on the bunk with surprising gentleness, Shamon stepped back. Emet tossed restlessly and he quickly put out a hand to stop him from rising.

“I’ve got something for him.” Crossing to the table, Gabie picked up the little sedation patch that Olin had left her.

Crossing back to the bunk, she ripped the backing off and pressed the patch onto Emet’s arm. It worked fast, thank goodness, the topical application shifting through his layers of skin, absorbing into his bloodstream, and within several minutes he quietened.

Shamon stepped back again, his arms folding, one hand stroking his hairless chin as his gaze swept over the smaller man.

Aware of the last sputterings of desire still trying to reignite inside her, Gabie blew out a deep breath and went into the bathroom. Taking the coolpak from the little chill cupboard beneath the sink, she came back out and placed it on Emet’s forehead.

Straightening she looked down at the man. He was flushed, running a temperature. *Sick. Infection? Possibly. Bugger.* She wished Olin was back right now.

A movement behind her, then a big, warm body moved up beside her. “Who is he?”

“Nobody.” She took a deep breath and that masculine scent just played havoc with her still sputtering nerves.

“You have an injured nobody on your ship.”

She looked up but Shamon was studying Emet. There was no sign of lingering desire on his face. Now he looked both curious and cautious.

“Yep.”

Emet shifted and the sheet came apart enough to show the brand on this thigh.

Now the very air took on a menacing tinge, and it was coming from the giant trader standing so still beside her. He didn’t move an inch, but she felt like he was about to come down atop her like a ton of stone.

Gabie started to edge away but Shamon’s big hand reached out and clamped unerringly on her arm.

“He is a claimed outlaw.” His deep tone held a bite.

No point denying it. “So he is.” Gabie took a deep, fortifying breath and gave her arm a little tug.

Shamon didn’t release her. “A claimed, *wounded* outlaw.”

No sense denying that, either. “Yep. That’s correct.”

“Is he yours?”

“Cripes, no!” Gabie scowled. “I don’t believe in keeping slaves!”

“Then tell me, Gabie.” Slowly Shamon’s head turned to face her, and his brown eyes sparked with suppressed anger. “Why do you have an escaped, claimed outlaw on your ship?”

“Don’t sweat it, Shamon, it’s not your problem—” Gabie began.

He was relentless. “Why do you have an escaped, claimed outlaw on your ship?”

Well, hell. Gabie shrugged. “He was wounded.”

“So why didn’t you turn him over to Michel? The peacekeepers?”

“Because we chose not to.”

“You can’t keep him here.”

Irritated, she snapped, “It’s not your business what I do!”

Shamon swung around on his heel and strode from the cabin. Gabie had no choice but to follow, for her arm was still in his grip. He wheeled her out of the cabin and into the corridor. Swinging her around to face him, Shamon frowned down at her.

“Careful, trader,” Gabie said tartly. “You’re on my ship. Don’t try to throw your weight around here.”

Though stars knew he could bounce her off every wall if he wanted and there was nothing she could have done about it.

“You have a wounded, claimed outlaw on your ship and he doesn’t belong to you, which means he’s on the run,” Shamon grated out. “If the peacekeepers decide to search your ship, you are in deep trouble, wench.”

“Ohhh, I’m so frightened.” Gabie scowled. “Mind your business.”

“I’m making it my business.”

“Well don’t. Having a grope doesn’t make you responsible for what happens to me.”

The silence that fell had the weight of a stone in a pond. It dropped down hard, and the widening ripples from it were unsettling, to say the least.

Every trace of care-free trader vanished before Gabie’s very eyes.

Uh-oh. Gabie just knew she’d overstepped a boundary somewhere. “Shamon, I—”

Her words were stopped when Shamon grabbed her other arm and pulled her hard against him. Startled, she had to tip her head back to meet his furious gaze. An atmosphere of warning filled the air, the darkness that crept over Shamon's handsome face and turning it from rakish to almost dangerous, making her breath catch.

Shamon leaned down enough to put them almost nose to nose. He glared into her wide eyes and said slowly, low and distinct, "You ever say anything like that to me again and I will personally see to it that you don't sit down for a week."

Oooh that sounded promising. The wayward thought skittered off into the recesses of her mind, leaving her to stare in surprise at the furious man before her. "Shamon, what happened between us was only a—"

One finger was placed against her lips, stopping her words once again. The glint in Shamon's eyes didn't bode well. "You don't want to go any further with that sentence, wench."

The warning was there in his eyes, in the hard line of his jaw, and in the flex of his fingers on her arm.

Gabie tried to make sense of it all. "Shamon, it was a toss of the dice, nothing more than—" She shrieked as he suddenly lunged upright, taking her with him.

Feet dangling well above level, Gabie found herself held up by the sheer strength in the hands on her arms and the bulging muscles in his arms. Impressive, considering she was no frail lightweight.

The heat in his eyes now had nothing to do with desire. "What 'tis between us has nothing to do with the dice, and everything to do with a man and a wench. But right now, Gabie, I'm more interested in this outlaw who is illegally aboard your ship and putting you in danger."

"He's flat on his back, Shamon, no danger at all."

"You know what I mean." Frustration flickered across his face, evident in the growl of his voice and the pull of his lips.

"Could you put me down? It's a little disconcerting to be up this high." And she couldn't think properly being in such close contact with this magnificent, angry male.

He stared at her for several seconds then put her down. Slowly. Sliding her against his body in such an unconsciously possessive way that it had Gabie catching her breath. As soon as her feet hit the floor, he bent over her, keeping their faces level.

“You better have some answers, wench.”

Irritation flickered through her once more. The muscle-bound moron might make her mouth water and her knees go weak, but she wasn’t about to be brow-beaten by him, either. Poking him in one hard pectoral, she snapped, “This isn’t your business, and you don’t have the right to make it so, now back off, big boy.”

Cripes, that made his strong jaw harden even more, giving it the appearance of having been carved from granite. The light of battle was in his eyes. Gabie groaned mentally. Now she had her work cut out for her, but she still refused to back down. No, there was only one thing she could think of to end this confrontation. She had to lie.

“He’s here for a short time only.” Changing tactics fast, she spoke soothingly, trying to sound reasonable when all she wanted to do was kick the trader’s stubborn arse. “He’s going soon.”

“He’s sick, burning up with fever—”

“Olin is taking care of him.”

“Who is he?”

“A friend.” She arched one brow at him goadingly before remembering that she was trying soothe the savage beast, not inflame him further. “I don’t leave friends to suffer. We’ll make him better and then he’s going. That’s it.”

Shamon’s gaze was sharp, probing, as he searched her face.

Gabie maintained a slightly irritated but sincere expression.

It was a tense few minutes, but finally Shamon straightened, though he didn’t release her arms. He looked towards the cabin doorway, a muscle in his jaw jumping.

Turning his gaze back to her, he shook his head suddenly. “You, lass, would try any man’s patience.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say.”

“The truth sometimes isn’t.” His fingers eased on her arms, running soothingly up and down them instead. “You promise me you’ll be careful, Gabie.”

The anger was still in his eyes, but so was resignation. A good sign. The handsome, muscle-bound hunk was realizing that she wasn’t going to be pushed around.

“I’m always careful,” she replied, almost distracted by his fingers trailing around her wrists and easing under the cuffs of her shirt.

“Are you staying here?”

“Huh?”

“In this settlement. This docking bay.”

“Yes.” For a short time. “Why?”

“Michel has already had your ship searched, so he won’t do it again for a while. Time enough for your friend to heal and disappear, and leave you safe.”

She smiled slowly. “Honey, you really do care.”

Shamon’s gaze moved slowly over her face, and his caressing fingers suddenly shackled her wrists. His voice was deep and low. “Aye, I do care. More than I should, mayhaps.”

Gabie blinked, not sure how to take this sudden turn of mood. Now neither angry nor teasing, Shamon was scrutinizing her with an attention that made alarm bells go off distantly in her mind.

Voices came from the stairwell, breaking the spell, and Shamon stepped back just as Paz came bursting into the corridor.

The skinny youth came skidding to a halt, his surprised gaze going from Gabie to the giant trader.

“Damn it, Paz!” Misha cursed as she came out of the stairwell and collided with him. “Why the hell—oh.” She looked from Gabie to Shamon, her eyebrows rising in curiosity.

Alerted to the presence of someone else, Olin appeared cautiously behind Misha. Seeing Shamon, he relaxed and yawned.

“Evening.” Shamon looked steadily at them all.

Paz bobbed his head nervously, but Misha eyed Shamon shrewdly. “Evening.”

Aware she had to get their understanding before something was said that shouldn’t be, Gabie spoke quickly. “Shamon met Emet. I told him he was a friend of ours and once better, Emet would be heading off.”

“Ah.” Misha nodded.

Paz just went paler. The boy had no idea how to play calm.

Olin shuffled past Misha. “How is Emet?”

“He woke up, groaning and confused.” Gabie inched past Shamon—ye gods, heat came off his very body!—and moved towards Olin. “I put the sedation patch on him. He’s running a temperature. Burning up.”

Olin picked up his pace. “I’ll attend to him. Paz.”

Paz took off after the older man in blatant relief.

Gabie rolled her eyes.

Misha still had that shrewd look in her eyes. “He’s... all right?” Meaning, was Gabie all right?

“Fine.” *As soon as I get my trembling knees under control and my heart beat back to normal.* Catching Shamon by one lapel of his sleeveless vest which hung open, Gabie started towards the stairwell. “I’ll see you out.” *Fast.*

Gabie was almost surprised when Shamon followed her. She’d half expected him to pull back. She was more than aware of Misha turning to watch as they disappeared through the door into the stairwell.

Silence descended as Gabie and Shamon went down the stairwell. She released his lapel and moved quickly, but he kept one stair above her, his long legs taking the stairs easily.

In the cargo hold, Gabie silently stepped to one side to allow him to pass.

Shamon stopped beside her instead, and she raised one brow in query as she looked up at him, tipping her head back as normal to look up his tall length to meet his eyes.

His expression was anything but reassuring. Those brown eyes missed nothing as he studied her closely and she frowned.

Unexpectedly, he took hold of her ponytail and gave it a gentle tug. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, lass?”

“Cripes, no. Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Mmm.” He looked out at the darkness beyond to the lights of the settlement, and then looked back down at her again. Lowering his head, he kept her imprisoned by the gentle yet firm hold on her ponytail. Brushing his lips lightly across hers, he said softly, “’Tisn’t finished between us, Gabie. I’m going to claim my prize.”

“Prize?” Ye gods, she could hardly think when he was playing such havoc with her senses.

“You.” Releasing her suddenly he strode through the cargo hold and down the ramp. Stopping briefly at the bottom, he looked straight back at her. “Tomorrow night, Gabie. As soon as night falls. Meet me at the tavern.” His eyes held heat. “You. One night. In my bed.”

And then he was gone.

Good God. Heat swamped through her and she felt almost dizzy. One night in that giant’s bed, she was sure, would be... unimaginable. All that strength around and in her... *ye gods!*

Puffing out a deep breath, Gabie stared out at the shining lights of the settlement. Could she do it? Could she really do it? Spend one night in bed with Shamon? If she’d had any notion she’d be caught out cheating, she’d never have made that bet with him. But she had, he’d thought he’d lost, he’d gotten rid of that beard, she’d been found to be cheating, and now he expected her to uphold her end of the bargain.

Shit.

There was dampness between her thighs that was for a totally different reason than the dampness that made her palms sticky, she was sure. No, wait, it was for the same reason. No, it wasn't. One was nerves, the other lust. Almost the same.

Oh shit.

Biting her lip, Gabie stared out at the lights. Could she do it? Did she have to? Hell, she'd shoot off into space right now if she could, but having Emet aboard was making her a prisoner. If she left, the peacekeepers somewhere else would search her spaceship. Here she was safe from that for now. Oh yeah, not to mention if she left, Raznin would be after her and she'd be in a real pickle then.

Cripes, when had life gotten so complicated?

~ * ~

"Are you sure?" The woman looked at him.

"Absolutely. The Daamen trader just came from the smuggler's spaceship."

She swore, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers. Letting out a soft breath, she straightened and gazed at the viscomm, but she didn't see it. In her mind she turned over her ideas, thinking hard. It was time for a new strategy. Things were moving, all right, but unexpected stumbling blocks were appearing.

The Daamen traders were never supposed to be a part of this.

"God damn it," she cursed. "Why the hell can't those randy bastards keep their noses clean? They always, *always*, get involved with the wrong wenches."

The man grinned. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"Shut up. Let me think. Stars, I can feel a headache coming on."

Propping one booted foot against the console, she leaned back in the chair and contemplated the ceiling. Things had gotten a little more complicated.

"We'll have to move soon," she murmured.

"Olin was in the taverns, talking to some unsavoury characters," he offered.

"No problem with that, it merely confirms that Gabie is getting edgy." Linking her fingers on her stomach, she frowned thoughtfully. "And Gabie getting edgy is

interesting.” She looked sideways and met the laughing eyes of the man. “Change of plans, Freeman.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

“We’re going to pay the peacekeepers a little visit.”

“What fun.”

~ * ~

Michel was just about to leave the Enforcement Building for the night when the man and the woman strode into his building.

He took one look at them and a chill went through him. Slowly he lowered his coat back to the desk. “What do you want here?”

The woman shut the door behind her. The blonde streak in her rich, brown hair stood out, but it was her cobalt blue eyes that looked so steadily at him that made him feel as though she could see every little thing he was thinking.

The man beside her smiled, his face pleasant, but there was a hint of hardness in the curve of his mouth.

It was the woman that Michel kept his attention on. This woman was someone you didn’t want turning up in your settlement, because it meant all hell was about to break loose.

“What’s going on?” he asked again.

The woman looked at him. “Tell me all about Gabie.”

Oh God. What had Gabie done this time to warrant the attention of these two and the group they represented?

Dread filling him, Michel sat down.

The woman took the chair opposite him and watched him steadily.

~ * ~

The wench needed someone to take her in hand. Shamon rinsed the soap from his hair, closing his eyes against the suds even though it wouldn’t sting his eyes.

All he could see, though, was Gabie's face as she admitted calmly that she had a claimed, wanted outlaw in her possession.

Sighing, Shamon turned off the water and reached for the towel, drying himself with quick, sure strokes. Getting out of the shower, he hung the towel over the rack, ran a brush through his hair and padded out into his cabin. Naked, he flopped into his bunk and yanked the covers over himself. Flicking off the light, he lay in the darkness staring up at the ceiling. From the corridor beyond came a few snores as his friends settled to sleep.

He wished he could sleep as soundly as they, but his sleep had been disturbed ever since his thoughts had become preoccupied with a certain little, outrageous smuggler.

Turning onto his side, he stared at the wall. He wanted her. Badly. But was it just physical? If 'twas, it certainly didn't explain the fear that had gripped him when he'd realized that Gabie was harbouring an outlaw. The thought of what could happen to her if she was caught... with her history of being a known smuggler though never caught, and the harbouring a wanted, claimed outlaw without notifying the peacekeepers... Christ, she could be arrested.

Put up for claiming or sent to Cardrak.

A shiver went straight up his spine at the thought and he rolled on to his other side.

Cardrak, the prison plant where Liane, Borga's wife, had been for eleven long years. The ors there that she'd shared memory of the horrors there that she'd shared with Borga and her sister warriors... the thought of Gabie incarcerated behind those walls made the gorge rise into his throat. The little smuggler wouldn't stand a chance against the hardened criminals inside. Within the day she'd be beaten and raped by men far bigger and stronger than she. Knowing Gabie, she wouldn't be able to keep her mouth shut, and therefore her smart comments to herself.

Gabie, beaten and raped. Bleeding. Unprotected.

Breathing harshly, Shamon sat up and shook his head, ploughing one hand through his damp hair. God, he couldn't let that happen to her.

But she probably wouldn't make it to Cardrak. First, she'd be put up for auction on the slave block. Anyone could buy her. Outlawed, she'd be up for sale to the

highest bidder, and once bought, her new master or mistress could use and abuse her as they wished.

Any red-blooded male would bid for her, wanting her in his bed. The thought of her luscious little body being abused by someone who didn't care, who would probably share her with his cronies...

"*Hell.*" Swinging out of the bunk, Shamon dragged on his pants and strode from the cabin.

In the dining cabin, he poured himself a mug of hot una and sat down at the table. Staring at the surface, he sipped from the mug.

Heddam entered not long after. Pouring a mug of hot drink as well, he went and sat opposite Shamon. "Problems, friend?"

Shamon sighed and looked up at him. "In the form of a certain little wench, aye."

"Let me guess. 'Tis two things only—you're worried sick about her, or she spurned you and you're broken-hearted."

"I am worried sick."

"Care to share?"

"Gabie has a claimed, wounded outlaw onboard."

Heddam's eyes widened.

"Aye." Shamon shook his head. "If she's discovered with him onboard her ship, she's got a one way ride to Cardrak or the slave tent."

"Michel wouldn't let her go there," Heddam stated. "He'll claim her before she even leaves his Enforcement Building."

That was true but it didn't make Shamon feel any better. In fact, it made a nasty little emotion curl through him. His fingers tightened around the mug.

He'd love to have me for his personal slave. Gabie's words rang in his mind.

If she was Michel's personal slave, he'd have the right to do whatever he wanted with her. Make her work, chain her up, punish her... *take her to his bed.*

The mug cracked beneath Shamon's fingers.

Heddam raised one brow but didn't say anything.

No bloody way was Michel or anyone else getting their hands on Gabie. Just the thought of any other man apart from himself touching Gabie's naked body, undressing her, holding her in his arms, or discovering the hidden delights of her luscious little body was enough to make him almost foam at the mouth.

Jealousy. Possessiveness. Right, they were the words for the emotions curling through him at the thought of Gabie with anyone but him.

He glared at Heddam. "Not Michel, nor any other damned man will claim her."

"Of course not," Heddam returned calmly. "Because you'll claim her."

"Aye." Shamon squinted at him. "How did you know?"

"Any fool can see that you're struck with the lass." Heddam eyed his friend over the rim of his mug as he sipped at the hot liquid.

No doubt all his friends knew. They always did. Trading and living in close proximity, many of them having grown up together, just about all the Daamen traders could read each other like open books.

Sighing, Shamon eased his grip from the mug. Liquid seeped out slowly from the hairline crack and with a muttered curse he got up, poured the una into another mug and tossed the cracked mug into the disposal unit.

Sitting down again, he looked at Heddam. "She's playing a dangerous game."

"The wench likes a gamble," Heddam reminded him, "But she only plays to win."

"Or cheats at it."

Heddam grinned faintly. "Aye."

"Until she's found out."

"And 'twouldn't happen often."

“Hell, what if she’d been caught out with the dice by someone else?” Shamon’s face suddenly went pale. “Do you think...” He couldn’t get the words out, it was too horrific to even think about.

Heddam looked at him knowingly. “That the wench bet herself with someone else?”

Shamon felt sick. If she’d done so and been found out...

“I doubt Gabie would have done that,” Heddam replied bluntly. “She’s not a wench to bet something like that against someone she knew would hurt her.”

“You think so?” Shamon took a fortifying sip of una. “God, anyone else but me and she might have been dragged off and...” *raped*. He couldn’t say the word.

“She’s no fool, Shamon.” Heddam leaned his forearms on the table.

“She took the bet with me.”

“Because you’re safe.”

Shamon looked at him.

“Because she didn’t expect you to find out that she’d cheated, and because she knew you wouldn’t hurt her if found out.” Heddam’s gaze was shrewd. “You wouldn’t force her, but you would try to seduce her.”

Shamon had a sudden sinking feeling inside his stomach. “’Tis the same...”

“Nay.” Heddam shook his head. “If you tried to seduce her and she fought you every step of the way and wanted you to stop, and you didn’t, that would be rape. ’Tis force. Seducing her and she be willing, ’tis not rape.” Heddam’s jaw hardened. “You wouldn’t force her, Shamon.”

Nay, he couldn’t force her. He couldn’t bear to hear her crying out, couldn’t bear the thought of her being hurt. If she even started crying Shamon just knew it would rip his heart out.

But if she melted in his arms... God, he would give her the stars if he could, show her how good it would be with him, give her a soul-shattering experience that would stay with them both forever.

Shamon looked at Heddam, and his friend just smiled and raised his mug in a silent salute. The companionship and support of his best friend was comforting.

But it didn't solve the dilemma of Gabie having put herself in a precarious position.

The cabin was silent as the traders drank their hot unas and got lost in their own thoughts.

~ * ~

"Do you think she'll agree?" Tason stood by the doorway.

"Of course." Raznin took a slow sip of wine.

"But what if she refuses?"

"Then we get hold of one of her crew and use him or her to coerce the bitch." Raznin smiled. "Gabie isn't a fool, Tason. She knows she's playing with the big boys now."

"I got the impression that Gabie isn't keen to play with the big boys."

"She'll come around. She's no fool."

Tason studied Raznin quietly. *You've been playing at the top too long, Raznin. You have no idea what people are capable of if they're scared enough.* Some little fish didn't want to swim with the sharks.

Gabie was one of them. Slipping away from the cabin, Tason looked out over the forest beyond the space shield. If Raznin wasn't careful, he would destroy them all with his ideas. A true shark at the top of the smugglers food chain, he was a danger to those under his command. He'd killed a lot of bigger fish on his way to the top of the food chain.

But even mighty sharks could be brought down by a couple of cunning little fish.

No, Tason didn't trust Gabie. Besides, he'd known her father and Gabie was a chip off the old block, no doubt about that. Leaning against the wall, lost in his own thoughts, he gazed out into the forest.

~ * ~

In the dining cabin, Raznin sipped his wine. Tason didn't have faith in him, he knew. His second-in-command was a good bloke, trustworthy in a battle, willing to follow him anywhere, but he lacked faith in this plan.

But Tason would see that Raznin was no fool. He played for huge stakes here. Larger stakes than anyone would ever guess.

And Gabie would be one of the major of the minor players.

Chuckling to himself, he sipped wine and contemplated what was to come.

~ * ~

Olin spent a lot of time with Emet before he finally left Misha in charge.

Gabie waited for him in the corridor. "Did you get what we needed?"

"Huh?" Olin blinked sleepily.

"Something to disable Raznin's ship?"

"Oh." Olin nodded.

"Good. You left it in the cargo hold?"

"It'll be here tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?" Gabie stared at him.

"Might be easier to just let Michel know about them and do a runner," Paz suggested, walking out of the dining cabin with a fat sandwich in his hands. Crumbs sprayed around him as he spoke.

"Get some manners, Paz," Misha growled, coming out of Emet's cabin and closing the door behind her.

"What?" More crumbs sprayed.

Gabie brushed a couple off her shirt. "Doing a runner marks us immediately as the source of betrayal. We need to still be in the settlement when the peacekeepers close in. We need to be all surprised and stuff." She looked back at Olin. "Tomorrow night? No earlier?"

“Earliest I can get my hands on anything without anyone asking too many questions.” He squinted at her. “What’s your problem?”

“Nothing.” She rubbed the uptilted tip of her nose. “It’s still plenty of time.”

“Sure it is. We get out there, set the disabler, and hightail it back here. Get a message to your peacekeeper without him knowing it’s from us and he’ll hightail it to the hidden ship and we’ll set off the disabler. Raznin will be a sitting duck for Michel. We’re free.” Olin looked at her expectantly.

“Right.”

Tomorrow night, Gabie. As soon as night falls. Meet me at the tavern. You. One night. In my bed.

Oh shit, wait... How was she going to avoid Shamon? No big deal anyway. She didn’t have any intentions of meeting him anywhere, so it didn’t matter. Right?

“It’ll be better if you don’t come with us,” Olin informed her.

“What? Why?”

“Because you need to be seen to be here, in the settlement and docking bay. If you disappear someone might get suspicious and you could be fingered as the culprit that disabled Raznin’s ship.”

“It’s going to be night time, Olin, where would anyone expect me to be but in my bunk?”

“You’ll just need to ensure you’re seen at the tavern.”

“Right. Fine.” She blew out an exasperated breath. “So who is going to the ship in my place?”

“Misha and me.”

“What? I don’t think so! You don’t know the way.”

“You’ll show Misha tonight, then come back and she’ll take me tomorrow night while you swan around the settlement.”

Gabie didn’t like the plan.

Misha looked at her. “We’ve sorted it all out, Gabie, so suck it up.”

“Oh, that’s nice. I thought I was captain here? Obviously I’m just supposed to do as I’m told. Forgive me. I didn’t know. Ideas of grandeur, obviously.”

“Yeah, that, too.” Misha disappeared back into the cabin.

“Tell me again why we can’t just dob Raznin in and watch?” Paz rubbed his face.

“Because if he gets away he just might come looking for us,” Olin replied. “Think, boy. If we disable his ship they can’t get away when the peacekeepers attack.”

“Oh.”

Olin shook his head. “I’m sure you spray out half your brains with those crumbs.”

Paz looked hurt. It was belied by the big bite he took out of the almost mangled sandwich in his big, awkward hands.

Heaving a sigh, Gabie rolled her shoulders. “So when do we set out? Misha?”

“Midnight,” Misha’s voice answered from the cabin.

“Bugger. It’s a walk and a half.”

“It’s because by the time you get there, most people will be asleep,” Paz informed her. “You know, most people sleep between midnight and three in the morning.” He glanced at Olin. “Apparently.”

“Cheeky bugger,” Olin said sourly, but there was a definite twinkle in his faded old eyes.

“I better get the scanner blocker out then.” Gabie started for the control cabin. “I don’t want Raznin to spot us coming.”

~ * ~

Running around a dense forest in the chill night air wasn’t Gabie’s idea of fun. Wrapped in a short cloak with a hood covering her head, she glanced back to see Misha studying the surroundings.

The albino’s cloak was dark and hid the white of her hair. Her face was covered by a black lace net to hide the whiteness of her skin, but Gabie knew her friend

was taking note of her surroundings to enable her to find her way back the following night.

Correction, tonight, because midnight had come and gone.

Two in the morning and a cold fog started to climb up around their legs. Bloody awesome... not. Gabie hated being cold, but her sense of humour, though not in a laughing mood, was not far below the surface. She didn't feel too bad. True, it was cold and she was getting damp, but at least they had a plan going. They were preparing and she preferred action to waiting around, which was partly why it irked her to be hanging around the settlement while Olin and Misha planted the disabler that night.

She'd much rather be in the thick of things, planting the disabler herself.

It wasn't long and she recognized the clearing up ahead. Pushing slowly and carefully through the bushes, she knelt down and studied the dark bulk of the spaceship. No lights surrounded it, and it would have been almost invisible to anyone not knowing it was there.

Gabie and Misha sat for a while, watching the ship, waiting to see who was coming and going, but all was silent. Gabie had no doubt the scanner was working overtime, searching for anyone disrupting the area frequency, but the scanner blockers attached to both hers and Misha's shirts kept their body frequencies scrambled enough that the scanner wouldn't pick them up.

No doubt Raznin would love to get hold of those little toys as well. Gabie grinned. *Well, jerk, you're not getting them. These are my secret little weapons.*

Slowly they moved around the ship, using the darkness and bushes as cover. It wasn't the most comfortable of movements, but it was a necessary evil.

By the time she and Misha were satisfied that they knew enough, they slipped away silently. It was four thirty in the morning before they walked into their own spaceship. By then they were both shivering. All Gabie wanted was a hot shower and her nice, warm bunk.

Settling down into her bunk, feeling warm and cozy after her shower, she closed her eyes. Just before she drifted off to sleep, the words slipped through her mind. *You. In my bed. One night.* Her lashes fluttered open. *Tonight.* Slowly she smiled. There was the perfect alibi.

And that, she was certain, was the cause of her heart fluttering. She'd found the perfect alibi. Being in a trader's room. Not that she meant to go to bed with him. Hell no. But it was a good cover...

Her heart fluttered like a butterfly imprisoned in her chest. Cripes, who'd ever have thought an idea could excite her so much? It definitely wasn't the idea of being in his room, much less his bed—which she had no intention of getting into—it was the whole idea of the perfect alibi.

Yep, the perfect alibi. How she was going to get out of going to bed with Shamon, Gabie had no idea. She'd come up with something, though.

~ * ~

Mellar stood at the window, watching the sun shine down upon his domain. Streets glistened from the early morning rain, the sunlight reflecting off the puddles. Children laughed and played, and their parents quickly came out and ushered them inside. It wasn't appropriate for them to be enjoying themselves when their leader was suffering anguish over the death of his wife.

He smiled, but it soon faded. He'd waited long enough. He was posting the notice that Emet had fled. His wife's murderer, her claimed outlaw that she'd cared for like her own son. A traitorous, murderous outlaw.

The disc had not been found and Emet had disappeared. He'd deal with the disc bit if it ever reared its head. So far nothing had happened. And really, who was going to take his word against that of a claimed outlaw? Besides, he'd ensured that all records of his dealings had been deleted.

Ah yes. Now all he needed to hear was how well his other business was going and things would be good.

~ * ~

Snug in his heavy coat, Freeman watched the docking bay. Interesting developments were happening on this cold, foggy morning in the dark. Oh my, yes. He smiled to himself. And even more interesting things were going to happen.

Oh yes.

~ * ~

Michel wasn't happy. He'd known all along that one day Gabie was going to take a major fall. She'd get her silly, carefree neck caught in a noose and he'd have to watch it tighten, and hope like hell he could get his childhood friend out of it without breaking the law himself.

But now... well, the chit had gotten in well over her head. *Hell*. And he couldn't do a whole lot to help her. God knows he'd tried, but up against the woman who'd visited him that night, he'd known his hands were tied. Plans were afoot and he could do nothing but stand and watch and pray like he'd never before prayed.

Things were going to go to hell in a hand basket, and sitting in the middle of it was the major gift, all tied up in a satin ribbon.

Gabie.

Leaning his forehead against the cold glass, Michel sighed. His gaze went to the dim lights of the docking bay. The big Daamen trade spaceship loomed over the smaller craft. Not far off the Daamen ship was Gabie's ship, *Larceny*. Full of contraband that no one could prove.

He could feel a giant headache coming on.

He'd wanted to act fast, but Freeman and his boss had stopped him. They wanted to watch and wait for a bit longer, see what else was going down. Observe the main players.

Trouble, trouble, trouble.

Lifting one hand to his chest, he rubbed. Now he had indigestion. He just knew it wasn't going to go away for a while.

Six

When Shamon walked down the cargo ramp the next morning, he half expected to see a vacant bay where the *Larceny* had been. He wouldn't have been surprised if Gabie had done a runner in the middle of the night. That she hadn't gave him hope.

He still couldn't believe he'd been so blunt with her. *Tomorrow night, Gabie. As soon as night falls. Meet me at the tavern. You. One night. In my bed.* Shocked was the only word to describe her expression. Those plump lips had parted and those bright green eyes had widened.

After the kisses they'd shared in her dining cabin, did she really think he wasn't interested, that he couldn't want her? Hell, just the thought of her in his bed was enough to make him need a cold shower just to think straight.

The night, however, had given him time to think. He'd never forced a lass in his life. Well, he'd never even had to do much coercing to get a willing lass in his bed. One smile, one wink, and the wenches had been practically dragging him to *their* beds.

But Gabie was different. She made him feel different, like he wanted to stamp his scent all over her and proclaim her as his, making sure the entire galaxy knew she belonged to him.

Hell, he had it bad for her. Worse. She was like an itch he couldn't scratch. How romantic. He grinned a little as he gazed towards the *Larceny*. Nay, he'd come to a decision last night.

If Gabie wasn't willing to make love with him, that would be it. He'd respect her wishes. He just wanted to ensure he had a good chance at seducing her before she could think of protesting. In fact, he'd know how interested she was by her turning up—or not—at the room door tonight.

And if she didn't turn up, he'd take that as a not interested. Then he'd just have to change the rules of the game to a little wooing. Romancing. For the first time in his life he'd be the one doing the chasing. Somehow it didn't seem so hard. Suns, was he really challenged by the thrill of the chase?

He'd be even more thrilled if she turned up at the room he was going to rent. But a chase wasn't such a bad thing. It was... well, titillating, to be truthful.

The way Shamon chose to see it, 'twas a win/win situation. He'd win her now or later. He'd probably go insane from desire if he had to chase her, but 'twould be worth it. There was a definite attraction between them, and he meant to fan the little sparks into a full-on flame. His fire was almost burning out of control at just the thought.

Heddam had laughed himself almost sick, and Simon, who happened to walk in right when Shamon was telling Heddam of his plans, had just shaken his head and asked how could Shamon possibly woo her when the little smuggler and the traders would probably travel in different directions by the end of the week? The crew were heading home soon, and the smuggler would fly off to deliver her ill-gotten gains to some poor sap.

Shamon just didn't believe in wasting time when his mind was made up. A believer in the best laid plans, he had two—one for if she turned up at his door, and the other for if she didn't.

He called it being prepared.

All was quiet at the *Larceny*, but it was there and as far as Shamon was concerned, it was a good sign.

He strode into the settlement and went to the tavern, intending to rent the best room. As he entered the already noisy room, he looked around. The tavern whores smiled at him eagerly. The air reeked of ale, unwashed bodies, perfume, ale and food.

And suddenly it wasn't good enough. To have Gabie here, in a room in a tavern, was... cheap. It cheapened his feelings for her. It was almost an insult. How could he have Gabie in a bed which no doubt had been used by hundreds of men and wenches to slake their lusts?

Backing out, he looked around. He didn't want Gabie on the trading ship. He wanted her to himself. If he had her for one night—the first of many, anyway—he

wanted it to be special. He wanted her to be unselfconscious, he wanted to make her scream with need without anyone else hearing.

Shamon wanted privacy for them both. This was going to be a special time.

Stepping down off the veranda, he strode across to the trade building to see one of the merchants the traders had dealt with earlier. He found him entering data on a viscomm.

The merchant was more than pleased to help out a Daamen trader, and when Shamon left he had the security lock code to a little rental dwelling in a side street. Inspection showed it to be small and cozy, with a fireplace in the living area, a small kitchen, a spare bedroom and a small bathroom. The furniture was sturdy and plain, but everything was clean. More importantly, the bed in the main bedroom was big and comfortable.

Shamon reported his approval to the merchant, who promised it would be ready with clean linens on the bed and in the bathroom, the fire going, and some tasty food in the kitchen cooler for Shamon's occupancy for the night ahead.

Satisfied, Shamon returned to the trade ship. Anticipation filled him at the thought of the night ahead, and he grinned. A cozy little getaway and a luscious wench with curves to make his mouth water, and a sense of humour that made him laugh. Aye, he'd be a fool not to look forward to being in Gabie's company.

Swinging into the dining cabin, he was surprised to see one of the armchairs occupied. The woman in it studied him with cobalt eyes, her pretty face smiling at something Simon had just said. A thick blonde streak shone out amongst the rich brown of her hair, which was pulled back in a loose ponytail.

"Sabra?" Recovering himself, Shamon moved forward eagerly.

She rose to meet him and he hugged her close. A childhood friend who'd had a hard life, Sabra was a favourite of them all.

"Shamon." Stepping back, she smiled up at him. "How goes it?"

"Fine." He tugged her ponytail. "Des here as well? Simon will be pleased."

"Nay. She's working elsewhere, just cleaning up a few loose ends and then she'll be heading for home."

"How about Cam?"

“He’s trading back near home. I’m working.”

“Oh?” He had a sudden bad thought and glanced at Simon, who shrugged.

Sabra perched on the edge of the armchair, her gaze sharp and steady. “Problem?”

“Nay, not at all.” Folding his arms across his chest, Shamon eyed her back. “The job is here?”

“The job is everywhere, you know that.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Aye, he did know that. The security worked behind the veils of secrecy, fixing problems that threatened the Lawful Sector before anyone even knew anything had happened. And sometimes no one ever knew, except the security officers. Shamon wondered sometimes if the Intergalactic Peace Ship Council for which the security worked even knew what went on all the time.

“Who else is here with you?” Shamon asked, keeping his voice light.

“Freeman.” She smiled.

Freeman. ’Twas Freeman who’d kept company with Oriel, the little soldier, until she’d been branded traitor and set out for the outlaws to hunt. Shamon’s mouth tightened. ’Twas for certain Freeman had helped give Oriel her freedom to wed Jase, but still, he’d not stepped in to help her when she’d needed it yet he’d professed to have been her friend for two years before then. Because the military had just been a job. He’d infiltrated it to find a traitor and it hadn’t been Oriel, though she’d nearly been shot for a spy if it hadn’t been for Freeman’s and especially Sabra’s intervention.

’Twas for that reason alone that Jase hadn’t punched Freeman’s face in for him. That and the fact that Sabra would have been furious. The wench had a vicious tongue when she chose to use it.

What concerned him, however, was the fact that Sabra was here now. *And so was Gabie.*

“Job here?” he queried.

“Just passing through,” she replied. “Stopped in to visit the peacekeepers, check things out.” Her smile betrayed nothing. “Heading on shortly.”

Just passing through. So she wasn't here for Gabie. Besides, Gabie was small game. Security wouldn't be bothered with a small-time smuggler like Gabie. The little wench wouldn't even register on their radar.

Relaxing, Shamon sat down on one of the stools and turned the conversation to idle chit-chat about home, friends and relatives. It turned out that Sabra hadn't been home for over a month, and he wondered how Cam coped with that. His friend was besotted with Sabra, his wife and childhood friend. Mind you, Shamon thought to himself, when Cam and Sabra did get together they disappeared for days on end. Time might be spent apart but every minute together wasn't wasted, and he'd never seen a happier couple. He had seen shadows in his friend's eyes, worry when his beloved returned with healing wounds, but he never questioned her.

Shamon had his own certainties that Cam knew more than he was supposed to. He certainly knew when she was going to be on the Intergalactic Peace Ship, or close to where he was trading, and often managed to meet up with her. Unless she was working, in which case he didn't see her or know her whereabouts until whatever mission she was on, was over.

'Twas the same with Simon and his security officer wife, Des. 'Twas the very reason Cam and Simon were such good friends. They shared a common worry. The safety of their wives, yet not once did they ask their wenches to leave the security.

Shamon wasn't so certain he could accept it if a wench he loved was out on dangerous missions.

So saying, Gabie shouldn't be on dangerous missions. The wench was bound to end up in trouble one day. Bad trouble. 'Twas not a pleasant thought.

Sabra stayed for several hours, joining the traders for the midday meal, laughing and chatting easily with them before she finally left. As she passed Shamon, she gave him a steady look but didn't say anything. Then she gave a small smile and walked out the door.

"She knows Gabie is here," Simon said.

Shamon looked sharply at him. "Gabie's small-time. What would Sabra want with her?"

"She never said that," Simon replied. "She just saw you spending time with Gabie and said she hopes you're not getting too involved with a smuggler."

'Twas it? Relief filled Shamon. "I can look after myself."

"Famous last words." Simon leaned back in the chair. "And Sabra will rip your ears off if you fall for the wrong sort."

"Cam needs to take Sabra in hand."

Simon laughed so hard he nearly fell out of the armchair.

Shamon shook his head then started laughing, too.

~ * ~

Ensconced in the shelter of the forest just on the outskirts of the settlement, Freeman waited patiently and watched. Twilight was just starting when he saw three figures appear in the *Larceny's* cargo hold.

They spent several minutes talking. Even though he couldn't make their features out clearly, he knew who they were. One had a long, white mohawk. That was Misha, the albino, an interesting female. The stooped figure was old Olin, a small-time outlaw who spent most of his time sleeping. The fuller-figured woman with the bouncy walk was Gabie herself. Of the skinny youth, Paz, there was no sign, so he was obviously inside the ship.

Misha was waving her arms around, and then Olin must have said something. A light tinkle of laughter carried faintly on the wind. Then Gabie broke away and strode down the ramp and towards the settlement. She disappeared from view. Misha and Olin stood for several minutes before returning back into the depths of the ship.

Freeman settled back to wait. Rain started to drift lightly in the wind, but he wasn't fazed. Pulling the hood of his waterproof coat up, Freeman kept his gaze trained on the *Larceny*.

~ * ~

Stepping up onto the veranda, Gabie glanced out at the light mist of rain and hoped it would stop before Olin and Misha set out at midnight for Raznin's ship. Misha wasn't in the happiest of moods when she'd learned that Gabie intended to spend part of the night in Shamon's room. Even though Gabie had explained that she was going in only to appease Shamon and then when the time was right, she was going to go and stay in another room, Misha was still dubious.

Olin had thought it was a great idea for an alibi, as long as she was sure she could handle the giant trader.

Cripes, Gabie had no doubt she could handle Shamon. He wouldn't force her, she knew it instinctively. He wasn't that kind of man. All she had to do was keep him occupied long enough, then turn on some tears and be scared and he'd spend the rest of the night soothing her and rubbing her back and then she could leave and go to another room when it was late enough that no one would notice. Everyone would have seen her go upstairs with Shamon and not come back down, and that was a great alibi.

There was no way Raznin, if everything went wrong, could pin anything on her. Come early morning while it was still dark, Paz was going to slip a message under the door of the Enforcement Building. She calculated that Michel would hear the news within minutes and then things were going to happen fast. And Raznin's ship would have been disabled by then, with Misha, Olin and Paz safely on the *Larceny* and, as far as anyone knew, herself in Shamon's bed.

She had to admit to herself, though, that she felt bad. Tricking Shamon wasn't something that sat well with her. Cheating in a game of dice was one thing, leading him on knowing she wasn't going to go through with anything was quite another.

To be honest, she felt lousy. She just had to make sure she didn't lead him on too long. She almost had second thoughts and backed away from the tavern door, but a picture of her crew and herself at the mercy of Raznin made her take a deep breath and stride right on in with her head held high.

There was no sign of Shamon anywhere, which was good, because it meant that she could announce her presence and what was going to happen to the barman, who was well-known for gossiping.

She didn't like gossip, didn't like that everyone was going to think she'd slept with someone, but then again no one really cared in a place like this and it was either that or risk being throttled by Raznin's cronies.

She could take the gossip. After all, it would be a two second wonder and then something much more interesting would take over—such as Raznin's arrest.

Crossing to the bar, she opened her mouth only to have the barman shove an envelope in her hand. Heck, he hadn't even opened it. Eyebrows raised, she watched as he hurried away. The crowd was busy.

“From Shamon the Daamen trader!” he shouted back when she raised her hand.

Oh. Okay. “Did he say what room he wanted to meet me in?” She roared back.

God bless shouting. Several patrons around her gave her the eye, two tavern whores scowled, and one drunk leered at her.

The message was going around. She and Shamon were sharing a room. She blushed just a little at the thought and the drunk leered even more, the tavern whores’ scowls grew thunderous and several men smirked.

“He said it was all in the note!” the barman shouted, and then ignored her.

With a shrug, Gabie pushed her way through the crowd and started up the stairs. Several whistles accompanied her ascent and she pretended to ignore them. All in all, it was good advertising for her alibi.

Once on the landing, she leaned back against the wall and ripped the sealed envelope open. The note was short and written in a bold, masculine scrawl. Holding it up to the light, she squinted. Hell, the man had to learn how to write legibly. But she made out the address.

She knew the street name but it wasn’t the tavern.

What the hell...?

Gabie rolled her eyes. Great. She had to go somewhere else. She couldn’t believe it.

Mind you, she could just sneak into a room and everyone would think she was with Shamon... though what if the barman knew what was in the note? Maybe Shamon hadn’t even written it, maybe the barman had taken the message. Someone would no doubt watch to see if she took the trader up on his invitation.

Bugger.

But she didn’t want to go down the stairs in front of everyone in case the barman didn’t know about the new address. There was only one thing for it. Out the back.

Sometimes being near the bottom of the smuggler food chain was damned inconvenient.

Grumbling beneath her breath, Gabie stalked to the back door, flung it open and started down the rickety stairs. She'd be really pissed if she slipped and broke her ankle. Now wouldn't *that* be a hell of an alibi?

She grinned, then chuckled, her humour reasserting itself. Shame she hadn't thought of that earlier.

Pulling the hood of her cloak up, she moved out into the misty rain and made her way to the side street. It didn't take long before she stood in front of the little dwelling. It looked cozy, the lights glowing dimly behind thick curtains making it look inviting.

Inside that little house was a giant of a man waiting for her.

Hoo boy.

Showtime.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and strode down the path. Stepping up on the little veranda, she pushed the hood back and knocked on the door.

It swung open and the warmth of the fire immediately beckoned to her. The only light in the room beyond was from the fire.

She expected Shamon to drag her inside but instead he stepped back and gestured with one hand. Arching one brow she walked past him and the door clicked shut behind her.

The lock snapped into place.

Whoa, that made her stomach do a slow flip.

Turning around, she looked up at him. "Locking me in?"

He grinned. "Just ensuring some privacy." He lifted his other hand and held out a thornless, vibrant pink rose. "For you, sweet lass."

Surprised, she took it. "What, no deep red?"

"You're not the deep red kind of lass," he replied, moving behind her to slip the cloak from her shoulders.

"I only warrant pink?" Amused, she sniffed the fragrance. "Nice."

In an expert toss he caught the cloak over a hook next to the door. “You’re all sunshine and brightness, light and airy—”

“Cripes, Misha calls me an airhead!” Swinging around to face him again, she shook the flower. “Are you calling me an airhead, too?”

“You’re making this difficult, wench.” Laughter sparkled in Shamon’s eyes. “I’m trying to be romantic.”

She tapped the flower against his broad chest. “Calling me an airhead isn’t romantic, let me give you the tip.”

“I never called you an airhead.” Reaching out, he chuckled her beneath the chin. “You missed the sunshine and brightness part.”

“Hmmm.” She rubbed the rose against her chin and eyed him thoughtfully. “What does deep red signify, then?”

“Mystery. Smouldering. Heat.”

“Oh, so I’m what, a chill?”

Taking the rose from her, Shamon traced the petals across her lips. “Nay, you’re a breath of fresh air.”

“There’s that air mention again.”

The flower was batted lightly against the tip of her nose. “If you’re spoiling for a fight, wench, ’tis a waste of time. I don’t argue much—”

She laughed outright.

His eyes sparkled with mirth. “At least until I met you.”

“You’ve met me before. I don’t remember you arguing with me then. In fact...” She took the rose from him and smacked him on one massive pectoral muscle with it. “I do remember that you preferred to ignore me. Not nice, trader, not nice at all.”

“Ah, but I had no idea what a delightful little sprite you are.” Taking the rose back from her, he slid the rose petals down her cheek and under her chin.

“So you’ve discovered what a barrel of laughs I am, now what?”

The sparkle of laughter in his eyes changed, dying down to be replaced with a spark of something... hot. The atmosphere changed as he gazed down at her, and she felt her own merriment fade, pushed back by the sudden awareness between them.

The room seemed suddenly smaller. The fire snapped in the fireplace, the flickering flames picking out the strong lines of Shamon's face, the orange glow highlighting the dips and swells of the powerful muscles in his arms and chest that bunched and stretched with his movements. Even the ribbed muscles of his abdomen were traced by the flickering flames.

He stood straight before her, towering over her, making her feel small and fragile, a notion she'd have roared with laughter at, at any other time. The rose he held in surprisingly gentle fingers trailed down her chin and throat, his gaze following the movement of the soft petals.

The petals might be soft, but Gabie felt his gaze as though it left a scorching trail on her skin. She knew why when he lifted that brown-eyed gaze back up to meet her eyes... the heat in them was like a banked fire.

Mentally she fanned herself. Her heart was starting to pound all over the damned place in her chest and if she didn't get some control on herself, she was going to jump the trader's bones.

God, what was wrong with her? She'd never felt like jumping anyone's bones—ever.

"Now," Shamon drawled huskily and God above, his voice was like hot honey, "Now I'm going to do some more in-depth exploring of the delightful little sprite."

Her knees nearly turned to jelly and she had to lock them in place to stop herself from melting into a puddle on the floor. Hells bells, his voice was like honey, all right, and she had honey gathering elsewhere, too.

Suddenly she didn't feel so in control of her own emotions anymore. Cripes, even her breathing had changed, picking up tempo, and when she parted her lips to let out an uneven breath and Shamon's gaze dropped to them *hungrily*, something inside her started to sizzle.

Without taking his eyes from her mouth, Shamon reached out to the side and dropped the rose onto the bench that ran along one wall. His big hands came up to rest lightly on her shoulders, his thumbs lightly caressing the base of her throat,

before he scraped his calloused palms softly up the column of her throat. By the time his hands framed her cheeks, Gabie was breathing fast.

Cripes. Any second she expected to start hyperventilating. She sure as heck couldn't get her thoughts straight. Every plan was breaking apart and scattering into oblivion as she focused on his face.

Slowly, so slowly, Shamon leaned his big frame down, drawing closer and closer, his gaze on her lips, and then he stopped. Hesitated almost, his gaze lifting until he looked her fully in the eyes. And he kept looking at her as he took her mouth with exquisite gentleness.

Her heart might have been pounding, but Gabie was holding her breath. All she could see were the strong lines of his face and the heat in his eyes. And when his lips touched hers with the gentlest of pressure, she could only breathe out a sigh of welcome, close her eyes and sway towards him.

With her eyes closed she could sense and feel so much more. She felt the slight shift of his hands as his elbows bent to allow her closer. The touch of his mouth was a caress, hidden strength and control that sipped instead of taking. The heat of his big body, the hard swell of his abdominal muscles as she reached out and lightly laid the tips of her fingers against them.

Like satin over hard steel, that was the only way she could describe his body. Hard muscle, smooth skin, warmth, and a clean, masculine scent that she recognized as being solely his scent. It called to her, seeping into her senses with every breath she took, curling through her and filling her with a deep contentment... but leaving her wanting.

Wanting more. So much more.

Shamon's kiss was gentle as he explored her lips with his. Little pressures as he moulded to her, tasted her with a tiny lick, nuzzled her.

"God," she muttered raggedly against his lips. "That's not enough!"

And she kissed him back suddenly, needing to taste him, to feel him hard against her, demanding more.

She swayed towards him and in a heartbeat his hands left her cheeks, his arms dropping down to wrap around her, one hand at the small of her back pulling her

arching against him, his other hand between her shoulder blades to support her as he bent her backwards.

And totally ravished her mouth.

Oh, cripes, yes, this was more like it! Now Gabie could really taste him. His essence filled her as thoroughly as he took hers into himself. His tongue swept in, giving no quarter, sweeping through and laying claim to everything.

The little spark inside her ignited, flaring bright, and she sought to press closer, her arms twining up and around his neck, her fingers sinking deep into the thick hair that spilled over his broad shoulders.

Still holding her mouth captive, Shamon straightened suddenly, his strong arms holding her fast against himself.

That totally awed her. Back in the far reaches of her mind, where her common sense had been firmly shoved, a little part of her gaped. No one had ever picked her up and carried her without a bit of a grunt of effort, but the giant trader picked her up like she was a feather.

He swung on his heel and she felt the strength of his long legs against her as he strode with assuredness through the doorway, down a little hall and into a bedroom. Stopping beside the bed, he finally released her mouth and drew his head back to gaze directly into her eyes.

Silence filled the room for several seconds while she lost herself in the smouldering brown of his eyes, made even deeper and mysterious by the glow of the small lamp on the bedside table.

“Gabie, are you sure?”

“Huh?” Confused, she blinked.

“I need to know you’re sure about spending the night with me.”

Shamon wanted her. Hell, he’d not made any secret of that fact since the second they’d made the deal over a game of dice. The desire for her burned in his eyes. And yet he hesitated.

Gave her a chance to back out before it was too late. God above, he was so honourable, and so sweet.

As if she could back out now, anyway. Every thought was centred on the man holding her and the thought of leaving the passion in his arms was just unthinkable. Her desire was starting to run rampant through her veins.

Another new experience.

“You want to know how much I want this?” she demanded. Good grief, was that her voice? All low and husky and with a hint of sexual heat?

Yep, must be, because Shamon’s eyes just got a shade hotter if that was even possible, and he sucked in a deep breath.

“Aye,” he almost hissed out. “I do.”

Well, Gabie was always a believer in actions being better than words. Sometimes. This was one of those times.

Slipping a hand behind his nape, she angled her head and licked the pulse that beat so hard in the column of his throat. Nipped that pulse, licked it again, and then sucked it lightly.

She was rewarded by his arms tightening around her, and the deep breath he sucked in again.

Hey, if she kept making him breathe like that, he’d be the one hyperventilating.

Trailing her lips up the strong column of this throat, she nuzzled beneath his ear, heard his breath hitch, and grinned.

Just to make sure he got the message, she flicked the tip of her tongue across the small, silver hoop in his lobe and breathed hotly in his ear, “What do you think, honey?”

“I’m thinking I’m ready to claim my prize now.” Without further hesitation, Shamon simply tossed her back onto the big bed, following her down fast. He ensured he kept his weight on his forearms so as not to squash her—*dear God, but what a way to go*—and looked down into her eyes. “You. In my bed. One night.”

Gabie thought those words were forever going to be burned into her brain. There could be worse. She couldn’t help but grin at that thought.

Shamon quirked one brow, managing to look so thoroughly, dangerously male, and yet rakish at the same time. “Something funny, wench?”

“Just a random thought.”

“’Tis so? Let’s see if it matches mine.” Propping himself up on one elbow, he reached down and started to undo the buttons on her shirt.

Slowly. One by one. Trailing the tip of his finger on each new exposed inch of skin as he worked his way downwards.

Driving her insane. Each touch starting off yet another spark. Any second she was going to go up in smoke.

“Cripes.” She writhed against him as the treacherous fire slid low and deep inside her. “Can you go any slower, trader?”

“You have no idea how I’m trying to pace myself.” Leaning down, Shamon pressed a kiss to the naked skin between the open edges of her shirt. “God, lass, you smell good.” He flicked his tongue against her and his voice deepened. “And you taste even better.”

Her nipples tightened, puckering and pressing against the lacy confines of her bra. Arching up, she pressed them against his chest, managing to only ignite the flames more when the torture of his hard flesh against her material covered nipples added friction.

“Steady, sweet.” Shamon glanced up and smiled hedonistically. And froze.

Whatever he saw on her face, it obviously caught him by surprise, but he didn’t look upset. Instead, his gaze became even more carnal.

Gabie had not a clue how she looked, all she knew was that she wanted him. On her. Against her. In her.

Sliding up her body enough so that they were face to face, Shamon looked down at her. “You’re running hot, little smuggler.”

“True?” Snaking her hand around to his back, she slid her fingers down his spine, watching as he arched back slightly, a hiss of pleasure escaping from between his teeth. “You don’t look so cool yourself, trader.”

Even more surprising was how her voice sounded. Sexy, breathless, a siren’s echo. Who knew she had it in her to turn this trader on so much? And oh yeah, Gabie might not be too experienced when it came to matters of the flesh, but that hard length pressing against her thigh was a blatant sign of arousal.

Not to mention the hedonistic flush in Shamon's strong cheeks.

"If you keep looking at me like that wench, our first time isn't going to be slow."

"Who wants slow?" Hell, if he went any slower, she'd be a gibbering wreck before long.

His pupils dilated, his breath hitching in his big chest. The swell of his pectorals pressed down on her breasts, hardness against softness, eliciting a small moan from Gabie.

"You be sure, lass," Shamon said softly, but with an edge of steel stroking the low tones.

"I'm not scared of you, Shamon."

"Mayhaps I'm scared of myself."

Before she could even try to sort out what that little remark meant, Shamon released his passion and Gabie was caught up. There was no room for any second thoughts. Heck, she was lucky to just remember to keep breathing.

Her head spun when Shamon swept her up to stand before him on the bed. His mouth was hot and damp against her skin as his fingers made short work of the remaining buttons on her shirt. Cool air caressed her skin as the shirt was tugged back over her shoulders and down her arms before being tossed aside. The clasp of her bra was unsnapped and the lacy support garment joined her shirt over a chair.

Gabie would have been a little disconcerted normally to be naked from the waist up and in the presence of so much testosterone, but when Shamon zeroed in on one nipple and sucked it deep into the recesses of his mouth, any self-consciousness fled. Her knees nearly collapsed and she let out a soft cry, half passion and half surprise.

Shamon's breath was warm as he laughed hedonistically against her flesh. One muscular arm came up and his hand flattened against her bottom to support her. The other hand came behind her knee.

"Lift your foot," he ordered.

Mindlessly she obeyed. A dim part of her had to admire him. The man was multi-tasking, sucking her nipple, managing to give orders, supporting her and undressing her all at once.

Her boots were discarded, followed by her bright pink socks. Her toes curled into the thick comforter when Shamon slid his tongue along to her other breast, laving the puckered nipple lovingly before drawing it in deep.

Invisible strings plucked desire straight to her woman's core and pooled. The dampness at the junction of her thighs had her shifting and moaning.

Strong thumbs hooked into the waistband of her pants and in one smooth motion Shamon drew them down her legs, along with the lace panties she favoured. She expected him to order her to lift her feet again but instead he gave her a gentle shove. Gabie fell back onto the big bed.

Blinking, she focused on Shamon as he laughed softly, deeply, yanking off her pants completely and tossing them aside. The man was a god, no doubt about it. A sex god, she was sure. From some ancient myth.

He shrugged out of his vest with admirable speed, toed his boots off, shoved down his pants and stepped out of them.

Gabie stared. She'd spotted a few naked men in her life and they hadn't left a whole lot of impression. But God above, she wasn't going to ever forget this ideal of manhood.

Dressed, Shamon was impressive. Naked, he was awe-inspiring. Muscles bunched and flexed as he moved. Broad shoulders, massive chest, long, muscular legs and lean hips. And sweet mercy, from the nest of fair curls at his groin his manhood curved up, thick and long, straining up past his belly button.

Slowly she raised her gaze, up past the muscles of his body, up further to the strong column of his neck, the square jaw, and the firm yet full lips that were wholly male below the straight lines of his nose. Finally she met his eyes. Hot, filled with desire, burning with passion. His hair spilled over his shoulders in a silken, shaggy fall.

He was the personification of a totally carnal male. Testosterone and concupiscence combined in a breathtaking man.

He coveted her. It was there in his eyes, in the way he stood, a man preparing to claim his prize. Claim her. Claim her for himself.

God, would he even fit in her? Gabie licked her lips. No doubt about it, she was feeling a tad nervous, but it didn't turn her off. In fact, it cranked her libido up several more notches. She didn't think she had any notches left to rack up but obviously she could still surprise herself.

Heck, she'd surprised herself so far, why stop now?

That magnificent male started towards the bed, his gaze steady on her, his steps sure. Muscles bunched, his manhood stayed rock solid.

Heart beating a tattoo in her chest, Gabie came up onto her elbows and started edging up the bed. Shamon suddenly looked like he was stalking her, and wasn't it just sick that it made her all squirmy and hot inside? Hell yeah, but she wasn't complaining.

Shamon's fingers curled around her ankle, stopping her movement. "Going somewhere?" he purred, just like a great lycat.

"No," she squeaked, then cleared her throat. "Not at all. Just making room for you."

"Really?" His teeth flashed white in the dim light.

And God above, he started pulling her down the bed towards him.

Fascinated, she kept her gaze locked with his. The gleam in his eyes was total prurience. The gleam grew the closer he drew her to him. He didn't stop until her hips were near the edge of the bed, and then he simply slid his hands up her legs and hooked them behind her knees, the breadth of his broad shoulders forcing her thighs wider as he dropped to his own knees before the bed.

Before her.

Shooting stars of Cyran, he had her spread open for his lustful gaze as he lowered his lashes and studied the secrets that had been hidden by the soft folds of her labia. Now he had a good view.

Oh no. This was not what Gabie thought was going to happen. Alarm zinged through her and she started to struggle upwards.

“Oh, no! Shamon, what are you doing? No, no! This isn’t—” She stopped with a gasp, and then fell bonelessly back onto the mattress.

His mouth was on her, his tongue lapping across her folds, pressing against her perineum. His hands behind her knees opened her wider, drew her closer, and he feasted on her.

Really feasted.

Liquid heat surged through her as his lips fastened on the little clitoris peeping out so shyly. He sucked it into a hard, aching nub. His thumbs parted the folds of her womanhood, leaving nothing hidden to his gaze or mouth.

“Oh God, Shamon! You shouldn’t...” Her thoughts scattered as he tongued her, that skilful organ probing at her secrets, swiping over her glistening flesh, leaving no crevice unexplored. “Ohhhhh...”

He swirled the tip around the entrance to her body, gripping her thighs and holding them apart when she involuntarily tried to close them against his invasion. “All mine, Gabie.” His breath was a warm brush against her highly sensitized nerves, pushing her higher up a steep slope. “One night. To do with...” He blew sharply suddenly, sending a chill across her clitoris... “As I like.”

Writhing on the bed, Gabie couldn’t gather her thoughts, couldn’t do anything. His breath on her flesh made her shiver in delicious heat, the chill of his deliberate sharp breath on her clitoris shaking her to another height.

Placing one big hand on her stomach, he held her easily to the bed as she tried to edge away from his sweet, torturous mouth.

Sparks skittered through her veins, her nerves were a tight ball of screaming sensations. She arched under his mouth, and when the heel of his hand slid lower and started to rhythmically grind against the base of her woman’s mound, she shattered.

Dimly she heard herself scream out as her world exploded. The climax rocked through with force, and it didn’t recede before another one rocked her, the pressure rubbing against the seam of her body pushing her even higher.

She had no idea how long she’d been out in that glorious Eros, but she didn’t come down to anything sweet and light.

Seven

Shamon couldn't believe how hot she was. Gabie's luscious little body undulated beneath his hands. Her honeyed taste filled him and he lifted his head to watch her in the throes of passion.

It was erotic. He couldn't remember seeing anything so hot in his life. But then what he did to her he'd never done with tavern wenches. With Gabie he needed to not just be in her, but *taste* her. *Know* her. *Have* her in every way he'd fantasized.

His staff throbbed, straining angrily against his belly, demanding release, but he forced his own desire down a little, though it was a struggle. He wanted to watch her just a little longer.

When Gabie started to get over the climax, he rubbed his finger against the seam of her body, pressing against her perineum, nudging the entrance to her body, and she shattered again almost immediately.

God, her body was so luscious and sweet. All curves and softness.

Standing up, Shamon placed his knees each side of her and slowly crawled up her body, bracing himself on hands and knees so he could watch her face as she shuddered her way down from the pinnacle of pleasure.

Those soft cheeks were flushed pink, her lips swollen from his kisses, and her eyes when they fluttered open were deep green, the brightness sparked with heat.

"Hello, sweet lass," he murmured.

"Shamon..." His name came out on a sigh.

Sliding his arm under her back, he took her effortlessly with him as he crawled up the length of the bed, depositing her gently against the pillows.

“Mmmm.” She started to close her eyes.

He laughed softly. “Nay, nay, little wench. I’m not finished yet.”

Propped up on one elbow, he leaned over and kissed her, licking deep. At the same time he cupped one of her bountiful breasts and weighed it in his hand. It almost overflowed his big palm and with a murmur of pleasure he pressed his palm down on it, rubbing the nipple against the centre of his palm.

Almost immediately Gabie arched into his hand, her eyes flickering open. Heat flared in her eyes, and he smiled. Aye, the little smuggler was running hot all right. Time to heat her up a little more.

His hand slid down the cute curve of her belly and through the patch of brown curls. He swallowed her gasp as his fingers slid between the wet folds, pushing unerringly to the centre of her body. He slid his finger deep, feeling her internal muscles clench down, the tightness of the channel as she pressed her thighs together.

“Oh, God, Shamon, I can’t... I can’t...”

“You can,” he whispered huskily, sliding a second finger deep into her.

She was so *tight*. He almost came at just the thought of how snug she’d be around him.

Sliding his knee between her thighs, he nudged her legs apart and slid a third finger inside her, stretching her gently, preparing her. He thumbed the little nub above the entrance to her body and Gabie shattered on him once more. God, she was so *responsive*.

Shamon caught her cry of release with his mouth, loving the way she arched up into him, her hands grabbing onto his biceps, squeezing his muscles as hard as her vaginal walls squeezed his fingers.

Sliding his hand up to cup her womanhood, he cradled her through the climax, but as she finally relaxed and came down, he started to stroke her once more, his lips sipping at her mouth.

Opening her eyes hazily, she whispered huskily, “You’re going to kill me.”

“Oh nay, Gabie. I have plans for you which involve you being very much alive.”

Her climb back up into hot desire took mere seconds, her body still humming with the after effects of the orgasm, and it wasn't long before she was pushing against his palm. Sliding his fingers across her sensitive outer labia, he pulled through the delicate curls and up over the slope of her belly, higher to her breast, cupping one and thumbing the nipple, watching as her pupils dilated and she arched into his hand.

Her legs shifted restlessly, the smooth softness rubbing sensuously against his muscular thigh, and Shamon swung himself over her, nudging her thighs completely apart. Catching her hands, he twined their fingers together and raised them above her head, resting their hands in the soft covers of the bed.

She looked up at him, her eyes smouldering and her mouth so deliciously swollen and red from his attentions. The thick, silken strands of her hair pooled around her head and shoulders and she looked utterly wanton, and he knew he'd remember this moment forever.

His need surged through him, the need to finally claim the secrets of her body, and he shifted, his throbbing phallus unerringly sliding through the damp curls, slipping through the moist folds and finding the opening to her body as though he'd done it a hundred times.

The wetness of her desire coated the throbbing tip of his manhood, and he couldn't wait any longer. Didn't want to wait any longer. Finally... finally, she was his.

One sure, hard thrust and he pushed deep. The tight channel gripped him like a glove, her smallness pushing against his staff, causing a sweet, torturous friction as he slid deeper... and he felt the giving of a fragile barrier before the pulsating head of his staff.

Gabie had been untouched. No man had known her.

The knowledge flashed through him on a heated wave of possessive pleasure, along with a flash of concern that pushed through the heady curtains of rapacious sensations.

Trying to reign in his baser instincts to keep pumping into her, Shamon hesitated, but Gabie opened her hot eyes, looked him full in the face, ordered, "Don't you dare stop now!" and writhed under him.

That was all the invitation he needed. Throwing caution to the wind, Shamon gave himself up to the glory of carnal desire. Pumping his hips, he pushed in deep, breathing raggedly as her muscles clamped tight, trying to hold him in as he withdrew and pushed back in again.

He wanted to make it last longer, stars he did, but Shamon could feel his need climbing, the frantic clawing of his pent up desire surging through his flaring veins lustily.

Every fantasy he had lately had been centred on Gabie, and now she was here. Under him. Writhing. Her body gripping him. Her slick channel open to his invasion, the tender folds of her labia parted by his invading body. She was a contradiction of softness, innocence and prurience combined.

And she wanted him. It was there in her eyes when she gazed up at him, in the way she arched her head back and moaned, in the pressure of her soft thighs against his hips as she sought to hold him to her. Her fingers squeezed his hard.

Heat seared through his veins, and he craved more of her. Dipping his head down even as his hips pumped hard, Shamon captured her mouth and ravished it as thoroughly as his manhood ravished her secret places. He gave no quarter, wanting only one thing in return.

Gabie's complete surrender.

And she gave it willingly.

A roil of sensation, a hot ball of passion, curled up inside him, starting low in his loins as he continued to thrust. His phallus, hard and throbbing before he'd even entered her, was swollen with need, the seed trickling from the tip already. He felt pressure, such sweet, torturous pressure, building and building. His head seemed to pound with a delicious throbbing as much as his manhood did. His scrotum pulled tight, and he changed angle slightly, pushing in deeper.

Then Gabie shifted herself, bending her knees and thrusting up her hips as much as she could with his body pinning her down. The sudden openness enabled him to slide yet even deeper, and Gabie's moan of enjoyment just inflamed him even more.

"Gabie." His voice was harsh with need. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

Those soft legs unhesitatingly lifted and wrapped around his waist, and now she was as open as he could get her.

Shamon thrust harder, the desire building higher, something he didn't think was even possible. His heart thundered, his muscles straining. Need was a hard, hot ball in his loins, building and building to a screaming pitch, and he could feel it driving him onwards, higher and higher, lost in the scent of Gabie, her body, her softness, her secrets. She called to him like a siren, and he plunged hard and deep, once, twice, three times.

And he shattered.

Seed erupted from him, flowing deep into her, his hips thrusting short and hard, pushing and pushing, wanting to go deeper and deeper. He didn't want it to stop at the same time his body screamed for release.

He strained forward, thrust hard again, and was swept away on a star-burst of colour and sensation. Dimly he heard Gabie cry out his name, felt her jerk convulsively under him, but he was lost to his own climax as he poured everything out into her.

When he finally came to, his cheek was resting against hers on the pillow, his nose pressed into the fragrant hair. His big body was pressed against hers, sheltering her, and he lifted himself up on arms that trembled slightly.

Gabie blinked dazedly up at him, then smiled weakly. "Wow."

That was an understatement. A chuckle of pure enjoyment rose up from him, and Shamon dropped a kiss on the tip of her cheekily uptilted nose. Rolling off her, he gathered her into his arms and pulled her flush against him. Tucking her head under his chin, Shamon sighed contentedly and closed his eyes.

Gabie snuggled into him and within a mere minute both were sound asleep.

Eight

Cheran searched the settlement with his men. They slipped through the shadows, lurked in the corners of taverns, and scoured the alleys. They didn't find the one they hunted.

Emet, it would seem, had disappeared, but Cheran was positive the man was in the settlement somewhere. Someone was sheltering him, but that would soon change.

Only a fool would shelter a wanted, claimed outlaw, and come morning, Emet was going to have a huge reward on his head. After all, murderers didn't invoke loyalty.

Gathering his men together, he led them back to their ship in the docking bay. All he had to do was wait.

~ * ~

In the Enforcement Building, Sabra stood and watched the rain misting the street beyond. Glancing up at the clouded sky, she allowed her thoughts to turn to her husband.

Cam. Somewhere out there he was trading and she just knew he was thinking of her. Placing her fingertips on the glass, she breathed upon it and when the white cloud formed on the pane, she drew a little heart on it with her finger. Smiling, she looked at it and then rubbed it away with her sleeve.

Her gaze drifted to the tavern across the street. Gabie. The wench was over there with Shamon. One of the peacekeepers had seen her enter, ask after Shamon and disappear upstairs.

Sabra frowned. Not good. Getting involved with a smuggler was not good. Not at all. The fact that it was a friend of hers made it worse.

Taking a deep breath, she rolled her head around to ease the kinks in her neck. There was nastiness afoot and things were going to get even stickier. She didn't want the Daamens involved and if Shamon was getting close to the smuggler, it didn't bode well. She might have to readjust her plans.

~ * ~

Gabie awoke slowly to the delicious sensations curling through her body. A big hand stroked her secret places, a hot mouth trailed over her throat. Opening her eyes, she became aware that her thigh was decadently lying across lean hips, the breadth of which forced her thighs wide. No wonder the big hand was wandering so freely.

"Shamon—"she began huskily, only to arch back and moan as a finger slid deep.

"Hush." The word was breathed hotly against her throat.

That was all that was said. From there, everything went into a red-hazed passion, desire thrumming through her as skilful fingers played her to a fever pitch.

Arching against him, she sought to touch, to taste, and when her tongue flicked across a brown male nipple, she was rewarded by the shudder of Shamon's big body. She laughed softly.

She caught a flash of a hedonistic grin in return as Shamon moved up to take possession of her mouth, and then she could only gasp as his staff slid through her open folds and the long, thick length of him invaded her body with a slow, sure thrust that went in deep.

She writhed against him, but he kept her close, using the friction of their bodies to drive her higher, the heat of his thickness in her pushing her up the pinnacle. Deliberately he let her quiver at the top, stopping his thrusts just when she was ready to tip over, quietening her whimpers with nibbling kisses, and as she started to gradually drift downwards, he started thrusting again.

Gabie could swear she felt the fever essence of him leaking inside her. In fact, she felt like swearing every time he drew her back from that awe-inspiring fall into sweet, carnal oblivion. But every time she drew breath to say something, Shamon would simply take her mouth and her breath, leaving her... well, breathless.

And then he did it, rushed her to the top, but just when her cynical side was ready to start weeping, she suddenly realized he wasn't stopping. His thrusts were stronger, harder as he gathered her against him and held on as she lurched over the edge into that wonderful vortex of orgasm.

When she finally drifted back down in a pleasant daze, Shamon tucked her against him, rested his chin on the top of her head and just cradled her close.

The last thing Gabie remembered was the brush of his lips on the top of her head.

~ * ~

From the forest Freeman watched the old man and the pretty albino melt into the rain-drenched foliage. Slipping from his shelter, he followed them.

It was a long walk but when they finally stopped he drew back into the shadows. Several times the albino—Misha, that was her name—had glanced behind her. Freeman couldn't see her face with the black lace covering it, but he would bet she was frowning.

The woman had good instincts.

The old man couldn't stop yawning. Every few paces he'd yawn or sigh. Olin should have been in bed.

Freeman grinned.

Then he saw where they were going and his brows rose. *Well, well, well.* It looked like their informant had been dead on.

Gabie was playing with the big boys.

Then he saw Olin remove something from his pocket. Freeman narrowed his eyes as he tried to see through the misty rain and his eyes widened in recognition.

Now what the hell was Gabie up to? Or maybe it was her crew? His lips pursed in thought. The crew of the *Larceny* were up to no good and in a big way. By the look of it they weren't just playing with the big boys. They had their hands in the feeding cage of a very hungry shark.

~ * ~

Bottom tucked back against a hard groin, Gabie nestled amongst the covers in a delicious drowsiness. A muscled chest against her back, hard thighs behind her own. Brawny arms cradling her close, a warm breath stirring her hair.

Outside the window rain pelted down, but she was safe and warm and so cozy in the shelter of Shamon's big body.

Opening her eyes slowly, she focused on the window. Rivulets of rain slid down the glass, and the wind sounded outside as it whistled around the side of the dwelling.

She shivered and nestled further back against the hard body behind her, the heat of Shamon's skin seeping deliciously into her. She stretched luxuriously but when she settled back down there was another hardness nudging her bottom.

The arms around her shifted, one hand sweeping low over her belly and sliding unerringly between her thighs, nudging them apart.

"Shamon?" She tilted her head back even as heat trickled through her.

He was a shadow in the bed behind her, but she caught the flash of white as he grinned at her. "The night isn't over."

"Well, thank God for that," she retorted huskily.

He laughed, the muscles of his chest rubbing against her back.

Reaching back, she ran her hand down a lean flank. "Because if this was a dream and I woke up right now—ye gods!" She shivered as a long finger slid around her clitoris.

"Aye?" A husky chuckle against her shoulder.

She couldn't think, not with that finger massaging the little nub into a quivering bud of nerves.

A hot tongue rasped across her shoulder. "Gabie?" A little nip.

"If I woke up..." She tried to gather her scattering thoughts.

"Aye?" A kiss, a lick. He nuzzled her throat.

"And it was a dream..." She inhaled raggedly as his fingertip played around the opening to her body.

“And if ’twas a dream?” he prompted.

He knew perfectly well what he was doing to her thoughts, the wretch. The very gifted, horny wretch.

“I’d cry.”

“Would you now?” He thrust lazily against her, his hard staff sliding against the cleft of her buttocks. “The mayhaps I’d better show you ’tis not a dream?”

“Yeah, might be an idea.” She arched back as his finger skimmed along her perineum. “Stars above!”

“You’re running hot again, little smuggler.” His lips were against her cheek. “Turn your face to me.”

“Yes master,” she managed to get out as she obeyed.

“Master, hmmm?” He kissed her lightly, thrust subtly, and slipped the tip of his finger inside her all at once. “I like that.”

No doubt about it, the man had perfected multi-tasking.

“I’m sure you do,” she started to say, only to find her words swallowed yet again.

His mouth took hers, and he ravished the honeyed sweetness beyond. She tasted him, opened to him, and let him conquer her.

A muscular thigh nudged the back of her knees and without thought she bent them, opening her body to him even as she opened her mouth.

Curling his arm around her, his forearm just beneath her breasts, Shamon slid deep inside her. He rocked against her, small sweeps of his staff.

She could feel her muscles clench him tight. Or maybe it was just that he was so big and her channel was so narrow. Or something.

Gabie couldn’t think straight and heck, she didn’t want to, anyway. Every thought was focused on how she felt. He dominated her, holding her still for his pleasure while ensuring her own, entering her from behind, entering her from above, filling her mouth and womanhood.

Taking her.

Giving to her.

His hips pumped, his mouth dropping to her throat, sliding to the curve where her neck met her shoulders. He licked the curve once, then fastened on her and sucked gently but insistently.

Marking her.

Good God, Gabie was sure he'd marked her permanently. His essence burned inside her as surely as his mouth burned on her skin.

She couldn't arch back in decadent surrender, but she pressed her hips back, loving it when he slid his big hand down low over her belly. His palm pressed against her, pulling her flush against him as he pumped into her, holding her.

His thrusts became harder as he worked inside her, withdrawing, flexing his hips and pushing deep once more.

This time when the climb up that slope of Eros started, he didn't tease her. His chest pushed against her back as he drew in deep, fortifying breaths, his breath hot on her skin. His hips pumped, his staff dragging through her tight channel, the slipperiness of desire making the passage take him in a firm, erotic grip.

"Gabie." Her name a harsh whisper against her cheek.

She turned her face to him and he caught her mouth again in a demanding kiss that left nothing untouched.

Just as he didn't leave her body untouched.

She rushed up the pinnacle, higher and higher, every hard, sure thrust of his hips raking through to push her onward.

Dimly she felt the tension in him, the hot spurt of his seed as he started to come inside her, and it shoved her out to shatter and splinter and whirl away through a prurient curtain that did nothing to soothe her, but everything to tantalize her further.

Somewhere, she recognized that the curtain that fell across her face was the thick silkiness of his hair as he raised himself up on one elbow to give her one last, hard thrust, and took her mouth at the same time, yet again swallowing her cry of pure lust and release combined.

He filled her with his seed, spurting deep and long.

And again, when she drifted down deliciously, she was cradled in his arms, and his face was nuzzling her neck. He settled like that, his nose buried in her hair, a sigh of contentment on his lips.

Sated, Gabie smiled sleepily.

~ * ~

The peacekeeper scanned the information coming through the Enforcement Buildings main computer. The usual—outlaws, sightings, possible smuggler flight paths. And one other.

He read the information before transferring the picture to the viscomm screen next to the door.

Nothing like an escaped, claimed outlaw to make the day interesting.

Linking his hands behind his back, he studied the screen.

The security officer, Sabra, came up beside him and studied it also. Silently she read the words beneath but didn't betray her thoughts with any expression.

The peacekeeper glanced sideways at her. Pretty, but those eyes were hard. An ex-bounty hunter, a Daamen wench, and wed to a Daamen trader. Sabra had lived hard. He'd heard a bit about her, knew her from a distance.

She wasn't to be messed with. He returned to his chair. No security officer was to be messed with... ever.

Continuing to read through the information coming through the viscomm, he sorted through the things that would need Michel's attention first thing in the morning, and those things that could wait until he'd dealt with the urgent things first. He sorted them into three different folders according to their urgency.

Glancing up, he observed Sabra cross to the door and step out onto the veranda. The door swung shut behind her, and he leaned back in his chair, wondering just what security was doing in the settlement.

~ * ~

Staring through the window to the sunlit meadows beyond his palace, Mellar watched the children laughing and playing.

By now the message would have gone far and wide. Emet was a wanted man, a criminal. A murderer. And he was wanted dead or alive. That almost ensured that some bounty hunter would kill him and apply for the reward, rather than go to the trouble of bringing him back alive. Emet could be shot on sight and Mellar was gambling that it would happen.

If it didn't... well, things could get nasty, but then, who would anyone believe?

Lifting his gaze to the mountains beyond, Mellar smiled grimly. Someone, somewhere, was crying. People were burying their dead. Others were mourning the missing. And many lived in fear.

It was a sweet balm to his dark soul.

Now the death of Emet would only make his happiness complete.

Meanwhile, business called. Turning, Mellar swept from the room, bellowing for his servant. An important man's work was never done.

~ * ~

The timer on the wall showed two in the morning. Shamon glanced down at the wench curled up in his arms. The thick swirl of shiny brown hair partly covered her face, and he gently pushed the heavy strands back behind one small ear.

Gabie was amazing. So responsive, she almost went up in flames with just a few strokes of his hands. One kiss and she wanted more. One stroke and she was arching for him. Several thrusts of his staff into her deliciously tight little body and she was already climbing towards climax.

Tenderly Shamon trailed a finger down her tip tilted nose, across those sweet, plump lips and rubbed across that little, stubborn chin.

Stirring in her sleep, she mumbled something and rubbed one hand across the lower part of her face.

Catching her hand, Shamon brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Several little scars nicked her skin and he studied her hand. Small, short clean nails, and a few calluses. A capable little hand for a hot little wench.

My wench.

He should have panicked at the wayward thought, but he didn't. He didn't try to kid himself that it was just a passing attraction. Having her in his arms, he wanted more. Craved more. And he just knew that craving was never going to go away.

So now what?

Almost as though she felt his scrutiny, Gabie opened one eye, looked up at him and mumbled, "What?"

"Just looking."

"Really?" Coming up on to one elbow—which gave him a most interesting view of full breasts—Gabie rubbed her eyes with the heel of one hand and blinked several times.

"Aye." Aye, he was really looking. Her breasts were so full and firm, big handfuls that almost defied the laws of gravity. Now he'd seen her without a support garment, he wondered how she managed to be so top heavy and not tip forward.

Gabie followed his gaze, blushed, grabbed the sheet strewn at their feet and hauled it up to cover her breasts.

No way was Shamon having that. Grabbing it, he tossed it aside.

"Too late for that, lass." He smiled at her, slow and... all right, he admitted it—lustfully.

"I'm not used to this," she muttered, covering her ample bosom with one arm, or trying to, anyway.

"So I noticed."

Amused, he watched the blank expression on her cheeky, elfin face give way to embarrassment.

"Kind of hard not to, I guess." A sheepish smile cured her lips. "And I guess you took care of that."

"Aye." He surely had. Stars, his chest almost swelled with pride. "It interests me that you've stayed virgin for so long."

“Why?” One fine brow arched. “You thought a smuggler would be an easy lay?”

Reaching out, he twined a thick lock of brown hair around his finger and used it to tug her face closer to his. “Nay. I’m just surprised that no man has tried to capture you.”

She grinned. “A few have tried, Shamon, but I wouldn’t touch them with a ten foot pole.” She gave an exaggerated shudder. “Dirty men with a penchant for anything remotely bearing a resemblance to a female. Hell, I bet they’d have shagged a female snarch given a chance.” Her grin widened. “They weren’t fussy.”

“But you are?”

“Hey, I’m a smu—into private enterprise. I’m not the kind of woman good men seek out.”

“Are you saying I’m not a good man?”

She looked at him for several long seconds before smiling a little. “You are, and that makes me wonder why you’d pursue this deal we struck. You must really like claiming prizes to sleep with me.”

She might have been smiling, but there was a trace of wistfulness in her eyes. It vanished within seconds but it was enough to make Shamon come up on his elbow. He looked down at her. Even balanced on their elbows, he towered over her.

“What do you mean, lass?”

She shrugged and looked away.

Reaching out, he caught her chin and turned her back to face him. “Gabs?”

“Aw, honey, you’ve got a pet name for me!”

“Don’t change the subject.” Shamon looked her directly in the eyes. “You know I desire you. I’ve not tried to hide it.”

Her round cheeks went pink, which was just so enchanting, but Shamon steeled himself from leaning down and kissing them. There was a little mystery here he wanted to uncover.

“I couldn’t help but notice,” Gabie replied. “Though I have no idea why.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Geez, Shamon, I’m not the kind of woman good men go for.” Abruptly she sat up, bringing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. Resting her chin on her knees, she looked towards the window where the rain spattered noisily.

Remaining propped on his elbow, Shamon reached out and trailed his fingers down her side, coming to a stop on the generous curve of her hip.

Gabie glanced down at him.

“And why aren’t you the kind of wench most men go for?” he queried quietly. And how could she even think it?

“Let’s see. Have you got time while I list it all?”

“All night.” His gaze swept leisurely down her body. “In-between other activities, of course.” All of which involved her luscious little body.

“Hmmm. Okay, let’s see. I’m short, fat, mouthy and laugh at—apparently—all the wrong things at the wrong time.”

It took several seconds for the words to sink in, and then Shamon frowned at her. “Who said you were fat?”

“I noticed you zeroed in on that,” she replied dryly.

“I won’t argue the short and mouthy,” he said. “’Tis you for sure. But most wenches are short in comparison to my height. Mouthy, aye. It gets you into trouble. Laugh at the wrong things? ’Tis a matter of opinion. I like your laughter and sense of humour. You make me laugh.”

“Honey, you really are sweet.”

Sitting up, Shamon leaned against the headboard of the big bed. When she didn’t say anything, he reached out again and ran one finger down her spine, smiling when she arched slightly. “What I see is a voluptuous wench with curves enough to make a red-blooded man drool.”

“You have a silver tongue, Shamon.” She glanced back at him. “How come no woman has ever caught you?”

“I never came across one I wanted to catch me.” *Until now.*

“They’re missing out on a prize.”

“You’ll make me blush in a minute.”

She flashed him an amused grin.

Moving quickly, Shamon snagged her around the waist and in one smooth move spun her around to land on top of him. Easily dragging her up his length, he didn’t stop until she was level with his face.

Those bright green eyes sparkled with a mixture of mirth and rising passion. “Now, see, your strength just makes me go all a-quiver.”

“I’m counting on other things making you quiver.” He slid his hand down her spine.

“Keep doing that and I’ll start purring.”

Let’s see if I can make you yowl.”

“I might scratch.”

“Ohhh, sounds intriguing, wench.”

Gabie laughed.

He lifted her up further. The wench was a light weight as far as he was concerned. As soon as her breasts were above him, he opened his mouth and sucked one pink-tipped nipple deep. And sucked. And sucked.

Bracing her hands on the pillow each side of his head, Gabie gasped and writhed.

Switching to her other breast, Shamon sucked, enjoying the tight little bud, flicking and teasing it with his tongue.

“You better do something fast,” Gabie groaned. “I’m getting wet.”

Shamon chuckled as he straightened his arms, holding her above him.

“This is a little... ah...” Gabie had one arm across her breasts, the other still braced beside him.

“Interesting?”

“If you bring me any lower, I’ll suffocate you with these bosoms of which you are so fond, trader.”

“Aye, but what a way to go.” He bent his arms, lowering her but shifting her down so that their faces were level when he finally settled her atop him.

Quirking one brow, she wriggled, and the movements caused those delicious little nubs to rub against his pectorals, and the curls at the apex of her thighs to entangle with his.

Shamon grinned wickedly at her. “Like riding, Gabs?”

She looked blankly at him.

“I’ve ridden you several times tonight.”

She blushed a little, but her eyes sparkled in memory.

Shamon pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “’Tis time I let you have a turn.”

Understanding hit her suddenly. “Oh, Shamon, I’m not sure about—”

He didn’t give her any more time to protest. Sitting upright with a powerful surge of muscles, he lifted Gabie up. His staff rose up, long and hard and throbbing, and Shamon set her on her knees right above it.

Crimson cheeked, Gabie looked from his staff to his face. “Ah... Shamon...”

“Trust me,” he said, and lowered her directly onto his shaft.

It was amazing how he found her entrance without error or hesitation. The tip of his penis slipped neatly inside her vagina, and he held her in place as her breath came faster.

God, she was so hot and wet, the moist heat coating his penis. She was ready for him.

She started to squirm. “Shamon, you have to do something...”

“I sort of thought ’twould be you doing it.” He grinned at her darkly.

“Cripes, what do I know about this? I’ve heard and seen things, but I’ve never *done* it.” He felt her try to take him in deeper.

“How about we go the ‘yes master’ routine again?”

“How about I smuggle some goods through your trade route?” she gasped.

“You’re a naughty little smuggler.” He lowered her inch by exquisite inch, watching as his thickness disappeared inside her.

“Who are you trying to torture?” Gabie moaned, her hands on his arms.

“You?”

“So why is your jaw clenched?”

“Good point,” Shamon said, and let her go.

Gabie slid down his shaft and landed full groin against his. Her eyes widened in awe, and Shamon could only tip his head back and groan as all that tight heat gripped him and sucked him into the depths of her woman’s secrets.

He swore he could just about feel himself bump against her cervix, and at the thought, he opened his eyes in alarm. He’d heard that bumping a wench’s cervix could hurt. He’d never thought of it until now. None of the tavern whores had ever seemed to care or complain.

By the look on Gabie’s face, she didn’t seem uncomfortable. She was biting her lip, aye, but her eyes were dark and heavy, a light flush on her face, and she was starting to rock against him

Her internal muscles clenched, pulling at him, and Shamon could only grit his teeth in lust as a fiery flow rocketed through his veins and pooled low in his loins. His staff swelled, lengthened, thickened, and he couldn’t believe it was possible to be any more aroused without exploding.

The wench was a natural at this, her body undulating as she rode him slowly at first. Her gaze was locked onto his and she smiled slightly. Secretly. A seductress.

“Oh yeah,” she said throatily. “I find riding quite... invigorating.”

And then she rolled her hips.

Shamon thought he was going to die on the spot. He fell back against the pillows.

Laughing suggestively, Gabie placed her hands on his chest and raked her nails lightly across his nipples, making him jerk beneath her.

And then once he started, he couldn't stop. Each jerk beneath her drove him into her depths and as his hips returned to the mattress, she rose up on her knees.

She actually let him slip free and he nearly went wild, grabbing her hips and thrusting deep within her once more, hearing her half gasp in surprise, half laugh in amusement.

A very hedonistic amusement.

Moving forward, she braced her hands each side of his massive chest and looked down at him. Rapacious devilment made her eyes dance, but carnal desire made them glow softly as well.

"So, Shamon," she murmured, raising herself enough to leave his shaft half out of her, "Do you approve of my riding?"

"God!" was all he could manage in reply.

But he did grab her hips and shove her back down atop his own hips again.

Her laugh was a siren's call.

Shamon couldn't take it any longer. Flipping her over onto her back, he rose above her and withdrew.

She blinked, surprised, then grinned up at him, twining her fingers through his long hair and tugging gently. "Got a problem, *master*?"

"Not now," he rasped, and drove into her hard.

It was like slamming home, the sensation of her muscles clenching around him so familiar now. He loved it. Loved the feel of her silken flesh against his, the heat of her inner body, the softness of her outer body, the desire and laughter in her eyes that combined to make such a heady mixture.

The laughter fled when he started thrusting hard and fast. The laughter turned to moans, and when he slid one hand beneath her to angle her hips up to him, she bent her knees and took him in deeper.

And finally she slid her legs around his waist, opening herself thoroughly to him, and he slammed in until they were groin to groin and he couldn't go any further.

With short, sharp thrusts he built the fire to full, flaring life between them. He didn't know where her body heat finished and his began, because he was such a part of her. He felt like he was falling into hot pools of green desire as he looked into her eyes, and another pool of slick heated desire drew him in deep to her body.

His breathing was ragged, and he pulled her closer and closer until their hips were ground together.

Reaching up, he grabbed a fat pillow and lifting her hips he shoved it beneath her.

Gabie's eyes widened but she didn't have a chance to ask anything because Shamon braced himself above her on both arms and swooped down to claim her mouth.

He claimed her mouth as he claimed her body, giving no quarter yet giving of himself. Tasting her, taking her, taking her essence from her honeyed mouth and spilling his own essence inside her exquisite, lush little body.

Once, twice, three times he shoved hard, buttocks clenching and hips pumping. His life seed spurted out, hot and thick, flooding into her. He strained against her, shuddering, his eyes closed as ecstasy soared through him.

But he didn't miss the way she screamed his name as she convulsed around him, her inner muscles clenching around and wringing from him everything he had to give, milking him until he was deliciously drained, deliciously spent, and all he could do was slump over her.

Head resting beside hers on the pillow, he buried his nose in her fragrant fall of dishevelled hair and just let his breathing spiral out of control.

It took a long time before either of them came back from Eros. When Shamon could he eased onto his side, taking Gabie with him and cradling her close. Just as his thundering heart started to ease, he felt her stir.

"Shamon?" Her breathless voice was a warm whisper against his neck.

"Aye?"

“Did I pass the first riding lesson?”

He started laughing, still ragged but genuinely amused. “Gabs, you passed with flying colours.”

“So, no more lessons?” she teased.

“I never said that.” He hugged her. “The night is yet young.”

“Mmmm.” Snuggling closer, she pressed a light kiss to his neck and settled down.

Shamon stared up at the dark ceiling while Gabie slipped off to sleep. She felt so right in his arms, her soft curves fitting his hard, muscled planes perfectly.

She fitted him perfectly. Her humour, her passion, her love of life.

He wanted that forever. How he was going to go about convincing Gabie of that wasn’t going to be easy, he had no doubt, but he figured they had a good basis to start with—namely their passion and their attraction to each other, and a shared love of laughter and life.

Now how he was going to get her to give up her life of smuggling was a whole other story. There was nothing he could do about it tonight, but come the morrow—which was really the morn—he was going to start a full-on assault on Gabie.

A Daamen never gave up on the wench he wanted.

Smiling, Shamon closed his eyes and drifted off into sleep.

~ * ~

Freeman watched Misha and Olin return to the *Larceny*. Things just kept getting more intriguing by the minute. He disappeared into the rain.

~ * ~

Gabie couldn’t remember when she’d ached so much before, or so deliciously. Hands braced on the wall, she tipped her head forward and relished the warm, fragrant, soapy water that flowed down, beating on her head and sluicing down her body.

The kind of aches she had could only be gotten one way and she grinned.

Okay, she hadn't planned on actually getting into Shamon's bed, but once she'd started talking to him, been in his presence... what could she say? No use lying about it to herself, she'd forgotten all about her little plan of deceit.

Hallelujah! Finally, she'd done something right.

Lifting her arms, she washed her hair, moving downwards over her body until she was thoroughly soaped. Touching the button to turn off the soap, she rinsed thoroughly. Turning off the water, she dried herself on a towel and got dressed in clean clothes.

Tugging her boot on brought a twinge to her inner thighs and she laughed softly. Yep, some nights she just got it all right. When she'd crept out of Shamon's bed just after dawn, he hadn't stirred. She couldn't blame him. She'd wanted to crawl right back in and snuggle up to his big body, but alas, it wasn't to be. She had things to see to. After all, she had to stick to some parts of her plan.

That included the early morning risers seeing her in the settlement, and that had involved sneaking back to the tavern and clattering merrily down the stairs inside, drawing scowls from one heavy-eyed patron who stuck his head out of the door of one of the rooms and told her to bloody walk quietly.

Gabie had waved cheerfully and continued clattering down the stairs. The cleaner in the barroom glanced at her and kept cleaning.

Her crew at the *Larceny* had greeted her with relief, and then Olin had gone back to bed while Paz and Misha went into the dining cabin for an early breakfast. Gabie had gone back to her cabin for a hot shower and clean clothes.

Her stomach grumbled. Apparently making love most of the night with a lusty trader brought on an appetite.

Running the comb one last time through her hair, she left it lying loose around her shoulders and hurried to the dining cabin. Misha and Paz were already eating, so Gabie took a heaping plate of hot food and sat down at the head of the table.

"I take it everything went as planned?" She forked up some steaming bacon and chewed appreciatively.

Misha nodded. "The disabler is attached underneath the ship. I set it to go off an hour ago and Paz slipped the note beneath the Enforcer Buildings door. I did see several pursuit craft lift off not long after but we've been keeping a low profile,

seeing as how we're all supposed to be fast asleep." She glanced slyly at Gabie. "Except for lover girl."

Gabie grinned around a mouthful of scrambled egg.

"If this all goes wrong," Paz sighed, "We'll be dead soon, anyway."

"Don't worry, Paz, I'll see you buried with full honours."

"Thanks, Misha, but you'll probably be dead, too."

"Then Gabie will see us buried with full honours."

"Hey, don't look at me." Gabie took a sip of hot una. "I'm saving my dinnos for other things."

"She loves us." Misha toasted Paz with a glass of berry juice.

Paz just shook his head mournfully and mopped up the honey on his plate with a piece of toast.

"So, how is our visitor?" Gabie looked at Misha.

"Emet has quietened. The sedative patch you put on him yesterday settled him right down. Olin checked the wound, it's clean. Oh yeah." Misha tapped the table. "Emet was running a temperature but Olin got it down overnight. He reckons that's why he probably got confused."

"We have to watch that Emet doesn't pull that little stunt again." Gabie forked up some more bacon. "Luckily I was able to fob Shamon off, but if Michel saw him—"

"But he's not been deemed as missing yet," Paz interrupted.

"True, but if he does and Michel remembered seeing him with us..." Gabie made a cutting gesture with her thumb across her throat.

Paz shuddered.

"I'll make sure he doesn't do anything silly." Misha twined her long ponytail around her hand. "He's had a rough time."

"And I guess that means I can't turf him out the ramp doorway just yet."

Misha looked at her.

“Two days I gave him.” Gabie shrugged. “Ah, what the hell. Dad never turned anyone away, and I’ve got that tradition to uphold. He’ll have to stay until he’s healed and *then* he’s out on his arse.”

“What if Brucie turned up hurt?” Paz queried.

“I’d shoot him, no questions asked.”

Laughing, Misha drained the juice from her glass.

“Speaking of which,” Gabie mused, “has there been any news yet?”

“Yes! It came on the uninews last night after you left.” Paz’s face brightened, a miracle on its own. “Brucie’s ship got attacked by space pirates. They took everything, and I mean everything. None of the crew had even their clothes left. Their ship was completely stripped of *everything*.”

“Not to mention that a nice, big picture of a naked Brucie was broadcast to every viscomm that allows general communications.”

Gabie batted her eyelashes. “No! How did that happen?”

“I’m sure we don’t know.”

Picking up their mugs, Misha, Paz and Gabie did a toast.

“To friends,” Gabie said.

“On the pirate side,” Misha said.

“And Brucie’s fat, naked arse,” Paz added.

“It will never be forgotten,” Gabie finished.

Sniggering, they returned to their breakfast.

“My, what a cozy group,” a voice drawled from the doorway.

Startled, Misha, Gabie and Paz swung around on their chairs.

Gabie grabbed for the laser that was normally holstered at her thigh, only to remember it was back in her cabin. Misha growled and Paz jerked upright.

“How the hell did you get on board?” Gabie stood up, the dinner knife in her hand. “And who the hell are you?”

The woman strode into the room, her cobalt blue eyes assessing everything. The man who followed looked mildly amused. Expression grim and his gaze restlessly sweeping the big cabin before coming to rest on Gabie, Michel looked anything but amused.

“Michel?” Warily, Gabie eyed the intruders.

Cripes, had they found out about Emet? No, wait, they had to be here about Raznin. Had someone seen Paz deliver the message after all? And who was this other woman and man? And more importantly, how did they get past the security shield?

“We’re here to discuss business,” Michel replied. “Or they are.”

“They?”

Michel nodded to the couple.

“It’s polite to ask for an invite before you board a ship,” Misha snapped.

“Trust me, this isn’t quite what I wanted.”

“I’m Sabra,” the woman stated matter-of-factly. “This is Freeman.”

The man gave a cheerful little wave.

“I’m so happy for you,” Gabie retorted. “Now what do you want?”

Sabra gazed steadily at her. “Your cooperation.”

“Is that so?”

Slipping her hand into the inside pocket of her jacket, Sabra withdrew an identification disc and held it up. “We’re security officers with the Intergalactic Peace Ship, and we have automatic clearance to enter any ship we want, which is how we got on board your ship.”

Gabie stared at Michel. “They can do that?”

He nodded.

Gabie exchanged glances with Paz and Misha. This didn't bode well.

Returning her attention to Sabra, she folded her arms. "So what does security want with us? I can't think how we attracted your attention."

Freeman grinned and it was suddenly very predatory.

Misha shifted uneasily and Gabie knew what she was thinking. It had to be Emet. He'd belonged to a settlement leader's dead wife.

Oh shit.

But then again, one escaped outlaw wouldn't attract the attention of the security, so why there had to be another reason, and it couldn't be good.

Sabra eyed Gabie coolly. "You have some interesting connections, smuggler."

"Private enterprise."

"Call it what you wish. You've flown under the radar all this time because you're small-time."

"So what have we done to bring us to your attention?"

From his jacket pocket Freeman withdrew an object and held it up. "Surprise."

It was the disabler. How had it survived the blast? That was impossible unless... *Play cool.* "And we're supposed to be surprised because...?" Gabie raised her brows inquiringly.

"Let's not waste time with lying," Sabra spoke briskly. "I don't have the time nor the patience. We know Link has been contacting you to carry an illegal load for him. We know who he works for, and as we have an interest there that naturally brought you to our attention."

Refusing to acknowledge anything, Gabie continued to look inquiringly at her.

It didn't seem to bother Sabra as she continued calmly, "Freeman has been keeping an eye on you and your crew."

Freeman gave another little wave. Gabie would have liked to break his hand for him; that would stop the irritating gesture. Almost as though he knew what she was thinking, his eyes twinkled.

Sabra remained standing still, her gaze on Gabie. “Freeman saw you taken by a man we know as Tason, but he couldn’t follow you. You returned and Olin met with some scummy low-lives and brought something back to the ship. Freeman took a little walk in the woods behind you and Misha, saw the ship and knew you two were planning something when you didn’t approach. He’s been keeping an eye on things since, and followed Olin and Misha back to the ship during the night and saw Misha plant the disabler.”

“My, he’s been doing a lot of walking and snooping, hasn’t he?” Misha’s teeth were clenched.

“You do pick some strange times for a stroll.” Freeman winked at her.

Sabra looked at the disabler in his hand. “He took it off because we don’t want those big-time smugglers disabled just yet.” She looked at Michel. “And we didn’t want them caught just yet, either.”

Silently Michel took a folded page from his pocket and Gabie recognized it as the printed page with the coordinates and information on Raznin’s ship. Well, at least parts of the plan were working. The peacekeepers had received the note. It was cold comfort.

“So, what are you trying to tell me? That you’re in cahoots with Raznin and Tason?”

“Hell, Gabie!” Michel barked out. “No!”

“Just checking, because you’ve never struck me as the kind to go bent.” Gabie shrugged.

Her mind was going in all directions at once. Cripes, they knew. Michel and the security knew about Raznin and Tason being smugglers, they knew she had a connection—however unwanted—with them. But why would that make them target her?

“I don’t understand. We unwittingly led you to them, so why do you want us? I doubt you’re here to chat about pleasantries.”

Legs braced slightly apart and hands linked behind her back, Sabra surveyed Gabie, Misha and Paz calculatingly. “We’re drafting you.”

Gabie’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“Is this a joke?” Misha demanded.

Paz was simply bewildered.

“No joke.” Michel didn’t look happy and that didn’t bode well as far as Gabie was concerned.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to draft dubious characters,” she said. “And we’re dubious. Ask anyone. Ask Michel.”

Sabra’s smile was anything but comforting.

“Michel, they can’t do this, can they?”

“I’m afraid they can, Gabie.” Michel’s mouth was tight, tension playing along the edges. “And you don’t have much choice.”

Oh crap! “Snarch shit.” She pointed to the door. “You’re all leaving now.”

“You don’t want to be doing that,” Sabra said.

“Watch me.”

Striding up to Gabie, Sabra stopped directly in front of her and looked hard at her.

Hiding the little shiver that went through her, Gabie arched one brow and eyed her back. The security had nothing on them, she reminded herself almost desperately. Nothing but the word of Freeman, and he looked to be a dodgy bloke anyway. One word against another wasn’t good enough.

Maybe.

Then again, Sabra’s cobalt eyes were raking over her face and seemed to be seeing a lot more than Gabie wanted her to see.

“You’re invading my space,” Gabie stated.

“I’ll be invading a lot more than that,” Sabra retorted. “This is the thing, Gabie. I can have your ship seized, your cargo overhauled, every person you’ve traded with hauled in for questioning and their supplies broken open and pawed through.”

“You won’t be popular, will you?”

“Your ship will be taken apart piece by piece while you and your crew will be held for investigation.”

That wasn't such a bad idea. Gabie glanced at Misha and raised her brows. Misha nodded slightly. They shared the same idea. If security had them, Raznin wouldn't want to be in league with the *Larceny* crew in the future. It was a sure-fired plan for the big sharks to leave the little fish alone. Not to mention Gabie and her crew would get some leniency from other smugglers higher up the food chain. Being targeted by security would earn them some respect and even some sympathy.

It would also mean it would be harder to trade with anyone, but first things first and that was saving their own necks.

“Sure,” Gabie shrugged. “Go ahead. Seize the ship, seize us.” *Oops, cripes, forgot about Emet.* “Wait. Give us a couple of hours to think about it and we'll get back to you.”

Michel sighed and shook his head.

Sabra smiled slowly. “It doesn't work like that.”

“Really?” Gabie looked at Misha. “It doesn't work like that.”

“I am so disappointed. Are you disappointed, Paz?”

Paz just looked ill.

“I know your cargo is illegal,” Sabra stated. “I know your discs are illegal. I'll find out who supplies you with the discs when I have a shake-down done through your clients. I'll track down your supplier, even if they're in the far reaches of the Outlaw Sector. I have some contacts there you wouldn't believe. And then I'll have you all charged, branded outlaw, and you'll be on your way to Cardrak.”

Gabie glanced at Michel.

“There won't be any selling or claiming of you.” Sabra eyed her coolly. “I can make sure of that. It'll be a one-way trip to Cardrak for you and your crew, Gabie.”

Paz made a small sound of distress.

Sabra smiled coldly. “Olin wouldn't last long there. But you three would be the toast of the prison, all fresh and young.”

Paz was so pale Gabie thought he was going to faint. She couldn't blame him. She was halfway there herself.

"You're bluffing," she replied.

"I don't bluff."

No, she probably didn't. Gabie felt a trickle of unease go through her.

"Please, Gabie." Michel took a step forward.

She didn't remove her gaze from the security officer's face. "You must want these smugglers awfully bad to threaten us with Cardrak."

"Aye," Sabra returned. "I want them bad enough."

Gabie looked at Misha and Paz. Things were getting worse. Security. They were almost a whispered word, a shadowy arm of the law. She had no doubt that Sabra would do what she had to, to get what she wanted.

And she wanted Raznin and someone even higher up the food chain.

And bloody hell, the *Larceny* crew were the bait.

Nine

When Shamon awoke with no soft, warm little body curled up against him, he knew immediately that Gabie was gone. The dwelling had a strangely empty air about it.

No doubt the wench had snuck off to see to some illegal business.

The sun shone down brightly when he left the house. Yawning still, he ran his hand through his still damp hair from his shower. He was eager to catch up with the wench during the morning, but first things first, he had work to do on the trade ship. Later he would see Gabie.

When he got back to the docking bay his friends were already preparing to load cargo.

“About time,” Simon greeted him. “I forgot you’d sleep late if no one woke you.”

“He’s a bit tired.” Heddum nudged Simon. “Had a long night. My goodness, are those bags beneath your eyes? Are they bags beneath his eyes, Simon?”

Simon peered at Shamon. “I do believe so.” A slow grin crept across his face. “Late night, friend?”

“Busy,” Shamon returned cheerfully. “I’m feeling damn good, in fact.”

“Do tell.”

“You wish.”

Shamon glanced across at the *Larceny*. All was quiet, but then he saw a man walking towards the ship. Gabie came down the ramp, Misha and Olin behind her, and she didn’t look happy.

Wishing he could hear the conversation, Shamon watched as the man stopped and the small group commenced talking. Gabie's normally merry face wore a scowl, and Misha and Olin looked far from happy.

Heddam stepped up beside Shamon. "Bad business afoot, mayhaps?"

"Mayhaps," he agreed, concern etching his face as he saw Gabie fling out one hand and start talking heatedly.

Then the man held up a disc and she almost snatched it away. He laughed harshly, the sound cutting through the air, and turning he strode away.

Shamon couldn't make out the words but it was obvious that Gabie was swearing. She turned back to Olin and Misha and they all started talking at once. Shaking her head, Gabie stormed back up the ramp and into the cargo hold, Misha and Olin on her heels.

Something was wrong. Shamon glanced at Heddam, to find his friend frowning. Simon stood not far off, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"The little smuggler seems to be having some trouble." Simon rubbed his jaw.

"I'll see her after." Shamon didn't want to wait, but he was no fool. "She won't like me trying to get information from her. I'll have to wait a bit."

"When did you get so wise?" Heddam asked.

"I happen to know the right way to handle the wench."

Heddam snorted.

Shamon spent the rest of the morning helping with the normal trade chores—loading cargo, cleaning the ship, maintenance, ensuring everything was ready to leave in the next couple of days. He took an inventory of the stores and headed into the settlement with Torkra and Mikal to get more food for the trip.

Coming back from the store, while passing the Enforcement Building, he caught sight of the wanted images and came to a sudden halt.

Torkra, who'd been ambling along behind him with his gaze on a pretty, blushing wench, walked straight into the back of him. "What the hell—"

Ignoring him, Shamon stared at the image poster. Wanted dead or alive for murder. It was Emet.

Bloody hell, Gabie was harbouring a murderer aboard her space ship. Did she know? He swung around on his heel and stared back in the docking bay direction. Was she safe? She had to be. Did she know? A prickle went down his spine. She might.

And if she was caught, it would certainly be the incarceration of her into a life of slavery or even worse, Cardrak prison planet.

Long legs eating up the distance, Shamon hurried back to the docking bay.

Mikal and Torkra kept pace, their faces puzzled, but they didn't ask any questions.

A heavy weight slammed into Shamon's chest. The *Larceny* was gone.

Simon looked at him. "She left within minutes of you going into the settlement."

"Did she say anything?" Shamon grappled with the knowledge that she was gone.

"Nay. We didn't see anyone. All we knew was that suddenly the ramp went up and the ship took off."

And very probably the murderer was still onboard.

"I have to contact her."

Simon nodded.

Shamon bolted up the ramp and into the cargo hold. He was off the platform lift before it even rattled to a halt on the second floor and running to the control cabin. Throwing himself into one of the two chairs, he flicked the viscomm on and dialled in to the general frequency.

He couldn't get a lock on the *Larceny*, so he sent out a message that would be picked up by most frequencies. Now all he could do was wait.

Leaning back in the chair, he rubbed his brow. She had to get back to him.

Tipping his head back, he rested it on the backrest of the chair and looked up at the ceiling. Why had she left so suddenly, without a word? It had to have been due to the man visiting her ship that morning. It had to be.

He closed his eyes. There had been such warmth and desire between them. Shamon and Gabie, entwined in each other's arms, her husky laugh sounding still in his ears. Her little moans. Her sparkling eyes and merriment.

He not only had to get hold of her to warn her of the murderer she had on board, but also to... well, to keep in contact with her. Seeing her once or twice a year just wasn't on, not now.

And she had a murderer aboard...

Snapping upright, he flicked onto a frequency block to almost everyone except a select few. Leaning forward, he waited impatiently. There was one crew who might be able to contact her. One crew who could be anywhere in the Lawful or Outlaw Sector, though from what he'd heard about Brucie, the bastard who'd flung Gabie over the banister, he'd had a recent run-in with a certain pirate crew, and that meant they were in the Lawful Sector.

And if his suspicions were correct, this pirate crew knew Gabie.

The screen flickered and then a big blonde wench appeared. Her eyes widened in delight. "Hello, handsome! Wow—what happened to the beard?"

"Illona." He even forgot to be scared. Normally the busty, lusty blonde chased after him with such fervour she actually made him nervous. He didn't have time to be nervous now. "Lost the beard in a gamble."

"I like it! Now I can see all those strong features. Makes my heart pound even more." Placing one hand over a buxom bosom, she fluttered her fingers. "Miss me, lover? Want to schedule a rendezvous?" She winked. "Big bed. Big blonde. Big man. Big co—"

"Illona, do you know Gabie?"

"Gabie?" One blonde brow shot up.

"The smuggler."

She leered. "Private enterprise, I believe she calls it."

“You *do* know her!” Thank the stars.

Illona grinned widely. “We did her a little favour recently.”

“So ’twas you that stripped Brucie and his crew of everything.”

“Nearly gave me heartburn, seeing that bastard without his clothes, but you know...” She shrugged, though her eyes glinted wickedly. “Had a favour to repay, so we did it.”

“I need to contact her.”

The grin faded. “Oh?”

“Aye. What’s her frequency?”

The grin still played around her lips, but her eyes were suddenly hard and calculating. “What’s this about, lover?”

“’Tis private. Please, Illona. The frequency.”

“I can’t give it to you.”

Curses. Was the wench jealous? Not now! “Illona—”

Leaning back in the chair, Illona studied him. “We don’t give out frequencies. It’s not part of our code.”

“I didn’t know you had a code.”

“My, my. Is the normally agreeable Shamon getting touchy?”

He ground his teeth.

Illona smiled slightly. The wench was baiting him. But she still had that calculating look in her eyes. Why had he never noticed how calculating she could be? *Because she always acts like such a sex-mad wench around me.* If it had been Brina, her captain, or Donika, another crew-mate, he would have expected it. He’d never again underestimate this big blonde wench as just a lusty space pirate.

“Illona...” He hesitated. “I really need to speak to Gabie. ’Tis important.”

“I can’t give out her frequency.” Illona sighed. “But I can get a message to her.”

Relief flooded him. “Ask her to contact me immediately.”

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. “Do you need us?”

“Nay.”

“If it’s trouble—”

“I just need to tell Gabie something. Urgently.”

“All right.” She nodded slowly. “I’ll send her a message.”

“Thank you.” He relaxed back against the chair. “Thank you, lass.”

She looked at him for several seconds, then smiled widely. “Sure you don’t want me and a big bed, lover? I could show you a really good time.” She winked.

“Uh... nay.” He shifted uncomfortably.

Illona laughed and cut the connection.

Stars, the pirate wench had always been able to unnerve him.

Closing his eyes, Shamon blew out a breath. He’d wait in the control cabin. Gabie had to contact him soon.

Minutes ticked past with agonizing slowness and worry bit deep. Was Gabie all right? Was she hurt? Did she know?

“Problems, Shamon?” A husky voice at the door brought his attention around.

“Sabra.” Uh-oh. “Nay, lass.”

She entered the cabin, her gaze going to the viscomm. “Are you sure?”

“Certain.” Shamon watched her closely, careful to guard his expression.

The wench was too smart, she saw too much. Felt too much. Her intuition was uncanny at times, no doubt from years as a bounty hunter then a security officer.

Sabra looked down at him. “Troublesome thoughts?”

“Nay.” He made himself smile. “What are you doing, lass?”

“Just passing through.” She studied his face, those cobalt eyes serious. “I’m leaving shortly.”

“Going back home?”

“Not yet.” She seemed about to say something more, then gave her head a little shake. “You take care, Shamon.”

“You, too.” He watched her turn and leave.

At the door she stopped and glanced back at him. Again it seemed as though she were on the verge of saying something, and again she gave that peculiar little head shake.

She left and Shamon stared at the empty doorway.

~ * ~

Raznin and Tason watched as the *Larceny* landed with a grind of engines.

“Think the ship will even be able to manage the load?” Tason queried.

“No doubt about it,” Raznin replied.

The ramp lowered and Gabie, Olin and Misha came out. Olin and Misha walked behind Gabie as she strode up to Raznin and Tason.

“All right,” Gabie said bluntly, her face set. “Where’s this damn cargo?”

Raznin smiled easily. “Nice to see you, Gabie.”

A muscle jumped in her clenched jaw.

“I’m glad you saw sense,” he continued.

“Didn’t have much choice, did I?” She glared around the clearing. “So? I want to get this over with.”

“A fast business deal. I like it.” He gestured to a small group of people huddled in the shade cast by his ship. “There’s your cargo.”

“Where?”

“There.”

Gabie looked closer and then red crept through her cheeks. “That’s human cargo!”

Raznin observed her with interest.

Misha and Olin looked grim, but Gabie was furious.

“That’s bloody human cargo!” Gabie was almost shouting, her fists clenched. “You’re trading lives!”

“It’s a trade.” He was amused.

“You’re getting us involved in illegal slavery!”

“You’re just the transport.”

“Goddamn this!” Gabie swung on her heel and glared at Misha and Olin. “*Shit!*”

They returned her regard steadily. Raznin was interested to see that the only signs of anger that Misha showed was a flaring of her white nostrils and a glitter in her pink-rimmed eyes. Olin ran one hand through his grizzled hair and squinted unhappily.

The old man wasn’t yawning now.

“Get them aboard,” Raznin ordered Tason.

“Damn it!” Gabie scrubbed her face, breathing hard.

Reaching out, Raznin grabbed her arm and yanked her around.

Furiously, Gabie glared up at him.

“This is what happens when you get too good at passing inspections, Gabie,” he said smoothly. “You come to the attention of those better than you. You’re a valuable transport mode right now.”

“Oh, I feel so much bloody better!” she snarled.

“There will, of course, be a tidy little sum of dinnoos in it for you and your crew.”

“My heart is filled with gratitude!”

“Somehow I doubt it.” Disinterested, he dropped her arm and watched as the little group of people—five in all comprised of four women and one man—were marched past them. “Where are you putting them?”

Swearing softly, Gabie gestured to Olin to lead the way. “Two of our cabins. We’ll have to double up ourselves.”

Raznin looked at her. “Don’t let them loose on the ship, Gabie. I’m warning you. If they escape or contact anyone, you’ll all be on the way to Cardrak.”

He could practically feel her frustration simmering in the air. Interesting. He’d expected her to be unhappy about this, but her fury was something... enticing. Raznin looked at her with renewed interest.

Ripe curves, a gamine face normally alight with mischief and merriment, she looked furiously pretty right now. Her breasts rose and fell with every deep, angry breath she took.

Reaching out, he touched a long strand of hair that escaped her ponytail. “After this we’ll get together.”

Shock flared in Gabie’s eyes right before she knocked his hand aside. “That wasn’t part of our *business* deal, Raznin. Just to run your cargo. Nothing else, understand?” She stuck out her hand. “Now give me the damned disc with the directions. I want this over and done with.”

Amused, he handed her the disc and watched as she loaded it into the handtronic she normally kept in the pocket of her jacket.

“Outlaw Sector. Surprise me some more.” She transferred the information from the disc onto the handtronic, slipped the disc free and gave it back to him.

Slapped it into his palm, to be more precise.

“Thank you.” He pocketed the disc. “I want a daily update.”

“Well, of course you would,” she returned snidely. “Any set time, *boss*?”

“You’ve got an attitude, Gabie.”

“Well, bugger me. Really? I wonder why?” Swinging around on her heel, she stormed up the ramp. “Come on, Misha. We’ve the devil’s work to do.”

The ramp went up as soon as Raznin's men came down, and he stood with Tason and watched as the *Larceny* rose and shot off into the sky. Within minutes it was a mere speck and then it disappeared into space.

"Gabie was upset," Tason said conversationally.

"Yes." Raznin smiled. "She was. Delightfully so."

~ * ~

Another space ship rose in the air from the settlement and took off in the opposite direction.

His work here was done. Cheran checked with the pilot before returning to the sumptuous private dining cabin and sitting down at the decorative table. A servant stepped forward and laid a platter of prime steak before him, along with a platter of vegetables and a pot of gravy.

Selecting choice cuts, he put them on his plate and sat back while the servant ladled the gravy onto the meat.

Emet was wanted for murder and now it was in the hands of the law. Cheran wasn't so sure it was the wisest move but he wasn't about to argue with Mellar. One knew when to quit—and that was while no one was pointing a finger at him.

Chewing on a piece of meat, he closed his eyes and savoured it. Oh yes, it was good. It was very good.

~ * ~

Gabie was ropable. She was so angry she felt like her head was going to burst.

Swearing, she stormed up and down the dining cabin. "Human cargo! Slaves! We're bloody carrying slaves!"

"And a wanted outlaw," Paz said unwittingly.

"A wanted outlaw is the least of my worries!" Thrusting her hand through her hair for the tenth time, Gabie kicked the table leg. "Bugger it!"

Misha and Olin exchanged glances.

"Cripes! Bloody security and bloody sharks!" Gabie ranted. "There's no difference between the lot of them!"

“Now, Gabie,” Misha attempted soothingly. “If we get caught the security won’t let us go to prison or the slavers. We’re all right.”

“You think?” Gabie glared at her. “I don’t trust security!”

“They seem to have a lot riding on this,” Olin attempted.

“Not as much as we do.” Her hair got another hand raking. “Never, never, *never* have we ever stooped to human cargo. *Never!*”

“Take it easy,” Misha said sternly. “You’ll go bald in a minute.”

“I’m going grey now, so what’s the bloody difference?”

“Then you’re going to give yourself a stroke.” Grabbing her arm, Misha dragged her to the table and pushed her onto a stool. “Paz, get Gabie a cold drink before she busts a blood vessel.”

Sheesh. Gabie scrubbed her face with her hands. Things just went from bad to worse. Just that morning she was wrapped in Shamon’s arms, loved almost to death, with what she thought of as her other cares being taken care of. Now she was caught in a play between security and a heartless smuggler. Even more ironic, both of them were using her and her friends as bait.

Picking up the glass Paz placed before her, Gabie downed the berry juice in several gulps, and almost gave herself heartburn for her efforts. Placing it back down on the table, she became aware of three faces looking worriedly at her.

Crap. She couldn’t lose it. She was the captain. It was her job to care for her crew.

Her crew.

A thought niggled at the back of her mind.

“Don’t you even think it!” Misha barked out.

“What?”

“You’re not ditching us and doing this alone.”

“I don’t see what choice it is of yours.”

“Plenty of choice.”

“I’m the captain. My word is law.”

Misha laughed outright.

Olin smiled lopsidedly. “We’re all in this together.”

“It doesn’t have to be—”

“We’re family,” Paz put in.

That silenced them all.

“And family stick together.” His eyes were big in his face. “Through thick and thin. Toil and trouble. Things.”

“Paz—” began Gabie a little more gently.

“No!” He was pale but determined. “No, you and Misha saved me. Olin takes care of me. We take care of each other. We’re family, Gabie. That’s what you told me.”

“And it’s true. It’ll always be true. But I need to think of the best for us all—”

“We’re *family*.” He folded his arms. “I’m staying with you.”

Gabie’s jaw dropped open in amazement. Paz never declared anything but doom and gloom. He’d never taken a stand in the time she’d known him.

“Hey,” said Misha in surprise. “You’re the one who’d run and hide rather than face a fight.”

“We all do that,” Olin said, his lips quirking.

“Of course we do,” Gabie said. “Cripes, we’re smugglers, not hardened criminals. And we’re small-time, which has suited us just fine.”

“Well, we’re in a bind now,” Paz argued defiantly. “And we’re sticking together through it. Right?” He looked at Olin and Misha.

Nodding, they looked at Gabie.

She conceded defeat. “Right.” She smiled widely. “I love you guys. You know that, right?”

“I feel so warm and fuzzy,” Misha returned.

“Now that’s taken care of...” Paz pulled a printed paper from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. “How about this?”

Picking up the paper, Gabie scanned it quickly. “Well, look at that.”

Misha and Olin raised their brows.

“Looks like it’s now official.” Gabie tossed the paper onto the table. “Emet’s a murderer. Might be time to inform him of it. Misha, your job.”

Misha’s face hardened as she tapped a corner of the sheet. “I don’t believe it.”

“Cripes, do you think I’d send you in there if I believed it?”

“So what are we going to do about it?” Olin wanted to know.

“Bugger all right now,” Gabie retorted. “No one knows he’s on board and he’s the least of my concerns.”

“Besides, he still isn’t well,” Misha interjected. “He shouldn’t leave.”

Gabie looked at her. Olin leered. Paz sighed.

“Well, well.” Gabie leaned forward. “You’re becoming quite the voice for Emet, aren’t you?”

“I’m just saying he’s not the kind to do something like that.”

“We’d already established that.” Gabie stroked her chin assessingly, a familiar sparkle of amusement rising inside her. “How much time have you spent with Emet, honey?”

“Not long—”

“Most nights,” Olin intoned. “Parts of the days. She even feeds him.”

“She even wipes his face and chest for him,” Paz added seriously.

“Really.” How interesting. Gabie eyed Misha.

“The man is sick.” Misha scowled. “I know what you’re all thinking, you sick lot of toadies.”

“Geez, harsh words.” Gabie grinned. “Maybe you know what we’re thinking because you’ve been thinking the same thing?” She looked at Olin. “Do you think she’s been thinking the same thing?”

“Oh yeah. I think she’s been thinking the same thing. Do you think she’s been thinking the same thing, Paz?”

“I think so.”

“Up the lot of you.” Disgruntled, Misha folded her arms and scowled at the far wall.

In the silence, Gabie rolled the glass between her palms. There were other things to worry about as well.

“Right,” she finally said. “Those people can’t be let out of the cabins.”

Olin nodded.

“Do we let security know we have them?” Paz asked.

“They’ll know already, and they’re contacting us tonight.” Gabie rubbed her fingers across the condensation on the glass. “We leave them in their cabins. They have toilets in there, showers, and can share the bunks.”

“We have to share,” Olin said gloomily.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa in here,” Paz offered immediately.

“Good boy.” Olin stretched, his joints creaking. “An old man needs a good bed.”

Misha rolled her eyes and Paz grinned faintly.

“We say nothing to these people until we know what Sabra wants them to know,” Gabie continued. “So we feed them and treat them nice, but don’t give them any chance to do anything stupid. So no opening doors until it’s mealtime, and another of us stands on guard. Got it?”

They all nodded.

“That’s it, then.” Gabie yawned and rubbed her face with both hands. “What a day!”

“Gets even better,” Paz said.

“Huh?”

“There’s a message from Illona on the viscomm.”

“Illona?” Gabie peered at Paz from between her fingers.

“Said someone else was trying to contact you.”

“Stars, we are popular. Who?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Might as well get this over with, too.” Standing, Gabie stretched and heard a joint pop. “Cripes, not only going grey, but bodily aging fast, too.”

“Might need another night in the bed with Shamon,” Misha said blandly.

Gabie frowned at her.

Misha’s eyes widened.

Oops. She should have made a smart comment or laughed instead.

To give her credit, Misha didn’t say anything. Nor did Olin, who was watching her from the corner of his eye. Only Paz was totally oblivious to what was being said... or not said.

Gabie left the dining cabin fast. Wheeling into the control cabin, she sat in the chair and tuned into the space pirate’s frequency. Within seconds the big, busty blonde was looking at her.

Hard.

“What’s wrong?” Gabie queried. “Did Brucie catch on that we set it up with you?”

“No. But a certain Daamen trader is trying to get in touch with you.” Illona studied her closely.

“Shamon?”

“Yeah. Lover boy. He seemed a little upset about something.” Illona leaned forward and her voice was soft but cold. “You do something to upset him, Gabie?”

“Not that I’m aware of.” Unless it was because she’d left his bed and taken off without saying goodbye.

A little pang hit her heart. Bugger.

“You better contact him.” Illona drew a deep breath. “And take warning, Gabie.”

“Huh?”

“I like Shamon. He’s my friend. You hurt him, I’ll nail your fat arse to the wall. You got me?”

“Cripes, Illona!” Gabie was taken aback. “I wouldn’t hurt him!”

“There’s a certain way to hurt a Daamen trader, Gabie. You better not hurt him that way.”

“And what way is that?”

“Don’t love him and leave him. You got me?”

Gabie stared at her.

Illona cracked her knuckles menacingly. “That big hunk cares for you, Gabie. A lot. You break his heart, I’ll break your head. You understand?”

“You’d have to get in line then.” Gabie was gob smacked, but she wasn’t about to take another threat lying low. “And what makes you think he cares for me in that way?”

“I know these traders. I know them well, how they think, how they act. I know Shamon’s got feelings for you. You crush them, I’ll crush you.”

“Geez. Thanks.” She took a deep, fortifying breath. “It’s not my intention to hurt him.”

“Then what is your intention?”

And wasn’t that the question of the year?

“I thought so.” Illona sat back and pulled on a finger, popping a joint and making Gabie wince. “You think about your relationship with that trader, Gabie.

You think hard where you're going and what you're doing, and you think about that trader. Understand?"

"You want me to think about the trader."

Another joint popped. "Don't make a funny with me. When it comes to my friends, I don't make funnies at inappropriate times."

"Right."

"So you contact that trader and you treat him nice. You figure out what you're doing and you treat him nice. Now what are you going to do?"

"Treat him nice?"

Illona's grin was all teeth.

Sheesh.

"I've sent you the frequency to Shamon's ship. Just key in Traders. I'll be in touch." The viscomm snapped off and Illona's face disappeared.

Great. Just great. Gabie dropped her forehead onto the console. Sabra, Raznin and now Illona. Everyone wanted a piece of her hide if she didn't do things their way.

Well, maybe she was tired of being controlled. Tired of being told what to do. However, like a vagrat in a trap, she was... trapped. Wasn't life just grand?

"Anyway," she mumbled. "Shamon doesn't think my arse is fat."

With a sigh she lifted her head and started to key in the frequency to the Daamen trade ship, only to stop, her finger above the keyboard.

Shamon. She hadn't had time to think properly about him and what had transpired between them. Probably because she'd expected to be sharing the next few days with him.

Slut that she was, she admitted she was hot for another taste of him.

Or had been, until Sabra had taken care of any free time she had left. Damn it.

Biting her lip, she thought about what Illona had said. He really had feelings for her? A warm trickle went through her. Wow. To think a man like Shamon, a roguishly handsome giant, actually cared for her...

Or did he? Just because Illona said so didn't mean it was true. It wouldn't be the first time that pirate had lied through her eye-teeth to get what she wanted. Hell, she was a space pirate, everyone knew they had no scruples.

But how did she herself feel about Shamon? Folding her arms, Gabie eyed the viscomm screen. He was gentler than she'd thought he'd be. He'd surprised her, pushing his prize claiming right up until the last second, then actually giving her a chance to back out. He'd have let her go if she'd indicated it as her wish.

That alone meant a lot to her. That and the fact that he'd been so gentle with her... well, at least until she'd ordered him to... Gabie grinned. *Oh yeah*. Just the memory had her nipples peaking.

Shifting in the chair, she shook her head. Right, Shamon was nice. Nicer. Nice didn't quite describe him. Nice described Olin, but she sure as heck didn't feel the same way about Olin as she did about Shamon.

Shamon made her laugh and spiked her mischief. Just about anything made her laugh, but somehow with Shamon it was more... intimate.

Blowing out a deep breath, Gabie squared her shoulders. It was a puzzle she'd look at later. Right now she had other things occupying her mind, such as being bait.

Switching onto the frequency, she found herself looking into Simon's thoughtful eyes as he glanced up from whatever he was studying on the control console.

He didn't look surprised to see her, but smiled and nodded. "Gabie."

Cripes. Did he know? He must know. Probably the whole Daamen crew knew that her cheating had been discovered and she'd ended up spending the night in Shamon's bed. It took all Gabie's determination not to blush.

"Simon." She nodded back. "I heard that Shamon's been trying to contact me?"

"He certainly has, lass. I'll just get him for you."

While he was gone, Gabie looked at the portion of control cabin that the viscomm showed, noting the big chairs. Big chairs for big frames. Everything was

neat and tidy. Not even a poster on the wall. It could certainly do with some decorating. A bit of colour, a few jokes pinned on the walls. Instead, it was functional. Pure function.

Gabie used her control cabin for games, chatting to friends, pretty much anything to do with computers and communication, and so did her crew. The control cabin was as much part of home as the rest of the ship.

Deep voices sounded, the sound of big boot treads drawing nearer, but she couldn't see the doorway of the traders control cabin. There was a flash of a brawny arm and muscle ribbed abdomen, and then Shamon sat down and looked her directly in the eyes. His hair was tied back haphazardly, one long lock of hair hanging over one massive shoulder.

Relief and strain combined in his brown eyes. "Gabs. Are you all right?"

"Fine." If you didn't count being torn in two by security and big-wig smugglers.

She could feel heat climb into her cheeks at the memory of that roguishly handsome face above her, the desire darkening his features as he surged into her. *Hoo boy*. Mentally she fanned herself. *Be still my pounding heart*.

"Gabie, that man you have on board. Emet."

Uh-oh. News travelled fast. "Shamon, I know what you're going to say—"

"He's a murderer. You have to get rid of him, notify the peacekeepers."

Alarm shot through Gabie. "You didn't do that, did you?"

"Of course not. You being found with a murderer onboard would cause you serious problems, especially being a smuggler." Shamon grimaced. "I know Emet isn't an immediate threat to you. I saw how sick he was. But you need to ditch him somewhere and call the peacekeepers to get him."

"Now, Shamon, I don't happen to believe he is a murderer."

"His face is plastered all over the wanted images!"

"True, but that doesn't mean I need to believe it."

Shamon's lips tightened. "You could be in serious danger."

“We chatted to Emet when we found him. I happen to believe his story. He’s been set-up, Shamon.”

“You can’t know for sure.”

“I know that he was injured and running long before that wanted image came out. Now don’t you find it odd that his master didn’t report him for murder almost immediately?”

“I don’t know what to think. All I know is you could be in serious danger and I’m not there to protect you.”

Whoa. Gabie blinked. “What?”

“You and your crew are alone with that man,” Shamon said. “Turn back. I’ll give you the co-ordinates to our ship and you can off-load him here. And I can make certain you’re all right.”

Cripes. Gabie regarded Shamon with new eyes. Was Illona correct after all? Shamon,” she began carefully. “Why are you so worried? You got what you won. I—”

Shamon’s eyes flashed. “Last night was more than a prize claiming, Gabie.”

“It was?” Her heart fluttered.

“Aye. I intend to see you again, and soon.”

A warm flush went through Gabie. “Well, nothing like being direct, is there?”

“I’m a direct kind of man,” he returned, his face relaxing. “I don’t see any point wasting time.”

This was new territory and Gabie felt like she could fall flat on her face at any second. A handsome hunk like Shamon openly declaring he intended to see her again soon. Who’d have thought it?

“And nay, ’tishn’t just for sex, though ’twas mind-blowing.” His grin was cocky and roguish all at once.

“No?” Her heart was thudding all over the inside of her chest.

“I want us to spend time together, get to know each other more.” Leaning forward, he studied her face.

Even though there were a million miles or more and two viscomms between them, Gabie could almost swear he was right in front of her in the flesh, she felt that weak-kneed.

“Uh—” She gathered her scattered thoughts and asked the only logical thing she could think of. “Shamon, how could that possibly work?”

“Distance is a minor detail.” Shamon shrugged. “We’ll check our schedules and make a time and place to meet.”

“You call that minor?” She laughed. “Trader, we don’t often cross paths, how the heck do you think we will now?”

“Because before we didn’t know when the other was in the vicinity. We could have passed within hours of each other, within mere miles.” Shamon was totally unconcerned and totally confident. “And now we have this relationship, we can make time to see each other, to know each other’s movements.”

Gabie’s eyes almost popped out of their sockets. “*Relationship?*”

“Aye.” His regard was steady and completely open. “After spending time with you, Gabs, I want to go further.”

“Further?” She nearly choked. “Don’t you think what happened last night was... far?”

His smile was a tinge carnal. “It can go further.”

Now she did fan herself with her hand. Ye gods, the man had a silver tongue in more ways than one. Though she had to admit, he intrigued her.

And face it, she’d never been so caught up in a man that she’d given him her virginity, yet last night she’d done just that. No regrets. And yes, if she was honest, she’d love to jump his bones again. And again. And heck, why not again? And consider again...

“You’re looking a little hot there, lass.” His voice had dropped, deepened even more, had a hint of smoky sensuality about it.

She sought to reason once more with him. “You’re a legit trader, Shamon, and I’m into private enterprise. How is *that* going to work?”

They looked at each other and the seconds lengthened into a full minute.

Then Shamon stated quietly, “While we’re seeing each other ’tis naught can be done, but when it goes further we will talk about it.”

“Goes further?” Gabie blinked, shock coursing through her. “Shamon, you can’t possibly mean—”

“One step at a time, lass.” Shamon smiled. “No sense creating problems before we’ve even begun.”

Oh, and she had huge problems, she just remembered.

“So send me your schedule,” Shamon said. “And I’ll see where our paths cross, and then we can work out meeting times.”

Gabie’s eyebrows arched. “Geez, you are bossy. I never realized that before. Good thing that comes out now.”

“’Tis a few things that will come out about both of us, Gabs.” His smile turned hot. “Some already has. I never guessed what a delightful little bundle you are in bed.”

Gabie went bright red.

Shamon laughed softly. “I’m looking forward to furthering our relationship, lass.”

“Hang on, hang on!” Gabie held up one hand, not sure if it was panic or desire warring inside her. “I never said I agreed to a relationship!”

“And you never said you didn’t. You did, however, throw forward some very valid questions which we’ve answered.” Shamon rubbed his nose with one finger, a twinkle in his eyes. “So send those schedules as soon as possible.”

“You’re so sure of yourself, aren’t you?” Gabie folded her arms, half laughing, half annoyed.

“I’m always sure when I know what I want.”

And he wanted her. If he kept looking at her like that she’d need a cold shower. She could almost feel the steam sizzling up from the seat she sat on.

“Meanwhile.” Seriousness chased the humour from his face. “You need to do something about Emet.”

More than happy to push the disturbing thought of a relationship—which she certainly hadn't agreed to—aside, Gabie focused on the new subject. "I told you I believe his version, and that was that he didn't murder anyone."

"You could be seriously hurt. How do you know you can trust him?"

"Because I've met some shady characters before, and I know when they're feeding me snarch crap. My gut tells me Emet is innocent."

"Then if he is innocent he needs to talk to the peacekeepers."

"He has no proof."

"So what are you going to do to get that proof?"

"Now, I never thought of that."

The glint in Shamon's eyes certainly wasn't humour.

The stubborn man wasn't going to let the subject go. Fine. Time to draw out the big guns. "I believe him. He's sick and can't look after himself. We'll get him better and then he can choose what he wants to do. End of story."

"Gabie—"

"And there's not a damn thing you can do about it." She smiled sweetly. "Because you are millions of miles away, you have no idea where I am, you can't tell the peacekeepers or I'll be done for harbouring a wanted criminal, and it's kind of hard to have a relationship when I'm in slavery to another man or rotting in Cardrak. So..." She fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Give up, honey."

A muscle jumped in his jaw and that only made her grin wider.

"One day very soon, wench, you and I will be in the same room," he finally managed to get out.

"Ooohhh, I am so worried."

He obviously didn't know whether to laugh or get angrier. His lips twitched, threatening to smile, while the glower wouldn't leave his eyes.

"Look, honey, I've been taking care of myself and my crew all this time without your advice and help. You're just going to have to trust me on this." She blew him a kiss.

“Fine.” He didn’t want to say it, she just knew, because he didn’t look satisfied.

“Good. See, you’re learning to give in to me already. That’s promising for a relationship.” Gabie laughed.

Before he could say anything she flicked off the frequency. Leaning back in the chair, she lifted her legs and crossed her ankles on the console. Linking her hands behind her head, she gazed out at the stars beyond the space shield.

Life sure took some interesting turns. This had to be one of the craziest for her yet. A law-abiding Daamen trader intent on a relationship with her and even weirder, the thought was tantalizing, and she was looking forward to meeting up with him again.

Well, there you go. One question already answered. She would meet up with Shamon again, see where things went between them. Why not? He was the nicest thing to happen to her yet and she wasn’t averse to finding out more about him.

It was also one of the most dangerous times of her life. Under Raznin’s hand, under the security’s harder hand, and with slaves locked in her cabins. Bait while two hungry sharks circled each other with the *Larceny* crew in-between.

Definitely not the time to be pursuing relationships.

Then again, how long could this possibly go on? Something else she had to ask Sabra when security contacted them.

Life used to be so uncomplicated. Gabie sighed.

~ * ~

They were heading for home. Shamon helped load the last cargo assignment onboard the trade ship. Frowning, he fixed the holding bar around the crate. He hadn’t heard from Gabie since he’d spoken to her the previous night. And she hadn’t sent him any schedules.

If she thought she was just going to disappear into the black space without giving their budding relationship a chance, the wench had another think coming. Shamon had contacts who would soon locate her position.

Hell, if she’d stated straight out that she didn’t want a relationship, that she wasn’t interested in him that way, he’d have given up. Mayhaps. Mayhaps not. Not. He grinned faintly. But the flush in her cheeks, her cheeky grin, and her

sparkling eyes while she'd talked to him had definitely not been a backing-off. Nay, the wench was interested. Intrigued. Whatever, he would take either and use it to further their relationship.

Heddam appeared in the doorway of the cargo hold.

"About time you showed up," Shamon said. "Slacking off while we work."

Mikal winked. "I think he fancied the buxom wench in the tavern and went back to spread his... er... love."

"You're just jealous, lad," Heddam returned. "And for your information, I've been getting some last minute details for Simon."

"Of course you were." Mikal laughed and walked past him down the ramp.

All traces of cheerfulness left Heddam's face and he walked into the cargo hold.

Shamon straightened slowly. "What's wrong?"

"Did Gabie mention that she had a visitor yesterday morn?"

"Nay." Now what trouble had the wench gotten into? "'Twasn't Michel?"

"Nay." Heddam leaned one arm on the crate, heavy biceps bulging. "Sabra and Freeman were there, though."

Just the names were enough to strike fear into Shamon's gut. "If they both visited Gabie, 'twouldn't be friendly."

"Aye." Heddam nodded.

"How did you find out?"

"One of the merchants saw them early yesterday morn. He was going for an early morning stroll and knows Gabie. He saw three people enter their spaceship, and he remembered seeing them at the Enforcement Building. He described them and Shamon, 'twas definitely those two, along with Michel."

'Twas bad. Two security officers aboard a smuggler's ship. Sabra wouldn't bother with small pickings like Gabie unless there was something else involved. Shamon looked over at the small, inconspicuous, unmarked IPC security planet craft that was docked in the docking bay.

Something bad.

It had to be Emet. Was that why Gabie hadn't sent her travel schedule?

Simon looked up when Shamon strode down the ramp. "Everything all right?"

"Sabra was spotted going into Gabie's spaceship yesterday," Shamon replied tersely.

"Sabra?" Simon's brows rose in surprise. "What would she want with the little smuggler?"

"Exactly. And 'twasn't long after that Gabie left the planet."

"Really?" Simon also looked towards the IPC security planet craft.

As they both looked, Sabra walked out of the door and jumped lithely down the steps to the ground. She had one hand at her ear and was talking, obviously into a communicator.

Was she in touch with Gabie? And if so, it could only be dangerous.

Shamon had to know. Fear clenched his gut at just the thought of Gabie being in danger. Was she safe? Was she even now lying in a broken, bleeding heap?

"You've gone pale." Concerned, Simon laid his hand on Shamon's shoulder. "Shamon?"

"I have to talk to her. To Sabra." Shamon started towards the smaller planet craft, only to remember he was working. He swung back. "Simon, I'm sorry. I have to—"

Simon waved him away. "Go. In your place I would."

He needed no second bidding. Long legs eating up the distance between them, he bore down on Sabra.

Canny wench that she was, she took one look at his face, said something into the communicator in her ear, stopped talking and waited for him. She stood easily but there was a leashed threat about her, something quiet and patient waiting to spring.

Wasting no time, Shamon stopped directly before her, making her tip her head back to look up at him. "What did you want with Gabie?"

Ten

Those all-seeing cobalt eyes studied him steadily before she replied, “’Twas just a little personal business, Shamon. Nothing to get uptight about.”

“Security and a smuggler together ’tis certainly something to get uptight about.”

“Security has investigated smugglers before.”

Shamon’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t mess with me, wench. Gabie as a smuggler is no threat to the galaxy. She’d tell you that herself. She’s small time.”

Sabra arched one brow.

“Security isn’t interested in small time.” Bracing his hands on his hips, Shamon frowned down at Sabra. “What did you want with her?”

In no way intimidated, Sabra replied coolly, “’Tisn’t your business, Shamon, so back off.”

“I’m making it my business.” He was about to mention Emet, but something stopped him. If Emet hadn’t hurt Gabie, his presence on her ship could very well make her situation worse. But neither was he going to give up.

“’Tis the problem with you traders, you latch on to some wench and think you’re owed explanations.”

“Tell me.”

“Nay.” She started to turn away. “Go back to your work and let me do mine.”

“Fine. I know some of what’s happening and I have contacts. I can get word to Gabie, but ’twon’t necessarily be on a secured frequency, because after all, I don’t know her frequency and I had to get some... unscrupulous... help in contacting her earlier.” Shamon watched as Sabra went still. “I’m sure the message that security is on her tail will spread to not only Gabie, but the whole galaxy.”

Sabra glanced over her shoulder. "You wouldn't put Gabie in danger."

"Mayhaps I'll be saving her tail."

"Go home, Shamon."

Anger spiked through Shamon as Sabra walked back towards her planet craft. Two long strides had him close enough to wrap his hand around her upper arm and swing her back around. He knew it was only because she knew who 'twas that she didn't punch him out with one of her deadly moves. Instead, she scowled up at him.

"I won't be giving up, Sabra," he stated between clenched teeth.

"Problem?" A voice queried from the doorway.

Shamon didn't even bother to glance up at Freeman. "'Twill be if someone doesn't tell me about Gabie's involvement with security."

"Ahhh," Freeman said.

Sabra looked down at her arm. "Get your hands off me, Shamon."

"Tell me."

"Don't make me hurt you."

"Tell me."

"What's going on here?" Michel's voice came from behind Shamon.

"A friendly discussion between friends," Heddam's voice also came from behind Shamon.

"Bloody wonderful." Sabra sucked in an angry breath. "The whole happy mob is here."

"Sabra?" Michel queried. "Freeman?"

"Just waiting for the boss to decide what she's going to do next," Freeman answered cheerfully.

"Back off, Shamon," Sabra growled.

“Nay. Tell me about Gabie.”

“Gabie?” Michel said in surprise from behind Shamon.

“Aye.” Shamon didn’t take his gaze from Sabra.

“I’m telling you nothing,” she replied coldly.

“’Tis to do with the outlaw?”

“Outlaw?” The wench scarcely missed a beat. “Aye. The outlaw. What’s his name again...?”

He had her. “I must be mistaken.” Shamon took a step back.

“Nay, you’re not mistaken.” Sabra tapped her chin. “Freeman, what was the outlaw’s name? ’Tis slipped my mind.”

“I don’t recall.”

Sabra looked expectantly at Shamon and satisfaction filled him. Security knew nothing about the outlaw hidden on Gabie’s ship, so he wasn’t the threat. Mayhaps. But for certain Gabie was mixed up with security in something and ’twas bad. ’Twas always bad to be mixed up with security.

Shamon’s smile was anything but congenial. “Tit for tat, lass.”

Sabra’s eyes narrowed. The wench was no fool. “What do you know of an outlaw?”

“What do you know of Gabie?” He folded his arms, his biceps bunching.

“’Tis not your business.”

“Gabie,” he stated quietly, “is my business.”

“She’s a no-good smuggler.”

“She’s my lover.”

Well there ’twas, all laid bare. Eyes flashing cobalt fire, Sabra sucked in a deep breath through gritted her teeth. The wench wasn’t impressed.

“And as my lover,” Shamon continued relentlessly, “her business is my business, especially if ’tis dangerous business. Now you either let me in on what ’tis happening, wench, or I’ll be finding out myself. Only ’twon’t be so private.”

“Why,” Sabra snarled, “do you bloody traders always fall for the worst wenches?”

“Lucky, I guess,” he replied easily. “Consider your own husband.”

Oh aye, he had the stubborn wench now.

“Who is the outlaw you speak of?” Sabra demanded.

“Nay. You give me some information first, wench.” Shamon rocked back on his heels, his gaze never leaving hers. “A little trade-off.”

“Spoken like a true Daamen,” Freeman commented in amusement.

Sabra glared at Shamon and he could just about see her brain ticking, turning over her options.

Seconds passed until she finally looked at Freeman. “Enter Shamon’s body pattern in the security shield”

Within minutes Shamon was seated in the dining cabin of the IPC security ship. It seemed they never rested, for a huge radar screen was set in one wall and an intergalactic map was set in the other wall. Freeman flicked all the screens to blank as Shamon walked in. A scanner was fixed above the kitchen bench. Several handtronics sat on the table beside two used mugs. A plate with crumbs lay in the middle of the table.

The dining cabin was small and functional.

Arms folded and her expression controlled, Sabra leaned back against the bench. “Tell me about this outlaw.”

“Oh nay, lass. You tell me first about Gabie and her involvement with you.”

“Tit for tat you said.”

“You first.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Hell, nay. I know you Sabra. I hold a key you may want.” Shamon mimed unlocking with a key. “You have information I want. You first.”

She exchanged glances with Freeman, who shrugged and said, “You’re the boss.”

“You backing out now, lass?” Shamon pushed.

“I’m figuring how much to tell you.”

“You tell me what I need to know. You tell me about Gabie’s involvement in whatever ’tis you’re investigating.”

“I’m going to tell Cam what an arse you are, Shamon.”

“He already knows, and in my position he’d do the same.” Settling in the chair, Shamon pinned her with a steady gaze. “Give.”

“’Tis all really very simple,” Sabra replied. “We’re investigating a slave ring and Gabie has had contact with some of those involved in the ring.”

“A real *link*.” Freeman smirked.

Shamon glanced at him curiously.

“Ignore him,” Sabra said. “Gabie and her crew agreed to work with us to find the main ringleaders of the smuggling ring.”

“She *agreed*?” Somehow Shamon doubted that.

“She took a little persuading but eventually she saw it our way.”

“You threatened her.”

“Who, me?”

“Aye, you.”

“I’m a little shocked you’d think such a thing.”

Shamon just looked at her unblinkingly.

“Anyway.” Sabra shrugged. “There you have it. Your turn.”

“Oh nay. ’Tis not it.” Shamon didn’t budge an inch. “Where is she headed?”

“She’s being monitored and we’re in contact with her. *Your* turn.”

Studying her, Shamon stroked his jaw consideringly. “The wench is in danger.”

“Not if she does as she’s told.”

“Do you have anyone with her?”

“Her crew. Cargo.”

Leaning forward, Shamon’s eyes narrowed. “Cargo as in human cargo?”

Sabra shrugged.

Shamon surged up from the chair. “You made her carry *human* cargo? *Slaves*?”

“I didn’t make her. That was the cargo on offer from one of the links.”

“If she’s caught—”

“If she’s caught security will intervene. She’s safe.”

“*Safe*?” Smoke was practically coming from Shamon’s ears. “Sending Gabie and her friends into a den of illegal slavery is about as safe as sticking their hands out the space shield in space! Have you lost your mind?”

Sabra looked at him blankly.

“Gabie and her friends are harmless, and to involve them in this is—is—unacceptable!” Shoving his fists on his hip, he stated furiously, “I’m coming with you.”

“What?”

“Somehow you are going to get me aboard the *Larceny*.”

“Not happening.”

“You are not sending that lass into a nest of slavers without me to protect her!”

“Take it easy, trader. Gabie’s not exactly going into a nest.”

“Oh? Then what is she going into?”

“Remains to be seen.”

“She could be blown from the sky or worse if her cover is discovered!”

Crossing to the radar, Sabra flicked a switch and a section of it flared to life. “The *Larceny* is being monitored. Security is scattered throughout the area in different guises. She runs into trouble, we’ll be there.”

“And how long would that be?”

“Gosh, let me think,” Sabra returned sarcastically. “It’s a big universe out there.”

“Damn it!” Shamon slammed his fist on the table, ignoring the little crack it gave.

Unimpressed and unfazed, Sabra regarded him steadily.

“Why Gabie?”

“Because she was contacted. Because she’s the one likely to get through without being checked. Because she’s the one most overlooked because of her little gadgets. Just because.” Sabra arched one brow. “Now, about that outlaw...”

Shamon glared at her. “She knows a lot. Comes from working in the Outlaw Sector.”

“Give me more than that.”

“She met one recently, helped him out.”

“You better have more than that.”

“’Tis all I’ve got.”

Eyes blazing, Sabra snapped upright.

“And by the way,” Shamon added. “You’re taking me with you on this trip.”

“You’re not coming!”

“Then you’re keeping me informed of everything that happens.”

Striding across the small cabin, Sabra stopped, scowled angrily up at him and jabbed him in the chest with one stiff finger. “You’re riding thin ice, Shamon. I

could have your arse slung in the Enforcement Building in seconds. You keep out of this and keep your bloody nose clean, you hear me?"

Bending down so that they were almost nose to nose, Shamon growled back, "'Tis obvious Cam hasn't been keeping you in hand." Swinging away on his heel, he strode from the cabin.

Sabra's cursing was music to his ears. Freeman's laughter echoed in the corridor.

Heddam was waiting for him when he stormed down the ramp. He didn't ask anything, but his brows rose inquiringly and he fell into step beside Shamon as he headed for the trade ship.

The traders looked up from their midday meal as Shamon came storming into the dining cabin.

"Trouble?" Simon asked quietly.

"Gabie," Shamon informed them all, "is over her head in trouble."

~ * ~

Mellar checked his appearance in the full-length mirror.

Behind him, Cheran studied his nails and waited patiently.

"What do you think?"

Cheran looked up. "You look regal as always."

"That is the impression I wish to give." Mellar crossed to the desk. "But what else?"

"You look vain. Pristine. As though any thought of murdering your wife would be beyond you."

Mellar smiled. "Very good." Sliding the heavy gold rings on his fingers, he admired the sparkle in the light. "Very, very good." He straightened the high neck of his collar. "Then let us proceed to my dear, departed wife's memorial. I can't wait to see her body turned to ash."

~ * ~

“They’re on course,” Tason informed Raznin.

“She’d be too worried not to be.” Leaning against the door frame, Raznin smiled in satisfaction. “Her crew was a good bargaining tool.”

Turning the chair to view his boss clearly, Tason said what they both knew. “If she’d been on her own, she might have run and hidden.”

“Yep. Her soft spot is her friends.” Raznin shook his head. “One should never be loyal to anyone but oneself.”

Well, wasn’t that handy to know. Tason stared at the empty doorway for a long time after Raznin left.

~ * ~

“These are the exact coordinates given to you by Raznin?”

“No, I made them up.”

“Sarcasm becomes you, Gabie, you know that?”

“I’m so pleased I meet with your approval, Sabra.” Gabie drummed her fingertips on the console as she looked at Sabra on the viscomm screen.

“So how many stops will you have to make on the way?”

“Four. All to refuel and restock. You know, our stores are depleting a lot faster with five extra mouths to feed.” Gabie’s smile was all teeth. “I wasn’t prepared for guests.”

Sabra, curse the security office, didn’t even blink. “Send me the coordinates now.”

“Oh, yes. At once. Of course. It’s so nice obeying orders when I’ve been a free agent for so long. I don’t know how I ever did it.” Feeling more ill-humoured by the minute, Gabie scanned the coordinates and sent them to Sabra’s viscomm. “Anything else I can run and do for you?”

“Aye. Scan all the slaves and send the picture images to me.”

“Oh, what fun.” Turning in her chair, Gabie yelled, “Misha!”

Misha stuck her head around the door. “You bellowed?”

“Sabra wants the slaves scanned and the pics sent through to her.”

“All righty.” Misha disappeared.

Turning back to the viscomm, Gabie smiled sweetly. “Do I get a gold star?”

A faint twinkle appeared in Sabra’s eyes. “You might get silver.”

“On my God, there is another emotion you have besides that of being basically a real bitch.”

Sabra laughed outright.

Cripes, Gabie couldn’t even get the woman angry. How pathetic was it that all she wanted to do was rile the security officer up? Right now, it was what she wanted to do just for the hell of it, and to vent her ill humour.

Stars, she hated being at the beck and call of someone else.

“When this is over,” she said tartly, “I’ll kick your arse.”

“Really?” Amusement lurked in Sabra’s eyes. “You and what galactic army?”

“Don’t worry, I have friends for hire.”

“You’re very brave when there’s a few million miles of space between us, smuggler.”

“Distance does a lot of things for my bravery.”

Freeman’s face appeared behind Sabra’s shoulder. “After this little adventure, Gabie, how about you and I get together?”

“How about I break your neck?”

“I’ve heard you’ll run from a fight if you can. I don’t think I’m in danger.”

“Fine. I’ll get Shamon to break your neck.”

“Yeah, that *will* make me scared.”

“You are such a moron.”

“If you fought with your tongue instead of running with your feet, you’d slay an army of outlaws.”

“Oh ha-ha.” And if she wasn’t forced to be in such a lousy position, Gabie could almost find herself liking Freeman. The man was a total arse and a tease, but good-humoured. Unless that was a front, too.

Probably was. He was probably programmed to be sweet and charm the ladies.

Misha came back with a tiny disc which she handed to Gabie. Knowing that Sabra was waiting for the pics, Gabie took great childish delight in checking through the pics first, having a real good look at them all and making her wait before finally entering the pics into the system. One click of a button and the pics were on their way to Sabra’s viscomm.

“Well, if that’s it, I have to go,” Gabie said. “Things to do, slaves to smuggle. You know how it is.” She flicked the switch and cut communications with the IPC security ship.

“You’ve not met these people yet,” Misha remarked.

“No. I’m trying to avoid it.”

“I noticed.”

“Huh?”

“You never volunteer to bring them their meals or stand guard since they boarded yesterday.”

“Perks of being captain, honey.”

Misha grunted.

“So, how’s Emet doing?” Gabie stood up and stretched leisurely.

“He’s a bit better. Lucid. Olin says his wound is healing well.”

“Goodo.” Gazing at nothing in particular, Gabie rubbed her chin.

“Now what?” Misha queried.

“Now we fly to our first stop over, refuel and restore and continue. I want to get this thing over with, and then we’re all going to disappear for a while.”

One white brow arched. “Oh, really? You think the Daamen trader is going to let you simply disappear?”

Damn it. Her friend knew. Gabie feigned a yawn.

“I know you spent the night with Shamon,” Misha continued with a small smirk.

“You don’t know anything.”

“One look at your face yesterday morn and I knew. I *knew*.”

Gabie rolled her eyes and picked up the book sitting on the console.

“So, was he as good a ride as Illona reckons?”

“How would Illona know?” Gabie returned a trifle too tartly, and cleared her throat. “Illona wanted to bed him but he never tussled with her in the sheets. She told us that already.”

“She reckons she’s a good judge of character and that Shamon would be a hot lover.” Misha followed her from the cabin. “So, was she right?”

Oh, cripes, yes. “I wouldn’t know.”

“You’re blushing.”

“Keep this up and you’ll be crying, because I’m going to hurt you.”

“My, my, my.” Misha kept pace with her. “A little defensive, aren’t we?”

Gabie ignored her.

“So when are you seeing him again?”

Gabie turned into her cabin. “I’m not sure.” And that didn’t feel good, either.

Misha followed her. “Soon?”

“How can it be soon?” Gabie threw the book on her bunk. “Look at the mess we’re in. How can I meet him?”

“Well, we are trying to maintain a normal routine and behaviour, and that would include meeting him if we saw him. We start avoiding people, simply landing, refuelling and restocking and taking off again, and we’re going to attract attention.”

Turning, Gabie looked at her. “Sometimes you’re too darned smart.”

“Just a hidden talent.” Misha buffed her nails on her shirt. “So, you seeing him again soon?”

“Well, he did want our schedule...”

“So we’ll send them to him.”

“Stop right there. I don’t want to unwittingly drag him into the middle of something.”

“Why would he be in the middle of something? Our delivery is after four stops. See him before our fourth stop. Besides,” Misha held up one finger, “That’ll make him less likely to hunt you down.”

Now there was a delicious thought. Hunted down by Shamon. A little streak of heat went right through Gabie.

Then she blinked, bringing her friend’s face into focus. “Hang on. What makes you think he’d hunt me down?”

The smile that crept across the pretty albino’s face was almost gentle. “Because I’ve seen the way he looks at you. That giant trader wants you, Gabie. He wants you bad. He won’t let you just disappear.”

“Cripes, when did you become such an authority on the subject?”

“I observe more than you think.” Misha tapped her forehead.

“You trying to tell me you have the third eye?”

“No, Gabie. I’m pointing to my eyes.”

“That’s your forehead.”

“I’m not about to poke myself in the eye because you need a true visual view.”

“It would be amusing.”

About to say something else, they were diverted by a moan from across the corridor. Immediately they hurried out of the cabin and into the one Emet was lying in.

It didn’t bypass Gabie’s notice that Misha went straight to the man lying in the bunk, her hand gently smoothing the hair back from his face, her face softening.

Well, how about that? Gabie looked from Misha to Emet, to find him smiling slightly up into her friend's face. And his smile was gentle.

Whoa. Gabie blinked.

"Are you all right, Emet?" Misha asked softly.

"Just a little twinge when I shifted. Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb anyone."

"You didn't," she replied, reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table.

Slipping one arm behind his shoulders, she helped him sit up and held the glass to his lips. Emet placed his own trembling hand at the base of it, but Misha kept hold, steadying it as he drank. When he'd finished, she eased him back down onto the mattress. The tenderness of her expression struck Gabie.

Hells bells, her friend was halfway in love with the claimed, wanted outlaw.

Misha spoke softly to Emet, and they both laughed, Emet weakly, Misha with tender amusement.

Seeing that they were both preoccupied with each other, Gabie backed out of the cabin and half shut the door.

Turning, she saw Olin watching her through sleep fogged eyes. Obviously he'd just awoken from his nap.

Pulling him aside, she pointed to the cabin door and whispered, "When did that happen?"

He scratched his head and yawned. "Quickly."

"No shit? How come I didn't know about it?"

"You were too busy with your Daamen trader." Olin started for the dining cabin. "Women."

Standing in the corridor, Gabie scratched her head. Things were taking a weird turn. A very weird turn. She was smuggling human cargo, she had a wanted, claimed outlaw onboard. Her friend was falling in love with said claimed, wanted outlaw. She herself was lusting after a Daamen trader, and she was the chew toy between two powerful groups.

Very, very weird. Gabie shook her head. Only one thing for it. Read a book and try to forget about the whole thing for a while.

~ * ~

Shamon looked at the schedule that Gabie had sent to the viscomm while the traders had been sleeping. The schedule didn't suit him. Gabie was heading in the opposite direction compared to where the trade ship was heading. The *Larceny* was heading towards the Outlaw Sector, while the Daamen trade ship was heading further into the Lawful Sector towards home.

Leaning back in the chair, he looked grimly at the viscomm. Four scheduled stops. He could get onboard during one of those stops, except that Sabra was right. His presence would be an immediate alarm for smugglers. He was too big to hide anywhere... then again, the *Larceny* probably had hiding spots no one but the crew knew about.

And he'd be there to protect Gabie.

But he could also provoke a worse attack. Gabie was a valuable asset to both the big smugglers and security. Aye, he wanted to protect her, but his presence could have the opposite effect.

Damn it.

Blowing out a breath, he propped his heels up on the console and gazed out through the space shield at the stars in the black beyond while he thought through the problem.

Should he tell Gabie that he knew what she was doing? Would that make her avoid him? Aye, probably 'twould. She'd agreed to meet him, but if she had an inkling he was trying to get close to her to protect her, she'd likely cut off communications. It didn't matter, he could get her tracked down, but he'd rather she came to him of her own free will.

'Twas a good sign that she still wanted to see him, even though she was in the grip of security. But still, he wanted to be on hand to protect her if the need arose. Aye, security was a tough bunch and could handle almost anything, but still 'twasn't *him* with Gabie. But he did have another plan...

Switching frequencies on the viscomm, he did a search of other trade ships in the areas Gabie had scheduled as stops. There were two ships. They could notify

him when they saw her ship land and take off, but that would be it. 'Twas no way Shamon could involve his friends in anything dangerous. Nay. He'd have to do that himself.

He started searching through small space crafts nearby that he could lease or buy. There were several but none he really fancied, though what choice did he have? Besides which, he had to get ships leave from Simon, though he knew 'twouldn't be an issue. One thing the traders did understand was protecting the wenches they loved.

Clicking on one of the small space crafts, he studied the description.

"Thinking of going somewhere?" Simon drawled from behind him.

Shamon glanced up as his friend and captain sat down in the chair beside him. "Gabie's scheduled stops aren't in the same direction as ours. I have to go after her, Simon."

"You won't be popular with security."

Shamon shrugged.

"What are Gabie's scheduled stops?"

Shamon brought the schedule up on screen.

Simon studied them and grinned slowly. "Well, what do you know. Seems 'tis your lucky day, friend."

"What?"

"I was informed just now that my wife, Des, has been called off duty and will just happen to be at Gabie's third stop."

"She must be on watch there for her arrival."

"I'd say so. She didn't say."

Nay, she wouldn't. Even their husbands didn't know exactly what their wives were up to, though Simon would be able to have a good guess now.

"So we're heading for the planet Des is on now."

Shamon looked at him. "You're turning the ship around?"

“Aye. I’ve spoken to the crew and they don’t mind diverting. ’Twill put us two weeks behind getting home.” Entering the change of co-ordinations into the control panel, Simon set the new direction. “The crew and I did a deal. They’ll give me that time in trade for the extra two weeks at home. It suits us all.”

Aye, Shamon could see his crew mates understanding Simon’s desire to see his wife. Even when home on Daamen, he didn’t see her as often as the other men saw their wives, not when she was working. When she was home, it was for longer stretches and Simon stayed with her, just as Cam did. Usually someone else either took over as temporary captain of Simon’s ship and went off to do his trading, or else the whole crew spent more time at home. It worked for them all.

And it meant Shamon would get to see Gabie without having to leave the trade ship. There would be no alarms raised amongst whatever outlaws Gabie was dealing.

“So you see, ’tis no need to leave us.” Lifting his arms, Simon linked his hands behind his head and regarded Shamon seriously. “This little wench means a lot to you.”

“I’m going to wed her,” Shamon replied bluntly. “And pack her away for safe keeping.”

A twinkle appeared in Simon’s eyes. “Have you told her this?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“She knows we’re in a relationship.”

“She knows because you *told* her.”

“Aye.”

Simon laughed. “And she just went along with it?”

“She tried a few reasonable arguments and I gave reasonable solutions.” Leaning back in the chair, Shamon crossed one ankle over the opposite knee and folded his arms. “She is the only wench for me, Simon, strange as that sounds.”

Simon held his hands up, palms out. “Friend, when I see the wenches we’ve ended up claiming as our own, nothing surprises me anymore.”

Shamon grinned. “They are an interesting mix of wenches.”

Simon’s smile faded and his expression became serious. “Shamon, I’m behind you on this. We all are. I won’t interfere in security business, ’tis an agreement I am in with Des, just as Cam is with Sabra. Just as all the wives and husbands are of their security partners. But I will help you as much as I can, you know that, right?”

Shamon smiled at him. “Aye, I know. And I wouldn’t ask you to do anything that would put you in direct confrontation with Des. Getting between a husband and wife is not good.”

“Of course...” Simon’s gaze drifted to the wall above Shamon’s head. “If I happen to stumble across any information that might not exactly be... you know... confidential. Like sort of overhearing something that might help without back lashing against anyone... well, that might happen and I might pass it on to you. You know. Just out of interest.”

Friends were God’s gift to people. “I appreciate that, friend.” Reaching forward, Shamon gripped Simon’s upper arm for a few seconds. “I really do.”

Simon smiled. “You all risked your lives to help me rescue my Des. ’Tis no way I would let you do this alone. I’ll help where I can and if that means transport, well, we’re all behind you.”

“This stop is good.”

“Further if needed.”

“A week—”

“We agreed on a week for this, but we’ve all been discussing things and if it means to save your wench we need to travel further, then we’re all behind you, Shamon.”

“I don’t know how dangerous this could get—”

“Did that ever stop us before?” Simon grinned faintly. “The men say ’tis time some wench caught you, Shamon, and they don’t want to miss you falling down that steep, slippery slope to matrimony. And they’re not adverse to a little intrigue and danger along the way. Heddam reckons ’tis the only thing that sparks up these trade trips, waiting to see which one of us will be the next to fall hard for some wild, unpredictable wench we’ll have to rescue.”

“Gabie would not be pleased to hear herself described as such.” Shamon couldn’t stop a guffaw. “And if those other wild, unpredictable wenches you all wed heard that description, ’twould be you menfolk in danger!”

“’Tis why we’re wise enough to say it only amongst ourselves.” Simon checked the coordinates once more. “We won’t get to the first two scheduled stops in time for you to meet Gabie, but by continuing while she’s stopping to refuel and restock, we should make up the time between our ship and the *Larceny* and land within a few hours of them at the third stop.”

“I’ll let her know.” Shamon looked up as Simon stood. “Thank you. All of you.”

“Don’t get maudlin on us, Shamon. It makes us ill.” With a grin, Simon clapped him hard on the shoulder and left the cabin.

~ * ~

The people in the settlement shivered and gazed up at the towering mountains. Isolated from most of the other settlements, reviled, regarded with suspicion, they huddled amongst the poor remnants of their settlement and eked out a living of sorts amongst the craggy rocks.

A ship zoomed low overhead and as one they withdrew into the shadows, following the ship’s progress with worried eyes.

Worry and hate and despair.

~ * ~

“What I’d like to know,” Gabie said, “is how you got my frequency.”

“Lass, your frequency is all I can think about.” Shamon grinned at her through the viscomm.

“Spill the beans, trader. Only a few people have my frequency.”

“I had it. I tuned your frequency right in to my satisfaction.”

“You have a one track mind, do you know that?”

“Only for you, my little smuggler.”

Gabie tapped the console sternly, fighting her answering grin. “Don’t tell me you shagged Illona for the information.”

Shamon actually paled. “Nay!”

“Kidding. How did you get it?”

“I have my ways.”

“Let me guess. Somewhere on your travels you picked up some hint on how to lock in.” Gabie’s eyes narrowed on a sudden thought. “You have illegal tracking equipment aboard!”

“Lass, I’m wounded. We’re law-abiding traders.”

“With some very dubious wives.” Gabie tapped the screen right where his nose was. “Someone has been doing little touch-ups to your equipment.”

Shamon leered.

Gabie grinned. “You know what I mean.”

“No illegal touch-ups,” Shamon said.

“Then somehow you got someone to give you my frequency.”

He waggled his eyebrows.

Yep, Gabie knew it. Somehow, Shamon had gotten her frequency from someone. And she could just about make a guess who. Sonja, now married to a Daamen trader, was once captain of the space pirates of which Illona was a crew member. No doubt Shamon had spoken to Red, who had spoken to Sonja, who had spoken to Illona, who had spoken to Shamon.

What a nice little circle.

“Sonja,” she said.

Shamon just smiled innocently, though he looked anything but with those wickedly dancing eyes.

“So, lass, we’re going to be on the same planet as you for your third scheduled stop, day after tomorrow.” His grin turned as wicked as the expression in his eyes. “Where shall we meet? My bed or yours?”

“Oh, my goodness, you do know how to fluster me.” Fanning her face, she dropped her gaze in mock modesty.

“I promise to fluster you even more.” He lazily ran his gaze over her. “Hmmm. You know, I can see you from the waist up, lounging back in that captain’s chair. And you’re wearing a nightgown.”

Oh-ho. What is he up to? Gabie arched her brows.

“How about you drop one of those little straps from your shoulders?”

“You want me to strip for you?”

“Aye, but I was thinking we’d start slowly. Sort of... you know...” He winked roguishly. “Stretch out the anticipation.”

“Viscomm sex.” Resting her folded arms on the console, Gabie leaned forward, giving him the perfect eyeful of her cleavage under the silky bodice of her low-cut nightgown.

Shamon’s gaze dropped to her very ample cleavage and boy, did he look hungry.

Chewing her bottom lips lightly, Gabie ran a finger across the swell of one breast. “You know, I am really a good girl, Shamon. I don’t think viscomm sex is a good thing.”

“Oh, trust me, ’tis very good,” Shamon breathed, and the heat in his gaze when he transferred his attention from her breasts to her face would have set her on fire if it could have touched her.

Warmth shot through her, zinging from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. “How about we play show and tell?”

“Sure.” His grin was all predatory passion. “You first.”

“Tut-tut. I already showed you something.” She slid a finger beneath the bodice of the nightgown and rubbed teasingly. “Your turn now.”

Cripes, teasing this giant sexually was such fun. She thought he was actually going to growl; his eyes glittered with banked lust and a touch of frustration.

Mind you, she was teasing herself as well. Her nipples were pebbling, spiking against the silky bodice. Shamon’s heated gaze didn’t miss it.

“Two things,” she said. “I showed you two things. Now off with your pants and stand up.”

Shamon stared at her for several seconds then he grinned widely. “Hey, ’tis not fair. You showed me hints. I’d be giving you an eyeful.”

She licked her lips. “Honey, you could give me an eyeful, but I’ll be imagining a handful.” Cupping her palm, she moved it as though weighing something.

His strong cheekbones flushed slightly, but it was with desire, not embarrassment. “Lass, you asked for it.” Abruptly he stood up and edged backwards.

Propping her chin in one hand, Gabie mentally rubbed her hands gleefully as Shamon moved far enough back that she could see him from his strong thighs to the top of his head. That long, shaggy hair spilled over his broad shoulders, and his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his pants.

His smile was hedonistic.

“Now, you’ll have to talk me through this viscomm sex,” Gabie said, her blood starting to flow heatedly even as her sense of fun tickled her. “I’ve not done it before.” And she couldn’t wait to try it.

Stars, she was game to try anything with Shamon. How odd was that?

“Oh lass, I can’t wait,” Simon returned. “But I’m going to break you in slowly.”

Turning slowly to present her with his broad, muscled back, he looked over his shoulder and smiled wickedly. Slowly, so very slowly, he inched his pants down his lean hips.

Gabie’s mouth went dry. “Is this where I start to yell ‘take it off!’?”

“Yell all you want, baby,” he replied huskily. “Yell on the viscomm, because when you’re with me in the flesh, you’ll be screaming.”

“Oh boy. Is this sex talk?” She winked. “Naughty talk?”

“You wicked little wench.” He winked back. “It can get a lot naughtier than that.”

“Do tell? And continue pulling those pants down while you tell.” *Oh yes, please, take ’em off!*

“Tsk, ts, ts. Such an impatient little wench.” The pants inched down slowly, revealing the beginnings of his hard, muscled buttocks.

“You know,” Gabie said conversationally. “If you were doing that in front of me right now—I mean here in the cabin with me—I just might want to trace that crease between those luscious buns of yours.”

Shamon halted for second, and then he started laughing, low and deep. And he continued to lower those pants, and—

“Hey, stop right there!”

“Wanting to linger, lass?”

“No. I want to get a closer look at that scar on your bum cheek.” Gabie raised her brows. “How’d you get that scar?”

“In a very manly way,” he replied seriously, though a twinkle in his eyes told another story. “During a fight.”

“Someone slashed you on the arse? Not very sporting.”

“Trust me, a slash on my arse was the least of my worries right then. I’ll tell you about it someday.”

“Okay. And someday I’ll kiss that scar all better.”

The muscles in his back and arms flexed as he drew in a deep breath. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Gabie grinned widely.

“And I can’t wait,” he almost growled.

“You’ll have to,” Misha said from behind her.

Startled, Shamon jerked up his pants, swung around and stared over Gabie’s shoulder. Red flushed his cheeks. Okay, now he was embarrassed. *Aw, how cute.*

Gabie looked over her shoulder. “Go away. I’m being educated.”

“Oh, you really want to come, trust me,” Misha said. “Turn off your sex object and let’s go.”

Her albino friend might be smiling but her eyes were serious. Something was wrong, and considering what they were involved in, it could be very wrong. Play time was over.

With a sigh, Gabie turned back to the viscomm, to find Shamon watching her, his expression now serious. “Sorry, Shamon. Duty calls.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “Just something I need to attend to.”

“Are you all right?” Shamon’s gaze shifted to where Misha hovered in the doorway.

“Just a captain’s job,” Misha said, but her eyes narrowed slightly as she studied Shamon. “Nice arse, by the way.”

Give the man credit, he didn’t flinch. Instead, he looked at Gabie. “Call me back.”

“Depends what’s happening—”

“Just call me.”

“Shamon, I’ll contact you tomorrow.” Gabie reached for the switch. “Playtime is over, honey.”

Stunned, his eyes widened. “Gabie! ‘Tis not the playtime I’m worried about!”

“You’re worried about us?” She smiled. “Honey, you’re so sweet. Until tomorrow, then.”

She flicked the switch and Shamon’s protests were cut short. The screen went blank.

“This better be good.” Gabie pushed up from the chair.

“Sorry to disturb your sex play,” Misha returned. “Some things are more important.”

“Is that sarcasm I hear?” Gabie passed her, looking for the source of her concern.

“What? From me?” Misha walked beside her, her own nightgown cut scandalously high, barely covering the tops of her shapely thighs.

“Perish the thought. Now what’s the problem?”

“Rose is sick.”

“Rose?”

“One of our cargo.”

“You know their names?”

“They are people, Gabie. Get over it.”

“I try not to think of anything like that.”

“Geez, you do head-in-the-sand really well.”

“I try to perfect it.” Stopping before the door, Gabie sighed. “I’m trying not to get too involved with them. Involvement means trouble. Just do the job.”

Misha sneered at her. “Is that why I saw you estimating the distance between the last stop and the Outlaw Sector?”

“Hey, I was just thinking that if things went belly-up, a couple of them—like all five—just might happen to slip loose close to the Outlaw Sector and disappear.”

“That’s you, Gabie. Big, bad smuggler. Thinking with your heart, not your head. What about us if things go belly up?”

“Trust me, the Outlaw Sector estimation was for us, too.”

Misha grinned at her. “You do love us.”

“Just trying to be prepared.”

“Prepare yourself for this, then.” The humour in Misha’s eyes disappeared and opening the cabin door she stepped inside.

Following her, Gabie glanced around the cabin. One of the women was sitting on the edge of the bunk holding a damp cloth to the face of the woman lying down. The third woman was hovering besides her holding a bowl of water. They looked up when Gabie entered, fear clouding their eyes.

Cripes, that fear made Gabie feel like a heel. Fine, she could have actually met them, tried to allay their fears, but she was trying to keep her friends alive as well. She didn't want anyone to fear her, but nor could she afford to get too friendly with the... human cargo.

Bugger Sabra! She could have allowed Gabie to tell them they weren't going to be sold, but secrecy was more important. Security couldn't allow any potential leak. She had to play the part.

It was a bloody shame her crew couldn't do the same.

Oh, be fair, Gabie. That's exactly why you refused to go near them! Because you'd end up befriending them and it would all go to Hell in a meteor.

Well, now she had to be near the illegal slaves. Scowling, she strode forward.

The women scrambled away from her, the fear in their eyes clouded with resentment.

"Stay standing back," Misha barked out.

Gabie glanced sideways at her. Well, looked like Misha was playing the game still. Especially since she was holding a laser in the barely-there folds of her nightgown.

"This is Rose." Misha looked down at the woman lying on the bed, and the harshness of her tone belied the sympathy in her eyes.

Okay, the tone was believable, but anyone getting a glimpse of Misha's eyes were going to know there was something decidedly non-threatening about the pretty albino. Good thing the other two women couldn't see her face properly.

Mentally shaking her head, Gabie kept a stern look pinned on her face. "What's wrong, Rose?"

"I'm—I'm fine," the woman gasped.

She didn't look fine. Frail, pretty, with black hair and blue eyes, and a small bulge at her belly.

A bulge at her belly.

Oh shit.

"Pregnancy sickness," Misha stated sternly.

Oh shit, shit, shit. No one had mentioned a pregnant woman!

Rose moaned suddenly and lurched to the side.

Misha and Gabie acted without thinking, Misha supporting Rose while Gabie snatched up the bucket and held it while Rose dry retched.

"Damn it," Gabie whispered through clenched teeth. "Damn Raznin!"

Rose trembled in Misha's arms, tears and sweat slipping down her cheeks.

Misha sent Gabie a warning look.

Remembering who was observing, Gabie gestured to one of the woman, handing her the bucket to hold. "I'll get Olin. He's bound to have something for an upset stomach."

Olin was never the easiest to awaken, but Gabie shook him until he jerked upright.

"Pregnant woman," she snapped. "Have you got something to settle a pregnant woman's stomach?"

Olin's eyes widened.

"Have you got something?" Gabie ran her hand through her hair. Another complication she didn't need. "Olin!"

"Wha—who's pregnant?" He looked at Gabie's tummy.

"Not me, you idiot. One of the women—Rose—is pregnant. She's dry retching. Have you got anything to ease it? Something safe for the baby?"

"Well, I—uh, yes. Sure." Getting up, he stumbled over to the cupboard containing all his medicines and first aid equipment. Fossicking inside, he

withdrew a bottle, poured a measure of the liquid into a little plastic container and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” Gabie saluted him with the container and hurried back to the cabin.

Rose wasn’t willing to take it, her haunted eyes showing her fear.

“It’s safe for you and the kid,” Gabie stated. “Honestly.”

And how ironic was that? A slaver saying something was safe. Blah! Obviously Rose and the other two women had their doubts, from the fearful way they looked from the liquid to Gabie.

“My job is to get you to your destination without harm,” Gabie told Rose. “You come to me pregnant, that’s the way I deliver you.”

Eleven

That seemed to ease Rose a little because she started sipping at the liquid. Once the container was drained, Misha eased her back down onto the bunk.

“Bang on the door if she doesn’t settle,” Misha instructed them.

Gabie followed Misha out, stepping over the mattresses on the floor. Obviously the women had been awoken by the dry retching. Misha shut the door behind them and in silence they went to the dining cabin.

Sitting at the table, Gabie dropped her face into her hands. “Rose is pregnant.”

“It would appear so.” Misha was grim.

“Damn it!” Gabie projected from the chair and ran straight to the control cabin. Flicking on the switch, she went to the frequency Sabra had given her for emergencies. “Come on, come on, come on!”

Misha hovered behind her, chewing her nails.

It wasn’t long before Sabra was appeared on the viscomm. Her hair was in a braid, wisps of it floating over her shoulders. Her eyes were alert, but there was a sleepy softness about her face. She’d obviously just gotten out of bed.

Good, someone else could have a bad night as well.

“Report,” Sabra said.

“Oh, and greetings to you, too!” Gabie snapped. “You have to get one of these slaves off my ship, Sabra.”

“Why?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“And your point is...?”

“My point is that she has an unborn child!”

Sabra looked expressionlessly at her for several seconds. “Request denied.”

“That was no Goddamn request!” Gabie yelled. “Rose gets off now!”

“Nay.”

“Listen, you.” Leaning over the back of Gabie’s chair, Misha jabbed one finger at the calm face on the viscomm. “We aren’t going any further with a pregnant woman onboard. Endangering her is a no-go, got that?”

“Stopping you and taking this wench off endangers the whole mission,” Sabra said quietly and firmly. “She stays with you.”

“You no-good bit—” Misha began.

“She stays.” Sabra was cool. “You’re being monitored by Raznin. He’ll suspect something if you’re stopped, and he’ll know if one of his slaves is transferred to another ship.”

“He wouldn’t know,” Gabie argued. “He’ll know we’ve been stopped, but hell, a friend could visit us in space. He wouldn’t know if one of his slaves left with them!”

“He’ll know because Raznin has started implanting tracking devices in his slaves,” Sabra stated. “One goes AWOL, he’ll know.”

Gabie stared at her.

“Aye, Raznin is a canny bastard.” Sabra nodded. “We need to stop him, and ’tis the only way. We can save hundreds, but not if we start going soft now.”

“But—”

Sabra pinned Gabie with a hard look. “Every slave now has a tracking device. That device stays in the slave. We can track all those with the device and save them, and we will, but we need to stop Raznin and this is part of the plan.”

Frustrated, Gabie glared at her. “Well, maybe if you told us the whole plan, we won’t worry so much!”

One fine brow arched ironically. “Tell you the whole plan? You?”

“Hey, we work for you now,” Misha pointed out. “You should be able to trust us.”

Sabra laughed outright.

Swearing, Misha pushed upright and paced the cabin.

“You get told only what you need to know.” Sabra informed Gabie after she’d controlled her laughter. “Now stop your whining and go to bed.”

“I really want to hit someone right now,” Gabie said from between clenched teeth.

“Save it for when you come face to face with an illegal slaver some day. Now, if ’tis all...?”

“Oh, please, don’t lose anymore sleep over our concerns.”

“I won’t.” The screen went blank.

Swivelling the chair around, Gabie looked at Misha.

“Can things get any worse?” Misha growled.

Gabie sighed.

~ * ~

The first stop-over was the next morning. Paz and Olin dealt with the refuelling and restocking of stores, while Misha kept guard on the two cabins holding the slaves.

The *Larceny* wasn’t approached by anyone, but Gabie knew they were being watched. Somewhere, a security officer was observing them. She wasn’t happy until the *Larceny* lifted back into space.

She was even less happy about reporting in to Raznin every day.

“On track and on time.” Raznin nodded approvingly.

“Just checking in,” Gabie said, and flicked the switch.

The screen went blank and she was more than happy to glimpse the fury on the bastard's face when he realized she'd cut him off.

Well hell, he'd only asked her to check in daily, not pass the time of the day with him.

Checking that the coordinates were set correctly for the second stop, which would be the day after tomorrow, Gabie smiled. She'd be seeing Shamon then and she couldn't wait. Having to put off his concern that morning hadn't been easy, but he'd no choice but to subside when she wouldn't reveal the problem.

She just had to ensure that they met away from the *Larceny*. Maybe a cozy hotel room for a couple of hours... Gabie grinned in anticipation.

"What are you so happy about?" Paz asked gloomily as she passed the dining cabin.

"Have to smile when I can," she informed him.

"We could all die."

"Now Paz, we're in a sticky spot but we're also under the protection of the security. What more could we ask for?"

His face had the expression of a mournful hound. "Things could go bad."

"And I have a plan if it does."

If Paz had of been a hound, his ears would have pricked.

"So don't fret," Gabie said, and walked off.

Sticking her head around the door of the cabin where Emet was holed up, she saw that he and Misha were chatting quietly. The patient looked a bit better. He nodded and smiled weakly when he saw Gabie.

Entering the cabin, Gabie slid her hands into her pockets and rocked back and forth on her heels. "You're looking better."

"I'm recovering." He smiled at Misha. "I have a great nurse."

Misha's blush against her white skin was startling.

Gabie grinned. "Oh yes, nursie takes good care of you."

Misha shot her a rude gesture that had Emet chuckling.

“So, no ill effects from your injuries?” Gabie wandered over to the bunk and looked down at the big patch on his side.

“Olin says I’m healing well. I’ve been out of bed and tried a few steps.” Emet shifted in the bunk. “After the midday meal, I’m going to try a little walk around.”

Gabie raised her brows. “Oh?”

“Yes. Olin says I need to start exercising.”

“Misha can take you down to the cargo hold. Plenty of room there.” *And less chance of discovering the slaves.*

“Great. I can’t wait to get out of here.” Emet hesitated, then grimaced. “I’m starting to imagine things.”

“Oh?”

“Late last night I thought I heard someone yelling the name ‘Rose’.”

Gabie didn’t bat an eyelash but she cursed herself, remembering yelling Rose’s name at Sabra the previous night.

“I’m sure it was just your imagination,” Misha said soothingly. “You might have still been a bit delirious.”

“You’re right.” Emet’s eyes held a haunted sadness. “Why I would be hearing my sister’s name, I don’t know.”

Good God. Gabie’s heart almost stopped.

Misha was struck dumb, a first for her.

“You’re sister’s name is Rose?” Gabie queried. *No, no, no. It has to be a coincidence, it has to be!*

“Yes. Rose...”

Oh no. The resemblance was suddenly there. *Black hair, pale skin, blue eyes... oh no.*

“The last time I saw her, she was happy. Pregnant with her first baby.” Emet smiled sadly. “I hope she’s all right.”

Oh no. Oh God. Not all right at all.

Misha looked sick. Her eyes were huge.

“I’m tired now.” Emet squeezed her hand. “I think I’ll sleep for a little.”

Yeah, and so he could cry in silence. Gabie didn’t miss the sheen of sudden tears in his eyes when he turned his head away.

Neither did Misha. She looked stricken.

“We’ll check on you later,” Gabie said.

Emet nodded.

Grabbing Misha’s arm, Gabie yanked her from the cabin and dragged her into the control cabin, a safe distance from the other cabins.

Unless one was yelling, of course, then one revealed things that made trouble for all.

“Oh no,” Misha groaned. “Gabie!”

“Cripes, can it get any bloody worse?” Gabie glared at her. “Wait a minute, that’s what you said last night. Yes, Misha, it *can* and *has* got worse!”

“Oh thanks. I wouldn’t have realized it if you hadn’t pointed it out to me.”

“*Argh!*” Raking her hand through her hair, Gabie threw herself into a chair at the table. “Now what?”

“I was kind of hoping that as you’re the captain, you’d know.”

Gabie glared at her. “My first instinct is to run.”

“Good plan, but not do-able.”

“Want to bet?”

“Yeah, we’re too far away from the Outlaw Sector just yet. Someone is going to catch us, especially in this bucket of broken-down bolts.”

“Hey, the traders fixed it. The *Larceny* will take us anywhere.”

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“We can run when we get closer to the Outlaw Sector.”

“Great. But meanwhile we have a pregnant illegal slave on board who seems to be the sister of our claimed, wanted outlaw.”

“How can we be sure she’s his sister?”

“Oh, God, Gabie! How much of a coincidence can it be to have an illegal pregnant slave named Rose with a resemblance to Emet?” Dropping her face into her hands, Misha shook her head. “And Emet has a sister named Rose who is pregnant.”

Olin and Paz walked in and sat down at the table.

“Problem?” Olin asked.

“Oh, just a little one,” Gabie replied. “One of the slaves appears to be Emet’s pregnant sister. That’s all. Not much to worry about. Just a little problem. Just a bit of a bump on the *meteor-strewn flight of my life right now!*”

“Oh.” Olin rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“Oh? That’s it? Just ‘oh’?”

“I thought there was a resemblance—”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Misha glared at him from between her fingers.

“Hey, I’m old. My eyesight isn’t what it used to be. I thought if no one else noticed it, it was my eyesight failing me.” Olin pointed at her. “I thought you younger ones would have been more observant.”

Paz looked at Gabie. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m trying to figure it out.” Gabie suddenly stood up. “I need to check out those male slaves.”

“What? What for?”

“Just in case we have his twin brother on board as well.”

“Emet has a twin brother?”

“No. I don’t know! I just want to do a double check. I should have done it before, instead of...”

“Sticking your head in the sand?” Misha growled.

Gabie glared at her.

“I’ll come with you,” Olin offered, standing and pulling his laser from the holster at his side.

When Gabie flung the door back, the two men were sitting on the bunk. Reading. A pot of steaming tea on the table. A plate of cake beside the pot.

“Good gravy.” Gabie arched one brow. “What is this, afternoon tea?”

“You didn’t say to keep them on bread and water,” Olin replied, unfazed.

The men jumped to their feet, the older one stepping in front of the younger one. The older man Gabie guessed was in his late twenties, the younger barely in his late teens, sitting around sixteen. But they both looked a little desperate now, and desperation was never a good thing to have in two young men.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Gabie growled. “I’m just checking out the merchandise.” Stepping back, she crowded Olin out of the cabin and slammed the door shut.

“Merchandise?” Olin looked at her reprovingly.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She hissed at him as they walked back to the dining cabin. “I was trying to sound tough.”

“Tough?”

“I’m not cut out for this, all right? None of us are,” she said fiercely, throwing herself back down on the chair.

“So,” Misha said, “was his twin there? Did he say hello?”

Gabie glared at her.

“Everyone is so mad,” Paz said.

“Oh, you think?”

Paz looked hurt, and Paz looking hurt was devastating. Normally he just looked mournful and sad, expecting something terrible to happen any minute, and now it was happening... well, he looked hurt. Misha looked like she wanted to cry and shoot someone all at the same time. Olin didn't even yawn or blink sleepily.

None of them were rough and tough. That was why being small-time smugglers had suited them all just fine. They weren't true outlaws. They weren't slavers. They weren't a thorn in anyone's side, except a small prick of annoyance with the law. And even then they were a very tiny prick in the big, bad world of smugglers. They had bluffed their way out of a lot of situations, because no one really knew the *Larceny* crew that well.

So how the hell they'd ended up being such prime targets was beyond Gabie's imagination. The wrong people at the wrong time in the wrong place.

Gabie shook her head. It just went to show that even being successful as a small-time smuggler could get you caught in sticky patches, and hell, this just had to be one of the stickiest. And it just got a whole lot stickier.

Gabie gave herself a mental slap. Straightening up, she looked around the table. Misha, Paz and Olin looked back at her. This was her family. She was captain. She had to do better by them all. Shame filled her.

Only for a few seconds, though, because none of it was totally her fault, and she didn't have time to be feeling sorry for herself. Besides which, her self-preservation and confidence in who she was and what she believed in came right to the fore.

“Right,” she said. “This is crunch time and we need to make a decision.”

Right away she saw relief take the hurt from Paz's eyes, and Olin smiled a little. Misha lost that look of angry despair. And hey, even Gabie herself felt better.

They always worked better when planning and doing something.

“What are the decisions?” Misha lowered her hands to the table.

“Well, what we know first. On this side,” Gabie wagged her fingers, “we have big, bad security supposedly supporting us, which is just a nice term for saying they blackmailed our panties off.”

“Nice analogy,” Olin approved.

“And on this side,” Gabie waggled the fingers of her other hand, “We have big, bad smugglers who will shoot our panties off if we don’t knuckle under.”

Paz looked mournful. Good sign.

“We could have gotten rid of the big, bad smugglers *if* the big, bad security hadn’t screwed us over,” Misha said.

“This is true.” Gabie waggled both hands. “Now clamped in-between these two forces is guess who?”

“Us?” Paz offered.

“Yes, and who else?”

“The slaves.”

“Right. Us and the slaves.”

“And Emet,” Misha added.

“Hey, the more in the mix the merrier.”

They all grinned, except Paz, who sighed sadly. “We’re doomed,” he said.

“Probably,” Gabie conceded, “But I’m sick of being torn apart by these two savage sides.”

“And the tearing hasn’t even begun yet,” Misha pointed out.

“And we’re running scared already,” Gabie said. “How much more proof do they need that we’re not suitable?”

“They really scraped the bottom of the barrel picking us,” Olin agreed.

“Probably why they did pick us,” Paz said. “Not being rough and tough, and more likely to run than fight, they probably figure they can herd us into a corner and chew our hides off whenever they want.”

Misha, Gabie and Olin stared at him.

“What?” He flushed.

“Cripes, these flashes of intelligence are getting unnerving,” Gabie said.

“Boy, you have some brain cells under that mop of hair.” Olin slapped him heartily on the shoulder.

Paz winced.

“And he’s made a good point.” Misha slammed her hand on the table. “They think just because we’re a bunch of cowards they can do anything they want with us!”

“Hey, settle up there with the coward bit.” Gabie frowned at her.

“Sorry. That was a bit strong. We have faced down a few bad things.” Misha grinned. “Brucie for starters.”

“And we do meet with some bad smugglers,” Paz added.

“And we do know some bad people,” Olin agreed.

“And I’ve drawn my laser on some bad blokes,” Gabie put in.

“And been lucky not to shoot your foot off at the same time,” Misha said. “We all know you can’t shoot for shit.”

They looked at each other and sniggered, relaxing in the shared camaraderie. Misha got up and poured everyone a hot mug of una, while Olin got out a plate of cakes. Sitting down again, they resumed the meeting.

“Right, so we’re agreed that we’re sick of being held on leashes and pulled two separate ways,” Gabie stated.

“That’s about it,” Misha replied.

“However, because we’re neither strong in might, nor hugely brave in the upfront, knock-’em-down-drag-’em-out stakes, we have a situation.”

“We have that, true enough.” Olin nodded.

Paz sadly munched a piece of cake, his sigh spraying Misha with crumbs. She brushed them off her shirt without a word.

“Let’s take this one problem at a time.” Gabie looked around at them all. “The major problem right now is that Emet is onboard, and also, unbeknown to him, is his pregnant sister, Rose.”

“Major problem,” Olin agreed.

“Now, I’d be all for letting Rose take off with Emet, but we have a problem with that as well.”

“A tracking device in all the slaves,” Misha explained to Olin and Paz.

“No problem,” Olin said.

They stared at him.

“We take the tracking device out, Rose can go anywhere.” He shrugged. “Keep the tracking device on board and no one will know she’s gone.”

“How do we explain that she’s gone when we get to the other end?” Paz queried.

Gabie brightened. “We could shoot the tracker out into space somewhere, it’ll be destroyed. We tell both sides she died onboard and we couldn’t store the body.”

“Didn’t want to risk catching infection or something,” Misha added. “Say we don’t know why she died.”

“Raznin wouldn’t give a rat’s arse about her body, he’d just be annoyed that he’d lost dinnos on her.” Gabie rubbed her chin. “But I reckon we’ll get away with it.”

“What about security?” Paz sprayed more crumbs over Misha.

Flicking them off her sleeve, she glared at him.

“Yeah, well there it gets sticky.” Gabie chewed her thumb nail. “Sabra won’t like it if we shoot a corpse into space.”

“She won’t pull us out of the mission until the end, so apart from doing a lot of yelling, there’s nothing else she can do.” Misha took a sip of hot una. “By then we can say we let Rose go. What can she do about that? Bugger all.”

“And Rose will get safely away with Emet.”

A flash of sadness came and went in Misha’s eyes.

“Emet can contact you later,” Paz said calmly.

Misha stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“You like him. He likes you. Meet him later in the Outlaw Sector.” Paz shrugged. “Simple.”

“Who are you and what did you do with our Paz?” Gabie demanded.

Olin chuckled while Paz blushed.

“I reckon our boy is more than just a bunch of mournful hormones.” Olin grinned widely.

“Yeah, I reckon.” Gabie refocused. “Well, I like that plan. It gives us a start. But how do we get that tracking device out?”

“I can do it,” Olin offered.

“You?”

“Sure. I just need to pick up a few items in the settlement when we land and I can do it.”

“You can’t do it now?”

“Gabie, I need a scanner to find out where the tracking device is, and they’re usually just under the skin somewhere. I find it and I take it out.”

“You can really get the tracking device out?”

“Yep.” Olin took a drink of una and smacked his lips in supreme self-satisfaction. “I’ve removed a few things in my time.”

“I don’t even want to think about that.” Misha made a face.

“But we need her cooperation.” Olin chose another piece of cake and broke it into bite-sized pieces. “Someone needs to take her aside and explain to her.”

“We can’t do that until we’re ready to let them go.” Gabie shook her head. “We can’t risk the others getting ideas.”

“Are we planning to release them all and run?” Paz asked.

Gabie looked at him and sighed. “I wish we could, Paz, but it’s not possible. I’m not risking us going to Cardrak if we’re caught by security.”

“But we could run for the Outlaw Sector.”

“Paz,” she said quietly. “As much as I want to, we can’t just make a run for it to the Outlaw Sector and hope to remain free. Raznin’s a vicious bastard and he undoubtedly has men in the Outlaw Sector. In the Lawful Sector, Sabra will be hunting us. I hate to say this, but Sabra is our only hope out of this mess.”

He was appalled. She couldn’t blame him. It was pretty much how she felt, too.

“Not only that,” Misha added. “Sabra has contacts in the Outlaw Sector. We’ll have every bounty hunter pack after our hides.”

“And the only thing we can do then is go deeper into the Outlaw Sector and place ourselves under the dubious protection of someone more vicious than those chasing us,” Olin stated. “Gabie’s right, Paz. We’re stuck on this mission.”

The timer on the wall flicked seconds passed as they all sat and contemplated the meaning of the words they all spoke.

Gabie rubbed her eyes. Misha stared at the table. Olin gazed at nothing. Paz looked at them all in turn.

“So why are we helping Rose?” Paz finally queried. “Won’t that endanger us?”

“She’s pregnant,” Gabie replied.

“But she’ll be saved by Sabra, won’t she?”

“Not necessarily. It’s dicey. Things could go wrong between now and when we deliver them to the smugglers on the other end of this trip.” Gabie shook her head. “I don’t want to risk Rose’s baby, or complications to Rose’s health if she loses the baby through some major cock-up.”

“But security has this covered. Why are we deviating from the path?”

Yeah, why were they? Why was Rose so important? Gabie looked at Misha. That was why.

Misha met her gaze unhappily.

“Oh,” Paz said. “Okay.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Misha said quietly. “I’m endangering us because of my own foolish fantasies. I’m the weak link here.”

“No, you’re not,” Gabie returned immediately. “You have feelings for Emet and I understand that. Sort of. Besides, we have to get Emet away safely before the law stumbles upon him, and it’s no big deal to send Rose with him. As long as we stick to the plan and he and Rose can be trusted to keep their mouths shut, we’re fine.”

“Can he be trusted?” Olin asked.

Misha looked levelly at him. “Yes. Yes, he can.”

“And Rose?”

“She’s an escaped slave, he’s an escaped outlaw. Neither is going to say anything.” She took a deep breath. “He has a mission of his own, anyway.”

“I’d forgotten about that.” Gabie rubbed the table with a fingertip. “Will he cancel his mission to get Rose to safety?”

“Let me talk to him.”

Gabie straightened. “Misha, not yet. Wait until we’ve landed. We need to make sure that Rose is definitely his sister. Resemblance and coincidence aside, this is a dangerous game. We need proof.”

“Get the photo image you took of Rose and show Emet,” Paz suggested. “Just tell him you think you know where she is and we might be able to get her.”

“Good thinking,” Olin nodded. “Then tell him if we get her, will he agree to go away with her, hide her somewhere.”

“Yeah, that could work.” Gabie took a sip of una. “Find out his intentions first, then get things organized.”

“What about the other slaves?” Paz asked. “What will they think if Rose disappears?”

“That we’ve sold her. They will be told nothing.” Misha straightened up. “I’ll get the photo image and show Emet.”

Leaning back in the chair, Gabie watched as Misha left the cabin. Paz wandered off to bed.

Yawning, Olin stood up and rubbed her hair affectionately. “You’re doing the right thing, Gabie.”

“It just gets stickier,” Gabie replied.

“Love isn’t a clear flight.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Misha doesn’t trust easily.”

“And that’s the only reason why I’m doing this.” She looked up at Olin.

He smiled and walked away.

Love. Stretching out her legs, Gabie stared at the far wall and waited. Love could be grand, apparently, but it could also be a pain in the arse.

There was the muffled sound of voices, one raised. More silence. Voices again, quieter. She glanced up at the timer. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Refilling the mug with hot una, she sat back down and sipped.

Finally Misha re-entered and sat down. Gabie squinted at her. Her lips were kiss-swollen and her hair mussed. “He showed his gratitude?”

Misha flushed, but her eyes were bright. “You could say that.”

“I take it Rose is his sister.”

“Yes. He was so happy, but also worried. I had to do some reassuring.”

Gabie eyed her. “So I see.”

Misha smiled widely.

Gabie grinned and sipped the una. Okay, life was difficult right now, but sometimes one just had to laugh.

“So how are we going to get them off the ship?” Misha queried. “When and where?”

“Thinking would be a good plan right now. I have no idea.”

“Security is monitoring us on each stop.”

“Yep.”

“Security and Raznin are monitoring us in space.”

“Yep.”

Misha attempted to tidy her long, white braid. “How about a meeting in space?”

“Who?”

“The Daamen traders. We could transfer Rose and Emet to their ship. No one would suspect.”

“Out of the question. They do not get involved.”

Minutes ticked past again.

“How about someone else meet us in space?” Misha suggested.

“I’ve another thought.” Gabie rubbed her chin slowly, an idea forming.

“Oh boy,” Misha said. “Wait for the fireworks.”

~ * ~

The docking bay was lit by big floodlights when the Daamen trade ship landed.

The ramp came down and the crew appeared.

“Hey, I’m looking for a suspect named Simon,” a husky voice came out from the shadows nearby. “I plan to handcuff him and do some disciplinary measures.”

Without blinking an eye, Simon swung straight off the ramp and disappeared into the darkness. A shriek sounded, a bit of swearing, and he came back into view with his struggling wife slung over one shoulder.

“Have a great time,” he told his crew, his eyes twinkling as he strode back up the ramp. “And don’t come back for a couple of hours.”

Des’s long, red braid bumped against the back of his thighs. Bracing her hands on his back, she lifted herself up enough to wave cheerily at the traders. “Yep. Bugger off, you lot. I have to take this man in hand.”

The traders grinned and waved back. Simon disappeared into the depths of the cargo hold and they heard the grinding and clunking of the platform lift as it ascended upwards in the ship.

Heddam laughed. “Well, ’tis Simon taken care of for a while.”

Kel arched one brow at Shamon. “And looks like you might be taken care of for a while as well, friend.”

Shamon glanced around at the other three ships docked in the docking bay. One was a planet shuttle, the other a smaller, sleek space ship, and the third was the *Larceny*.

Gabie. His heart picked up and he couldn’t stop the big grin that spread over his face.

“Aye, ’tis another one of us taken care of.” Mikal nudged his brother, Torkra. “’Tis time we found ourselves a little wench to save us from our loneliness.”

“Your overworked hormones, you mean.” Aamun slung an arm around each brother’s shoulders. “Come on, boys. I’m the oldest here—”

“And wed,” Torkra said.

“And totally besotted by my beloved Mina,” he agreed. “So until I see her again in a few weeks, ’tis my lot to try and steer you young ’uns down the shiny, clean, chaste path while we’re here.” He winked at Heddam. “I’ll watch these boys at the tavern, make sure none of those wenches corrupt them.”

“Help!” Torkra opened his eyes wide in mock panic. “Heddam, save us! Help!”

“Aye, you go help them,” Shamon said, striding off towards the *Larceny*. “I’m going to check up on the smuggling game.”

“Your game sounds more fun than Aamun’s!” Mikal yelled.

“Now, now, lads,” Aamun said. “Your mother will thank me.”

“We won’t,” Torkra retorted.

“If I don’t get a wench soon,” Mikal stated, “You might start looking good to me, Aamun.”

“I didn’t know you cared so much.” Aamun fluttered his eyelashes.

Shamon grinned as the sounds of merriment followed him, but then he saw Paz come hurtling out of the *Larceny*. The youth skidded to a knock-kneed halt right in front of him.

“Are you all right?” Alarmed, Shamon reached out to steady him.

“Oh, I’m fine.” Paz looked up at him. “Gabie headed into the settlement. You’ll find her there somewhere. I don’t expect her back for a while.”

Disappointment flooded Shamon. “Do you know where she headed?”

“Uh... not really. Business.” Paz’s face lit up and he nodded. “Yep. Business.”

“Most of the merchants don’t do business this time of night.”

“Merchants?” Paz’s face got a strange expression on it.

“Ah.” Now Shamon understood. “Would this business be illegal, by any chance?”

“I don’t know what you mean. Private enterprise is what we do.”

Shamon sighed. “Tell her I’ll be at one of the taverns. I’ll be back in about...” He glanced over at the trade ship and a grin quirked his lips. “Four hours or so. She can find me at the trade ship or the tavern. Tell her it doesn’t matter what time, I’ll answer her call.”

Paz nodded and started backing away.

“Don’t forget to tell her,” Shamon said.

“I won’t.” Paz wheeled and bolted back to the *Larceny*, disappearing inside quickly.

Turning back, Shamon saw that his friends had just reached the gates of the docking bay. He sprinted after them and walked with them into the settlement. Instead of settling in the closest tavern they came to, however, he checked out all three taverns in the settlement in the hopes of coming across Gabie. Heddam accompanied him, but when they had no luck, they returned to the main tavern and sat with the other traders.

Or with some of them. Mikal and Torkra were already gone.

“They couldn’t even wait for a nice ale.” Aamun shook his head, laughter in his eyes.

“Just wait until they’re wed,” Kel said. “Pretty tavern wenches won’t compare to their own lass.” Sighing dreamily, he took out a small image photo of his wife from the pocket inside his vest.

Heddam faked a shudder. “Old married men.”

Shamon grinned. A commotion at the doorway had him looking up quickly, but it was just a couple of drunks staggering outside. The doors banged shut again. Disappointed, he returned his gaze to his friends.

Two saucy tavern whores came across with mugs of ale. They giggled and flirted, but only Heddam was interested. Aamun, Kel and Etol laughed and chatted, but as they were wed, that was as far as they were prepared to go. Shamon was too preoccupied with thoughts of Gabie. One of the wenches sat on Heddam’s lap and giggled and whispered in his ear. After one long, wistful look at the four big traders sitting and sipping their ale, the other tavern wench sighed and gave up.

An hour passed before a figure passing the big window they sat beside caught Shamon’s attention. It was Olin carrying a small pouch. By the time Shamon got to his feet and made it out onto the sidewalk, he’d disappeared.

Scratching his head, Shamon looked up and down the lamp-lit street. The old man could move fast but then again, there were plenty of shadowy places for him to disappear into quickly.

There was still no sign of Gabie. Leaning against the veranda post, he lifted his head and breathed in the fresh air. Inside the tavern was the odour of ale, perfume, sweat and food. Outside was a refreshing change for a few minutes.

Another hour passed and still there was no sign of Gabie. Shamon did a quick check of the taverns again, but she was nowhere to be found. The trade buildings were locked down for the night.

Disappointment grew. Where could the lass be? No doubt illegal business, but he didn’t like it. ’Twasn’t safe. As if she wasn’t playing with fire already. Hell, the lass was just dangling above the flames. She should be safe at home.

His home on Daamen. Safely surrounded by family and friends. Where she couldn't get into trouble. Shamon sighed and looked up at the star-spattered night sky. Wishful thinking that didn't look to be coming true any time soon.

She had one more stop scheduled after this planet, and that meant that stop was going to be the most dangerous, he just knew it. Sabra might be keeping tight-lipped about it, but he wasn't a fool. He intended to be nearby when Gabie landed on that planet for the final stop. There was no way he was allowing her to face danger without him nearby.

Returning to his friends inside the tavern, Shamon sat back down. He'd just started to nibble on a bowl of fruit when the door burst open and Paz looked around frantically before shooting back out again.

Shamon didn't need any more hints. Gabie was in trouble. Lunging up from the table he moved fast, the tavern crowd parting hurriedly for his big frame as he thundered through. Shoving the door open, he looked straight across the street to the other tavern. A fight was in full swing.

Paz hovered outside the tavern, wringing his hands and biting his lip, then he squared his shoulders and started to bravely head into the building.

A peacekeeper grabbed his arm and yanked him back. Two more peacekeepers appeared, and then someone else shoved through the crowd. Shamon saw his face in the light and recognized him instantly as a security officer, one he'd seen in the company of Sabra and Des a few times.

If security and Paz were trying to get into the tavern, that could only mean Gabie was in there somewhere.

"Are we going in?" Aamun stood at his elbow.

"Aye," Shamon replied grimly, and sprinted across the street. "And I'm only looking for Gabie and any of her mob."

He shoved past the peacekeepers quickly, and they were no match for his big frame as he ploughed through them with Aamun, Etol and Kel right on his heels.

The tavern was a riot of fighting bodies. Tavern whores squealed and swore, men cursed and grunted, and bottles were flung.

Shamon waded in without a second thought, grabbing men by their scruffs and throwing them aside. The whole time his gaze swept the tavern, trying to spot a

bouncy ponytail or a white mohawk. It was almost impossible with the seething mass.

Fighting his way to the other side, he swung around to find that Aamun, Kel and Etol were in the thick of the fight, shoving brawlers out of their way as they searched for Gabie.

He backed up against a table intending to jump up on it to get a good view when he felt a tugging on his pants. Glancing down, he saw Gabie on her hands and knees under the table looking up at him.

“Hi, honey!” she shouted. “Want to share my space?”

He was so relieved he nearly fell to his knees. Instead he reached under, grabbed a handful of her shirt and dragged her out and up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Staying out of the way,” she replied logically, right before her eyes widened. “Look out!”

Shamon dodged the bottle just as it whizzed over his head. He heard a thunk and lifted his head in time to see Gabie shaking her hand and swearing. The bottle was lying on the table beside her. The crazy wench had stopped it with her hand.

He had to get her out of here. Turning with her tucked close in to his side, he saw that more peacekeepers had poured into the tavern, the security officer among them. Aamun, Etol and Kel fell in on each side of Shamon and Gabie, forming a barricade as they shoved their way through the battling crowd.

The front was too dangerous, so the traders turned to the back door. Within minutes they burst out into the quiet of the night.

“It’s about time!” Misha exclaimed, running forward. “That fight we started wasn’t going to last for... long...” She trailed off, her eyes widening at the sight of the traders.

Gabie flapped one hand at her frantically, and Shamon stared disbelievingly down at her. “*You* started the fight?”

“Cripes, no!” She looked affronted.

But Shamon knew. He took one look into her innocent eyes and he just knew. The wench was up to her neck in some kind of underhanded happening and he

meant to find out just what, but before he could say anything two peacekeepers stepped into the little alley with their lasers drawn.

“Hands up,” one of them ordered.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Aamun said. “We were trying to get out.”

“Right after you went in.” The other peacekeeper looked at Gabie. “And it seems you were after this troublemaker.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Gabie replied.

“Of course you don’t.” Stepping back, the peacekeeper gestured with his laser. “Now it’s mighty interesting how you four went in and came out with her. Let’s see what the Head Peacekeeper thinks about it all.”

Which was how Shamon found himself sitting in a cell with Aamun, Kel and Etol, while across from them Gabie leaned against the bars of her cell, looking unworried. She gave him a little wave. She shared her cell with Misha and a couple of tavern whores. As soon as the whores found themselves opposite the Daamen traders, they joined Gabie at the bars, winking and batting their eyelashes at the traders.

Two other cells contained groaning and cursing brawlers.

Shamon knew Gabie was unhurt, he’d made sure of that on their trip in the back of the planet cruiser on the way to the Enforcement Building. Now that he knew she was fine, he was eyeing her with smouldering anger. Gabie and Misha were so unworried and seemed almost... self satisfied. Very satisfied. Misha was whistling between her teeth and Gabie was leaning against the bars and looking like she didn’t have a care in the world.

“Just what the hell was that all about?” Shamon growled at Gabie.

She raised her brows at him. “Honey, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Misha said something, and I know something is going on.”

“Misha says a lot of things.”

“Yep, I sure do,” Misha agreed from where she lay on her back on the narrow bunk. “I say a lot of things. You have to learn to ignore me.”

Shamon narrowed his eyes at Gabie. “Why were you there?”

“Just passing a bit of time.”

“That wench is up to her neck in whatever was happening in that tavern,” Aamun observed from beside Shamon.

“Aye.” Shamon glared warningly at her. “And she’s going to tell me what as soon as we’re out of here. Right, wench?”

“Really, Shamon, you’re so suspicious,” she drawled.

“You’ll have to wait your turn, anyway,” Kel said.

Shamon watched as a peacekeeper strode down the corridor between the cells and stopped directly before Gabie’s. Opening it, he gestured to both Gabie and Misha.

“Oh, favouritism!” One of the whores pouted.

“Hey,” Misha replied. “You’re more than welcome to go first.”

“Just move it,” the peacekeeper ordered.

Shamon watched his wench disappear with her friend and the peacekeeper. The door to the cells slammed shut and raised voices sounded. He couldn’t make out the words, but he recognized the tone and level. Des was out there and she was spitting mad.

He could almost make out the swearing he just knew the air was being peppered with. Aye, he could sympathize with Des because right now he didn’t know what he’d do if he got his hands on Gabie. Spank her or hug her tight. Mayhaps tie her up and toss her in the cargo hold of the trade ship.

The wench was making him old. And fidgety. He paced the cell restlessly as time passed. Worry grew stronger, though he knew she was safe with the security. But he meant to tear a strip off her for putting herself in such danger. Hell, she could have been seriously hurt.

Finally one of the peacekeepers opened the door and came up to the traders’ cell. Opening the door, he stood back. “Des wants to see you lot.”

The traders exchanged glances. Aye, they could just imagine the reception they were going to get, too.

The door to the cell corridor shut behind them as they entered the back office. The peacekeeper left them alone with Des. She was standing by the window, her arms folded under her breasts, a scowl on her pretty face. Eyes so pale a brown as to be almost yellow glared at them.

“You bloody imbeciles!” she swore.

“Now, Des—” Aamun begun soothingly.

“Don’t even start, Aamun.” She stabbed a finger in Shamon’s direction. “It’s you who’s the worry here.”

“Me?” Shamon raised his brows inquiringly, though he knew what was coming.

Striding forward, Des glared up at Shamon. Tall for a wench, she was still shorter than the traders, but she wasn’t one to cower from those bigger than her, as she’d proven in the past. “Listen, you big moron, why the hell did you go into that brawl?”

“Why do you think?” he parried.

“You knew Gabie was in there. How did you know?”

“I saw Paz looking scared enough to wet his pants. I knew if he was running around alone and scared, something was wrong.”

Her eyes raked over him suspiciously. “How’d you know she was in that tavern?”

Shamon shrugged. “Lass, Paz was about to go in there. ’Tis no way that boy would wade into a fight unless he cared for someone.”

“’Tis true.” Aamun nodded. “That merry little lot isn’t known for seeking trouble.”

“Want to bet?” Des was practically breathing fire.

“Physical trouble, I mean.” Aamun couldn’t quite hide his grin.

That only infuriated Des more. She prodded Shamon in the chest with one stiff forefinger. "I'm telling you to back off and leave these happenings to us to sort out, Shamon. No more bloody heroics, do you understand?"

Gently taking her finger, Shamon removed it from his chest. Anger kindled inside him. "I know you're doing your job, lass, but I'm telling you right now if Gabie is in danger you're not going to be able to keep me away."

"You have no idea what is happening, Shamon!"

"I know some, and if Sabra didn't see fit to fill me in on the rest you can't hold me responsible for anything that might happen."

"Oh, do you want a bet? I'll sling your arse in a cell, Shamon!"

"Mayhaps you'd have to declare me outlaw, lass, because I'll not back down if Gabie is in trouble." He looked grimly down at her.

Eleven

“Goddamn interfering traders!” Des cursed. “I should just *detain* you for questioning!”

“Waste of your time, considering I know no more than what Sabra has told me,” Shamon replied reasonably. “And don’t you think whoever is watching Gabie might find it odd that security has *detained* us right after we saved Gabie?”

He could just about hear Des grinding her teeth. “They don’t know security is involved.”

“But they know the law dragged us in here. They know I’ve spoken to Gabie.” Shamon leaned down just a little. “Might be enough to get a bit of suspicion going, Des.”

“I oughta kick your arse!” Des’s temper was almost at boiling point. “I’m telling you, Shamon, keep your bloody nose clean! Do you hear me?”

Satisfaction filled Shamon. Des had nothing to go on and they both knew it. “I hear you, lass.” So could the rest of the building, he was sure.

Cursing, Des kicked a nearby chair. “If I see you even sniffing around Gabie, I’ll be after you, Shamon!”

He couldn’t help but say, “Too late. I’ve done more than sniff.”

“You get hurt during this, Shamon, and I’ll kick your arse black and blue!”

In her own way, the fiery wench cared for her friends. Shamon smiled slowly.

“Out!” She flung open the door. “Now!”

The traders filed past her. In the main office Simon was leaning calmly against the wall.

Shamon came to a stop beside him. “Simon, I’m sorry your evening has been... ah... disturbed.”

“’Tis what you call it?” Simon drawled. “Now my wench is in a foul mood.”

And ’twas only Simon’s kindness that had made coming here in the trade ship possible. “Simon, really, I am so sorry—”

“Ah, friend, trust me, when it comes to the wenches we love we’ll face down anything.” Smiling, Simon clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll calm my little wife down and sweeten her mood again.”

“But it shouldn’t have affected you—”

“Trust me, the problems don’t affect me except for making Des fiery again. And you know, sweetening her up is my speciality.” Simon winked. “’Tis always a challenge... and I always win.”

Shamon couldn’t help but grin.

“And if I don’t sweeten her up, well then, things get really interesting.” Simon’s eyes twinkled as he looked past Shamon to the other door which was opening. “The fiery security officer can be really intriguing in bed.”

Des stormed out of the back room into the office, took one look at the traders and snarled, “What the hell are you all still doing here? Didn’t I tell you all to get lost?”

“Just waiting for you, sweetheart,” Simon said mildly.

“I meant them, not you.” Des glared at Shamon. “Out!”

Simon winked at Shamon.

Shamon sent Des a little smile and nod, which she simply glared at in turn, and he left the Enforcement Building with Aamun, Etol and Kel.

“Whoo, that Des does get furious,” Etol observed. “I thought for sure she was going to make good on her threat with you, Shamon.”

“And she probably would have, but she knows I was right when it came to too many people having seen the peacekeepers take us all away. Sooner or later word

would get around that she'd detained one of us, and things would have gotten very suspicious." Shamon rolled his shoulders. "The wench is no fool."

"You know she's going to tell Sabra everything," Aamun said. "You're going to have her after your hide as well."

"Aye, I know." Shamon glanced up and down the street. Everything had returned to normal. "And in turn I'm after Gabie's hide. She started that fight and I want to know why. Silly chit could have gotten herself killed."

"Life is so interesting when love hits," Kel said, and chuckled.

"Wouldn't miss this for the world," Etol agreed.

Shamon rolled his eyes and started towards the docking bay. His anger had cooled a little but he still wanted answers. Just the thought of what could have happened to Gabie in the tavern was enough to make him shudder. He never wanted to see that again. But knowing Gabie, things just might get worse. Knowing security, it wasn't going to be smooth and without danger.

Damn it all. First things first, and that was getting answers from a certain infuriating wench.

Aamun, Etol and Kel left him in the docking bay, veering away to the trade ship after laughingly giving him some pretty useless advice.

Shamon continued on to the *Larceny*. The cargo area was in darkness but he knew Gabie was there. He could practically feel her. As he drew closer, he spotted her in the shadows. She was sitting on the ramp, her feet swinging lazily.

"Hey, honey," she drawled.

Stopping directly in front of her, Shamon reached up and wrapped one hand around the heavy iron arm supporting the ramp. Her knees brushed his pants legs. Sitting on the ramp put her just below eye level. In silence he studied her, the lights from the docking bay enabling him to make out her gamine features in the dimness.

She gave him a sweet smile. He didn't know whether to laugh or yell or simply sigh in frustration. But there was something else he wanted to do, ached to do.

He kissed her. It was a simple matter to close the distance between them, a simple leaning forward and lightly pressing his lips to hers.

It was meant to be a light kiss, but they'd been apart for too long. He'd been too worried. He'd wanted her close, with him, where he knew she was safe. He'd been scared for her.

Instead of being gentle, his kiss was hard, taking possession of her lips, demanding everything, and she gave it willingly. Swaying forwards, she braced her hand on his chest, only to gasp into his mouth and pull back with a small curse.

Shamon opened his eyes to see her shaking her hand gingerly. The hand that had diverted the bottle aimed at his head.

In the tavern.

In the brawl.

Which she had started.

There went the urge to laugh. Now he knew he wanted to yell. Except he wasn't the yelling kind, but he could sure do intimidating really well when he tried.

But first, he caught her wrist, carefully angling her hand so he could study it in the dimness.

"It's all right," Gabie said a touch breathlessly. "Just a bit of bruising."

"'Twouldn't have happened if you'd not been there." Giving her palm a light brush of his lips, Shamon released her hand, reached up and braced both hands around the heavy iron arm supporting the ramp. Leaning forward, he looked down at her and growled, "Why the hell did you start the brawl?"

"Oh, I didn't," Gabie replied earnestly.

"Oh, you did. Misha said so. Right after we saved your delightful little body."

"Misha has no idea what she says sometimes."

Shamon leaned closer.

"I think it has something to do with that mohawk of hers," Gabie added. "It parts her brain in the centre, and not always evenly."

The muscles in his arms flexed and hardened with his weight when he shifted a fraction.

Far from being intimidated, Gabie merely looked impressed. Reaching up, she traced one massively bunched bicep with a fingertip and he felt the light touch right through to the soles of his feet.

Ignoring the touch—or trying to—Shamon focused on the problem. That problem being Gabie. “Why did you start the fight?”

“I didn’t.” Sliding her finger up his arm, she traced it across his vest to the opening, then laid her hand flat on his chest, her palm shaping the hard lines of his pectorals. “Honestly.”

The little witch was seeking to divert him. It was almost working. Heat was snaking through his veins at just her teasing touch. He blinked away the little fog of desire that was starting to curl through his senses.

Capturing her hand, he slid his fingers up to her wrist and clamped a light but firm hold around it. “Don’t lie to me, Gabie.”

She gave an experimental little tug but when he didn’t let go, she sighed. “Shamon, I was caught in the tavern when that brawl broke out—”

“Don’t.”

Blowing out a puff of air, she eyed him.

He pinned her with a narrow-eyed look.

“All right.” She shrugged. “Fine. I can’t tell you.”

“’Tis so? I beg to differ.”

“Beg all you want.” With a little toss of her head, she sent the perky ponytail dancing across her shoulders. “It’ll make no difference.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. I mean, what are you going to do? Beat it out of me?”

“Mayhaps I should.” Annoyance hardened his voice.

She laughed outright. “You couldn’t beat me. It’s not in you.”

“I could give you a damned good spa—”

“Oh, don’t start with empty threats, honey.” Reaching up, she patted him on the cheek and smiled widely. “You couldn’t hurt a fly.”

Damn it! Frustrated, Shamon glared down at her. Men ran from a Daamen when one was furious. The traders were known as charming, happy-go-lucky giants, but no one messed with them if they were angry, and if a Daamen was angry at a certain person, that person sought hiding, or blurted out everything they knew.

Gabie just laughed. *Damn it*, she should have been in tears, not that he wanted her in tears, but he did want her to tell him everything. She wasn’t intimidated by him, didn’t fear him, and was blatantly laughing at his threats.

Stars, he could admire her if he wasn’t so damned... *worried* about her.

And ’twasn’t in him to be furious, to be angry. His nature was amongst the most easy-going of the crew. He laughed, he teased, and he enjoyed life.

This one little wench was making him almost chew steel nails, she got him in so many knots. And this latest stunt had made him so worried he was actually trying to intimidate her into confession.

Like that worked. Nay.

“Damn it, Gabie.”

“Oh come on, Shamon. You’re made for loving, not arguing.” She winked up at him.

“You’re not in the clear, wench.” Releasing her wrist, he caught her chin in a firm but gentle hold and tilted her head back. “You risked your safety pulling a stupid stunt for some unknown reason and if you ever do it again, I swear, right now, it will be damned uncomfortable to sit down.”

“But would you kiss it all better after?” Her eyes gleamed in the dimness. “It’d be worth it for that alone.”

She was going to drive him stark raving mad, he just knew it.

“He’s gone!” Paz burst out of the door between the cargo hold and the ship. “They got away! The diversion worked—” He stumbled to a halt, his widening eyes taking in Shamon’s forbidding expression. “Uh...”

“Who is gone?” Shamon asked quietly.

“No one,” was Gabie’s immediate answer. “Paz, you’ve been drinking too much berry juice again.”

“Who... is... gone?” Shamon asked again.

Oh aye, Gabie mightn’t scare, but Paz was a bundle of nerves. He took one look at Shamon’s face and went white.

“Go inside, Paz,” Gabie said sharply.

“Stay right there,” Shamon gritted out.

Paz was frozen to the spot, visibly shaking.

“Damn it, Shamon!” Gabie shoved against his chest. “Leave him alone.”

Oh aye, Paz was the weak link right now. His fear made whites appear around his irises. Gabie might be one tough nut to crack, but Paz would shatter and tell him everything.

Intimidation would work on the skinny youth.

In one smooth motion, Shamon placed one booted foot beside Gabie’s hip on the ramp and he heaved himself up effortlessly, ducking under the heavy iron arm. Straightening, he glared down at Paz. Towering over him.

“Who is gone?” he repeated.

“I just... he... I can’t...” Paz was shaking.

Shamon felt sorry for him. The lad was just that... a lad. And trying to be loyal to Gabie. Which meant Gabie was Paz’s weak link.

Life was good when you found the chinks for which you were searching.

Gabie came pounding up the ramp, placing herself in front of Paz. Glaring up at Shamon, she said grimly, “Leave him alone!”

And Gabie’s crew was her weak link, which made her vulnerable to outsiders. But she wasn’t scared of Shamon.

“Paz, he won’t hu—” she began.

Nay! In a lightning move, Shamon grabbed Gabie and swung her in front of him, clamping one arm around her waist to pin her arms to her sides, and his other hand he placed firmly over her mouth. If she reassured Paz, the boy would never talk.

Shamon's actions only annoyed Gabie, but it sure scared Paz. He glanced frantically around.

"Last time," Shamon growled. "Who is gone?"

Stars, the wench was a wriggler. She was trying to shake her head at Paz and kick loose at the same time. If Paz didn't answer soon, Shamon was going to have to release the little eel or risk squeezing her too tight, something he couldn't bring himself to do.

Paz, thank the suns, couldn't take the sight of Gabie in the giant's grip and looked frantically back at the door leading into the ship.

And suddenly Shamon knew. "Emet is gone?"

Paz looked like he expected the roof the cargo hold to fall on him.

Shaking his head, Shamon released Gabie, who sprung in front of Paz like a little angry lycat, all cute and bristling.

"Cripes, you didn't have to bully him!" she accused.

Folding his arms across his chest, Shamon arced one brow at her. "Well, you weren't going to tell me, wench. And why the big secret about Emet going, anyway? I knew he was with you, and you said he was leaving when he was well enough." He shook his head.

"I'm just trying to keep you out of things." Exasperated, Gabie threw up her hands. "The less you know, the better you're off."

Oh-ho. "What things?"

Gabie looked at him.

Shamon looked at Paz.

"Go back inside, Paz," Gabie ordered.

The boy didn't need any more urgings. He disappeared through the doorway into the ship, his long legs making short work of the distance.

Well, now he just might get the whole story from Gabie about the slaves, about security, about everything. About the fight... Shamon blinked. *The fight. Emet was gone.*

A sudden hunch took hold, and he strode back down the ramp to stare at the vacant bay beside the *Larceny*. The sleek little space ship that had been there earlier was gone. Emet was gone. *Security was tailing Gabie, so how did she get Emet away without being discovered?*

By making sure security knew she was in a tavern and starting a brawl. A diversion.

Hands on hips, he tipped back his head and sucked in a deep breath. “While you caused a brawl guaranteed to draw security from the *Larceny* to you in the settlement, Emet got away on that little ship undetected.”

She appeared beside him and looked at the empty bay. “My, you pieced it together nicely.”

“You risked your life for Emet.”

“No big risk. I was hiding under the table, remember?”

As if he could forget. “Gabie, you could have just told me.”

“Like I said, some things you don’t need to know.” She looked up at him. “So how did you know security was watching me?”

Shamon pursed his lips. The wench didn’t miss a word. *Ah well, ’twas for the best.* Once they had things between them in the open, then he could sort out what to do.

“Someone saw Sabra and Freeman go into your ship. I made Sabra tell me what was happening.”

“You made Sabra tell?” Gabie looked dubious.

“I had information she wanted, and I also threatened to ask questions about you. She didn’t have much choice.”

“That was dangerous.”

“Sabra is no fool.”

“Pfft.”

Surprised, Shamon looked down at her.

Her eyes twinkled up at him, the lights of the docking bay spearing across her face enough to show her amusement. “She actually fell for that?”

“For what?” Slowly he turned to face her.

“Thinking you’d ask questions in the wrong places? Please!”

“Lass, Sabra couldn’t risk anything. She knew I’d ask questions and even though she knew I’d be careful, she couldn’t risk anything getting out.”

“Kind of late, don’t you think? Whoever saw the security enter my ship would spread a few tidbits around.”

“Trust me, whoever saw you will be keeping their mouth shut.”

“Might be too late.”

“You don’t sound too worried.”

Gabie smiled widely.

Shamon shook his head. “You need someone to watch out for you, wench.”

“I can do that myself.”

“Aye, you’re doing a great job of it so far.”

“Trying to pick a fight?” she queried cheerfully.

“How are your slaves going?”

She fell silent almost immediately. The merriment left her eyes, and Shamon could have kicked himself, he felt so lousy.

“Lass, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.” He reached for her.

Avoiding him, she took a step back. “Sabra told you that much.”

His step was longer, and he caught her hand. “Aye.”

“This isn’t something I want to do, Shamon.” Anger wiped away the merriment in her eyes, and Shamon wanted nothing more than to put the sparkle back. “Maybe we shouldn’t see each other until this is over.”

“Not likely, Gabie. I need to know every move you make.”

“What for?” She tugged at her hand. “And let go.”

He ignored her attempt to get away from him. “Because I won’t let you go into danger without being nearby.”

“That’s kind of silly considering you’re not part of the deal,” she returned sharply. “And will you *let go*?”

“Nay.”

She glared up at him.

Shamon met her gaze squarely. “Here’s the truth of the matter, lass. You’re mine and I take care of my own.”

“Listen, trader, that big he-man attitude might work with other women, but it doesn’t do anything for me.”

“You’re going to inform me of your every move.”

“What? I don’t think so!”

“You’ll let me know who you’re meeting, where and when.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Times, dates and places.”

“Cripes, I already have to knuckle under to Sabra and Ra—others. I don’t plan on adding you to the list!”

“Fine. Then I’m travelling with you.”

Gabie’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“Aye.” Shamon glanced into the cargo hold. “I have no doubt you have plenty of hiding places.”

“Nothing that could fit your giant frame!” Gabie shook her head. “No, Shamon, no way. You are not coming with me.”

“Here’re the choices, Gabie. You either let me know every step you take, or I’m coming.”

She opened her mouth, closed it and then shook her head. “What makes you think Sabra is going to allow that?”

“Sabra won’t know and if she does find out, ’twill be too late.”

“She’ll stop the *Larceny* and drag you off by your ears. Which isn’t a bad idea.”

“She won’t stop the ship, ’twill bring it to the notice of the smugglers.”

“Look.” She took a deep breath, obviously trying to calm herself. “Shamon, this is ridiculous. This job was forced on me. I just want to get it over with. You’re complicating things where complications don’t need to be.”

“Gabie, ’tis dangerous. ’Tis no guarantee that things won’t go wrong. You could get seriously hurt.” Just the thought made his chest tight. “You’re my lass and ’tis my job to see you’re safe.”

“Shamon, we’re just in the beginnings of a relationship. Apparently.” Gabie tugged on her hand again. “Don’t make this your business when it’s not.”

“Too late.” He drew her gently to him. “You’re my business.”

“You’re complicating things.”

“Nay. I just want to know where you are and what’s happening. ’Tis a reasonable request.”

“None of this is reasonable. Just back off.”

“Two choices. Keep me informed or I’m coming with you.”

“Maybe I’ll tell Des and she’ll just shoot you. And trust me, that insane woman would do it in a heartbeat.” Gabie rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “I’m surprised she didn’t shoot me. She looked mad enough.”

“What’s your choice, Gabie?”

“None of the above. I get this job done, get security off my back, get Ra—others off my back, and then we can take up where we left off. If you still want to.”

“Two choices,” he said relentlessly, and took a step forward.

She took two steps back. “No choices.”

“You have five minutes to decide, or I’ll decide for you.”

Gabie looked up at him and sighed. That sigh went straight to Shamon’s heart, especially when a glimmer of sadness showed in her bright green eyes.

Reaching out, he slid his finger beneath her chin and caressed her. Leaning down until they were almost on eye level, he studied her. Aye, she did look sad. Confused. The normal merriment and laughing defiance had suddenly disappeared. Her shoulders slumped a little, and she looked... lost.

That tore right through him. Sliding his hand behind her neck, he cupped her nape and drew her forwards until her forehead was resting against his. They looked deep into each other’s eyes.

“Lass, let me help you,” he said softly.

“I can’t,” she replied softly. “Shamon, you say you’re worried about me, but have you thought how scared I am that if you get involved, you could be the one hurt?”

“I need to know you’re all right, Gabs. Can’t you understand?”

“And I need to know you’re safe while this stupid bloody mission goes ahead.” Her soft sigh was warm against his lips. “I have enough to worry about with Misha, Olin and Paz, without worrying about you as well. Stay away from me until this is over, Shamon. Please.”

The trembling words touched him to his soul. His thumb rubbed gently under her hairline.

“Then you have an understanding of how worried I am about you, lass. I’m furious that Sabra would drag you into a hellish mess like this. I’m furious that you’d put yourself in danger to divert them while an outlaw got away. I’m furious that I can’t be by your side during this mess.”

“No way out of it, Shamon. I have to see this through. We have to see this through.”

“Not alone.” He held her gaze steadily. “Never alone. Just keep me informed of what’s happening, Gabs, ’tis all I ask. So I know where you are, when you’re there, who you’re meeting. If something goes wrong I need to know.”

“So you can come flying to the rescue?” She smiled tremulously.

“Aye.”

“Security will be there before you, you know that, right?”

“But ’twon’t be the same. ’Twon’t be *me*.”

“Shamon—”

“If ’twas me facing so much uncertainty, would you be worried?”

“Of course.”

“Would you want to know what was happening?”

“Yes.”

“So why won’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re not the one in danger, so it doesn’t count.”

That was so typical of her that Shamon couldn’t stop the rueful chuckle from escaping. He shook his head, feeling the silky skin of her forehead against his.

“’Tis double standards, lass.”

“Hey, I’m into private enterprise. Double standards are the norm for me.” She smiled.

To Shamon, that smile was like the sun coming out from behind a dark cloud. He kissed her gently.

Steps sounded and Gabie straightened, Shamon’s hand sliding from her nape. She turned to Misha, who had stepped out onto the ramp.

Misha nodded briefly to Shamon but returned her gaze to Gabie. “Someone on the viscomm wants to talk to you.”

“I’m coming.” She turned back to Shamon and he could see the glint of relief in her eyes. “I have to go. I’ll see you later, all right?”

“Gabie.” He tugged her close by the grip he still had on her hand. “You’ll tell me?”

She hesitated. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Gabie, this is important. You’re needed now...” Misha’s voice trailed away apologetically.

“I have to go.” Gabie stood up on tip toe and kissed him swiftly on the lips.

“Gabs—”

“I’ll see you later.”

Shamon could only watch as she disappeared up the stairwell into the depths of the ship. For several seconds he gazed into the darkness of the cargo hold before jumping down off the ramp and striding back to the trade ship.

He knew Gabie. She wouldn’t tell him where she was going, and he couldn’t keep track of her if she didn’t want him to know. But there was another way to ensure he knew where she went, and that was to plant a tracking device on her ship.

’Twas time to talk to Torkra.

He found him dozing on his bunk. Torkra opened his eyes when Shamon knocked on his door, swinging up into a sitting position when he entered.

Torkra grinned. “Have a little disagreement with your lass?”

“What would you know about it?” Kicking out the chair under the desk, Shamon dropped down onto it. “You were busy with a winsome tavern wench, if I recall, while we went after that little smuggler.”

“Heddam informed us.”

“She’s stubborn.” Shamon shook his head.

Torkra grinned wider. “Find out why she started that brawl?”

“She was diverting the attention of Security while Emet made his getaway.”

“She told you that? I’m surprised she’d confess so easily.”

“She didn’t. Paz told me in not so many words. Came belting down the cargo hold saying something about ‘they’ve gone’ and I realized when I noticed that the small ship next door was gone and...” Shamon suddenly stilled.

Torkra looked at him questioningly.

“‘They’. Paz said ‘they’.”

“More than one person,” Torkra stated. “So could it be Emet and one of her crew?”

“No. She knows she needs them all right now to keep suspicion at bay.” A nasty thought surfaced. “So who else did she send with Emet? One of the slaves? All of them?”

“Nay, I doubt that. She knows she needs those slaves, and she’d put all her friends and herself in danger if she set them free now. Those slaves are under security surveillance, I would think.”

“So who went with Emet?” Shamon looked at Torkra.

Torkra shrugged.

It was something to think over later. Right now, Shamon had other things to sort out.

“I know you and Sonja get together and work on a few little extras,” Shamon began.

Torkra held up one hand. “’Tis all legal, I assure you.”

“Right.” Shamon rolled his eyes. “Of course. Like that engine thruster that somehow found its way onto Simon’s engines. Like the blocker you somehow came by from her.”

“That was just in case we had to avoid detection from undesirables. ’Twas Sonja’s suggestion, of course.”

“Of course.” Torkra eyed Shamon curiously.

“Do you have a tracking device?” Shamon asked bluntly. “One that won’t be picked up by security or anyone else?”

“Ah.” Torkra tapped the side of his nose and winked. “To track a certain smuggler’s ship?”

“How’d you guess?”

“You’re head over heels in love with the wench, Shamon. Any fool can see it.”

“Obviously, since you did.”

“Be nice to me.” Getting off the bunk, Torkra strode over to a wooden chest in the corner of the cabin and opened the lid. “You want to attach it to her or the ship?”

“Tis a choice?” Shamon moved up behind the younger man and peered into the chest. “Stars, Torkra, what gadgets have you got in there?”

“Never mind.” Going down on one knee, Torkra started to carefully sort through various small implements which Shamon had never before seen. “I do a little experimenting. Now, do you wish to plant it on Gabie or on her ship?” Taking out a small container, Torkra lifted out a tiny gadget and held it up. “This can slip into the lining of her jacket. Or...” He picked out another little container and opened the lid to reveal a tiny square no bigger than his thumb nail and no thicker than a piece of paper. “You can attach this inside the ship somewhere.”

“You made these?” Shamon held both implements in his hand, impressed.

“I adapted them from the prototypes available... in places.”

“The blocker is illegal.”

“In times of emergency, a cloaking device is necessary for protection.” Torkra laughed when Shamon raised one eyebrow at him. “Sabra knows I’m working on it.”

“Sabra?” Shamon took a closer look at the young man, barely out of his teens.

“Aye. She saw a couple of things I had adapted and shown Cam, and she was interested.” Torkra’s cheeks flushed a little as he added almost shyly, “If I perfect a

few things to the requirement of security, they may buy the designs from me, and even better, allow me to assist in making the official models.”

“Giving me the tracking device won’t endanger your work with her?”

“Nay. She doesn’t know what else I’m working on. I don’t tell people everything.” Torkra grinned. “This could be a trial run.”

Surprised, Shamon studied Torkra. He and his younger brother were the youngest of the trading crew. At nineteen years of age, Torkra was the opposite of his brother. Mikal was blonde, feisty and had a zest for life. Torkra was dark-haired, quieter, with a quirky sense of humour.

And, it appeared, very intelligent. The youngster was a real surprise.

“Does Simon know what you do?” Shamon queried. “Aamun?”

“They know I tinker with things.” Torkra shrugged. “I think Simon suspects something, mainly because Sabra showed up at the ship one day wanting to talk to me, and to give me something I needed to advance one of my prototypes. But he never said anything.”

Nay, Simon wouldn’t ask anything. Shamon could just imagine the thoughtful look on his face, though.

“So.” Torkra straightened. “Which tracker do you want?”

Refocusing on the problem at hand, Shamon pursed his lips. “The tracker will tell me where the *Larceny* is, but if Gabie’s not on it when she gets into trouble, I won’t know for certain where to find her.”

“So take both.”

“Are you sure?”

“Aye.” Torkra nodded. “I have the plans. ’Tis easy to make more.”

Easy? Shamon took another look at Torkra. The young man was a bit of an enigma. How had he missed just how intelligent he was?

Torkra carefully repacked the contents of the chest. “How are you going to get the tracker into Gabie’s clothes?”

“By getting her out of them.”

Torkra laughed.

“I’ll wander over shortly.” Shamon held up one of the devices. “Actually, I’ll sneak over now and plant one of these on her ship. Can it be put on the outside without being damaged by the pressures of space?”

“Aye, no worries. I’d advise under the ship where ’twon’t easily be spotted. Somewhere obscure where they won’t do checks so often.”

“Not near the landing ramps, refueller cap, or space shields.”

“Aye.” Torkra stood up. “Want me to draw you a map?”

“Cheeky sod.” Shamon ruffled his hair affectionately.

Exiting the trade ship, he started across the docking bay, and that was when he saw Gabie and Misha walking fast across the lit grounds. Dropping back into the shadows, Shamon pocketed the trackers and trailed behind them, careful to remain out of sight.

He had a feeling the lasses were going to meet with either security or smugglers, and he intended to find out which.

They moved through the settlement until they came to an old, broken-down shed on a dilapidated street. Everything was quiet, and that didn’t bode well to Shamon. He watched as Misha knocked on the door and it swung open to reveal a man. The light behind him hid his features. Gabie and Misha entered and the door slammed shut behind them.

The street had no lighting, so it wasn’t hard for Shamon to move stealthily through the weeds and around the side of the house. Kneeling beneath the window, he was careful not to press too close to it as he rose to peer inside. What he saw was not to his liking.

Gabie and Misha were arguing with four men. The men were hard-eyed, hard-faced, and were ruthless.

The dark-haired man seemed to be doing a lot of swearing, and Gabie was trying to placate him. Suddenly he grabbed Gabie’s arm and jerked her forward. His fist slammed into her stomach, doubling her over. It happened so fast. Within seconds Misha was struggling in the grips of two of the men, screaming Gabie’s name, cursing the men. The darkhaired man grabbed Gabie’s hair, dragging her head up, and he slammed the back of his hand viciously across her face.

Shamon's heart rate doubled, fury surging through him. *He was going to kill the bastard! Rend him limb from bloody limb!* A roar of pure rage starting, he started to spring to his feet when something hit him from behind. Stars burst in front of him, a flash of agonized light. The instinct to protect his lass kept him from falling immediately, and he stumbled down onto one knee, bracing himself with one hand on the ground. Another blow landed on the back of his head. Darkness claimed him, and even as he fell, her name was on his lips, and fear filled his heart. Then he knew no more.

~ * ~

The people were being rounded up. He watched from his position at the top of the mountain. The last of the settlers were being hunted down, driven out of their homes, pursued and dragged from their hiding places amongst the rocks as they tried to flee.

Things were getting too dangerous. It was time to end this little operation before it was discovered.

Taking a sip from a goblet of wine, he watched dispassionately as one woman slipped and fell down the incline, smashing her head against a rock. Blood spurted. One of the hunters stopped and crouched down to check her. When he stood up and walked away, the watcher knew she was dead.

What a waste of dinnos.

The big ships hovered nearby, the ramps down awaiting the human cargo.

~ * ~

Misha was crying silently as she steadied Gabie's swaying steps.

"It's all right," Gabie rasped, straightening carefully. Her stomach hurt and her cheek throbbed. She limped, her shin burning from the brutal kick Tason had dealt it while she was down on the floor. Her wrist stung from the vicious twist he'd applied to the skin there. "Shit, you'd think he'd do better than an old-fashioned twist-burn on it."

"It's not funny." Misha's voice was both furious and wobbly. "That bastard!"

Cripes, Gabie's heart was still beating double-time. "I don't think he likes me."

“This is no time to crack funnies, damn it!” Misha’s arm around her waist was gentle. “I should have blown that prick apart when we walked through the door.”

“We didn’t expect to be jumped.” Gabie sucked in a breath of air.

Nausea welled up in her and she forced it down. Pain throbbed through her and all she wanted to do was swallow a heap of painkillers and lie down.

Misha was careful to take the backstreets so no attention was drawn to their staggering progress. Worse was the fact that they knew Tason’s men were watching their every move to ensure they didn’t go for help. Bastards.

By the time they staggered up the ramp of the *Larceny*, spots were dancing before Gabie’s eyes.

“Olin!” Misha yelled as they got into the cargo hold. “Paz!”

The staircase rattled as Olin and Paz ran down it.

Olin took one look at Gabie and cursed. “What the hell happened?”

“Tason is a little pissed at me,” Gabie croaked.

Paz came up on her other side, pulling her free arm over his shoulder and steadying her as Olin did a quick inspection.

“Get her to her bunk,” he ordered. “I’ll be right there with the medi-kit.”

Her bunk sounded like bliss. Gabie bit back a groan as Misha and Paz shuffled her up the stairwell and into the main corridor of the *Larceny*. Her shin throbbed even worse from banging it on a stair when she didn’t lift her foot properly.

“Maybe we should get someone—” Paz began worriedly, as they laid her back on the bunk.

“No.” Misha dashed an angry tear from her cheek. “Those bastards that did this were watching our every move back here. No help.”

Gabie cracked open an eyelid. “Don’t sweat it, Paz. I’m not seriously hurt.”

“You don’t look good.” Perching gingerly on the edge of the bunk, he took her hand. He was so pale she thought he’d faint. “What happened?”

Olin came barrelling through the door. “That’s what I want to know.”

Gabie closed her eyes. "You tell them, Misha. I'm just going to lie here and whimper for a bit."

Her hands trembled. Getting a bit of a beating was something she didn't come across every day. Sure, she'd seen others get beatings, you couldn't go where she'd gone and not see some bad things, but she'd never been on the receiving end of one. Until now.

Olin was fussing over her, lifting her shirt and pressing lightly on her stomach.

"Damn!" Opening her eyes, she pushed his hand away. "Don't touch!"

"I have to make certain you're all right." Olin scowled at her and resumed prodding carefully.

"I want painkiller. Give me lots of it."

"Not until I check you over." Olin took her wrist and studied it. "What happened? Misha, you're crying, damn it. Are you all right?"

"Gabie got hit, not me." Sitting on the chair, Misha trembled with anger and grief combined. "When we got the call to meet Tason, as you know, we thought he was just checking on us. He told us he had further orders for us, that's why we walked right into the bastard's den with no backup."

"I'd have shot him." Furious, Paz squeezed Gabie's hand. "Shot him dead."

Touched that the gentle Paz cared so much, Gabie opened one eye and smiled slightly, even though it hurt. "Aw, Paz."

Olin's mouth was tight. "Did he find out about Rose?"

"No." Elbows on her knees, Misha leaned forward. "He was angry about the brawl. Said he couldn't have us risking ourselves by starting brawls for our own amusement, drawing the laws attention to ourselves. He said if we wanted trouble so badly, he'd give it to us. And then he started on Gabie." Her fists clenched. "I started to go to her aid, but we were outnumbered. Two men grabbed me. They took my laser and held me back while that bastard..." She blinked. "Gabie, I'm so sorry."

Knowing her friend was swamped with guilt, Gabie held one hand up. "Misha, you said it yourself. We were outnumbered. There was nothing you could do. Stop fretting."

“Next time I’m going with you,” Paz announced.

“Next time,” Gabie said wryly, “I’m insisting we meet in the open and we’re having all lasers drawn.”

“I’ll have the ship’s lasers set on them,” Olin promised grimly as he straightened. “You’ll be fine, Gabie. It’s mostly soft tissue injury—bruises and the like. You’ll be sore for a while, but there’s no serious damage that I can see. And he avoided marking your face.”

“Just give me painkillers.” Gabie closed her eyes. “I’m not brave. I don’t like pain. Give me lots of painkillers.”

Olin came back with a glass half full of green liquid. Gabie swallowed the bitter brew and lay back down. Olin ushered Misha and Paz from the cabin before turning back to her from his position at the doorway.

“Gabie?”

“Yeah?” She looked at him.

He looked a little lost and suddenly older than she remembered, and Gabie wondered what bad memories this little episode had brought back to him.

His mouth worked and he swallowed, but all he said was, “Call me if you need me. I’ll check you during the night.”

“Thanks. Thanks, Olin.”

He turned off the light and closed the door partially behind him. The light in the corridor was dimmed. Their muted voices drifted back to her.

Now she was alone she could relax. *Cripes, would this nightmare never end?* Gabie stared up at the dark ceiling. Tason was dangerous, she’d known that, but this was the first taste of his violence she’d had, and no doubt there’d be more if she didn’t watch her step more closely.

Holding up one hand, she felt it shaking. Violence was something she and her friends avoided. They weren’t heroes and they weren’t tough. It was why they worked for themselves and stayed mainly in the Lawful Sector. It was why they smuggled on the small side, flying beneath the radar of the bigger smuggling sharks and the law.

Well, it looked like that idea was shot all to hell. Gabie rubbed her eyes, feeling bereft. After this, she just knew that Tason and Raznin wouldn't let her or her friends go. This wasn't going to end if the security didn't end it, and who knew how far they were going to allow the *Larceny* crew to be used and abused? *Hell, where was security when she was getting the shit beaten out of her?*

Flopping her good arm down on the pillow above her head brought a sharp ache from her stomach as the movement stretched her body, and she carefully brought her arm back down to her side.

One thought hovered in her mind. She wished Shamon was there with her, to hold her, reassure her, and tell her it would be fine. But hell, she couldn't call on him. He'd tear the settlement apart looking for Tason and likely get himself killed.

No, she had to see this through herself.

A tear pricked her eye. Common sense be damned, she still wished Shamon was with her. She craved the safety of his big arms right now. If he'd been with her there would have been no way Tason would have dared laid a finger on her. But then Shamon might have been shot, and that was something she couldn't even bear to think about.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed as the painkiller flowed through her system, easing the hurts.

No, she had to get herself and her friends out of this mess somehow. She had to contact Sabra and ensure that that they would be protected once this bloody mission was over. A guarantee. She didn't want to be used over and over. No way. Not her and not her crew. What they'd do once out of the smuggling game she had no idea, but it had to be better than being the chew toy for those bastards, both security and smugglers.

Slowly she drifted off into a troubled sleep.

~ * ~

When she awoke during the night strong arms surrounded her, cradling her close. A big body curled protectively around her.

"Am I dreaming?" Sleepily, the painkiller making her groggy, she tried to look up.

A big palm gently tucked her face back into a strong neck. “Nay. Go back to sleep, sweet lass.” A brush of lips on top of her head, a tender, light rubbing of a big hand on her back.

She snuggled closer. “I wished you were here.”

“I’m here.”

“I’m safe with you.” In the dream she pressed her lips to the strong column of his neck. “Shamon...”

“Sleep.” The words were deep and husky, as though clouded with emotion. “I’ll watch over you.”

She smiled and drifted off again.

~ * ~

The next time she woke it was to find Des bending over her, concern in her eyes and determination in the set of her jaw.

Well hell, her dream had just turned into a nightmare.

“Are you all right?” Des asked.

She wasn’t dreaming. Gabie sighed. “Yeah. A few bruises. I’ll live.”

“Good. We need to talk.”

“Aw, cripes. Now?”

“We don’t have time to waste. There’s a raging Daamen trader on the loose.”

~ * ~

Flexing his hands, Tason remembered the shocked expression on Gabie’s face when he’d struck her. Shock and then pain. It was a lesson she’d remember. Drawing attention to herself from the law, being stupid enough to cause a brawl. The silly little bitch had work to do, and she had to do it without playing around.

Leaning back in his chair, Tason watched as the stars flickered past the space shield. Sometimes lessons had to be harsh.

~ * ~

Striding into the dining cabin of the trade ship, Shamon glared at Des. She eyed him back without fear.

“I heard,” she said.

“Heard?” He almost snarled it. “Gabie was beaten up, I was knocked out, and you only just *heard*?”

“I heard not long after it happened. I’m sorry. I also heard how you’ve been storming through the settlement searching for those bastards. You didn’t find them.”

“You have to get Gabie out of this situation, Des. Now.”

“No can do.” She shook her head.

“Then why did you send Heddham and Simon to find me and bring me back here to meet you?” The fury that had been boiling up inside him threatened to overflow. “You can’t continue to risk her life like this!”

“It’s not solely my decision.”

“Then whose bloody decision is it?”

Twelve

“Sit down.”

“I don’t want to bloody sit down, Des!”

“Park your arse on a stool or this discussion is over.”

Shamon glowered at her. “I’m putting a stop to this. Right now.”

He could almost see Des grinding her teeth together but give the wench credit, she was hanging onto her temper. Just. And he didn’t care.

She took a deep breath. “I have an offer for you.”

“No offers. ’Tis over. I’m taking Gabie back to Daamen.”

“Really? What about her friends?”

“I’m taking them, too.”

“Then sit down and listen to what I have to say first.” She studied him. “How’s your head, by the way?”

Thanks to the painkillers Heddam had given him earlier, it wasn’t as bad as it had been. It ached instead of throbbed.

“I know who those men were who beat up Gabie,” she said when he didn’t reply.

“Then lead me to them so I can rip those bastards apart!”

“Sit down, Shamon.”

In answer he swung away and started striding for the door. Gabie was his concern, not a security mission.

Simon appeared in the doorway, blocking the exit, his calm gaze settling on Shamon.

“Move,” Shamon ordered.

Simon didn’t shift. “Shamon, I know how you feel.”

Shamon almost saw red, he was that furious. “Gabie was beaten up, Simon! How the hell could you know how I feel?”

“Because you helped me rescue Des, remember?”

Aye, he had. Simon had gone through a silent torture, helpless to save her until the trade ship got close enough. But they had saved her.

Gabie hadn’t been saved.

“You’ve seen Gabie, you know she’s all right,” Simon continued quietly. “Bruised and sore, but all right. Just sit and listen to what Des has to say.”

“Des may be your wife, Simon,” Shamon snarled. “But I don’t see anything being done to protect my lass! Now out of my way!”

There was a brief flash of anger in Simon’s eyes, but it was mixed with understanding. When Des started forward Simon held his hand up to her without removing his gaze from Shamon’s.

“What happened was terrible, I know,” Simon began.

“Damned right ’twas,” Shamon cursed. “And there won’t be a next time.”

“Nay, there won’t, because you’re going to be with her on the rest of this mission.”

Shamon looked at him as the words sunk in.

“Aye, you’ll be with her.” Simon nodded. “Sit down and Des will explain.”

“She shouldn’t be on this mission at all—”

“I agree, but ’tis not our call. Gabie agreed and now too much hinges on this mission, the lives of many people, including children.” Stepping forward, Simon placed his hands on Shamon’s shoulders. “Shamon, I know Des faces danger every day. I don’t know much of what she gets involved in, but there are times I have no

doubt I'd scream with insanity if I knew what she did. But 'tis her choice. Gabie made a choice when she agreed—"

"Agreed?" Shamon gave a harsh bark of laughter. "She was blackmailed, Simon."

"I know. But she was also blackmailed by smugglers. Ruthless smugglers, Shamon. Even if security hadn't stepped in, Gabie and her friends would be either dead or running the same mission. The only difference is that she has security at her back."

"You call getting beaten up being covered?" Just the memory of Gabie being hurt made Shamon's teeth grind together. "Where was security then?"

"Actually, one of the security team was there. That's who knocked you out," Des said.

Shocked, Shamon swung around.

"And before you go off on your bloody high horse, he would have interfered if it looked like she was going to be killed or severely injured."

"Severely injured?" Shamon was almost breathing fire. "She was *hurt*! How much more should she have to suffer before someone helps her? How much—"

"Shamon."

His name was spoken quietly but it caught his attention, made his breath catch, and he turned swiftly to see Gabie standing in front of Simon.

"Shamon, I'm all right—" she began, but she didn't get a chance to say more because Shamon was there in one long stride.

Emotion overwhelmed him. His throat was tight, his heart beating hard as his fury was momentarily forgotten at just the sight of her. Gathering her close to him, Shamon wanted to squeeze her tight but a little voice of wisdom reminded him of her smaller stature and bruises.

Bending down over her, he pressed his mouth to her shiny brown hair. "You shouldn't be out of bed, lass."

"I'm fine." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "I mean, I can't breathe or anything right now, but apart from that..."

Easing his hold, he allowed her to pull back just a fraction. Not enough to put any space between them, but enough so she could tilt her head back to meet his gaze. The bruise stood out on her cheek and her complexion was pale, but apart from that she seemed all right.

“Shamon.” She laid one hand on his chest, her palm warm against his bare skin. “Des and Simon are right. This was a decision I had to make—”

“’Twas forced on you, Gabie. ’Twasn’t a true choice.” Anger threaded through him, but so did concern and love. He wanted to take her away, wrap her in cotton wool, and protect her from any more harm. “I’ll take you back to Daamen. Just give me the word, and I’ll—” Gabie’s fingertips on his mouth stopped his words.

She smiled ruefully up at him and shook her head. “The smugglers won’t stop looking for me or my friends now. They wanted us because of our...” She glanced at Des who was standing to the side, her sharp-eyed gaze watching everything. “...stuff. They’ll want that all the time now. That’s why they picked us, because they knew we stood the best chance of running the slaves past the law. As Paz said, now they’ve cornered us they’re not going to let us go. Ever.”

“Those smugglers will be history, lass.” Shamon speared Des with a look. “Security knows who they are—”

“Only the ones who had a run-in with Gabie,” Des replied, unfazed. “The top shark, the one they work for, is the one we’re hunting. The others are just big fish.”

“And Gabie is bait,” Shamon snapped. “She could have been killed!”

“Settle down.” Gabie tapped his arm, and even though her eyes were warm, her tone was pitched low to a calming level. “Shamon, I need you to listen. Please.”

That was what got him. The soft plead. One look from those bright green eyes, that one word from her lips, and he could feel himself caving in. He tried to steel himself against it.

“Please, Shamon.” Gabie pressed closer. “Just listen. For me?”

He was a goner. Shamon knew it and so did Simon. His friend and captain was smiling faintly. One look at Des’s arched brow and sardonic expression made it obvious that wench knew it as well. He had a sudden sneaking suspicion that Gabie had been brought in as reinforcement.

They’d found the one chink in his armour.

“Fine,” he bit out. “I’ll listen, but it better be bloody good.”

“Then sit down.” Des pointed to a chair. “Before I kick your—”

Simon cleared his throat.

Des sent him a sour look.

He smiled back at her.

More concerned with Gabie than the little scene being played out, Shamon led her to the table, his arm around her shoulders. About to settle her on a stool, he changed his mind and sat down, drawing her onto his thigh and settling his arm around her waist.

Her cheeks went red and she tried to slide out of his hold. “Shamon, I can sit on a stool.”

“Just stay right here.” As close to him as possible, right where he wanted her. Perched on his lap she was on eye level with him, and when she turned her head to protest he met her gaze squarely.

He didn’t know what she saw in his eyes, but she sighed.

“You’re being difficult.”

“I have a right to be after what I saw happen to you.” He tightened his arm around her waist, only to ease up when he felt her stiffen. Spreading his palm across her belly, he said softly, “You’re still sore.”

“Just a bit bruised.” Glancing away, she watched as Des and Simon sat down at the table opposite her. Her cheeks were still pink and when she looked back at him, she whispered, “Did I dream you?”

Knowing immediately what she meant, he brushed his lips across hers. “Nay, ’twas no dream. As soon as I regained consciousness, I went to see you. A hundred space pirates couldn’t keep me away from you.” Especially when she’d curled into his embrace and admitted wanting him.

In fact, right now he was torn in two. One part of him wanted to hunt down the bastards who’d hurt her and beat the living shit out of them, and the other part of him just wanted to hold her close and never let her go.

When he'd been able to tear himself away from her, once Olin had assured him Gabie was fine, he'd stormed into the settlement and scoured the alleys and taverns after finding the dilapidated shack empty. It had taken all Heddum and Simon's strength and persuasiveness to get him back to the trade ship.

She touched his cheek pensively. "I heard you got hurt."

"'Twas nothing." Catching her hand, he brushed his lips across her knuckles.

A tremulous smile curved her lips and Shamon wanted nothing more right then than to carry her off and make love to her. Slow, gentle love.

"Right." Des fixed a hard gaze on both Gabie and Shamon, breaking their private moment. "You two are causing a problem."

"I told Sabra I wasn't good at this kind of thing," Gabie retorted.

"Starting that brawl got you into trouble, brought you to the attention of the smugglers you're working for," Des continued. "Not to mention it could have gotten you badly hurt."

Gabie frowned.

"And you." Des speared Shamon with a menacing look. "What did you think you'd accomplish by storming into the settlement? You all but verbally announced to all and sundry that Gabie was yours and you were going to rip apart the men who'd hurt her."

"I'm not going to let my lass be treated like that," Shamon growled. "I had every right to hunt those bastards down. And I tell you right now, if I'd gotten hold of them there'd be nothing left to scrape up with a shovel."

Gabie patted his arm soothingly. Simon smiled as he traced a pattern on the table top.

"Oh yeah, you think he's right," Des stated sourly to him.

"Aye. I'd have done the same," Simon replied easily.

"So why drag me back?" Shamon asked curtly.

Simon looked up at him steadily. "Because there is a better way. One 'twill suit you and security. Sort of."

Suspiciously Shamon switched his gaze to Des. Simon's wench was disgruntled, so whatever had been decided she wasn't in sole agreement.

"After the shit hit the fan, I contacted Sabra," Des said. "She knows you a lot better than the rest of security do. She cleared it so you could travel with Gabie as her protection. Back up," Des clarified, pointing a finger at him. "You travel on her ship as back up, and you keep track of her when she leaves."

This was unexpected. "Security actually agreed?"

"Sabra organized it, don't ask me how. It didn't help that Simon put the idea in her head." Des glared at her husband. "Don't think I'm going to forget that in a hurry, trader."

Simon just kept smiling, though his eyes got a little hotter. And it wasn't with anger. Des actually blushed slightly, which only seemed to spark her temper more.

Visibly reigning herself in, she turned back to Shamon. "The *Larceny* has a hiding space you can use if the smugglers get onboard. But you are not to engage them in a fight or let them know of your presence unless Gabie's life depends on it. You may have to tolerate a bit of shoving or pushing—"

"Nay!" Shamon leaned forward.

"That's the condition, trader, take it, like it, lump it or leave it," Des growled.

Anger surged through him. "Watch Gabie get hit? Are you out of your mind?" He swung his gaze back to Simon. "You really think I can do that?"

Simon sent him a slow, barely discernable wink, and that made Shamon suddenly rethink. Simon knew something Des didn't, or was going to give advice he didn't want her to hear.

His friend held his gaze for several long seconds before answering quietly, "Your interference could mean the life or death of Gabie and her crew. 'Tis why I'm sending Heddham with you."

"You think he can hold me back?"

"He can talk sense into you during what could be a harrowing time."

Des narrowed her eyes at Shamon. "These are your choices, Shamon. One—you go as her back-up but keep hidden and stay quiet, only interfering if the *Larceny's*

crew is in danger of their lives, and track them when they leave the ship and report back to security. Two—and trust me, this is the one I favour the most—you stay the hell away from Gabie and her mob or end up cooling your heels in a holding cell until this is all over.”

“You should pull Gabie from this and protect her,” Shamon said furiously.

“Shamon.” Gabie shifted in his arm to look at him. “You know I can’t go to ground. I’ll be hunted for the rest of my life. And so will Misha, Paz and Olin.”

“You’ll be safe on Daamen,” he growled. “I promise you that.”

“Yeah, but I’ll never be able to travel freely. None of us will. What kind of life is it for us, constantly looking over our shoulders, worried that someday someone will grab us?”

“’Twon’t happen on Daamen.”

“I don’t want to spend the rest of my life skulking on Daamen. And... and I want to stop these smugglers. They’re dealing in live cargo, human cargo.”

“Then let security deal with it. They know the main players.” Shamon ran his palm across her back. “Gabie, ’tis too dangerous. I don’t want you hurt anymore than you’ve already been.”

Gabie looked at Des. “Show him. Show him what you showed me on my ship.”

Without a word Des took a handtronic from her pocket and handed it to Shamon.

“Look,” Gabie said, and flicked one of the little buttons.

He looked, and what he saw made him sick. Bodies were piled up beside a mass grave. Another pic was of a small group of ragged children, crying, despairing. Another showed a wench and man being torn away from their children. Each pic showed the cruelty of slavery. Hunger. Despair. Haunting. Beatings and whippings. Humiliation. A couple of clear rapes.

It shook him, made nausea roil in his throat. All he could think to say was, “Slaves are sold in the markets.” He put the handtronic down, not wanting to see anymore.

“Yes. Outlaws. And those slave markets are under law and rules. But these, Shamon, are innocent people. These are hunted down and sold in the Outlaw Sector.” Des leaned her folded arms on the table. “These photo images were taken and sent to us by someone we’re trying to locate. The communications stopped several months ago, we don’t know why. But whoever is behind this particular lot is one we’ve been hunting. So far we have no actual proof of the ringleader. Our only hope to track him down is through the slaves Gabie has onboard the *Larceny*.”

Sabra had told him about the slavery but the photo images brought it to harsh reality. The children, the wenches. The men behind it were ruthless. And Gabie was rubbing shoulders with them, had already been a victim of their violence.

Convulsively his hand on her thigh tightened. “There has to be another way.”

“This is the closest we’ve ever gotten. This way we can find out those near the top of this operation and by finding them, we can pinpoint the leader.” Picking up the handtronic, Des slid it back into her pocket. “Gabie has given us the closest lead we have. Frankly—and, trust me, this hurts me to admit it—we need Gabie and her crew.”

He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to hear the ring of sincerity in Des’s voice. Unknowingly his hand spread wide over Gabie’s back to cradle her almost tenderly.

“Gabs.” Shamon caught her gaze. “You could get so badly hurt. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“It does.” Reaching up, she laid her palm against his cheek, and her beautiful green eyes shimmered with tears. “I didn’t really understand about the slaves until I saw them, not just aboard my ship, but in those image photos. I didn’t see them until Des showed them to me an hour ago. But having seen them... Shamon, I need to do this. We need to do it. Misha, Paz, Olin and me. We saw the images and we agreed to carry this out to the end.”

“You showed her.” Shamon took a deep breath. “Des—”

“I did what I had to do,” Des cut him off. “Simon made me explain to you. I was all for slinging your arse in a cell but he suggested this route was the wisest to take with you.” She cut her husband a glare. “He owes me big time.”

“Trust me, lass, I’ll pay back big time.” His smile was more of a leer. “Anytime you’re ready.”

Shamon felt Gabie give a start of surprise and remembered that she'd never seen Simon with his wife. Thoughtful Simon was often replaced with Besotted Simon and Lustful Simon.

And Simon had interfered in security business, something he never did. For Shamon.

He felt an unaccustomed emotion rise in him when he looked at Simon. Fair-haired, thoughtful, easy going and no man's fool, his friend would walk through the fires of Hell for his beloved wife, and 'twould appear he'd risk her wrath to help a friend.

Dragging her gaze from Simon's, Des scowled at Shamon. "So make up your mind, Shamon. I don't have all bloody day to be dealing with your soulful heart. Are you going with Gabie or staying the hell out of our way?"

"He's staying away," Gabie said immediately.

Shamon ignored her. "I go with her."

"I don't want you on the *Larceny*." Gabie's lips were set. "It's a stupid idea and you're going to get killed. Des, you should have listened to your gut feeling and slung his arse in a cell."

"'Tis no way I'm letting you go without me, lass." Shamon rubbed her thigh. "I prefer this idea."

"You would," both Des and Gabie said at once. They looked at each other and visibly shuddered at being in agreement.

"No argument on this," Shamon told to Gabie.

She muttered something beneath her breath but he knew by her sigh that she was resigned to the idea.

He turned his attention to Simon. "Heddam doesn't need to come into the danger zone with us."

"He goes," Simon stated. "In fact, he insists. He volunteered."

"And for such an easy-going trader, Shamon, you're a hothead when it comes to Gabie." Des stood up. "Right, I'm finished farting around with precious egos and feelings. Let's get this operation back on track. Gabie, come with me to the control

cabin and I'll give you another frequency you can contact me on. It's a direct private line."

Shamon released Gabie only after giving her a brief kiss on the cheek and a light squeeze on her thigh. She limped after Des and only paused in the doorway to cast him an unhappy glance before following the taller wench out into the corridor beyond. She wasn't happy about Shamon accompanying her, but he was more than glad. And he had a good friend to thank for it.

The silence filled the dining cabin and Shamon switched his gaze to Simon, who was regarding him calmly. Shame coursed through him at the memory of his words.

"Simon, I owe you a huge apology," he began.

"None needed," Simon replied promptly.

Shamon ploughed on regardless. "You said you'd never interfere in security because of Des's involvement, but you did. For us. For Gabie."

Leaning forward with his forearms on the table, Simon regarded him steadily. "You're my friend, Shamon. You've gone through danger with Red, me, Darvk, Borge and Jase, all for our lasses. Do you truly think I could do any less? Nay." He held up his hand when Shamon opened his mouth. "'Twas a small thing, just a suggestion made to Sabra. 'Twas she who took it up."

"Des is furious with you."

Simon grinned. "The wench is such a delight when she's mad. And Shamon, she's not as furious as you think. She'll rant and rave, but she knows 'tis the only way."

"I don't know how to thank you," Shamon said quietly.

"By staying safe and trying to abide by the rules set down by Des." Simon shook his head. "Though truth be told, if 'twere Des in danger, I'd be doing exactly as you are."

"Heddam—"

"Wants to go. He's your friend and he knows you may need backup when the time comes. Trust me, 'twas not easy to choose when every man on this ship, every one of your friends, stepped forward to volunteer their help. Heddam won out by

simply telling the others, quite coarsely I might add, to shove off. He was going with you.”

Shamon had to swallow the lump in his throat. “Des is your lass and I yelled at her. I wouldn’t hurt her, Simon. You know that?”

“Of course I know that. I wouldn’t have stood there if I’d thought differently. I’d have pinned your arse to the wall.” Simon sat back. “Now, something else before you get too soppy on me.”

Feeling very soppy, Shamon waited.

“I want you to put that tracker Torkra gave you on Gabie’s ship, and the other tracker in her jacket.” A full smile wreathed Simon’s face. “We’re following you.”

Somehow Shamon wasn’t surprised. “How’d you get Des to agree?”

“Oh, my delightful little wench doesn’t know.” A twinkle appeared in Simon’s eyes. “We’ll just happen to be trailing a distance behind you, going about some extra trade business if she gets suspicious. But the wench is so focused on this operation she won’t be looking for us.”

“You think? Des knows you too well, Simon.”

“’Tis just trading business. Work is work.”

“Thank you,” Shamon said simply.

Simon just smiled.

~ * ~

Gabie was not happy. Standing at the end of the corridor, she watched as Heddam and Simon approached, both carrying a bag of clothes and other essentials. Behind her a piece of the end wall had slid aside to reveal a small hidden cabin. It was a hidey hole that no one apart from the crew of the *Larceny* knew about. Well, the crew and now Des, bugger it. A bunk was the only thing in it.

“By storing your things in here,” Misha was saying as she strode along beside them, “No sign of your occupancy will be visible if we get boarded by anyone. One of you can sleep here and the other in the spare cabin, but remember to grab your bed linen and things when you bolt for this hidey hole if we get boarded.”

Nibbling her bottom lip worriedly, Gabie watched as the traders put their bags in the hidey hole.

“Mornin’, lass,” Heddam said cheerfully.

“You shouldn’t have come,” she replied. “This is stupid and dangerous.”

Stopping right in front of her, Shamon bent down and kissed the tip of her nose, making her jump. “This is exactly where I want to be, and no amount of pouting is going to change it, lass.”

“We were doing okay—” she began.

“Just obey security orders.”

She glared up at him. “Oh, now you say it, now you’ve got your big foot in the trap with us!”

“We won’t get in the way,” Heddam assured her, his twinkling eyes betraying his serious countenance. “You won’t even know we’re here.”

Considering how big they were in the small ship, Gabie seriously doubted that. Not to mention that Shamon was right here. In the ship. She could almost feel herself breaking out in a sweat.

“Aye,” Shamon agreed. “In fact, we’re going to help out. We’ve had extra stores brought onboard to start with—”

“Good thing,” Paz said miserably. “You have huge appetites. It’d have cleaned us out of stores within two days otherwise.”

“You do exaggerate.” Misha rolled her eyes. “Three days, maybe.”

Gabie sighed.

“We’ll let you get settled in.” Misha took Gabie’s elbow and started to lead her away. “While we double-check the coordinates.” As soon as they’d entered the control cabin, Misha let her go. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” Gabie glared at the viscomm. “Oh look, the coordinates which I just rechecked *ten minutes ago* are fine. What a wonder!”

“Will you stop sulking?”

“No.” Sitting down in one of the chairs, Gabie folded her arms. “I didn’t want anyone else involved in this, Misha. You know that. Now I have two more to worry about.”

Her friend snorted inelegantly. “I doubt we’ll have to worry about those two! In fact, if anyone tries to hurt us now, they’ll have something to worry about with our two giant bodyguards on board.”

“They’re not here to stop us being shoved around, only killed.”

“Hey, I’ll accept that.”

Drumming her fingers on the console, Gabie looked out at the docking bay. From her position, she could see the Daamen trade ship readying itself to leave within the next hour.

That’s where Shamon and Heddham should have been. Safe on their ship. No one was stupid enough to attack a Daamen trade ship. Well, except for Sonja’s space pirates, and how had that ended up? With Sonja wed and pregnant to the captain of the very same trade ship she’d hijacked.

Life was weird sometimes.

“Would you be as worried if it wasn’t Shamon with us?” Misha leaned against the wall.

“No. I mean yes.”

Misha smirked.

“I don’t want anyone else but us here. What if he got himself killed? Huh? Or Heddham? How could I ever face the traders again?”

“They volunteered.”

“They were given a choice they couldn’t refuse.”

“They could have chosen to walk away.”

“They should have.”

“So why did you let Des talk you into allowing Shamon to come with us?”

“What else could I do? He was on the rampage, looking for that idiot who hit me. He was a danger to himself, and the only way to control him was to stick him with us.”

“And Heddam?”

“He stuck himself with his friend.”

“So we’re all stuck together.” Misha shifted her position a little. “Are you going to sulk for long?”

Leaning her head on her hand, Gabie sighed. “No. But give me a few minutes, all right? I should be allowed to sulk for a few minutes at least.”

“You have five minutes and that’s being generous.”

“Wow. You are so bighearted.”

“I know. You’re very lucky to have me.” Misha started for the door. “I’ll do a last check and then it’s time to lift off.”

After a few minutes of indulging in a good sulk, Gabie shook her head. What was done was done, and there was nothing she could do about it. Shamon was onboard. She just had to suck it up.

Misha came back not long after to give her the all clear to take off and Gabie immersed herself in guiding the *Larceny* out of the docking bay and steering it towards space. Within minutes nothing but black surrounded them and stars sparkled through the space shield.

She felt him as soon as he entered the cabin. It was as though his aura brushed against hers when he stopped right behind her chair. It sure did things to her own aura when two big hands fell onto her shoulders and long fingers massaged her tense muscles.

“Lass,” Shamon said quietly.

“Don’t think you can get into my good graces by being nice.” Dropping her chin forward, she sighed in ecstasy as his thumbs ran up the column of her neck. “But don’t stop trying.”

Shamon laughed.

She peeked sideways at him, but all she could see was a hard thigh. “Who got the spare cabin and who was relegated to the hidey hole?”

“We tossed. I lost. Heddam got the spare cabin.”

“Cripes. If you’d asked, I’d have loaned you my dice.”

Sure fingers kneaded her shoulders. “I’m not likely to forget about those dice, lass. ’Twas the best thing to happen to me.”

“That dice was the best thing to happen to me, too. I’ve won a fortune with them.”

“’Twasn’t dinnos I was thinking about.”

Hoo boy. There was no mistaking the tone of the words. Tipping her head back, Gabie stared up into brown eyes that held more than a trace of warmth. In fact, a simmer of heat shone from them.

Wow. “Listen, Shamon.” She cleared her throat as he leaned down, his face coming closer, all those strong, yummy lines coming into fascinating focus. Even upside down his face was enough to make her knees go weak. “This is a small spaceship. No hanky-panky.”

“Fine.” His lips brushed hers. “I’ll do hot and heavy instead.”

Just the mere thought almost made her slip right out of her chair.

Cupping her cheeks, his thumbs caressing her cheekbones, Shamon held her still for his kiss. The unfamiliar position was different. Tantalizing. Oh, all right, she admitted to herself through a pleasant haze, it was almost erotic.

He pulled away too soon for her, but she managed to not grab him and drag him down to the floor to have her evil way with him. Cripes, who knew she was such a slut when it came to this giant trader? Maybe he’d unleashed the slut in her when he’d popped her cherry. Now there was a thought.

“You’re grinning.” His face still hovered above hers, his gaze tender and, yep, still hot.

“Just a thought.”

“Share it.”

“No way.”

“I could make you tell me.”

“I’d like to see you try—” Her words were cut off by the viscomm beeping an incoming communications. Straightening up, she mentally shook the remnants of pleasure from her mind. “You better leave. This could be... ah...” If she told him the names, would he go off half-cocked?

“Your contacts.” She felt him back away, but his fingers trailed lightly across her nape before lifting off. “I’ll wait outside.”

Gabie waited until he’d left the cabin completely before she flicked the viscomm on to reveal Raznin.

He looked at her dispassionately. “You’ve needed a lesson.”

“Gosh, was that your idea? Thanks.”

“I trust you learned from it and won’t repeat your mistakes.”

Gabie gave him a quick, sardonic salute.

Even though his eyes remained cold, a small smile played around his mouth. “You have spirit, Gabie.”

“Disappointed your boy didn’t beat it out of me?”

“Oh, I’m saving that pleasure for myself.”

That didn’t sound good.

Raznin actually licked his lips. “I’m quite good with a whip. I can make you scream for mercy and not even break your skin with the lash.”

“Wow.” Gabie gazed levelly at him, refusing to grimace at the mental picture that not-so-pleasant statement brought forth. “Your thoughtfulness awes me.”

Those hard eyes raked over her, cruelty flickering in their depths. “I can’t wait until we’re together. I have such plans for you.”

Shamon might not have been in the cabin, but Gabie could just about feel the fury rolling off him. The back of her neck prickled and she was half afraid he’d

come pounding into the cabin, grab Raznin by the neck and pull him through the viscomm screen.

One could dream, but the harsh reality was that Raznin was safe who knew how far away in his ship, and Shamon was a little touchy when it came to Gabie's well-being. It was better to put an end to things before the big trader gave his presence away by the steam coming from his ears to curl around the cabin door frame.

"As much as I'm enjoying this little chat," Gabie drawled, "was there a particular reason you contacted me?"

Raznin looked at her for the longest time, and she resisted the impulse to squirm uneasily. One thing she'd learned a long time ago in this business was never to let any of the big sharks circling know you were scared of them. The scent of fear was a sweet aroma to their twisted senses.

Finally, he said softly, "You stay away from that Daamen trader."

Aw cripes, he knew about Shamon. "Trader?"

"I know you've been with that bastard, Gabie. I won't tolerate it."

"You won't tolerate it?"

"You're mine."

Oh shit. Oh hell, that wasn't good.

"I won't have that trader thinking he can handle my merchandise," Raznin continued. "If he does, I'll have to brand you with my name, burn it into your skin so everyone who sees it will know who you belong to."

Hells bells. The insane idiot was nuts. Skin crawling, Gabie managed not to leap from the chair and run a mile. Instead, she looked coolly back at him and stated, "I belong to no one. My ship belongs to no one. My crew belongs to no one. We were forced to do this trip for you, Raznin, but don't presume to think you own us."

"Not 'us'. You, Gabie. Just you." His smile was thin, his gaze like broken glass across her skin. "I don't care about your motley crew. Just you."

Amazingly her ire was pushing her fear aside. "As touched as I am, I have a message for you, Raznin. Go to hell." Reaching for the switch, she added angrily,

“And don’t contact me again. I’ll report in to Tason as arranged, but your ugly mug is one thing I don’t want to see ever again.”

When she snapped off the switch, his laughter still echoed in her ears.

Slumping back down in the chair, she eyed the screen and then her trembling hands. *Hey, how about that?* Even when angry, she was still scared of the bastard. No shame in that, he was a scary person, and she’d never had any delusions about her own bravery. Her own stupidity at times, yes, but not bravery.

Getting up from the chair, she turned to find Shamon standing right behind her. His eyes burned, but not from lust, and his big hands were fisted at his sides.

“Don’t say it,” she said.

“I’ll kill him before I allow him to set one hand on you,” Shamon gritted.

“Yeah, well we can’t all have what we want.” She walked past him. “Misha shown you the ship yet?”

There was silence behind her for several seconds and she thought he was going to start yelling or something, but instead he fell into step beside her, his long legs shortening their pace so she could keep up. “Nay.”

“Well isn’t this your lucky day. Let’s do the tour of all—oh, let’s see—two floors?” She gestured grandly. “This is the main floor, sleeping cabins and dining cabin and control cabin. Want to see the cargo hold?”

Shamon’s lips twitched, amusement vying for control over the fury that still burned in his eyes.

“Oh, come on, honey.” Slipping an arm through his, she led him to the door into the stairwell. “Get over it.”

“’Tis not something I’ll get over until that bastard’s neck is between my hands.” Shamon followed her grimly down the stairwell.

“We all have our little fantasies. Personally, mine is to land my ship right on top of him.” Gabie scrunched her brow thoughtfully. “Like some old story... from a long time ago... to do with a house landing on a witch or something.”

“My fantasies involve you.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“The surprise would be what I do to you in those fantasies.” There was a definite huskiness in his voice now.

Stopping on the last step, Gabie turned and looked up at him. The hunk of testosterone was looking down at her, his eyes twinkling even though the last traces of anger still gleamed dully behind the humour. There was a half smile on those gorgeous lips, and his hands on the iron railings slid lightly up and down them as though he were caressing something really sweet.

“Aye,” he said throatily, watching her. “And my fantasies intend to come to life.”

Cripes! “I don’t even want to know.” Her heart started to patter a little faster.

His smile was hedonistic.

Shaking her head, she turned back around and stepped down the last step and out into the cargo hold, to find Heddam and Olin studying the inside of one of the hidden cupboards in a wall.

“’Tis a fine array of weapons you have here, lass,” Heddam greeted her.

“Huh?” Crossing the floor, still favouring one leg—the bruise there from Tason’s kick was a real corker—Gabie peered inside at the steel box filled with lasers, six manblasters, and two long-range lasers. “Oops. Forgot about these. *Cripes*, Olin, I thought we’d delivered these?”

“I think we got side-tracked. Remember Hortio couldn’t meet us outside the Outlaw Sector that time?”

“Oh yeah. He was being chased by a bounty hunter pack. Huh.” Hands on hips, Gabie surveyed the weapons. “I remember now. We thought we better beat a retreat, too.”

Kneeling on the floor beside her, Shamon lifted the lid of another steel box and peered inside. “Hells bells, wench, ’tis an arsenal you’ve got in here!”

Bracing her hands on her knees, Gabie leaned down and peered in as well. “Oh yeah. A box full of explosives.”

Shamon looked up at her. “Tell me you didn’t have these on board when your ship went on fire.”

“Okay. I didn’t have them on board when the ship went on fire.” At his widening eyes, she added, “The very little fire which, I might add, I put out.”

He closed his eyes with a pained expression on his face.

“Don’t worry,” Olin said cheerfully. “Only the good die young. Gabie’ll last forever.”

Gabie laughed right along with him, but oddly enough, Shamon didn’t find it funny. Heddam was trying to look serious but his lips were twitching.

“You’ll be the death of me.” Shamon straightened up.

“Hey, don’t blame me.” Gabie held out her hands, palms out. “It was your idea to accompany me. You see that bright light at the end of the tunnel, you just remember that.”

“Do you really deal in weapons?” His face was anything but cheerful.

“No.”

He glanced at the box and back at her.

“We did a favour and things got a bit mixed up.” Gabie grinned at Olin.

Smothering a yawn, Olin explained, “One of our fellow private enterprise’s ship broke down in space, and we agreed to deliver his goods for him. This box was part of the goods. Unfortunately, the one we were supposed to deliver it to, Hortio, ended up on the run. We went in different directions and I guess this has been forgotten.”

“What are you going to do with it?” Heddam queried.

“Return it at some stage to Hortio.”

“But he’s on the run.”

“Then we’ll leave it someplace for him and send a message.”

“Won’t he be annoyed you forgot about it?”

“Hey.” Gabie held up her hands, palms out. “He forgot about it, too. He’ll be glad we remembered and stashed it for him.”

Closing his eyes, Shamon pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Lass, ’tis dangerous.”

“Hear that, Olin?” Gabie nudged Olin. “It’s dangerous.”

“You don’t say.” Olin nudged her back.

Shamon sighed. “If security or the law find out you’re smuggling weapons—”

“We’re transporting goods,” she corrected him.

He got that pained look again and it made her grin wider.

Closing the lids of the boxes, Olin slid the wall panel shut and locked the bench back into place in front of it. Now it looked like any part of the panelled walls of the cargo hold. No one would guess a compartment was hidden behind it.

Heddam and Olin headed back up the stairwell, leaving Gabie and Shamon to follow. She’d only taken two steps past Shamon when she felt his big hand wrap around her upper arm and pull her carefully around to face him.

Shamon didn’t say a word, just simply gathered her gently into his arms and kissed her softly. Soft and sweet and long. A tender kiss that sizzled Gabie right down to the soles of her boots.

With a sigh she swayed into him, relishing the warmth of his body seeping into her as she kissed him back. However, when she sought to deepen it he lifted his mouth from hers.

“Nay, lass.”

“What’s wrong?” Puzzled, she looked up at him.

“You were hurt.” That big palm rubbed lightly up her back, and his eyes darkened with a mixture of fury and remorse.

“I’m fine, Shamon. Cripes, I’ve had a whack before—”

“’Twasn’t just a whack, lass.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I saw him punch you in the stomach.” His other hand slid to the front of her to lie gently against her belly. “And slap you.” His lips didn’t quite touch the bruise on her cheek, but his

warm breath brushed lightly across her skin. “I was going to kill him, Gabs. I was going to go into that shack and tear that bastard limb from limb.”

Sliding her arms around his waist, Gabie leaned her cheek against his muscled chest and snuggled in against the warm strength. “Don’t fret, Shamon. I didn’t get much more than what you saw.”

“You’re limping a little.”

“Oh. A kick in the shin.” It had hurt like hell. “He fights like a girl. I mean a kick? Sad. Very sad.” And it still hurt when she flexed her foot.

“When we get face-to-face, I’m going to pull his guts right out of his ears.”

Shamon spoke softly but there was a hint of savagery in his voice that surprised Gabie, and tension rode his body. Lifting her head, she glanced up but all she could see was a strong throat and a hard jaw.

“Shamon?”

He didn’t answer but he did finally tilt his head down to look at her. Mingled with the fury in his eyes was pure remorse.

Inquiringly, Gabie raised her brows.

“I should have been there to protect you.” A crack was audible in his deep voice. “’Tis my job to protect you, lass. I saw what happened and was laid low by a blow—”

“Two blows,” she corrected.

“No matter. I should have killed that bastard then and there. For what he did to you, he should be having soil piled on top of him right now.”

The depth of emotion in Shamon’s eyes and face touched Gabie. “You couldn’t know security was going to knock you out. You can’t blame yourself.”

“I do. I—”

“Come on, Shamon,” she chided. “Shit happens, and it happened to you. And me. I’m over it.”

“Are you?” His gaze was probing.

Gabie shrugged. “Nothing I can do about it but go forwards, right? Off-load this cargo like security wants and then find someplace to lie low where no one will bother us.”

“You can just let Tason walk away, just like that?” He frowned. “I can’t and won’t.”

“I never said he’d walk away free. He’s security fodder, remember?” Sliding her hand beneath his vest, Gabie smoothed her palm down his bare back. “Des said she’d make sure he had extra special care.”

“After I get through with him, ’twill be nothing left of him for Des to take care of.”

“Shamon—”

“Nay.” He dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. “I will get that lowlife scum, lass, and he’ll rue the day he even thought of laying a hand on you.”

What a hero. A stubborn lug, but a hero nonetheless. Mentally shaking her head, Gabie hooked her thumb in the waistband at the back of his pants.

Almost immediately she felt a shift in his body, and it wasn’t just the sudden firming in his pants against her stomach. The tension eased away to be replaced with something else, and the palm rubbing her back slid down to cup one buttock.

Cripes, just his touch could make her smoulder. And when he looked down at her with that heat in his eyes, that desire, it made sparks skitter along her skin.

Shamon leaned down, his lips parted slightly, and she stood up on tip toe to meet him.

“Gabie!” Paz’s yell coming down the stairwell broke the mood.

“The boy.” With a rueful sigh, Shamon released her and stepped back, but his heated gaze stayed locked on her. “But ’twill be later, sweet lass.”

“Not in front of Paz or the others there won’t be.” Trying to school her deliciously rattled thoughts, Gabie watched the door to the stairwell. It was kind of hard to do when her blood was coursing so hotly. Just one kiss from Shamon and she was starting to sizzle.

“I’m not into voyeurism, unless ’tis just me and you.” His vice dropped deeper, lower, and seductive. “I’ll spy on you anytime you want, lass.”

“Cripes.” Squaring her shoulders, Gabie took a deep breath.

“When everyone is asleep, I’ll come to your cabin,” he continued softly as the clattering on the stairwell sounded louder.

She couldn’t stop the grin. “I’m sharing with Misha.”

“The come to my cabin.”

“Your bunk is too small.”

“The laser pit.”

“Two of us won’t fit in there.”

Paz appeared in the doorway, his eyes bright even though he kept his expression miserable as normal.

“We won’t be side-by-side,” Shamon promised huskily.

Cripes. Mentally fanning herself, Gabie limped forward to meet Paz. She felt Shamon’s hot-eyed gaze right through the back of her pants. He was watching her backside. *Hoo boy.*

Thirteen

Outside the space shield it was dark with pinpricks of light. Emet gazed out, his sister standing beside him. Slipping his arm around Rose, he hugged her in close to his side. He'd never suspected she'd been taken to be sold, and he shuddered at how close a call it had been. Five days ago they'd escaped the settlement in the space ship Gabie had organized for them.

Misha. The pretty albino was in his thoughts a lot. She'd trusted him with only a part of a secret that had the *Larceny* crew in its grip. He didn't know the whole secret, only that he was never to mention about Rose being onboard.

Misha and her friends were soft-hearted, so why then did they have other slaves on board? She'd assured him it would turn out all right, that he should take Rose and run for safety, go into hiding. It was better for her and him.

Misha. He thought about her. She was so sweet and funny, with a sarcastic wit that made him smile. He was going to miss her, though... maybe he'd be back soon. He wanted to see her again. Maybe if this was ever over... No, he had to be positive. It would be over. He hoped.

Yes, he would find shelter, a safe place for Rose, but then he had to continue his mission. Find the one he sought, though he was beginning to despair of ever finding her. He didn't really know how. His mistress hadn't explained properly to him, she'd been too weak, too strung out on pain killers, her thoughts a mess. But he had a name and he was doing his best. It was just he had to be so careful, there were any number of steps he could take wrong, and then the disc would end up in the wrong hands and all would be lost.

The alarm in the ship started going off, a loud peel ringing through the depths.

Alarmed, he ran from the little dining area into the control cabin, Rose on his heels. Fear filled him as he looked at the scanner. Something big was zeroing in fast.

“Pull up,” a voice demanded over the viscomm. “We are going to board.”

“Who are you?” He looked at the viscomm, but the screen remained dark.

Then his flesh crawled as a skull and crossbones started to form on the screen.

Space pirates.

“Oh, dear God,” Rose breathed. “Emet!”

Space pirates.

He almost panicked, thoughts milling through his mind. Should he call for help? To do so would be to announce who they were and their coordinates to the law, and to those who hunted him. Not to would result in anything terrible happening to his sister.

Wide-eyed, she looked at him. Tears sparkled and she shivered.

If he sent out a distress call, he would be imprisoned, and Rose, sweet Rose, would face a fate much worse.

He was caught between two evils... and ironically one of them should have been a saving grace.

He could only try to outrun the space pirates.

Mind made up, he flicked on the thrusters and the little ship took off with enough speed to almost make the stars blur.

The space pirates kept pace and were closing in relentlessly.

“Feel like playing?” The voice was amused. “All righty. But we will win in the end, you know. We always do. So, what’s your name?”

Ignoring the taunting voice, Emet concentrated on flight of speed, until finally the space pirate ship started to draw too close.

He had no choices left. Wouldn’t pirates be worse than what could happen to Rose? Frustrated and fearful, he reached for the viscomm, switching frequencies to locate a peacekeeper, or even bounty hunters. Someone. Anyone.

“Emet!” Rose wrung her hands. “What are we going to do? We can’t be caught! We can’t! They’ll get us—”

“The pirates will get us if we don’t call for help,” he returned sharply.

“But what if *he* hears?” Tears were pouring down Rose’s face. “Maybe we can bargain with the pirates. Maybe we can—”

“They could rape you, Rose! They could kill us both!”

She knew. It was in her eyes, her pale, tear-drenched face. Protectively she laid her hand on her belly even as her mouth worked soundlessly.

Turning back to the viscomm, Emet started desperately to put out a distress call.

“This is the spaceship *Blaze*. We are under attack from space pirates. I repeat, we are under attack from space pirates. Our coordinates are—”

“Now now,” the voice broke through the frequency. “Don’t start squealing like a baby.”

How had they done that? Somehow they’d blocked the frequency. Desperately he tried other channels, putting out calls wherever he could but getting no reply as each frequency shorted out.

And then it happened. A hideous sound of metal screeching cut him short, and he looked around sharply. In the same instance the ship shuddered, throwing him and Rose to the floor. The ship continued to shudder and the screeching continued to sound, loud even over the pealing alarm.

The he saw it. A big, black, menacing wall of steel obliterated the view of space through the space shield as the big space ship outside scraped across the hull of their little ship. The control console sparked and sizzled as some kind of high frequency shorted the circuits.

Scrambling to his feet, Emet desperately fumbled with the weapons system, turning the laser atop the ship to face the big ship grinding against them. He heard a curious wrenching sound, a whine, and then the ship shook as something struck the side, a harsh grating and then the ship rocked once.

“They’ve boarded.” Fearfully Rose pressed against him as they turned to face the doorway. “They’ve forced the entrance and clamped a boarding tunnel to the opening!”

“Stay behind me.” Teeth clenched, holding a laser in both hands, Emet turned to face the doorway.

From beyond the ship came a calm order. "Take everything. I'm going to have a little chat with the not-so cooperative captain."

~ * ~

They were landing very soon. Shamon checked over the coordinates.

"I've already done them." Misha frowned at him.

"Just checking, lass."

"I've done them before you came. I know what I'm doing." She tapped his chest as she walked past him. "The question is, what are you going to do?"

Straightening up from the console, Shamon raised his brows at her. The albino was a sharp-witted wench, pretty and smart. He liked her. In fact, he liked the whole crew more than he thought he would have done.

"Think you can sit tight in here with your big friend and wait for us to return from wherever it is we have to meet our *friend*?" Sitting in the chair, she swung it back and forth while managing to keep her gaze on him.

Leaning back against the console, he folded his arms. "Aye."

She grinned.

"I have to," he growled. And he didn't like it, but his hands were tied right now. If he dared to pull a stunt that didn't require his interference, then Des and Sabra would have him off the ship and cooling his heels in a cell before he knew it.

Security was everywhere, 'twould seem, popping their heads up in the most unlikely places. This last stop would no doubt be crawling with security. Hopefully they'd have this mission finished in no time.

But if one hair on Gabie's head got hurt, he'd tear through every smuggler like they were cotton wool, security or not. Besides, he'd planted the tracker in Gabie's jacket, slipping it through a small split in the lining. The spilt was near the collar, and the tracker would have worked its way securely to the bottom of the lining by now. He'd know exactly where she was at all times. As long as she kept the jacket on.

"I wish I could watch your face when the time comes," Misha drawled. "Your pacing should be something to see."

“I don’t pace.”

“Oh. So you’ve only taken up pacing recently.” She winked. “Could it be because Gabie is so near, yet so far? Hmmm?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

Impudent wench. Shamon didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. ’Twas true, he and Gabie had been able to spend some time together, but nothing like he’d hoped. There’d been no hanky-panky nor hot and heavy. In fact, apart from some stolen kisses and cuddles in the laser pit, ’twould seem the ship was way too small to find a cozy corner for something carnal. Mindful of her bruises, Shamon wanted somewhere he could love her slow and easy, taking care and time. There wasn’t privacy anywhere on this little ship apart from bathing and sleeping, and as she shared a cabin and his bunk was too small, and she refused to sneak into Heddam’s cabin with Paz around, all Shamon managed was to steal kisses and caresses whenever they found themselves alone. And there wasn’t much alone time.

Lovemaking just wasn’t possible on board ship, and ’twasn’t just the fact that most things said could be heard from one place or another. ’Twas Paz, too. Shamon could understand that Gabie didn’t want to be caught in a compromising situation with young Paz wandering around. She took care of him like a brother, and Shamon personally agreed that Paz didn’t need to see his captain and friend on her back—or against a wall, or anywhere else for that matter—with the big trader on or against her with their pants down. So no lovin’ for Shamon and his little wench. Yet.

Heddam, the twisted bastard, found it hilarious.

Paz’s long, skinny legs took him everywhere as he prowled with restless, youth zeal. Olin seemed to sleep just about everywhere. Shamon had even found him snoozing in the laser pit one day. The man loved to sleep.

Misha, on the other hand, spent a lot of time meditating, which surprised Shamon. She also spent a lot of time with Paz and Heddam, playing computer games with zest and single bloody-mindedness. She was ruthless when it came to games of winning and losing and played with skill.

Gabie... ah, his sweet little Gabs. She laughed, she joked, and she teased. She enjoyed life. Even being on the small spaceship didn’t faze her. There was the ever-present bounce to her step and mischief danced in her eyes. The only time she didn’t laugh was when the slaves were mentioned.

Oh aye, Gabie didn't like the idea of slaves on her ship. In fact, she refused to go near them. Misha and Paz fed them while Gabie skulked in the control cabin. The wench told him if she saw the slaves one more time, she was in danger of setting them free, so she stayed away.

Misha openly called her a coward and Gabie had agreed without a qualm. He had to admire the lass, she didn't hide her emotions.

The last five days had given him an insight into the crew of the *Larceny* and both he and Heddum had developed a close friendship with them. Shamon took an interest in Paz, finding him to be both thoughtful and insightful, when he wasn't being such a miserable sod. Olin was like a sleepy uncle, and Misha an irritating but loveable sister.

Gabie just fried his boots off with lust. At the meal table one night she made him spill his drink by running her foot along the inside of his leg while sitting opposite him and eating her ice cream demurely.

She ran her fingers suggestively over his bottom when she stood so sweetly beside him listening to the others, her hand wandering unseen behind him. But he sure felt where her hands went. Picking her up and carting her away to teach her a lusty lesson was something he wanted to do—badly, achingly wanted to do—but 'twasn't to be on the ship. But later, when this flight was over, the wench had better be prepared for some wild loving. He had a whole bunch of lust built up just for her.

The wench in his thoughts chose that minute to come bouncing through the doorway. "We just about ready?" She beamed at him, but he didn't miss that little pink tongue flicking out to lick her bottom lip.

It made him tight. He allowed the heat he felt to flare in his eyes and she laughed knowingly.

Shamon sighed. She would truly be the death of him. If a man could die from carnal overload without release, he was a dead man.

"We land in an hour," Misha informed her.

"Then I better contact Tason." Gabie plopped inelegantly down in the spare chair and reached for the viscomm. "Then I better contact their Mightiness the security and inform them of plans." She glanced at Shamon, that big, cheeky grin curving those luscious lips. "No offence, honey, but take a hike."

Warmth spread through Shamon. All right, heat, because whenever he thought of Gabie, he always felt warm, but when she was in the same cabin as he, then 'twas heat he felt. Moving to her chair, he spun it around, bent and placed his palms on the armrests and leaned forward.

“Got something to say?” Bright green eyes sparkled up into his. “Don’t like my orders, trader?” She poked him in one big pectoral. “This is what happens when you play on the bad side of the law, honey.”

Both amused and hot at once, he looked her over leisurely before settling in to kiss her long and deep. As always, she was a willing participant and opened willingly to him. Her taste flooded him and he licked deep, wanting her flavour, wanting her in every part of himself. Her lips were so soft, so sweet, and her essence was like hot honey, addictive to his senses.

God, he loved her.

Distantly he heard Misha give a polite cough, but he ignored her as he plundered the carnal depths of Gabie’s mouth.

His staff started to stiffen as longing swept through him, the need to be inside her, to be skin against skin, his staff clasped in her tight sheath. To have her under him, unable to do anything except to take everything he gave to her.

The baser man inside him demanded he simply grab her, toss her over his shoulder and cart her away to his cabin. The more intelligent side of him forced him to lift his mouth from hers, take two deep breaths and straighten up.

“Thank the stars,” Misha said dryly. “I thought I’d have to get a crowbar between you two before it got too heated.”

“I’m in perfect control of myself,” Gabie panted.

God above, she looked like carnal sin in a hedonistic body just made for loving. Her green eyes had darkened with desire, her lips were red from his kiss, her cheeks flushed, and her magnificent bosoms were rising and falling fast with every breath she took.

“I better go,” Shamon managed to say huskily. His lusty nature nearly cried, while his intelligent side congratulated him.

Curse his intelligent side.

Reaching out, Gabie snagged her finger in the waistband of his pants and smiled seductively up at him. “You know, trader,” she said, her voice a low purr, “in a couple of hours this will all be over and you and I can be alone.”

Thank God for that. Shamon couldn’t say a word. Instead he bent, grabbed her chin, kissed her hard and left the cabin fast before he forgot about everyone else in the ship and had his lustful way with her.

Out in the corridor, he leaned back against the wall and sucked in deep breaths, trying to control his raging libido.

Stepping out of the dining cabin, Heddham took one look at him and laughed. “Got a problem, friend?”

As if he didn’t know. Shamon gave him a narrow-eyed look.

Grinning hugely, Heddham took a bite out of the apple in his hand and chewed in amusement.

“One day, Heddham, you sadistic bastard, you will be standing in my place,” Shamon predicted.

“I think Gabie prefers you.”

“Some wench will come along and knock you right out of any common sense you ever had—and you never had much to start with.”

“Oh, I’m hurt.” Heddham took another big bite of apple and chewed with gusto.

“And I’ll be the one standing there and laughing at you.”

“’Tis not very nice of you.”

Shaking his head, Shamon was about to give a scathing retort when he heard Tason’s voice on the viscomm. Holding up his hand to indicate silence, he focused on the voice.

Heddham moved up silently beside him and they stood and listened intently.

“I noticed you’re a slave short,” Tason said tightly.

Shamon glanced at Heddham. *A slave short?*

“Oh, yeah.” Gabie didn’t sound concerned. “One of the women died.”

Died? Confused, the traders stared at each other.

“How did she die?”

“She was sickening or something. We don’t know. She died during the night and we shot her body out into space an hour ago.”

What? Shamon saw the same startled query in Heddam’s face.

“You shot her out into space? You dumb bitch!”

“Hey, I wasn’t about to have some sick corpse on my ship, spreading stars knew what infection and disease.” Gabie’s reply was sharp. “So I got rid of the body. What’s your problem?”

“You should have told us she was sick earlier!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you cared. Misha, Tason cares about the slaves. Did you know that?”

“Why no, Gabie, I didn’t know that. I’m touched.”

Shamon gave a silent groan. *Could the wenches not keep their badly-timed, witty comments to themselves? Nay, ’twas asking too much. And what the hell was that about a dead slave? There’d been no dead person onboard the ship. The wench better have some answers after this.*

“I wouldn’t be so careless of another man’s property, Gabie,” Tason said tightly. “Raznin isn’t happy.”

“Raznin can kiss my arse.”

Shamon almost fell to his knees right then and there. *Did the wench have no sense? Wait, nay, she didn’t.* He’d listened in on every one of her conversations with the smugglers, and she just had to have a smart answer for everything. Never mind being the death of him, ’twould be the death of her, the silly chit. The wench didn’t just need a protector, she needed a gag, too. Misha was just as bad, so no help there.

“So, where do you want me to drop these slaves of yours?” Gabie asked. “I’m kind of in a hurry. We’re close to the Outlaw Sector so I’m guessing you have customers waiting somewhere? Want me to drop them off at your meeting place?”

“No.” Tason sucked in a harsh breath. “When you reach the planet, go to the Lewd Tavern—”

“Gosh, what an inspiring name for a tavern.”

Shamon was going to shake the wench until her teeth rattled.

Tason ignored her. “You’ll be met by two of my men who will accompany you back to the *Larceny* to inspect the cargo. If they find everything in order, they’ll give you the coordinates to the drop-off point.”

“Why waste time? You could just give us the coordinates now and we’ll meet you there straight away.”

There was silence.

“Don’t you trust us?” Gabie asked.

The silence continued.

“That’s not nice. I’m hurt. Are you hurt, Misha?”

“I’m deeply hurt.”

“Just do your job,” Tason said grimly.

There was more silence and then Shamon heard movement in the cabin.

“Wow, Tason’s a real ball of laughs today,” Misha observed.

“You can say that again,” Gabie said. “Hello there, security? I’m paging Sabra or Des or whoever the hell I’m supposed to be talking to this wonderful day.”

Shamon and Heddam entered the cabin just in time to hear the irate security guard ask, “You should know your contact by now. Wait there.”

“Oh, like I’m going to go anywhere,” Gabie retorted.

Shamon walked up behind her. “You know ’tis Sabra you talk to this time.”

“Yeah, but it’s such fun to annoy security.”

“Immature, but fun,” Misha added. “Gives us a little something to brighten our day.”

“You two keep annoying Tason and you’re likely to find yourselves shot or worse,” Shamon said grimly.

“There’s something worse than being shot?” Gabie looked at Misha. “Wow.”

“And what,” Shamon continued, “is this about a slave dying?”

“’Tis what I’d like to know.” Sabra sat down in front of the viscomm and she wasn’t happy. In fact, she was furious. “Why did you not inform me of someone being sick?”

“It happened so fast,” Gabie replied. “Geez, did you really want me to keep a sick corpse on board ship?”

“Those slaves are innocent people, Gabie!”

“And one is a dead innocent person. Cripes, you really think Tason would have let us keep a corpse? He’d want to have gotten rid of it straight away. This way the body couldn’t be desecrated.”

“You don’t call being shot into space being desecrated?”

“We said a prayer over it,” Misha said in a reasonable tone. “Geez, what’s the fuss about?”

Sabra glared at her, then switched her cobalt gaze to Shamon. “You let them do this?”

“I had no idea,” he replied truthfully.

“He was asleep.” Gabie shrugged.

“Shamon, have you counted—no, wait, you can’t. If those people saw you, it would be the end of this. The slaves can’t know we’re onto the smugglers in case they give us away through fear.” Sabra took a deep breath, but a faint spot of anger coloured each graceful cheekbone. “When this is over, Gabie, I’ll be looking for some answers and you better have them.”

“I told you. The slave died and we shot her out into space.”

Sabra jabbed a finger in her direction. “Nay, you didn’t, because if someone onboard had been sick, you’d have been begging me to get them help.”

“Hey, I tried that with a pregnant slave and your answer was, if I remember—no. Hang on—it was ‘nay’.”

“If you let a slave go, I’ll wring your neck myself.”

“Tason knows she died, so what’s the big deal?”

Sabra’s eyes narrowed. “You told him?”

“I sort of thought he’d notice he was one short when he did the head count.”

Sabra looked hard at her. “Was this sick slave who died the pregnant one, by any chance?”

“Of course not.”

The security officer studied her closely, then abruptly raised her hand. “What’s the plan?”

Gabie repeated what Tason had told her, and then waited.

Shamon watched Sabra. She leaned to the side a little then brought a peach into view. Giving it a little polish on her shirt, she took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. Someone out of sight spoke quietly to her and she nodded. She had the peach half finished before she spoke again.

“You’ll do as they say and follow their orders. We’ll be watching you and be close by in case something goes wrong. Say nothing to them about us.”

“Oh, you mean this is all a secret?” Gabie turned wide eyes towards Misha. “It’s a secret. Did you know it was a—”

Shamon covered her mouth with one hand.

“My thanks,” Sabra said dryly.

Gabie pulled his hand down and he twisted hand around to capture her fingers in his. When she glanced up at him, he shook his head a little and smiled slightly.

Amazingly she gave him a small smile back and turned to face the viscomm, her fingers entwined with his.

The actions brought Sabra’s attention to Shamon. “You.”

“Aye?”

“You and Heddham are to stay hidden onboard ship when Tason’s men enter. You don’t show your face or beat them silly, understand? Even if they get a bit rough with the wenches, you stay hidden. You are only to interfere if they look like they’ll get their silly heads shot off. Mind you,” she added in an exasperated mutter, “with the smart-arse mouths they have on them, that could be sooner than they think.”

“We understand,” Heddham said from behind Misha’s chair.

“’Tis your job to ensure lover boy here doesn’t lose the plot if someone hits Gabie,” Sabra stated.

A muscle ticked in Heddham’s jaw. The thought of any wench or child being hit went against the grain of every Daamen trader. “’Tis a tall order, lass—”

“’Twas the agreement,” she replied sharply. “If you go against your instincts and beat the crap out of the men, you’ll destroy the whole mission and kill a lot of people. This mission will fail if you can’t control yourselves. If you think ’tis too tall an order for you, let me know now.”

“And you’ll send a ship to collect us,” Shamon stated bluntly.

“’Twould be too dangerous,” Heddham pointed out.

“I’ll block the scanners and no one will know we board the *Larceny*,” Sabra said coolly.

“Hey, scanners are illegal.” Misha rested one elbow on the armrest of her chair. “Fancy security having illegal things. I’m shocked.”

Sabra ignored her. “Your word, traders, or you’ll be collected.” She leaned forward. “The lives of you all, including Gabie, rest on your ability to restrain yourselves.”

Shamon squeezed Gabie’s fingers gently. “We gave you our word before, Sabra. You can trust us.”

“I just had to be sure.” Her eyes softened slightly. “I know what you Daamen men are like when it comes to wenches you care about.”

“I would never endanger Gabie, nor the rest of the crew.” ’Twould be hard, but too much hung in the balance. “We will only interfere if they are in danger.”

She nodded. “Fine. Gabie, we have a lock on your ship, so we know when and where you’re going. We won’t be far behind you. Now you need to make sure that you’re wearing your communicator so we can listen to the conversation between you and the smugglers.”

“So I can’t whisper sweet nothings in their ears?” Gabie sighed. “Where has the privacy gone?”

“Listen to Sabra.” Shamon gave her fingers another gentle squeeze. “’Tis your life—the lives of you all—we’re gambling with. We need to be able to hear everything going on.”

“I’m duly chastised.”

Shamon doubted that very much.

“I have the receiver to your communicator and other security officers have the receivers to your crew’s communicators.”

“And I?” Shamon asked suspiciously.

Sabra looked broodingly at him for several long seconds before answering grudgingly. “There’re two spare receivers in Gabie’s container. You just remember your promise, trader.”

He inclined his head. He could have been insulted by her words, but he knew his friend was truly worried, and being forced to cave in to him hadn’t sat easy with her. The mission involved a lot of lives, and those lives depended on Sabra and people obeying her orders.

“So what if things go to hell in a hand basket?” Misha asked. “You know, just in case.”

“That’s my problem, not yours.”

“Gosh, I thought having my arse in a sling was my problem. My mistake.”

“Just do what you’re told and keep your head down.”

“Not run like a rabbit? Cause we can run. We’re good at that.”

“Just obey their orders.” Sabra shot Gabie a hard glance. “Got that? We’ll know exactly what is happening and what to do.”

“What if Tason orders us to do something nasty? Then what?”

“Trust me. We’ll guide you if the need arises. ’Tis all you have to do.”

“Oh, that’s comforting. I mean, the reason why we’re now facing down a shipload of ruthless smugglers—slavers—whatever the hell they are, is because we had to do what you said. What’s not to trust?”

“Another word of advice,” Sabra said. “Keep your smart comments to yourself when you’re facing down the slavers. Your mouth will get you killed one day.”

“Cripes.”

Sabra gave a faint smile. “I’ll be seeing you.”

The viscomm went blank. Gabie swung her chair around and looked at Misha.

Shamon watched the silent way they looked at each other. They didn’t even have to talk, it was as though they were reading each other’s mind. Wondering what harebrained scheme they might be hatching, he glanced worriedly at Heddum, who was looking uncertain.

“I still say we run like rabbits,” Misha finally said.

“I agree totally.” Gabie nodded. “Maybe we can save that as our back-up plan in case everything does go to hell in a hand basket and we’re right in the middle of said basket.”

“Good plan.”

“I can’t take the credit. It was all your plan.”

“Why, thank you.”

Shamon heaved a silent sigh of relief. Nay, no worries about grand schemes with these two.

Misha pushed upright. “Well, I’m going to ensure we all have our communicators ready to put on before we land, and to inform Paz and Olin of the plans.”

“I’ll come with you, lass.” Heddam gave Shamon a small wink and left the cabin.

Gabie stood up, turned and looked directly up into Shamon’s eyes. He was taken aback to see shadows in the brilliant depths.

“Gabs?” He drew her to him.

“You promise me,” she said fiercely. “You promise me you won’t take any stupid chances.”

“Gabie—”

Fisting her hands in his vest, she gave it a small jerk. The worry in her eyes surprised him. “I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt, Shamon. Because of me. Us.”

Soothingly he ran his palms up and down her upper arms. “Lass, I won’t get hurt. ’Tis you I worry about.”

“And it’s that worry that’s the problem.” With a sigh she dropped her forehead against his chest. “Just promise me you won’t go silly, all right?”

Tenderness filled him and he slid one finger beneath her chin, tilting her head back so he could gaze down at her. “Gabs,” he said quietly. “You’re my lass and I’ll guard you with my life—”

“Oh, crap. That’s just what I don’t want—”

“But credit me with enough sense to know when guarding you could mean even more harm. I’m forced to go along with some of this, and I won’t pretend ’tis easy, but Gabs, I’ll not see you hurt too much.” He kissed her gently on her forehead before resting his own against hers and gazed into her eyes. “’Twill almost kill me if you get handled roughly, but I know I endanger us all if I make a move. But if you’re in danger, I’ll be there.”

“I don’t think you should use the communicator.”

“Like hell.”

She sighed, and the sudden sadness in it tore at him.

“You’re a fool to hang around with me, Shamon. I’m no good for you, and now you’re in danger because of me and my life. You should be safe on Daamen or in

Simon's ship, having fun with your friends, not traipsing around after me trying to protect my hide."

"Your hide belongs to me." With a small smile he laid his hand on her bottom. "And I'll be watching out for this hide."

"Shamon..." She halted, tried again, then sighed and glanced away.

"What?" He encouraged her tenderly. "Speak to me, Gabs. Tell me what troubles you."

"You mean apart from the fact that there're slaves aboard my ship, I'm being blackmailed by both security and smugglers, and now I've got you as well?"

"'Tis a good thing or bad thing that I'm lumped in with your responsibilities?"

She gave a sheepish grin. "You're the only good thing right now, trust me."

"'Tis pleased I am to hear it." He nuzzled her nose with his.

"Shamon... if anything happened to you..." She dropped her gaze.

"Nothing will happen to me."

"If it did... nothing will be the same. I don't know..." Her soft sigh puffed against his lips, making his toes almost curl in his boots.

Shamon's hand on her bottom flexed. Stars, if only he had a place he could take her to, a place he could lay them skin against skin, where he could shower her with kisses and reassure her how much he loved her.

The thought stopped him in his tracks. He'd not told her how he felt. Should he? He studied her, the way her thick lashes lay against her cheeks as she continued to avoid his gaze. Would it unnerve her? Distract her during this time? He couldn't risk it. Besides, when he told her, he wanted privacy, not a few seconds snatched before everything converged on them again.

After this hellish mess was over, whether she protested or not, he was going to carry her away to Daamen, take her somewhere private, tell her he loved her, and then show her just how much.

And she was never going to face danger again, he'd make sure of that. He'd just not let her know that. Shamon was no fool.

“Anyway...” Those thick lashes lifted and her green gaze was warm. “You promise to keep your head down and run like a rabbit if the shit hits the fan.”

“I promise.”

“You don’t mean it, though.”

“Nay, but I’ll say it to make you happy.”

She laughed, and as always her laughter was like a sparkle of sunshine after rain, touching him with welcome warmth and making him laugh as well.

He hugged her to him and kissed her.

Gabie leaned into him and kissed him back.

“Gabie!” Paz’s voice sounded down the corridor.

Shamon groaned against her lips. “That boy picks the worst times!”

“It’s a knack he has.” She kissed him again and pulled away. “In here, Paz!”

“When this is over, lass, I’m taking you away where we won’t be interrupted, and I’m going to have my wicked way with you.” Shamon looked at her hungrily.

“I’ll hold you to that.” With a grin, Gabie walked past him, giving him a heart smack on his backside as she did so.

He lunged after her and she shrieked and dodged out the door into the corridor. When Shamon shot out after her, she was standing behind a startled Paz. Give the boy his due, he looked nervous but he didn’t back away.

Shamon smiled and walked past him, giving his hair a fond ruffling. But as he passed Gabie, he reached back and swatted her on her luscious bottom. She yelped in surprise and Shamon grinned. Aye, life with the wench would never be dull, but first they had to get through this in one piece. His grin faded as he turned into the dining cabin where Misha was holding the little box of minuscule communicators and discussing them with Heddam and Olin.

Regardless of what he told Gabie, he’d guard her with his life. One whiff of danger and he’d place himself in-between her and whoever sought to harm her. Without Gabie, his life would never be the same. If she died, the sun would leave his life forever.

Heddam looked up as Shamon came to a halt near the table. “These communicators are the same ones Reya and Tenia had back in the Outlaw Sector.”

“Aye?” Peering into the box, Shamon saw the tiny, miniscule communicators. “They look like it. How do they work?”

“Same as the ones we used before. They attach to whatever you press them to. From memory, we attached ours to our earrings.”

“I remember.” Shamon looked at Gabie as she came to a stop beside him. The wench didn’t have earrings, and nor did Misha, he saw when he shifted his gaze to her.

“These are slightly different in that they adhere to skin.” Sticking her fingertip into the box, Misha withdrew one to show it stuck on her finger. She flicked her finger around, shook her hand and waved it in the air. The communicator stayed attached. “All we have to do is put them on the inside of our ears.”

“How far inside?” Heddam looked warily at the communicators.

“Just inside. Like this.” Placing her finger into her ear, she pressed slightly and withdrew her finger. “Just press it onto the inside flap.”

“Flap?”

“The piece coming from your head,” she said with a grin. “It’s halfway up facing the inside of your ear.”

“Here.” Gabie touched his earlobe, ran her finger up to the top of the lobe, then turned her finger inwards and tapped the small flap above it again. “It won’t catch the light to reflect anything, and will be concealed.”

“Right. It won’t fall off and disappear into my ear canal?” Shamon felt her every touch.

“You big baby. Of course not. It won’t come out unless you press against it with your finger again, and then it’ll reattach to your finger.” She patted his arm. “You’ll be fine, honey. I promise.”

Even Paz grinned.

“Just think,” Olin mused. “These may save our lives.”

“Oh yeah,” Misha said dryly. “I worship communicators.”

And that brought to mind another little problem. “Speaking of saving lives,” Shamon murmured as Olin put the lid back on the communicators. “Mayhaps you’d care to explain a missing body?”

“Huh?” Gabie blinked.

“A dead slave on board?”

“Oh. Well, one died and we shot her out into space.” Gabie took a step back.

Shamon snagged her wrist. “If there’d been a sick person on board ship, you’d have been bawling your eyes out, wench. I’m not stupid. Now how about the real explanation?”

“I’m hurt that you don’t believe me.”

Give the wench credit, she did a fair job of looking hurt, too. But Shamon saw right through her.

“The missing slave, wench. Where is she?”

“And who was she?” Arms folded, Heddum swept the *Larceny*’s crew with a stern gaze. “’Tis a dangerous game you’re playing right now, and you added to it by releasing a slave.”

“He wants a confession,” Misha said mildly.

“Crap.” Gabie said.

Shamon looked at Olin, who shrugged and yawned. Paz went paler than ever when Shamon speared him with a warning look.

“There’s no big deal.” Resting her free hand on the table, Gabie slouched back against it. “One of the slaves was pregnant, so we sent her off with Emet.”

“Pregnant?” Shamon didn’t like the sound of that. “Did Sabra know?”

“Yep. But she wouldn’t take her, said the woman was being monitored with a tracking device, as all the slaves have on them. But Olin knew something about tracking devices and removed it, and we set the slave free and kept the tracking device. As far as anyone knew, she was still on board. We just got rid of the

tracking device in space this morning, so as far as anyone knows she disappeared and we say she died. End of story.”

“End of story?” Shamon couldn’t believe the satisfied expression on her gamine face. “Gabie, if that slave talks—”

“She won’t,” Gabie assured him. “She’s Emet’s sister. He’s wanted, she’s wanted, they won’t talk. How’s that for a good plan?”

He didn’t know whether to throttle her himself or applaud her actions. So he did the only thing he could do to retain his sanity—pinch the bridge of his nose, squeeze his eyes shut and take several deep, calming breaths.

“I knew you’d see it our way.” Gabie cheerfully patted him on the arm and withdrew her wrist from his grasp. “Come on, people. We have to pretty ourselves up for the big meeting.”

The crew left the cabin and in the silence left behind Shamon opened his eyes to find himself looking at Heddham, who was trying to control his laughter.

“Those people,” Shamon finally managed to say, “are a bloody danger to themselves.”

Heddham started laughing out loud.

“Where do they get their crazy ideas from?” Sitting down, Shamon rested his forehead in his palm.

“You have to admire them.” Still chortling, Heddham sat on another chair. “They have soft hearts.”

“To match their heads.”

“I heard that!” Gabie yelled from beyond the door.

“You would,” Shamon muttered.

Heddham laughed harder.

~ * ~

The Lewd Tavern didn’t match its name. There was only one tavern wench who looked half asleep and was slouched down on a stool at the bar. A handful of men

sat at the tables. The bartender looked like he'd seen better days, and there wasn't a bouncer in sight.

"Wow, this place is full of life," Gabie commented.

Olin glanced around. "It's jumping, all right."

They hadn't gone inside four steps before two hard-eyed men in the corner got to their feet and strode across the room.

"Here's the welcoming committee." Gabie watched them approach.

"Keep your smart comments to yourself," Shamon's voice sounded in her ear.

"Just being friendly."

The snort that sounded was open disbelief. How about that.

The men looked nasty, hard-eyed and one had a viscous scar across one cheek. Lasers hung low on their hips, and they looked her over with a lust that made her skin crawl. Olin they dismissed with a brief look, which was a mistake, because Olin could be quick when he wanted to, one of the reasons Gabie had brought him along. But it was to their advantage if Tason's men thought him of no consequence. It gave her and Olin the element of surprise if needed.

"We're here to check the merchandise," one of the men said, his gaze raking across her breasts.

"I'm sure." Ignoring the crawl of her skin, Gabie gestured to them. "Come along. I've things to do and I want to get this over with."

Their laughter was low and mocking, but they followed. She felt their gazes on her as she walked, and she wished she'd worn a long coat instead of her usual short jacket. Yuck. She'd had this before, she could handle it.

Oddly, it had never bothered her so much until she'd met Shamon. When Shamon watched her hungrily, it produced an entirely different sensation.

It was a relief when the docking bay came in sight. Three spaceships were docked, the far one being the *Larceny*. Misha was waiting at the bottom of the ramp, her stance casual, but Gabie could see that her laser was loose in the holster. Her friend was primed for trouble.

They might run like rabbits sometimes—all right, most times—but when cornered they could fight if they had to. Poor fighters, true, but they had been able to get themselves out of messes a couple of times.

She just hoped this wasn't going to be one of those times, though she wouldn't have to worry. Shamon would rip the men's heads off if they turned deadly.

Misha nodded briefly to Gabie and Olin, didn't bother to greet the men and fell into place behind them as they went up the ramp. Paz was standing by the control cabin door, and he looked decidedly ill when the men passed him with sneers.

"Where are the slaves?" One of the men asked.

"In these two cabins." Gabie stood back.

"Open the door of the first cabin."

Misha did so and the two women inside huddled against the back wall, their eyes wide with fear, visibly shaking.

Damn it. Gabie looked away, not wanting to see their distress. She'd be glad when this was over. Cripes, all she wanted was to live a little boringly for a while. Yep, that'd do her. Smuggling wasn't an option after this. She kept her gaze averted when the door to the cabin holding the male slaves was opened and then shut.

"Right." The man gestured to his friend. "Search the ship."

Gabie leaned back against the wall and waited. The search she didn't fear. She had faith in the hiding compartments of her ship. They had been built in by Olin, and he didn't look worried. The hidden compartments had never been discovered when the law had thoroughly searched the ships, and she doubted these two jerks would have any better luck.

The man came back soon and shook his head. "Clear."

The first man looked at Gabie and leered. "Reckon you're right to continue to the drop-off point."

"I am so pleased."

“Come with me to your control cabin and I’ll enter the coordinates.” He narrowed his eyes when Misha and Olin made to accompany them. “You three stay here.” He looked at his friend. “Guard them.”

Misha’s lips tightened and Olin looked at Gabie.

“Stay here,” she said.

The man almost pushed her into the control cabin. He waved his laser at Paz, and Gabie gestured to him to leave. She was relieved but still wary when the man quickly entered the coordinates into the viscomm. Until he stood up.

He moved fast, grabbing her hair and forcing her to her knees. Bending down over her, he said in a deadly quiet tone, “Don’t get any funny ideas of double-crossing Tason, bitch.”

“The thought never crossed my mind.” She winced, unable to stop the gasp escaping her when he gave her head a cruel wrench.

“You do anything stupid and Raznin will let us all have a piece of you.” He licked his lips, his gaze dropping to her breasts. “And I’m first in line. There’s a few of us to ride you, bitch, but Raznin will be the one to break you.”

“Right.” She grabbed his wrist. “I don’t think he’s going to like it if I’m bald.” Tears pricked her eyes at the pain.

She heard the low rumble of a growl through the communicator in her ear.

Fourteen

He shoved her hard and she crashed against the console. “Be seeing you, bitch.” He strode from the cabin.

“Gabie!” Misha was in the cabin before the men had even made it into the stairwell. Falling to her knees beside Gabie, she helped her sit up. “Shit. Are you all right?”

No, she felt like crying. “Of course I am. Geez, what is it with men and grabbing hair?” Rubbing her stinging scalp gingerly, she held on to Misha’s arm as she stood up.

Olin was in next, worry stamped on his weathered face.

Gabie held up her hand. “Steady on. I’m fine.”

“What did he do to you?” Olin demanded.

“Pulled my hair.” She smiled when all she wanted to do was sit down and shake, but falling apart in front of her friends wasn’t an option. “What is it with these sissy men? Kicks in the shins and hair pulling. Cripes, did no one teach them to hit like a man?”

Paz ran back in. “They’re gone.”

He leaped away just in time when Shamon came barrelling through the doorway with Heddam on his heels.

Gabie was glad to see him, and when Shamon gathered her into his arms and hugged her fiercely she even managed not to wince as he accidentally squashed a new bruise.

“Lass, are you all right?” Placing her back on her feet, he ran his hands gently across her cheeks, his gaze searching her face for marks.

“Of course.” She smiled up at him, managing to swallow the lump in her throat. “They fight like girls. I can handle that.”

“Your hair...” Fury burned in his eyes and a muscle ticked in his jaw, but his hands were tender as they lightly brushed across her head, his fingers undoing the tie so that her hair spilled free around her shoulders.

Alarmed, she put her hand up and felt around. “What? He yanked a patch out?”

“’Tis the least of your worries—”

“Misha!”

“Your hair is fine. Messy, but fine.”

Misha’s voice came from the corridor, and now Gabie saw that the cabin was empty apart from she and Shamon. And that was when she stopped fussing with her hair and looked up at him. She tried, she really did, but her bottom lip trembled a little and he saw it. Fury and anguish fought for supremacy in his eyes and he picked her up by the simple process of putting his hands each side of her ribcage and lifting. When she was on eye level, he pressed his cheek to hers.

“God, lass.”

Leaning full against him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. His grip shifted and then his arms were wrapped around her. She didn’t care that a bruise on her back bit like hell under his arm, all she cared about was that for now she felt safe. His embrace was a safe haven. And while she wouldn’t cry in front of her friends, she didn’t mind being weaker in front of Shamon.

Life was strange. But who gave a vagrat’s arse anyway?

She gave a little sniff.

“Gabs.” It was all he said, but his voice held a wealth of emotions. Fury, sadness, even a hint of...

“Cripes, Shamon, you’re not crying, are you?” Turning her head, she buried her face in his thick, shaggy hair and breathed deeply of his clean, masculine scent.

“Nay.” But his voice was thick.

That almost broke her heart, so she did what she always did to cope with unexpected situations. “We don’t have time for crying. And I can’t very well sit you on my lap and rub your back.”

“God, lass, do you have any idea what torture ’tis to know you’re being threatened and be unable to do anything about it?”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t easy.” Lifting her head, she pulled back enough to look at him.

His eyes burned with fury, but there was guilt mixed in, too. Regardless of the situation, Shamon felt guilty.

“This is pointless, Shamon.” Gabie tapped his nose lovingly. “You can’t feel guilty about what you can’t fix.”

His normally merry brown eyes hardened. “I’ll be exacting some revenge later, lass, don’t worry about that.”

“I’m not worried, as long as you don’t go haywire and try to get that revenge before security shows up.” She gave his face a little pat. “We have to leave now or those men will wonder why we haven’t flown off already. I don’t want them back. Let me down.”

He held her for a few seconds longer, and she saw the emotions chasing through his eyes. In those few seconds, with their faces so close, she saw another emotion in his eyes, something that turned them warm and soft and tender and almost... loving.

Whoa.

She blinked, but before she could say anything, Shamon kissed her, a slow, drugging kiss that chased all thoughts of hard-eyed men and replaced them with visions of... oh, admit it. Thoughts of a naked trader, a big bed and hot lovin’.

“You’ve turned me into a slut,” she mumbled under his lips.

Shamon was so surprised he stopped kissing her and pulled back to stare down at her. “What?”

“I should be worried about what’s coming, but instead I’m thinking of you lying in bed with no clothes on—”

“Gabie!” Misha’s voice resounded in her ear.

Misha? Cripes! She’d forgotten about the communicators they all wore. Everything she and Shamon had said had been heard by everyone on board the ship! And... shit, shit, shit. Security.

A cough sounded in her ear, and then Olin said, “Are we leaving?”

Shamon grinned at her mortified expression, took pity on her and let her slide down the front of his body until she was on her own two feet.

Clearing her throat, Gabie lost the battle with her blush. “Getting ready now,” she said gruffly.

Shamon ruffled her hair. When his arm was outstretched, she saw the red mark on his upper arm, the impression of fingers. It had been a big hand, and there had been force in the grip. There was only one other person who could have done that to him.

He followed her gaze. “Heddam sort of had to hold me back a bit.”

“Cripes, did he try to rip your arm off, too?”

“Nay, I believe he’s saving that for later.”

Shaking her head, Gabie turned back to the control console. Shamon dropped a kiss on top of her head and left the cabin.

Misha came in seconds later and took the chair beside her. “You all right?” she asked casually.

“Fine.”

“I bet.”

“Don’t start.”

“Kiss you all better, did he?”

“Misha—”

Misha made kissy sounds.

“You do realize your impressions are being heard by just about everyone?”

“Hey, I’m famous.”

Gabie sent her a rude gesture.

“Want me to describe what you just did to our listeners?”

“Reckon they’ll hear me boot your arse?”

“I’ll have a heap of witnesses.”

“Are we leaving or not?” Olin’s disgruntled voice interrupted their banter. “I want to catch a nap before we arrive.”

“You get your beauty sleep, Olin,” Misha replied. “We’re going now.”

“About bloody time,” Des’s voice growled. “You’re giving me a headache.”

The sound of a chortle came over loud and clear over the communicator.

“Everyone wants to be a comedienne,” Gabie said, and started the engines.

“Just send us those coordinates,” Des said grumpily.

“Are you ever in a good mood?”

“Only when Simon is around,” Freeman said cheerfully.

“You shut your cake hole,” Des barked out.

~ * ~

Raznin watched the skies. Beside him stood Tason. Behind them stood their ship. Nearby his men waited, their lasers loose in their holsters, watching for trouble. They all waited for the *Larceny*.

This was the last of the slaves, and it was one he was going to personally oversee. Their biggest load, their final load. And it was going to be huge financially. Clients waited less than a day’s journey away.

And he intended to net a bigger prize.

Gabie.

She occupied his thoughts. The kind of woman he wanted. Smart, spirited, sassy and full-bodied like an over-blown rose. It would be beautiful to bring her to her

knees, to make her cry, to strip her of everything and break her spirit. She'd take awhile, though. And that was what made the anticipation all the sweeter.

The *Larceny* appeared, growing bigger as it drew nearer. The small spaceship skimmed over the trees, veered away, banked, soared over again and finally came in to land.

His men retained their relaxed postures, but they were wary. Illegal slavery made one very, very careful when dealing with suppliers and clients both.

The ramp lowered and Gabie appeared. Raznin drank in the sight of her as she stopped at the bottom of the ramp. She made his mouth water and his palms sweat. God, he wished he had his whip in hand right now.

Gabie looked across at him warily. "Now what?"

She was such a sassy little bitch. He smiled. "Bring the slaves out."

She turned her head and spoke to the old man who stood behind her. He disappeared back into the depths of the ship.

The pretty albino strode down the ramp with that arrogant tilt to her head, her long white braid swaying behind her. She was a cocky bitch, he'd give her that. And perhaps a little more dangerous than anyone gave her credit for.

Gabie and Misha spoke quietly, glancing around the clearing, obviously checking out his manpower. They'd see he wasn't a man to cross.

"Here they come." Tason shifted.

Down the ramp came four people, two men and two women. They weren't shackled and he sighed.

He raised his voice. "Why are they not shackled?"

"You didn't mention shackles," Gabie replied. "You should have said if you wanted them shackled."

"They wouldn't want to try anything." Tason moved forward with four men. "I'll shoot them where they stand."

One of the women was sobbing.

Olin, the old fool, patted her on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort her.

“Shackle them,” Tason ordered his men.

They moved forward holding chains and iron shackles.

One of the young men started to fight, and the youth quickly followed. The men subdued them quickly with several hard, skilled punches, bringing the men to the ground in pain.

“Hey!” Gabie started forward, anger burning in her eyes. “Hey, you don’t have to be so damned rough!”

“They’re slaves.” Raznin moved forward. “Come here. I have something for you.”

Gabie eyed him suspiciously. “I’d rather not. This was the deal, Raznin. I delivered these slaves to you, got them past the law. Our job is done.”

Oh, she was so sweet. “Now, Gabie, this isn’t the total end. We worked together really well.”

“And it’s been fun. Bye.” She started backing towards the spaceship.

Tason moved in behind her, his laser barrel pressed to the back of her head.

She paled but she didn’t start crying. “Well, if you insist.”

Misha drew her laser fast and pointed it directly at Tason. “Put the laser down!”

Within seconds Tason’s men had their lasers drawn and aimed right at Olin and Misha. The albino didn’t give an inch, her jaw muscles working as she gritted her teeth.

“I suggest you put down your weapon,” Raznin said.

“I suggest you kiss my—” Misha stopped and drew a deep breath. “Let her go.”

“I’m just wanting a chat with your captain, albino. It’s not my fault if she isn’t exactly a cooperative sort.” Raznin looked at Gabie. “Tell your people to holster their lasers.”

“I think they’re a little worried about me.” She winced when Tason’s barrel rapped her lightly on the back of the head. “Ow. Misha, put up your laser.”

Misha looked like she was trying to swallow a lemon whole. She had to force herself to holster her laser and Raznin took a second look at her. The albino could be a problem.

“Get the slaves on board,” Raznin ordered the men standing with the four slaves.

The six other men stood in a semi-circle, their lasers drawn as they watched Misha and Olin.

Tason pushed Gabie forward until she was directly in front of Raznin.

Ah yes, she had spirit, this one. The saying was that the *Larceny* crew weren’t into violence, and that was true, but neither did they back down when cornered. How very entertaining.

Reaching out, Raznin caught her chin in a cruel grip. “I find you very intriguing.”

She gritted her teeth.

“I want you, Gabie. You belong to me as much as these slaves do, only I’m not going to sell you. I’m going to break you myself.” He leaned down.

“You kiss me and I’ll bite your lip off.” Gabie jerked backwards against Tason.

Tason gripped her upper arms and held her still.

Raznin laughed then slapped her hard.

“*Goddamn it!*” Misha started forward, only to be brought up short when one of Raznin’s men sent a hot laser beam searing the ground in front of her. Helpless, furious, she could only stop and clench her fists. “Gabie wasn’t part of the deal!”

“The deals are mine to make.”

“You double-crossed us.” Gabie stood straighter, his handprint a red glow on her pale cheek.

The woman wouldn’t cry. He admired that. It whetted his appetite to give more pain and find out how long she’d last before begging for mercy. He bet it would be awhile.

“More like changed the deal.” Reaching out, he ran his hand down the side of her face, deliberately pressing on the slap mark.

She struck out instinctively, shoving his hand away.

Oh yes. The excitement flickered inside him and he slapped her across the other cheek hard enough to bring her to her knees.

The bitch didn't know when to stay down. She twisted around and kicked Tason hard on the side of the knee with the sole of her boot. Something cracked ominously and Tason let out a scream and fell to one knee.

Gabie scrambled backwards on hands and knees, her gaze darting from Tason to Raznin.

"You are a bad girl." Raznin shook his head. "Punishment is due."

He caught the movement from the corner of his eye and swung out. He'd been too careless, too focused on Gabie. Too amused and excited by her defiance.

Tason aimed the laser at her. "I'll kill you!" Spittle flew from his lip as he dragged himself upright, his useless knee making him scream again in pain as he pulled the trigger.

Everything happened at once. People he didn't know were suddenly spilling from the bushes and laser fire seared the air. Men fell, screaming, blood pouring from injuries, and the smell of burned flesh was sickeningly rife in the air.

Misha was yelling Gabie's name, but someone brought her down to the ground as she rushed forward. She fought with the man holding her, her swearing and cursing peppering the air.

"It's a set-up!" someone yelled.

"You bitch!" He couldn't believe it! It shouldn't be happening! There'd been no sign on the scanner of any other craft or person in the entire vicinity! Raznin looked to where Gabie was scrambling to her feet. *The bitch had double-crossed him!*

There was no going back, he saw men in uniform cutting off his path back to the safety of the ship. His men were injured. *It was finished! But there was still a way—still freedom.* There was one who could save him! And to save him, he needed this bitch to get him through!

Drawing a knife from the sheath at his waist, Raznin threw himself at Gabie, catching her around the knees.

“Shit!” He heard her swear right as she fell headfirst back onto the grass.

Raznin moved fast, years of ruthless fighting ingrained in him. Years of subduing the weaker sex giving him the experience to move up to his knees, dragging her with him so her back was to his chest.

“Stay back!” he yelled, the tip of the dagger at her throat. “I’ll slit her from ear to ear if anyone comes any closer!”

A curse filled the air. Everything stopped, and he found himself facing a semi-circle of grim-looking people, men and women. Eight in all. They wore... oh God, they wore the IPS security uniforms. That explained it. They’d used some of their underhanded, secret ways of infiltrating his previously-cleared area! And he knew those two women heading the pack, the tall redhead and the shorter woman. Des and Sabra.

He was dead.

They watched him without blinking, like carrion eyeing a particularly tasty bit of offal.

“Let me go,” Gabie said quietly, her voice trembling but still refusing to give in.

That made him madder.

He hauled her upright as he stood, the dagger pricking her skin to draw a bead of blood.

“You always had a smart mouth, bitch,” he panted in her ear. “I thought you were so easily cowed to work for us. Seems I was mistaken. You actually had the guts to double cross me.”

“Not like I had a choice,” she muttered, only to gasp as he jammed the dagger under her chin.

“Back off, Sabra!” Raznin yelled, dragging Gabie with him as he moved backwards. “Get back!”

“It’s over,” Sabra said. “Give up.”

“It’s never over.” He laughed harshly. “Tell your men, and that albino bitch and the old outlaw, to get away from the *Larceny*. Now.”

“You can’t get away from us.” Sabra matched him step for step, circling around as he edged back towards the small ship. “’Tis wasting time, Raznin. If ’tis what you like to call yourself.”

“It’s what I like to call myself when I’m working.”

“If you say so.”

“Stop there!” *She was getting too close, too damned close.* A glance sideways showed Des and another security officer slowly moving inwards as well, trying to trap him. “Stay right there, or Gabie will get worse than *this*!”

He stabbed down hard, slashing Gabie straight down her upper arm.

She cried out as the sharp blade sliced through her jacket and shirt, cutting through to the flesh beneath.

“Hold still!” He jerked her upright hard, keeping her tight to him, sliding the blade back up to her throat. “The next time it’ll be your throat, bitch!” He glared at Sabra, seeing nothing but coolness in that beautiful face. “That was just a warning, Sabra! Now hold your people back!”

“You won’t get away,” she replied in that maddeningly calm way she had. “And you’re not making this any easier on yourself.”

“Let me show you just how uneasy I can make it for Gabie if you don’t do as I demand!”

“Oh, you don’t want to do that,” Gabie gasped, and started fighting.

“Gabie! No!” Des yelled.

He cursed. Holding on to her was like trying to hold on to a slippery fish. Her heel slammed into his shin, her blood making his hold slide.

Furious, he angled the dagger, pulling it back with the intent to stab it forcefully through her shoulder. Or side. He didn’t care where as long as it forced her compliance and showed the cursed security that he meant business.

The dagger didn’t descend. In fact, he couldn’t move his arm. Actually, he felt like his wrist was in a vice.

He felt it suddenly, the heat of rage, a towering presence behind him. The mammoth size of the fingers wrapped around his wrist.

“Your mistake,” the deep voice said with deadly quietness in his ear, “was in threatening my lass.”

The big hand holding his wrist twisted with no effort at all. A sharp snap echoed through the clearing and then fiery pain seared up Raznin’s arm as he realized his wrist had been snapped like a dry twig.

The dagger dropped from his hand but he couldn’t turn, couldn’t run, because two big hands clamped in his clothes and lifted him high in the air.

Vaguely he heard voices yelling, swearing, ordering the giant, raging trader to drop him, but the scariest thing was the roaring that filled the air.

It wasn’t coming from the blood rushing through his veins either.

It was coming from the giant holding him high above his head. Huge muscles flexed and bulged, and murder burned in the eyes of the Daamen below him.

Raznin just had time to scream before he was hurled away with brutal force. He’d no sooner hit the ground in a haze of agony than he was grabbed, hoisted up and flung once more, this time crashing against the side of his own ship.

His lip split as a big fist connected with it, his shirt ripped as a huge hand twisted in the material and hauled him upright, and he was sure his stomach had been ripped open when a blow to it felt as though it had gone right through and taken his spine with it.

He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think and black descended on him... but not before he felt himself hoisted up once more and the wind whistled in his ears...

~ * ~

Sitting beside the table, face pale, Gabie winced as Olin applied antiseptic to the long, deep cut marring her arm. Blood dripped down onto the absorbent sheet he’d placed beneath her arm. Her jacket was ruined, as was her shirt. She’d tossed her jacket aside but she’d only allowed him to cut her shirt sleeve off. No way in hell was she baring her body to so many eyes.

Just as she refused to allow the security medic to attend her wounds. Olin had cared for her and her friends for a few years now, and she wasn't about to trust anyone else.

Shamon sat opposite her, watching every move Olin made. He held her hand as tenderly as if it belonged to a newborn. He'd hardly said a word since they'd gotten onboard. Gabie cast a sideways glance at him. Man, she wouldn't be forgetting his rage in a hurry. He'd flung Raznin around like a paper doll. She was sure he'd been going to rip him limb from limb just as he'd always threatened to do, but the timely arrival of the Daamen trade ship meant more men to help Heddam restrain Shamon when he'd continued after Raznin like a rabid hound.

Cripes, it had been such a mess. Shamon had gone rampaging after Raznin, and Des, Freeman, Sabra and another security guard had been trying to stop him but he'd simply shaken them off like fleas. Even Heddam hadn't been able to do more than slow him down.

It had taken the combined efforts of Simon, Heddam and Aamun to bring Shamon under control. Then he'd simply turned, gathered Gabie up into his arms and carried her aboard the big trade ship. Just like that. Ignored Misha and Olin and Paz who had been hovering around her, trying to offer help, while she'd been staggering around like a damned drunk, in pain and worried sick about Shamon, and wanting to kick Raznin herself.

Misha had landed Tason a good kick in his injured knee as she passed him, God bless her.

Her friends were chewing their lips while they watched anxiously as Olin applied anaesthetic.

"Could have done with that before the antiseptic," Gabie informed him.

"Can't risk germs," he grunted back. "Stop whining."

Shamon squeezed her fingers gently. Finally he raised his gaze to hers and the tenderness in the brown depths made her smile slightly.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing," Des snapped. "Damn it, Gabie, you were told not to antagonize that bastard!"

"Who? Olin?" *That was funny.*

Even Misha thought it was funny.

Des didn't think it was funny. "Are you insane? You were bloody told to obey orders. You wouldn't even listen to us!"

"Hey, be kind," Misha chided. "She's hurt."

"You can talk. What the hell were you doing pulling a bloody laser?"

"It was automatic. It's something I do when it looks like my friends are in danger."

"You were told to obey orders!" Des ran one hand over face. "Shit!"

Shamon just smiled at Gabie.

She smiled back.

"Why can you never do as you're told?" Sabra asked quietly from where she leaned against a nearby wall watching Olin work.

"Well pardon me for being tired of having my hair nearly yanked out of my head," Gabie replied. "Oh yeah, and for being tired of being slapped around and—yuck—having that jerk try to kiss me." She shuddered. "I dare you to stand still while that's happening."

"You could have waited." Sabra's gaze flickered to Shamon but her words were directed at Gabie. "What about that kick that broke Tason's knee? What was that about?"

"That was a lucky shot."

Simon, who was standing slightly behind Des, had a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"Most impressive," Misha put in.

"Tis my lass." Shamon squeezed her fingers again, his gaze approving.

"You might have gotten away unharmed if you'd only obeyed orders," Sabra repeated, though she had a resigned expression on her face.

"I told you we weren't cut out for this," Gabie reminded her. "We run like rabbits, or we panic and fight. What choice did we have? We sure as hell couldn't run."

Freeman laughed outright.

“Shut your cakehole,” Des told him sharply. “This isn’t funny.”

“Well, it sort of is.” He guffawed.

She turned away in disgust and caught sight of the grin on Simon’s face. Her eyes narrowed and she sucked in air. “And what the hell were you doing so close by, anyway?”

“Trading, lass, what else?” Arms folded across his massive chest, he looked down at his wife standing by his side.

“Trading? What trading do you have in this area?”

“A bit of this, a bit of that. The usual.”

“You better show me your schedule, trader.” Scowling, she poked him in one massive pectoral. “And it better be real.”

“Lass, you wound me.”

“Don’t push it.” Her brown eyes, so pale they were almost yellow, flashed with temper. “How did you know where to come?”

“Just luck. We flew over, I recognized the *Larceny* and saw the trouble.” His eyes were totally innocent. “My friend was down here. ’Twas nothing I could do but aid him.”

“You keep up that innocent shit and you’ll need aid yourself.”

“From you?” His teeth gleamed in an almost predatory grin. “I can’t wait.”

Big tough Des blushed. Gabie stared in amazement. Freeman was laughing in his normally annoying fashion. Heddam grinned. Sabra just looked even more resigned.

Besides, staring at a flustered Des was more fun than watching Olin thread the needle he held in his fingers.

“You keep up those wise cracks and you’ll be in trouble,” Des said heatedly, trying to recover her composure.

Simon leaned down and whispered something in her ear. Well, hello. There was a flare of heat in her eyes and then that blush just got a little redder. Simon looked so pleased with himself that Gabie wanted to laugh. Unfortunately, it was all she could do to control the nausea roiling inside her as she felt the push of the needle in her flesh. True, it didn't hurt, but the thought was sickening regardless.

Misha came to her rescue by diverting her attention. "So we're free to go now, huh?"

"Nay." Sabra watched the needle going in and out of Gabie's arm without expression.

"What?" Gabie looked at her. "We did as you wanted. You got Raznin and Tason. We're done."

"You're witnesses when the trial is brought to the IPS Council court."

"What? When's that?"

"When this is finished, which will be soon. We only have to find one more piece of information, though we may still have enough if we can break Raznin and Tason."

"I'll break them." Shamon's deep voice drew Gabie's attention to him once more.

Yeah, he looked like he'd break them in half. That fury had just been banked in his eyes before, now it flared full force.

"You nearly broke them already," Sabra replied. "But I need them breathing."

Shamon didn't look convinced. Gabie gave him an encouraging smile and squeezed his fingers. "My hero. You did look fierce out there, tossing that sack of shit around."

"If your friends hadn't dragged you off, you'd have torn him in half," Paz added. "I'd have liked to have seen that."

The vehemence in the youth's voice startled Gabie and she looked at him. His pale cheeks were flushed and anger burned in his eyes. Along with a sheen of tears. *Whoa*. That was unexpected.

"Paz," she said soothingly. "It's all right. It's over."

“He hurt you, Gabie. If Shamon hadn’t grabbed him, you could be hurt even worse.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t happen. Security wouldn’t have let him kill me, right?” Gabie glanced at Des.

“It hurts to say this, but you’re right. We’d have saved your sorry arse.”

“Cripes, thanks for caring.”

“I wanted to kill Raznin and Tason myself.” Paz abruptly left the cabin.

Gabie started to stand up, only to have Shamon’s fingers tighten and Olin push her shoulder down.

“Sit still,” the old man ordered her gruffly. “You can see to the boy after.”

“Paz needs me—”

“I’ll go.” Simon pushed away from the bench.

“Simon, you don’t need to go—”

“Yes, he does.” Sabra looked directly at Gabie. “Paz needs a man right now, not a wench’s touch.”

“Listen, I know Paz—”

“And I know men. Paz is a young bloke and he needs a man to talk to. Olin is busy, and your boy needs someone right now.”

“She’s right,” Shamon said quietly. “Paz has emotions that only another man could fathom.”

Well, that left Gabie feeling very unwanted and useless. She glanced up to see Misha with exactly the same expression and felt a little better. Misery loves company.

“Besides, we have other arrangements to sort out,” Sabra continued. “The *Larceny* will be towed back to the IPS and you and your crew will travel aboard our security ship.”

“What?” Startled, Gabie transferred her gaze to Sabra. “Why?”

“Because you are witnesses in an upcoming court case and too valuable to lose.”

“Hey, we’d come back.”

“Right now you are all under protective custody.” Sabra studied her calmly. “You will stay in custody abroad the IPS. Once the court case is over, you’re free to go.”

“So you’re imprisoning us?”

“Not at all. You’re free to move around the IPS as you’ll be monitored at all times.”

“Hey,” Misha said. “That’s not freedom.”

“It’s your best offer. I could just keep you under lock and key.”

Somehow Gabie just wasn’t surprised by the whole thing. With a sigh, she looked down at her arm, which Olin was covering with a very large self-adhesive patch.

At least she wasn’t going to get the stuffing belted out of her any time soon. That just had to be a bright spot. Not to mention her scalp would get some relief from all the hair yanking it had suffered lately. Whoo hoo, another bright spot. Things were looking up. She sighed.

“Gabie, Misha, Olin and Paz could travel with us,” Heddham suggested.

“No,” Des said immediately.

“’Tis a good idea,” he insisted. “Paz gets to hang around with young Torkra and Mikal, which will give him something else to think about. ’Tis plenty of room for Olin to lie around and sleep—”

Olin sent him a sour look.

“Misha can play cards and things with the others and amuse herself by cheating them out of as many dinnoes as they’re silly enough to part with,” he continued, “And Shamon and Gabie get time to... uh... recuperate.”

“Is that right?” Des gave him a hard look.

“Shamon’s been stressed lately.” Heddham nodded seriously. “He needs some downtime with his wench.”

“Oh yes, *down* time is exactly what he probably does want.”

“You can stay guard on our ship,” he added enticingly. “Take Simon in hand. You said yourself he’s in trouble.”

Even Sabra grinned.

“’Tis a good idea,” Shamon agreed. “I’ll not lie. I’ll feel better if Gabie is with me. After today...” He looked steadily at Gabie before turning his gaze to Sabra. “Please,” he said simply.

Cripes, what woman could turn down that look? That plea? It even made Gabie’s heart melt.

Sabra wasn’t a pushover, though. She eyed her big friend and fellow Daamen back just as steadily.

“You know we can protect them all,” he continued. “We will. And we’ll be right behind you. If you want, you can send other security aboard.”

The silence stretched as she looked at him consideringly.

“What harm can there be?” Freeman asked cheerfully from where he lounged in one of the big armchairs which completely dwarfed him. “We’re going the same way, travelling together, everyone is happy. Sounds good to me.”

“Anything sounds good to you,” Des shot at him.

“What are you worried about? *You* get to spend time with Simon.”

“I’m on duty.”

“I hear he loves it when you play the tough security officer.”

Gabie was half expecting Des to jump all over the smaller man. Des was a woman, but she was tall, well-built, had a mouth like a sewer and was as tough as nails.

Except when it came to her husband, Simon, obviously.

Actually, Gabie didn’t want to travel on the security ship. She felt much more comfortable on the big trade ship, amongst friends. With Shamon. She looked at him and his smile was warm, his gaze warmer.

Cripes. She was warmer.

“All right.” Sabra decided. “We have the extra people on board with the freed slaves anyway. If Simon is in agreement, you lot can travel aboard the trade ship. Des, you go with them.”

“As if Simon wouldn’t agree to time with Des,” Freeman said. “I just bet you’re jealous because it’s not Cam’s ship, Sabra.”

“Shut your cakehole,” Sabra and Des said at the same time.

“A man can’t say anything anymore,” he returned cheerfully.

~ * ~

Checking his clothes in the mirror once more, Mellar angled his head from side to side. Even after all this time, he was still a good-looking man. It would be easy to find another wife amongst these high-class people.

Cheran, as always, watched impassively from his place by the door. In his arms he held Mellar’s rich, fur-trimmed robe.

“Have you spotted any likely pickings amongst the females?” Mellar held out his arms and watched as the robe settled around his shoulders.

“There are some young ones. Very pretty.”

“Good. Good.” He arched one brow at him in the mirror. “Have you heard back?”

“All went well.”

“Excellent!” Clapping his hands enthusiastically, he crossed to the table, poured a goblet of wine and downed it in one gulp. “Then let’s get on with the hunt for my next wife!”

Opening the door to his chambers, he stepped out into the corridor. People came from both directions. It was a thriving, chattering throng, and he revelled in it.

~ * ~

Misha and Gabie settled into the one spare cabin on board the big trade ship. Paz was sharing with Mikal, and Olin had Shamon’s bunk.

Shamon was sleeping on the big sofa in the huge dining/living cabin. In the dim light from the corridor he looked almost angelic. Kneeling by his side, a glass of icy berry juice in her hand, Gabie studied him. Apart from his size, he didn't look anything like the raging giant who'd come to her defence and nearly killed a man the security wanted alive. He'd been almost possessed.

She'd been half scared security would have to hurt him to get him away from Raznin, and it was with relief she'd seen the other traders come piling out of their trade ship.

Since she and her friends had come onboard the trade ship that morning, he'd treated her very carefully, making her rest after she'd cleaned up, ensuring she had everything she wanted at her fingertips, hovering around her like a mother hen.

It was sweet, but she didn't want a mother hen. She wanted a lover.

Shamon.

Leaning one elbow on the armrest, she rested her chin on her hand and studied him.

His lashes, thick and black, lay lightly against the tanned skin of his cheekbones. His lips were relaxed in sleep, slightly parted. That strong jaw was still strong, but it couldn't detract from the gentling of sleep.

The cover he had draped across his body from the waist down. From the waist up he was naked, his muscles hard dips and swells in the dimness. Was he naked from the waist down? Somehow she doubted it, not with Misha aboard and sleeping in what was basically a public cabin.

Reaching out with one finger, she stroked back a thick lock of fair hair, pushing it back over one broad shoulder. What was it about Shamon that attracted her so much? Sure, he was dangerously handsome, but all the Daamens were. She'd met many of the different crews to know that. They were a handsome, good-natured people. But none had attracted her.

None had made her yearn for their touch, or filled up a corner of her mind. And considering how full her mind could sometimes be with schemes, just the fact that Shamon could invade her thoughts so easily was shocking in itself.

Just the thought of maybe not seeing him after all this was over was enough to make her breath hitch.

But why was she worried? He'd said himself he wanted a relationship, to go further. She'd seen it in his eyes, something more than just attraction to her. Seen it but wasn't sure if she could trust it.

Sitting back on her heels, she took a sip of the berry juice. When he'd come roaring to her rescue, she'd been shit-scared he'd get his head shot off. She really had. For one awful minute when it looked like he would kill Raznin, all she could think was that he was risking his life for her, and if he died, she'd die right along with him.

Because she couldn't bear the thought of life without him.

Vagrats. All this excitement was bad for her. It made her maudlin. She blinked back a tear, took another sip of juice and started arguing with the little voice inside her head.

All right. Do you love him?

I don't know.

You must know.

I don't know enough about relationships to know.

Go with your gut.

I could have had that slit open today.

Ha-ha. Focus.

If I'd die without him, that must mean I love him.

You could be right.

I think I'm right.

What if you're wrong?

I think too much. I need to go with the flow.

Are you avoiding thinking of it?

I'm thinking of it now. How is that avoiding it?

Do you love him?

I guess so.

Oops. Well, there it was. She guessed she loved him. But how did she know for sure? Bummer. She needed a sure sign. As Misha said, sometimes she was thick in matters close to home and this was likely one of them. Maybe she was just infatuated with Shamon and not actually in love. Could infatuation kill you if the object of your desire died?

Life would be easier if a big neon sign in her head would just flare up with “You’re In Love” flashing on it, then she’d know. Sheesh, what did she know of love and men? Nothing. Maybe. She’d sure never given her virginity to anyone. Until Shamon.

“You think any harder, lass, and you’ll give yourself a nose bleed.”

Startled, she refocused her attention to find Shamon regarding her from sleepy eyes.

“I’ll try not to get any on the carpet.” She held up the glass. “Want a sip?”

Coming up onto one elbow, all that glorious shaggy hair spilling over his shoulders, Shamon took the glass from her. “Are you all right, Gabs?”

“Sure. I always kneel by men and offer them drinks.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners in amusement as he took a swallow of the berry juice. His head tilted back with another swallow and it took all her discipline not to reach out and trace the strong cords in his throat.

Lowering the glass, he handed it back to Gabie. “Nice.”

“I thought so.” And she didn’t mean the drink.

One dark brow arched up, and his eyes lost that sleepy look. Interest sparked in them as he glanced down her night-gown clad body. Then his attention snagged on the big self-adhesive patch on her arm and he reached out to lightly touch her skin above the patch.

“Are you sore? We have some painkillers in the medikit.”

“I’m fine. Olin gave me a heap of painkillers because he knows what a wussy I am when it comes to pain.” Gabie took a slow sip of berry juice. “How about you?”

“I’m fine.” He echoed her words. “So why are you here and not tucked up in bed?”

She looked at him for several long seconds. *Oh, to hell with it.* Placing her glass on the table behind her, she moved forward fast, framing his cheeks with her hands and kissing him. Long and deep. Just like he always did to her. Drugging his senses, tasting him, and feeling his response come swiftly.

One big hand came up to cradle the back of her head and Shamon expertly angled his head to allow their kiss to deepen. That quickly he took control, plundering the depths of her mouth and leaving his taste flooding her.

Fire flared suddenly inside her, filling her with a wild wanting.

“Cripes, I am such a slut,” she mumbled into his mouth, right before she plundered him deeply in return.

She didn’t know how it happened, but one second she was kneeling on the floor kissing the heck out of the man, the next he’d surged to his feet, his arms around her bringing her up effortlessly with him.

Lifting her head, she looked him directly in the eye. “Oh, you’re not taking me back to the cabin to sleep, are you? I told you, I’m fine. I—”

Hoo boy. That look in his eyes wasn’t concern. It was totally hedonistic.

“Too late for that now,” he replied, and his words had a carnal bite to them. His mouth lifted at one corner. “We’re going upstairs to the solitary cabin where no one can hear you scream when I make you come.”

Whoa. That just fanned the flames hotter. “There’s no bed there.” Holding tight to him, she nuzzled his neck and laughed when she heard his breath catch.

“Trust me, lass, we don’t need a bed.”

He held her against him so easily, as though she weighed less than a child. She felt the strength in his body as he strode along, the flexing of his muscles. The brush of his pants against her legs.

Well, that answered that question. He wasn't naked from the waist down.

She was. She smothered a giggle in his hair.

There was a lurch and she looked up to find that they were on the platform lift. It shuddered, gave a groan and ascended.

No sooner had she lifted her head from his shoulder than Shamon had her pressed up against the wall, the strength of his big body and arms holding her pinned in place as he ravished her mouth thoroughly. She felt like she was drowning in him, his taste, his touch, his scent.

By the time the platform clattered to a halt and Shamon carried her off it, Gabie could hardly think straight. All she knew was that she wanted him, his skin against hers, and his body in hers. She didn't think she'd breathed it aloud until she heard his groan. *Oops*. She grinned. *Ah well*.

Shamon moved swiftly down the corridor, turning into the solitary cabin and striding across directly to the lone chair that sat in the middle of it. It was the only furniture in the cabin. A huge space shield took up most of the opposite wall, and outside sparkled stars. It was empty as far as the eye could see.

Gabie didn't care much about the view except to be grateful that the security ship was ahead of the trade ship. Some things she'd be happy to do with Shamon. Shagging him senseless in full view of watchers wasn't one of them. She might have recently discovered how besotted with him she was, but her inner slut drew a line at putting on a display for others.

However, she had Shamon to herself, so she was totally uninhibited.

Not that she'd have had time to be inhibited anyway. One second she was cradled against him, the next second he'd stood her on the chair.

"This is different," she managed to say, her heart trying to keep up with the fire in her blood.

"I just need to get rid of something," Shamon replied, his eyes hot and his hands fast as he shucked his pants and kicked them aside.

Cripes. The man had a raging erection already. Gabie was impressed. More than impressed. Oh, all right, downright hungry.

"Oh yeah," she breathed. "Do me, Shamon." She reached for him.

He caught her as she almost threw herself off the chair at him, laughter and voracity combined in his eyes. “I’d thought to go slow, but Gabs, you make me run too hot.”

“Good,” she said, zeroing in on the pulse beating frantically in his neck and giving it a rapacious lick. “Because I don’t exactly feel like slow right now. Let’s go for it.”

His laughter filled the room, but it was tempered with pure eroticism. He swung her around in a dizzying half circle and dropped back onto the big chair, bring her with him so that she was kneeling astride him, her knees each side of his thighs.

His manhood throbbed against his belly, almost rock hard, and Gabie closed her hand around it as she leaned forward and kissed Shamon almost desperately.

She didn’t know why, couldn’t even begin to imagine why she was so frantic to have him inside her. Close to her. As close as he could possibly be, but it was as though he could read her mind.

Big hands tugged her nightgown off and tossed it aside, bearing her to his heated explorations. His palms were calloused, rough against her skin, but boy, did she love it.

When one big palm cupped her breast, she slid her hand firmly up his shaft and felt him buck beneath her.

“God... Gabs...” His voice was almost pained.

She drew back a little to see his expression. The man had an expression of such hunger on his face that it bordered on rapacity. For her. That made her even bolder, as though she wasn’t bold enough already.

Experimentally she thumbed the top of his staff, slicking the bead of seed across the slit in the tip, using a firm pressure to rub it around the tip.

He liked it all right. His groan was hoarse, his hand tightening almost convulsively on her breast. And when she kissed him using hot little presses of her lips across his mouth, he actually cursed.

Fire burned through her veins, need washed through her like a wave of molten lava, but she wanted to give him pleasure. At the same time she wanted him in her.

Typically, she was caught between two choices. Story of her life.

Shamon fixed it by the simple process of lifting her up onto her knees, using one hand to position his turgid staff and, while keeping her gaze locked with his, guided her down.

The thick length penetrated her openness, invading her slick body, pushing through the tight fit of her sheath and making her moan his name as he slid fully home.

He shuddered beneath her, the muscles in his chest expanding with his breath, brushing her sensitized nipples.

His hands clutched her bottom, supporting her as she rose up instinctively. God, the sensation of his thick, veined staff sliding through her heat was erotic in itself. The sight of his eyes glowing with such concupiscence made her libido surge almost out of control, and she pushed down, flexing her hips, clenching her inner muscles.

Shamon cried out, his voice hoarse and deep, and his grip changed, clamping onto her hips and taking over.

The man had control issues, she thought vaguely. But she didn't care, not then, not when he was urging her on, controlling the ride, guiding them both higher and higher.

Everything blurred, became heat and fire and screaming nerve endings. Her nipples against his chest, his hard body under her, against her, in her. His hair tumbling over her breasts as he leaned forward while simultaneously drawing her against him. Then that hot mouth was on her throat, his tongue flicked once, twice, against her skin, and then he started to draw on her.

She almost shattered at the sensation of his staff driving deep inside her and his mouth marking her. Marked inside and outside as his seed started to leak hotly, coating her sheath, slipping deeper inside with every thrust.

Gabie couldn't think. Her fingers entwined in his hair, she inhaled, smelling him. His scent in her nose, his essence in her, his mark on her, and then he kissed her long and hard, not coming up for air, and now she had his breath in her lungs

She had everything of him.

Shamon pushed her higher, their sweat mingling, his powerful thighs surging under her, his hands controlling her movements. Everything around her went dim and all she could do was stare into his eyes.

Those eyes, usually so merry, so happy, so full of laughter, now burned with prurience. Pure male rut, pure heat, and no mercy.

“You’re mine,” he rasped suddenly. “No one else’s.” He thrust hard beneath her while holding her down, slamming home deep inside, and he stopped.

Just like that.

Cripes!

“Oh God, no, don’t stop,” she pleaded, trying to shift on top of him.

He was merciless, all right. Inhuman. He had to be to stop like that when their hearts were racing, their libidos going overtime and that pinnacle of mind shattering pleasure was just a little further up.

“Mine,” he grated again. “Say it.”

“What? Now?” She could have cried with frustration.

“Aye. Now and forever.”

Geez, she’d do whatever it took to make him start again. “Yes. Yes, yes, yes! Yours! Let’s go!”

In one smooth move he yanked her hard against him, her breasts crushed against his chest, and he looked deep into her eyes. “’Tis no going back for you, Gabs.”

Something had just happened between them. Something important. Gabie blinked, but before she could even think to say anything Shamon captured her mouth, his tongue plundering the depths, sweeping away all partially constructed thoughts.

Powerful thighs moved under her and that glorious pumping started inside her again. Fire flared, passion seared and she was quickly lost to the mind-numbing pleasure that built and built inside her, pushing her higher, the sensations low in her sheath and rippling through her belly consuming her, burning her up, and as she felt the first swell of climax, she also felt the hot spurt of seed deep inside her.

Shamon stiffened beneath her, his grip on her hips holding her still as he strained inside her, and when he thrust suddenly, Gabie was tipped over the edge.

She arched back, her world shaking and shattering, that hot, wet heat filling her even as her senses were flung away to spin into oblivion.

She didn't feel the hard body straining under her, the staff pumping hot seed into her. She didn't feel the hands gripping her hips, fingers biting deep as the man, in the depths of passion and love, gripped her tightly and sought to bury himself so deep in her that she'd never be free of him.

But she was more than aware that even as she whirled out in glorious, splendorous space of nerve-shattering ecstasy, Shamon held her safely grounded.

She was free to fly in complete safety, and she gave herself over to the glory of it uninhibited.

Fifteen

When his heart finally stopped pounding, Shamon angled his head to look down at the wench snuggled against him. The long line of her back and the swells of her voluptuous buttocks called to him, and with a sigh of contentment he ran his palm up and down those sweet curves.

“I could start purring” Gabie mumbled against his throat, “But I’m too deliciously tired right now.”

“I’ll just imagine it.” He pressed his cheek against the top of her head where it rested against his shoulder.

“You’re desperate.”

“Not as much as I was when you seduced me.”

She laughed.

“You’re mine.” He brushed his lips across her hair.

She stilled. She remembered. Had she meant it? Had it only been said in the heat of the moment?

Slowly she straightened up, her hands on his shoulders, her legs still astride his thighs. Those green eyes searched his, her gaze probing.

It was a moment suspended in time.

“’Tis no going back for you, Gabs.” Bringing one hand around, he traced her cheek to her chin with one fingertip. And watched her.

She took a deep breath. “Shamon...”

He refused to help, looking at her intently.

“The hell with it.” Gabie flung her hair over one shoulder with an arrogant toss of her head and stated bluntly, “I have no idea what I feel for you, all right? I know you make my senses whirl, you make me lose any common sense I may have—and Misha says that’s not much to start with anyway—you make me laugh, and I know if anything happened to you I’d just die.” She arched one brow. “What do you say to that?”

Joy spread through Shamon like a warm tide. “You love me, ’tis what I say. What I know.”

“I’m glad one of us knows.” An uncertain look spread across her gamine face. “You reckon I love you?”

He started to laugh. He couldn’t help it. She was so adorable, a bit of a scatterbrain, outrageous, wholly disrespectful and soft-hearted. Cuddling her close, he said, “Aye. I know so.”

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Of course. I’m allowed to.” He nipped her ear, delighting in her squirm on his lap.

Stars, he was still buried deep inside her. The squirming caused some really interesting sensations.

She must have thought so too, because she suddenly went all languid in his arms and kissed his neck.

“Why are you allowed to?” she murmured.

“Because I’m your soon-to-be husband.”

That got her attention. She shot upright on his lap, her eyes big. “What?”

“Aye,” he said with supreme satisfaction. “My wife. You belong to me, we’re getting married.”

“Since when?”

“Since I found out we loved each other. Of course,” he tapped her nose, “I knew long before you did.”

She stared at him for several seconds and he could just about see her busy little mind ticking. That could be both interesting and amusing.

Finally she said, "That's very brave of you, considering I come with company."

"Oh?" He could just bet he knew where this was heading.

"I have family."

"Oh?"

"Paz. Misha. Olin. I won't desert them."

"No problems," he replied easily. "They can live in my other house."

"*Other* house?"

"Aye. I'll just buy the closest one to us."

"Closest to us?" Her eyes narrowed a little. "Exactly where are you intending for us to live?"

"On Daamen."

"And exactly what am I supposed to do while you're away trading?" Her arms were folded now, which pushed her breasts up most impressively.

He had a hard time keeping his mind on the subject but managed it with admirable single-mindedness. "You can stay home or get a job, 'tis up to you. You'd do well in the trade business. Legal trade business," he added.

"You have it all worked out, don't you?" she accused.

"Aye. You can choose to either stay home or work, Misha can get a job, Olin can sleep his days away and Paz can go to school with the other Daamen youths."

"Is that right?"

"They're all free to come and go." He sobered. "Seriously, Gabie. They're your family and I'd not expect you to leave them behind. They are welcome to stay on Daamen if they wish, and if they choose to stay I'll look after them until they settle in. Paz is welcome to live with us if you and he want, or he can stay with Misha and Olin. I'll provide a home for them close to us."

“They don’t need to be provided for. We all have plenty of dinnos of our own to retire on in comfort. But what if they don’t want to stay?”

Shamon studied her quietly. “Can you let them go?”

She bit her lip and looked away. “We’ve all been together for so long...”

“Would they wish you to go with them, leave behind one you love? Could you do it?”

She was silent for so long that he started to worry. God, what if she couldn’t? What if she really did mean to go with them, to keep them together? If—

“No.” She spoke softly, then turned back to face him. A tear glistened in her eye, making the green depths sparkle. “No, I couldn’t leave you.”

And then she hugged him, burying her face in his neck. He felt the shiver go through her and he cradled her against his chest.

“Nothing is ever simple,” she said, her words muffled in his hair.

“But it all works out in the end, lass,” he replied soothingly. “Family always works it out.”

~ * ~

It troubled her. Not that fact that she might—*might*—love Shamon, but what to do with her friends if—*if*—she agreed to wed him—*wed?* *sheesh!*—and stay on Daamen.

Sitting up in the solitary cabin the following morning, she munched on a chunk of chocolate and stared morosely out at the stars.

“Geez, you have the same expression as Paz wears.” Misha entered the cabin.

“Yeah, well his is make-believe and mine is real.”

“Why? We’re safe, your hunk of handsomeness is on the same ship, you had nooky last night and everything looks rosy. What could possibly be wrong?” Turning her back to the space shield, Misha folded her arms and leaned back against it.

“What makes you think I had, as you so nicely put it, nooky last night?”

“It was a good guess, but your blushing is a dead giveaway.”

“You are such a cow.”

“Why, thank you.” Misha’s grin faded and she looked seriously at her friend. “So what’s wrong?”

Gabie held out the chocolate and Misha took it from her, careful to keep her fingers on the wrapper at the bottom. Taking a bite, she chewed and watched Gabie.

“I don’t know where to start,” Gabie mumbled. “Life used to be simple.”

“Still is.”

“You think?” Gabie took the chocolate block and bit off another piece.

“Sure. We’re alive. What’s simpler than that?”

Gabie looked up at her. “Am I in love?”

“Sure,” Misha replied without batting an eyelid.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“How come you know and I’m not sure?”

“I was always the brains of this outfit.”

Gabie sighed.

“Come on, Gabie, anyone can see that big lug is besotted with you, and your face just lights up when he just enters the room.”

“It does not!” Gabie reconsidered. “It does?”

“It does.” Taking the block of chocolate back, Misha took a bite. “Yummy chocolate, by the way.”

“Shamon gave it to me from a stash in the cargo hold. Said it’s expensive but I was... worth... it.”

Misha cocked a brow and grinned hugely.

Gabie crossed her eyes at her.

“So what’s the problem?” Misha licked some chocolate off her thumb. “He loves you, you love him, and you live happily ever after.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Sure it is.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“You, Olin and Paz. I can’t just ditch you.”

Misha looked at her for several long seconds and when she next spoke her tone was softer than Gabie had ever heard it. “Oh, Gabie, is that what this is about?”

“Yes.” Gabie shrugged.

“We’ll be fine. Gabie we’ve always been family, that won’t change. But you need to follow your own path, and we need to follow our path.”

“Shamon said if you wanted to come and stay on Daamen he’d buy you all a house to live in, and you could get a job, and Olin could sleep and Paz could go to school.” At the expression on Misha’s face, Gabie gave a sheepish grin. “It sounded better last night.”

Misha shook her head.

“I told him we all had plenty of dinnoes of our own and he didn’t need to provide for us.”

“He’s really sweet and all, but Gabie, I have my own plans.”

“You do?” Well, that was a surprise.

“Sure. I’m going to find Emet.”

Gabie’s mouth fell open. “Emet?”

“When this is over, I’m going to find him.” Misha met her gaze steadily. “I want to see if there’s anything between us, if anything could be between us.”

“Misha, are you sure? He’s wanted.”

“And if he’s wanted, and we find out we love each other, then we’ll settle in the Outlaw Sector somewhere.”

Just like that? Gabie blinked.

“And if you three want to come, you can.”

“What if we don’t?”

“I’ll see you all settled and go myself.”

“You’d leave us?”

Misha sighed. “Gabie, I love you all, honestly. But sometimes different paths beckon. Emet is my crossroad. I need to find out if we have a life together.”

“Cripes.” Gabie shook her head. “And here I was worried about leaving you.”

Misha smiled.

“You’re brave,” Gabie said bluntly. “Why did I never notice that before?”

“Because you’re arrogant.” Misha laughed when Gabie threw the chocolate wrapper at her. Catching it, she crumpled it in her hand and tossed it back to Gabie. “Because we’ve never had to think about each other that way. We grew up together, we know each other’s strengths and weaknesses without having to consciously grasp the concept.”

“Scary thought.”

“Yeah, it’s given me some nightmares, too.”

“I mean, you’re able to see the parting of the ways as just something that happens. I find it harder.”

A kind look crossed Misha’s face. “That’s because you’re such a family person, Gabie.”

“What? No.”

“Yes. You look after us, you care for us, you do all sorts of crazy things and drag us along with you—”

“Hey, I’ve followed you on some crazy jaunts.”

“Yes, but don’t you see, Gabie? You like having family around. Friends. You’re a born family person.”

“And you’re not? Crap.” Gabie wasn’t entirely too sure what she thought of this assessment.

“Sure, I like family, but like all families sometimes we have to go our own ways. You never thought about it because you never thought we would, never even considered the possibility because you didn’t want to.”

“Of course I thought we might, but one day. Not now.”

“Now is one day.”

Gabie stared at Misha. Bugger. She was right.

“But what about Paz? Olin? They’re our family.”

“Olin is old enough to choose whether he wants to come with me or stay on Daamen and sleep his days away. Paz is young, but he needs a say. And Gabie...” Misha hesitated. “He needs a stable home now.”

“Are you saying we neglected him?”

“No way. I’m saying that he has a chance at stability, and whether he gets that with you or me, he has a choice. He needs that to be content.”

“If we split up he won’t be happy.”

Misha smiled. “Paz is more intelligent than he lets on.”

Silently Gabie looked past Misha to the blackness of space beyond. Pin pricks of light, stars in velvet darkness, shone brightly. Like a million wishes and hopes and dreams of a future in an uncertain world.

“Wow,” she finally said. “I feel stupid.”

“Sure you do,” Misha said cheerfully. “But we lived for the moment, Gabie. Nothing wrong with that. It’s just now we all face a crossroads and paths have to be chosen.”

“We just have to choose the right ones,” Gabie murmured.

“And for the right reasons. And the first thing for you is to get it straight in your own head whether or not you love Shamon.” Misha pointed at her. “Let me make it easy for you. Will you leave him and come with me?”

“When do we return?”

“Maybe never.”

“Shit, no. Are you out of your mind?”

“There’s your answer.”

“Huh?”

“You chose Shamon over me.”

Appalled, Gabie shot upright from the chair. “Oh, Misha, I never meant—”

“God, girl, get a grip on reality!” Misha rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t come with me if you knew I was never coming back, if you couldn’t see Shamon again. If you didn’t love him, you could do it. You really need a good smack to the head to get your thoughts unscrambled.”

“I’ve had enough slaps, thank you.”

“Then it didn’t do any good.” Misha straightened up and walked across to the door. “Sometimes, Gabie, you shouldn’t think about things too hard. You can make mountains out of molehills.” At the door she turned and grinned. “See you later Mother Hen.”

Gabie sent her a rude gesture.

Once she was alone in the cabin again she resumed contemplating the space outside. Wow, things were getting weirder. Misha actually had plans. Olin and Paz had to make a decision. Gabie had to stop doubting herself and make a clear-cut decision.

“Cripes,” she said out loud. “I love Shamon.”

She waited. Nothing mocked her, nothing echoed back. In fact, it felt good to say the words aloud.

“I love Shamon.” She tested it out on her tongue again, and grinned. A little prick of delight slid through her. “I love Shamon. Okay, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

Leaning back in her chair, she gazed out at space again.

“I’ll live on Daamen, be a working woman until I have lots of babies, and then I’ll rear them and make love almost every night to a big hunk.”

She waited for panic to set in, but a surprising feeling filled her instead. That actually sounded even better. She grinned wider.

Well, when said hunk was home. The saying was absence made the heart grow fonder. If that were true then with the fire that blazed between them, they’d burn up the sheets every time he came home.

With a smile on her face, she daydreamed the next hour away.

~ * ~

The Intergalactic Peace Ship—IPS for short—was massive. It was the main ship for meetings between fifty planet leaders, which included their advisors and families. People worked on the ship, and IPS soldiers guarded the ship and the leaders on it. IPS security operated from the ship as well, but it was whispered that this not-quite-understood arm of the IPS law had other places they met and worked. Secret places.

The docking bay at the bottom of the ship was heavily guarded, and security fell into step each side of Gabie, Misha, Olin and Paz as they stepped down into the bay.

Gabie wasn’t happy about being parted from the traders, but there wasn’t much she could do but give Shamon a cheery wave and put on relaxed face.

“Love makes you do nice things for others,” Misha whispered from the corner of her mouth.

“I don’t like being amongst security. They give me the willies.” Gabie glanced sideways at the soldiers. “So do they.”

Olin just looked sleepy, but Paz was looking around in wide-eyed awe as they were herded down long corridors in the bowels of the ship. Eventually a big lift with open doors stood at the bottom, and they were guided onto it.

“You sure this doesn’t lead to prison cells?” Gabie asked suspiciously.

“I wish,” Des replied.

“You know, you really need a personality transplant.”

“I like me just the way I am.”

“So does Simon,” Freeman offered with a lazy grin.

Before Des could say anything, Sabra said, “We’re taking you to meet Uleah and Meekta. Uleah is the security chief. Meekta is the head of the planetary leaders. He knows we’re onto something, and has been waiting to hear the information as we’ve gathered it. We have enough to place before him now.”

“Hey, you know more than we do,” Misha pointed out. “I don’t think we need to meet the big cheeses.”

“They want to meet you, and it’s vital that security can recognize you on sight so you won’t be apprehended when you’re walking aboard ship.” Sabra looked them over. “Meekta likes to know what is happening.”

Personally, Meekta and Uleah scared the hell out of Gabie. Meekta was a tall, imposing figure in a long, black robe with a hard face and intense eyes that seemed to peer right into her soul. Not a good thing. Uleah watched them all with an intensity that made her want to squirm.

And not in a good way like Shamon made her squirm.

Hey, maybe she was in love after all. Was this the sign?

And maybe she’d better try not to divert her nervousness by thinking thoughts that shouldn’t be thought while being so closely scrutinized by two men who could squash her legally like a bug. A woman in private enterprise had to keep her wits about her.

Paz was too wide-eyed to be nervous. He was gawking at everything, his head swivelling around his neck as though he were demon possessed.

Olin didn’t appear too concerned.

Misha was as jittery as a bug on a lampshade, but she managed to hide it. Gabie only knew because her friend's eyes were taking everything in with flitting glances.

God above, they all probably looked as guilty as sin.

Meekta sighed suddenly. "These are your witnesses?"

"So far," Sabra replied calmly. "And the slaves and prisoners."

"But nothing to tie them to the other?"

"We'll get it, don't worry. This is just rounding up those who might not be found when needed."

Cripes, that was a veiled hint of Sabra's belief that Gabie and her mob might entertain ideas about fleeing the area. Not without Shamon Gabie wouldn't, and not after seeing those image photos, either. She frowned at Sabra. Who ignored her.

Story of her life. And one that had made her very successful as a small-time smuggler. Cripes, and look where that had got them. Now they were in the middle of big legal clout. Whoo hoo. Not.

Uleah looked up from the handtronic in his hand. "Gabie of Ceron, introduced to smuggling at an early age by her father, took over his business when he passed away, and continued being a small time smuggler with access to dubious methods enabling her to pass her illegal merchandise as legal when searched by peacekeepers."

"We like to call it private enterprise," Paz chirped up excitedly.

Cripes! Gabie didn't dare look at him.

"Hmm," Uleah said, then switched his gaze to Misha. "Misha of Ceron. Grew up with Gabie, joined her as part of her crew when Gabie took over smuggling."

"Private enter—" began Paz.

"Not now, Paz," Misha growled out of the side of her mouth.

"Usually acknowledged as Gabie's second-in-command." Uleah looked at Olin. "Olin, birth place unknown, believed to be a one-time outlaw who was never

identified by the law. Part of Gabie's crew since he hooked up with her father." His gaze finally fell on Paz, who was still gawking at everything. "Paz, orphaned young and taken on by Gabie as the final person in her crew on a stopover on the outskirts of the Outlaw sector. Birth place unknown." He flicked a switch on the handtronic. "That's it."

Gabie was surprised they didn't know the colour of her panties as well.

"And now four prime witnesses in a very delicate case." Meekta stared heavily at them.

Obviously he wasn't impressed. Gabie felt the overpowering need to bow and scrape but managed to retain her dignity and stare back. Sort of. She looked at his nose instead of meeting that assessing, hard-eyed gaze.

"Take them to their appointed cabins," Uleah told Sabra. "Make sure they are fitted with monitors and several security guards before turning them loose onboard. They are to remain on the main floors only."

And that was that. The *Larceny* crew were herded out, down another long corridor, up another two floors and finally led to two cabins. Olin and Paz were escorted into one cabin, and Misha and Gabie into the one directly beside it.

As cabins went, these were luxurious. Big beds, velvet covers, graceful furniture, huge rooms. Gabie could get used to it. She wasn't too happy when her sleeve was rolled up briskly by Des and a narrow metal cuff was snapped around her arm just above the elbow.

"Your monitors," Des informed her, snapping an identical one around Misha's arm. "It doesn't matter if anyone sees them, they are only recognizable by security, but we prefer to keep them out of sight anyway."

"Oh, another secret," Gabie said to Misha.

"It doesn't match my shirt. Do you have it in another colour?" Misha queried.

"Personally I'd like to put it around your neck," Des replied. "But we can't all have we want."

She left the room and Gabie and Misha looked at each other.

"Wow," Misha said. "Beats a cell any day."

“This is true.” Gabie looked around. “And I haven’t had my hair pulled once today. Life is good.”

“We better check on Paz and Olin.” Misha started for the door. “Olin is probably asleep already and Paz will be having a heart attack.”

“You reckon?” Gabie followed her. “He’s too excited to think heart palpitations right now.”

“Yeah. Excitement from Paz is scary. Miserable suits him better.”

They laughed as Misha opened the door, only to come face to face with two security guards who watched them impassively.

“Oh, escorts,” Misha said. “How sweet.”

“I’m Merissa.” The woman’s features were totally expressionless. “This is Brion.”

Brion was just as impassive as his co-worker.

Gabie peered around. “What? Only two guards? I’m disappointed.”

The security guards just looked at them.

Misha eyed them from the corners of her eyes as she knocked on the cabin door of Paz and Olin.

Paz yanked the door open and peered out excitedly. “Misha! Gabie! Have you seen this room? *Wow!*”

“God above,” Misha said. “Get a grip, boy. This much excitement can’t be good for you.”

“He’s been like it since we arrived.” Olin grinned a little.

“Can we go for a walk?” Paz’s cheeks were actually flushed.

Misha and Gabie exchanged glances.

“Sounds like a good idea,” a deep voice rumbled from behind them.

And wouldn't you know it, that familiar warmth went shooting straight through Gabie at just his voice. Turning to face Shamon, she grinned up in delighted relief, and yes, her heart did do a crazy somersault in her chest.

"Love," Misha whispered.

Ignoring her, Gabie simply walked over and flung her arms around Shamon. Who the hell cared who watched? She'd just faced down the security chief and the highest planet leader and lived to tell the tale. If she could do that, she could hug Shamon in public.

He obviously had no worries about kissing her quite thoroughly in public. By the time he set her down she was flustered and more than a little warm. Hoo boy, that fire was just starting to spark along her veins.

"Misha and I are sharing a cabin," she felt compelled to tell him.

Shamon laughed, amusement making his brown eyes dance merrily. "Don't worry, lass, 'tis a lot of rooms on board this huge ship."

"I'm being monitored." She gestured to Merissa and Brion. "And guarded."

"Oh?" He looked over her head, but his eyes still twinkled. "I'm sure I can work something out with Sabra."

"We're going for a walk," Paz informed him, bright-eyed. "Coming?"

"Aye, I wouldn't miss this for the world," he replied.

"Nor would I," Heddiam added, falling in beside him.

It was the most interesting and best walk Gabie had ever been on. Best because Shamon's arm was around her shoulders hugging her gently into his side, and interesting because there were so many different people on board from so many different planets. Each wore their planet clothes of prestige and amongst these obvious dignitaries, workers hurried. Neatly dressed, calm and correct, they moved with quiet, speedy efficiency through the crowds. IPS soldiers marched along the sides of the corridors in pairs, and Gabie caught sight of security guards here and there.

The place teemed with law.

How ironic that the *Larceny* crew walked the same halls, and were guarded by the law as well. It made her want to laugh uproariously. Her father would have been so impressed.

An hour later and they were still walking and exploring. Gabie came to a stop as a delicious smell wafted through the air. Roasting meat. Her mouth watered and her eyes lit up.

“Hungry?” Shamon queried, sensitive as always to her moods. Or maybe he was just observant enough to see her sniffing the air with her tongue almost hanging out and drooling.

“Starving,” she agreed.

Merissa led them down the corridor, swung a right, and then a left into a huge dining room. Tables of people filled the floor space with wide areas between the tables left clear for the people to walk in-between on their way to and from the huge serving area at the back of the dining hall.

Heddam sat down at an empty table they came across in the middle of the hall. “I’ll guard this while you get the food,” he informed Shamon.

The food was delicious, and so much of it. Haunches of cooked meat, piles of roast vegetables, platters of cut-up fruit, towering cakes and big urns of hot and cold drinks. Pastries, stews, pastas, rice dishes, everything a hungry person could dream of was stacked behind the serving counters.

Servers were busy filling plates with people’s orders and handing it to them across the top of the servers. Some workers were obviously waiting on tables, for they piled plates on little trolleys and headed back to certain tables.

“I think I’ve died and gone to Heaven,” Gabie breathed.

While she ogled the dishes and tried to make up her mind, Shamon kept his hand on her back and ordered his and Heddam’s food. By the time the sweetly smiling server had handed him his plates, Gabie didn’t care. If the server was so pleased to see Shamon, she’d serve Gabie fast just to impress him. She could live with that.

Misha walked beside her as they carried their plates. Merissa walked in front of them. Shamon walked behind them balancing both plates and Paz, Olin and Brion brought up the rear.

They had to stop while several servers angled past them with their trolleys. Gabie was gazing around when Misha let out a low hiss.

“Hmm?” She glanced at her.

Misha was staring at someone.

Gabie looked over but she didn’t see anyone of particular interest. She did see Sabra and a huge Daamen trader with wildly rioting curls spilling over his shoulders walk in the door. More people followed.

Misha looked pale.

“What’s wrong?” Gabie whispered.

“I think... I think I saw...”

“What?”

“Emet.”

“*What?*”

Misha hushed her quickly and when Merissa gave her a narrow-eyed look over her shoulder, Misha smiled calmly, took a piece of meat off her plate and chewed it, making noises of appreciation.

“Are you sure?” Gabie whispered as soon as Merissa looked away again.

“No. Yes. Maybe.”

“Where?”

They started moving forward again.

“I thought he was behind Sabra.”

“There is no one behind her expect, oh, a *stack* of people. None of them look like Emet.”

Misha took another long look then sighed and shook her head. “I’m seeing things.”

Gabie wasn't so sure. Misha rarely imagined things. But Emet wasn't here, he was millions of miles away by now. She hoped. There was no way a wanted outlaw would be walking in the midst of a ship chock full of the law.

They finally came back to their table to see that Sabra and the curly-haired giant were chatting to Heddum. The curly-haired giant had his arm resting on the back of Sabra's chair, and Gabie didn't miss the way she leaned slightly towards him, even while she talked. Gabie blinked. Whoa, the security officer had her hand resting on that massive thigh, too.

"Shamon," the dark-haired giant greeted him cheerfully.

"Cam." Shamon nodded back. "I should have guessed you'd be waiting here for your love."

"Always, my friend, always." Dark eyes switched to Gabie, the expression friendly and relaxed. "I've heard you're having some interesting times."

Shamon set his plate on the table and sat beside Gabie. "Gabie, 'tis Cam, Sabra's long-suffering husband. Cam, 'tis Gabie, my wife-to-be."

Gabie choked on a bite of meat, Misha laughed, Paz stared open-mouthed, and Olin grinned faintly.

Shamon patted her helpfully on the back. "The lass is still trying to get used to the idea," he explained to Cam.

Gabie downed the glass of water that Sabra handed to her and finally got her breath back.

"Congratulations are to be given, then." Cam's eyes twinkled. "When's the happy day?"

"After Shamon's funeral, apparently," Misha informed him.

"Cripes!" Gabie turned and glared at Shamon. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He held up a napkin. "Want a wipe?"

She snatched it out of his hand and bunched it up in her fist. Cripes. Paz. Paz had no idea, and now it had been sprung on him and what would the poor boy think?

“Paz.” She turned around to face him across the table. “I’m so sorry. I—”

“It’s about time.” Paz shook his head sadly. “You took so long coming to grips with it, I thought I’d grow old waiting for you to make up your mind.”

Well, that floored her. Misha, the vindictive cow, was laughing so hard she was going to fall off her damned chair any second. Heddam wasn’t much better.

“You just can’t hide anything from this boy.” Olin proudly patted Paz’s shoulder.

“You knew?” She couldn’t believe it.

“We all knew, Gabie.” He sighed heavily. “You were the only one who didn’t seem to know until much later.”

Relief pored through Gabie. Paz knew and he was okay with it. He wasn’t freaking, unlike she’d done. Even Olin looked happy.

She pointed the fork at Paz. “You and I are going to have a little chat later about what else you might know.”

He wasn’t worried, just resumed gawking at everything around him.

“See.” Misha wiped her eyes. “Nothing to worry about. Mountains out of molehills.”

“I’ll give you molehills if you don’t stop laughing.”

“You should have seen the expression on your face.”

“I liked it,” Shamon rumbled from beside her.

“You would.” She fought the smile.

His lips brushed her ear as he whispered seductively. “I like your expression even more when I’m deep within your tight little sheath and you’re screaming my name.”

Luckily she had nothing in her mouth because she would have choked again. Instead, she gave a cough and said, “Yes, well...” picked up her fork and stabbed a potato.

He laughed and straightened up. His big arm brushed against hers as he picked up his own fork and resumed eating.

It seemed the rest took pity on her flustered appearance and talked amongst themselves as they ate.

It wasn't long before Gabie noticed her friends ending furtive glances over her shoulder. Gabie raised her brows but Misha could only look at her with wide eyes.

Wide eyes wasn't good.

"I think... I think I saw..."

"What?"

"Emet."

Oh crap. Gabie stared at Misha while pretending to take a sip from the water glass. Misha bobbed her head once.

No, no, no. This was not good. This was bad. Olin, who was sitting beside Misha, was smothering a yawn with one hand, but his pinkie was waving frantically. A waving pinkie meant trouble.

Trouble that was disturbing both Olin and Misha could only mean Emet.

Emet was here.

A clatter sounded, someone cursed, a mumbled apology and then a stunned cry rose above the murmur of a hundred or more voices.

Everyone at Gabie's table looked around. Four tables from them a man stood, wine spilled down his elegant, fur-trimmed robe. The man by his side was reaching for an empty holster, disgust on his face when he realized he carried no weapon, having had to give it up when he boarded the IPS.

The man backing away from him had yellow hair but there was no mistaking Emet. It was a very bad wig. Where the hell had he got it? Maybe it had looked all right when he'd had the scarf he wore wrapped around the bottom part of his face, but it was half pulled off now.

There was mistaking those dark eyes or pale face, though.

"Oh, no." Misha sucked in a harsh lungful of air. "Gabie!"

Sabra, Brion and Merissa looked sharply at Gabie and Misha, but Sabra returned her attention to the men standing.

“Help!” the man with the fur-trimmed robe yelled. “He’s a wanted murderer! *He killed my wife!*”

It hit Gabie in a flash. This was the man who had set Emet up, the one who had hunted him.

Security guards were popping up all over the place like corks from bottles. Soldiers appeared like ants from two doorways.

And Emet ran.

If it had of been Gabie, she’d have run, too. She totally approved of that method. It had served her well in the past.

Then Misha was up and running, dodging around the table, evading Merissa’s hands as the security officer lunged forward. Never one to think things through, Misha was up and over the nearest table.

That caused a commotion. People yelled and screamed, plates hit the floor and everyone started getting up.

“Grab her!” Sabra bellowed.

“Misha!” Olin yelled.

Paz was open-mouthed, then he gathered his fragile courage together and followed Misha.

Now soldiers were aiming for Misha and Emet, people were dodging others, and yep, things had gone to hell in a hand basket. There was only one thing for it. Misha was in trouble and Gabie was in the hand basket with her.

“Nay!” Shamon made a grab for her, catching her collar as she started upwards.

Well, she’d gotten away from jacket clutches before now. One swift shrug of her shoulders and she was out of the jacket, leaving it dangling in Shamon’s fist.

Brion and Sabra were heading right for her and Olin, bless him, dived over the table and crashed into Brion.

Gabie leaped over the next table, inwardly cringed as her hand landed in a bowl of cream, and then she was sprinting after Misha, who had changed directions while she chased after Emet and dodged two IPS soldiers.

The fur-trimmed man was trying to follow and closing in fast behind Emet, the crowd allowing him to gain the upper hand.

Briefly Gabie caught sight of a tall, imposing, black robed-figure stopping in the doorway, his mouth open in amazement. That was all she could see before someone grabbed her arm and swung her around.

It was an IPS soldier, and he was yelling something at her to do with “Get down!” or “Stop!” or some such rubbish, because really, when it came to coming to a friend’s aid, who the heck stopped? She retaliated by grabbing a bowl of mashed potatoes and letting him have it full in the face.

Give the man credit, he tried to hang on, but Shamon was bounding over a table and clearing it in one stride, and he didn’t look happy, so she was in no mood to give credit to anyone. Placing a boot in the soldier’s stomach, she pushed hard. He still didn’t let go but one of the fleeing, screaming women tripped right over Gabie’s leg and broke the soldier’s hold on her.

Gabie took off running until she skidded in some spilt gravy and went down on the floor, bringing four women down with her. No time to be gracious, she kicked her way free and on hands and knees scuttled under the tables. This was a technique she was familiar with, and by the time she came out the other side she’d put a bit of distance between herself and Shamon, as well as Sabra who looked like she could eat nails for breakfast. Her face was like thunder.

Forget the luxurious cabin, Gabie had no doubt the cells would be her room for the next several years.

A soldier had caught hold of Emet and they were grappling. Misha threw herself on top of them. Freeman was now in the mix, trying to drag Misha off the soldier.

The fur-trimmed man was making for them all, and in his hands she caught the dull sheen of a knife. *Cripes, was he going to try and stab Emet with a butter knife or something?* Then she caught sight of a sharp blade and realized that he’d grabbed a carving knife from the haunch on his table.

He was going in for the kill, and her best friend was in-between him and his prey.

Gabie surged forward, using her elbows and boots, pushing and kicking her way through. Someone yelled her name, a hand grabbed for her, and she gave the owner an almighty shove, sending him backwards into a pile of people.

A gasp of horror rose above the clamour of stampeding people, though now it seemed the stampede was less, as though they were getting under control.

That wasn't a good thing, it gave less cover, but hell, she was in the manure right up to her eye balls, so no point worrying about that now. Spotting the bastard nearing the grappling group, Gabie jumped up onto the table and ran fast.

A plate of peas went up in the air, a bottle of wine tipped over and she sprang from the chair, across the open space and up onto another table.

Keeping her eyes on the fur-trimmed man, she judged the distance and leaped. Landing on his back, she brought him down amidst some very elegant ladies. They rolled away screaming so loud she thought her ear drums would burst.

It was the least of her problems. The fur-trimmed man snarled and slashed back at her with the carving knife, slicing through her shirt sleeve.

"You *wanker!*" She exploded furiously and grabbing his hand, she bit him.

Hey, fancy that, he screamed like a girl. Gabie felt a well of victory until she realized she was tasting his blood and spat out his hand in disgust. He made to scramble away but she was onto him like a vagrat, angling her arm under his throat.

He got rid of her by simply rolling and squashing her beneath him, the rush of oxygen from her lungs forcing her to let him go and shove him away instead.

The man was persistent, she'd give him that. He was off and running, but so was she. No way was she letting anyone hurt her friend.

Then she saw the man stab out with the carving knife, and he was running in a direct collision course with—her heart froze. Shamon.

Shamon was pushing his way through the crowd and his attention was on Gabie. He didn't seem to see the man, the craving knife.

No! Her heart stuttered. Shamon was going to be seriously injured, maybe killed, and there was no way—*no way*—the man she loved was going to die by any bastard's hand!

Letting out a yell of rage, she grabbed a bottle as she hurtled past an empty table. She bounded up on a table, threw the bottle, missed the man and did the now familiar launch.

The landing hurt this time, mainly because the man's heels were right in her abdomen. Well cushioned she might be, but some things still hurt. Gritting her teeth, she hung on, even when he shook her so hard her teeth almost rattled. Shamon was safe and that was all she cared about. Oh yeah, and Misha, of course. And Emet.

When had life gotten so complicated?

The man yanked loose suddenly and she started to follow, pushing up onto her hands, only to be stopped by a long, swishing black robe appearing directly before her. And two big boots to her right. And a smaller pair to her left.

Blowing out a puff of air, she blew a hank of hair off her face and looked up slowly. The big boots were attached to a security uniform. The smaller pair to her left were attached to a security uniform, and going by the cursing in a familiar, husky voice, it was Sabra.

The black robe, now, that could only belong to one person. She looked higher and swallowed. And higher. Until finally she had her head cranked back and was looking up into the furious face of Meekta.

That was bad, but worse was when she heard Olin let out a yell from somewhere and she remembered Misha. Planet leader or not, Meekta was in her way. In a fast move she started to push up, only to have two big hands come under her arms and yank her upright. She was pulled back against a giant body and the two big arms came around her from behind.

"No!" she yelled. "Shamon, let me go! Misha's in danger! *Misha!*"

"Gabie, stop!" His voice was loud in her ear as he tried to hold her. "Misha is safe. *Gabie*. Misha is safe!" He swung her around. "See?"

It was true. Panting, Gabie saw Misha and Emet standing with Paz and in front of them stood four security guards. Beside them stood Uleah. Misha had one arm around Paz's shoulders and the other hand she had on Emet's arm.

Misha managed a weak grin at Gabie and an even weaker wave.

Relieved, Gabie slumped back into Shamon's hold. His hold gentled and he breathed softly into her ear, "'Tis all right, sweet lass. 'Tis all right."

Remembering the fur-trimmed man, she started to stiffen, only to see him being escorted from the hall by two security guards. At least for this minute, Misha was safe. And Shamon.

She started to look up at him, only to be diverted by Meekta stalking around to face her. Fury emanated from every part of his body, but his voice held icy control. "You will be escorted to the interview room, and you better have a damned good explanation."

He stalked from the room, Uleah by his side.

Sabra appeared beside her. "Come on." Oddly, she didn't look unhappy. Her face might have been calm and cool as always, but there was a sparkle in those cobalt eyes, and a spring in her step as she looked towards Emet and Misha.

"I'm coming with Gabie," Shamon told her.

"Fine. Let's go."

Shamon put Gabie down but retained a hold on her hand. Her very sticky hand. As she followed meekly beside him, she was more than aware of the number of angry faces glaring at her. Probably because many of them wore their meal on their clothes and in their hair. Well, she did, too, but they didn't find her complaining, did they? Sheepishly she avoided their gazes. When in doubt or guilty, deny everything and look at nobody.

Her fingers curled tightly around Shamon's and he gave her hand an encouraging squeeze.

As they stepped out into the corridor, she looked up at him. He towered above her head, shoulders and a bit of chest. "Are you mad at me?"

He actually turned his head and looked down at her in amazement. "What?"

"You know. Are you mad?"

"Wench, I'm furious, but let's not discuss that right now."

"Good plan." If he was furious, waiting was good. Maybe his temper would blow over. She hoped.

It was a comfort to know that even though he was mad—furious—he still sought to comfort her, his bigger body sheltering her from angry and curious looks, her hand almost tenderly held in his.

He was like a big, angry, teddy bear. She decided to cling to that comparison because any other thought was frankly a little daunting. It was daunting enough that she and her friends were in deep shit with just about every law officer on board the ship, not to mention the highest planet leader.

It seemed like the longest walk but the shortest time before they were standing in the interview room, lined up like criminals in front of the table behind which Meekta had sat. Uleah stood to one side, while Shamon leaned against a nearby wall, having had to relinquish her hand.

Gabie cleared her throat. “Sorry about that little scuffle.”

If looks could kill, she’d be dead as a door nail on the floor right then and there. Meekta was not impressed.

“You seem to have a lot to say, so you can go first.” He pointed at Gabie.

“Uh... well, Misha went to help a man in distress and when I saw she was in trouble, I went to help her.”

“I’m informed that she was not in trouble when you ran after her.”

“It’s psychic. I just knew. And I was right.” She wished he’d stop glaring at her out of those eyes. It gave her the creeps, and she shoved her hands in her pockets to hide their trembling.

“What about you?” He looked at Paz.

“I went to help,” Paz croaked, looking like he might faint any second.

Olin shrugged. “What he said.”

Meekta looked at Misha. “You started it.”

“Uh... er...” She shuffled her feet. “I saw this man being attacked by that other man with that ridiculous furry-trimmed robe on and went to help.”

“You went to help an identified murderer.”

Her eyes flashed. “He’s not a murderer!”

Meekta's eyes cut to Emet. "You are Emet, claimed by Shona, wife of Mellar, a planet leader. You are accused of her murder."

Gabie's eyes widened. *Shona was the wife of a planet leader? Oh man, they were so dead! Who was going to believe their word over a planet leader, for God's sake?*

The noose was tightening around her neck. She could just about feel it.

"You told me Mellar was a settlement leader!" She hissed at Misha.

"Oh, like I know everyone? I wasn't far wrong anyway."

"There's a huge step between *settlement* leader and *planet* leader!"

Shamon didn't look too happy, either. He straightened from his leaning position against the wall.

"May I speak?" Sabra stepped forward.

Meekta sat back, glowering at Gabie and her crew.

"Of course, Sabra," Uleah said. "If you can help sort out this mess—"

"Sabra?" Emet looked up hopefully. "You're Sabra?"

Slowly Sabra walked up to him, her gaze drifting over his face as though memorizing him. Gabie felt Misha stiffen beside her.

"Aye," Sabra said finally. "I'm Sabra. You were Shona of Brcyton's loyal servant."

"Yes." He reached eagerly inside his shirt, only to stop when several security guards stepped forward. "I have something for you."

He did? Gabie leaned forward to gaze past Misha and Olin at Emet.

"Really." Sabra's gaze dropped to his hand. "What is it?"

"A disc. Shona asked me to see that you got this disc." He pulled the tiny pouch from his shirt, lifted the thong over his head and dropped it into Sabra's outstretched palm.

"And what does it contain?"

“I’m not sure. Information on Mellar, I think.”

“Have a care what you say,” Meekta said quietly. “Mellar is a respected member of the IPS Council.”

Well, didn’t this just get better and better? Gabie groaned mentally.

Emet looked at him. “Mellar is a cruel man. He deals in slavery and I know Shona hated it.”

Whoa. Gabie blinked and exchanged glances with Misha. *Slavery?*

Sabra’s eyes gleamed. “And you believe this disc contains information of that slavery?”

“I think so.”

“Why didn’t you contact me through the IPS?”

“Shona died from yet another beating at Mellar’s hands.” Emet shook his head. “With her dying breath she bade me to give this to you, and I had to steal away into the night. I didn’t know how to find you without revealing myself to the law and being reported to Mellar first. As a claimed, branded outlaw, he would have known of my whereabouts first. I had to find a way to contact you somehow without tipping anyone else off.”

“Yet you came to be on this ship. How did you know I’d be here?”

“I was captured by space pirates, but when they heard that Rose was pregnant, they released us.”

“Rose, huh? Your pregnant sister?” Sabra cut a glance at Gabie.

Oops. Gabie shrugged and gave a half smile. *Ah, hell.*

Emet nodded and continued, “But I recognized the pirates as having ties with Sonja, who is married to Red of the Daamens. I knew she might know where you were. She’d heard you were on your way to the IPS, so the pirates...” He coloured. “They gave me a wig, an identi-disc the big blonde had stolen from some server she’d slept with recently, and put me on a planet shuttle bound for here. I came as a worker.”

“Really.” Her nostrils flared a little. “I’ll be wanting that identi-disc. And Freeman?”

“Yes?”

“That identi-disc was never reported as having been stolen. Strike that name off our workers’ list. That dumb bastard ever sets foot on this ship again and I’ll personally tear his lungs out.”

“Consider it done.”

Sabra looked at Emet again. “You took a risk coming here.”

“I took the risk for my family. I had to see you, Sabra. I had to deliver this message from Shona. This was my only chance and I took it.”

“I knew Shona. She’d contacted me with her fears, but we had to proceed with caution as she didn’t have proof. Now...” Turning, Sabra crossed to the desk where Meekta was sitting and spoke quietly to him. He nodded and she slid the disc into a raised slot in the desk. The slot slid down, taking the disc with it. The screen in the far wall flared to life.

“You wanted to see Sabra?” Gabie hissed at Emet. “Damn it, we could have gotten the message through to her directly! She had our arses in a sling this whole bloody time!”

“What?”

“You dick!”

“I didn’t know!”

“Give him a break,” Misha said. “We hid him. How could he possibly know?”

Gabie threw her hands up in the air and faced front again, only to find Uleah watching her in amusement.

Yep, they were just great at relieving stress for people.

Shamon was looking a little stunned himself. Well, at least she had company.

Shona’s face came on the disc and she looked tired. “Sabra, I have finally got proof that Mellar has been breeding slaves in a small gulley four hundred miles from here. He keeps them under guard and they can’t leave the settlement. Emet,

the man who is bringing you this, is my most trusted servant. He comes from this settlement and his family are there. He saw the settlement himself when he passed over it on an errand for me, and he recognized the place from his childhood. His sister, Rose, was from there as well but she has disappeared and I fear that Mellar has taken her for slavery.”

Shona’s face disappeared and a map appeared on the screen.

“The valley is here. Approach with care because there are armed guards everywhere. The people are fetching high prices in a small settlement in the Outlaw Sector. The settlement is far inland and is populated by high ranking outlaws. The people are prized for their black hair and pale skins that won’t tan no matter how long they’re in the sun. It’s a genetic fault that Mellar has been perfecting with selective breeding.”

The map disappeared and a list appeared.

“On the right are the listings of all the people Mellar has sold, and on the left are the names of the outlaws who bought them. Mellar himself signed the document with his special seal, and you’ll find his prints on them. He was too arrogant to think I’d find it. He is in partnership with his cousin, Drasen, who handles the slave trades personally. Drasen calls himself Raznin when he’s doing business.”

Raznin? Gabie’s mouth dropped open. *That bastard Raznin was Mellar’s cousin? Cripes!*

Sabra looked satisfied. Very satisfied.

“In case there’s any doubt, here are image photos taken showing Mellar with Drasen during the rounding up of slaves. The man who took these disappeared. I don’t know what happened to him, but I have no doubt he was discovered and is dead. I don’t know if Mellar suspects me or not, but so far he’s just his normal mean self. If you get this from Emet, I’m probably dead, because otherwise I’d have brought this to you personally.”

Shona stopped talking and photo images flashed onto the screen. Mellar and Raznin—truthfully named Drasen—were pictured in each of them with thin, hungry looking people, their big eyes shadowed. The photos had been taken as things happened, so there was no doubting who was putting shackles on people, who Mellar was kicking, the paper he handed Drasen. More image photos, each more damning than the last.

The screen went blank.

Sabra looked at Meekta. “According to the people we rescued, which, by the way, was a huge shipment because Drasen had a fair number onboard already, Mellar had rounded up every last person in the valley. He split his load between several ships for safety in case of attack by space pirates or the law, and then he met the different ships near the Outlaw Sector and gathered the whole lot of his slaves together for the final transportation into the Outlaw Sector. This was to be his final load. He suspected things were getting dangerous and obviously wanted to close operations. We were lucky to find those people before they were sold. But we’ll still do a thorough search of that valley and we’ll round up those men who worked for Mellar. They won’t be hard to identify with help from the people they kept imprisoned. “

“Well,” Meekta finally said. “Do your worse, Sabra. Any man who is on the Council and does this brings shame to us all.” Fury burned in his eyes and he sucked in a deep breath. “I know you suspected Raznin—Drasen—of having a hand in this, and now you have all the proof you need. Neither of them will ever see the light of day again. In fact Cardrak, the prison planet, will be their next and last stop.

“They do have to stand trial,” Freeman said mildly.

“Have no doubt, the Council will ensure they get what they deserve.” Meekta stood up. “I shall contact the leaders immediately and have them arrive as soon as they can. Meanwhile, keep those two... men... locked up tight.”

“Four, actually,” Freeman informed him. “Mellar’s sidekick, Cheran, was caught trying to sneak away, and Tason, who works for Drasen, is keeping him company down in the cells.”

“Good. I want those people found and returned, as many as can be. I realize that some will never be found, but those that can, find them.” Meekta left the room.

The whole mess was a nightmare. But there was one thing that stood out with glaring brilliance.

“You knew,” Gabie accused Sabra. “You know that Raznin was Drasen.”

“I suspected.”

“Why the hell didn’t you just pick him up? Why make us do that whole mockery of a slave run?” Man, she was so angry she wanted to kick something.

Preferably Sabra, but she was scared the security officer would kick back.

“The run wasn’t a mockery, but was to ensure that Raznin and Tason were definitely who we suspected.” Sabra pulled the disc from the slot in the desk. “You were the only one with a direct link, but we couldn’t use your word against Drasen’s in a court. It wouldn’t hold water. So we needed to witness a direct transaction. You gave us that.”

“I don’t believe this.”

Sabra gave her a genuine smile. “You did a lot of people a big favour.”

“My heart beats with gratitude.” Gabie pointed at Emet. “I can’t believe we could have avoided all this if we’d only known that he carried the disc to give to you. *Cripes!*”

“Well you just think about that next time you knowingly aid and abet a known, wanted criminal. Michel will be tickled pink when I tell him.” Sabra looked at Emet. “You’re free, but you’re still in custody here as a prime witness until the trial.”

Misha looked exceedingly happy.

“Tell me where Rose is and I’ll send someone to pick her up,” Sabra continued. “She will also be held in protective custody here until after the trial.”

Emet looked like someone had just given him a palace, he was beaming so much.

Gabie couldn’t help but grin. Well, things hadn’t turned out so bad, had they? Nope, things had turned out just right and—

A big hand curled around her wrist. “I want to talk to you.”

Oops. Gabie looked up at Shamon. “I don’t know. Are you still mad?”

“What if I am?”

“You can’t touch me. I’m in protective custody.”

He looked down at her. “I saw what you did, Gabie.”

“Hey, I think most people did.” She gestured at her food-stained clothes. “We were all wearing some dinner by the end of that fiasco.”

“I mean chasing that bastard when he was wielding a carving knife.”

“Oh. Well, like I said, he was after Emet, and Misha was rushing to Emet’s aid, and Misha’s my best friend, so what could I do but enter the fray with her?”

“My best friend,” Misha said cheerfully. “All three of you.”

“We did come to your rescue,” Paz said, trying to push out his skinny chest.

“I saw that, never fear.” Shamon closed his eyes briefly. “I saw you go down in piles of bodies, I saw you leap onto tables, I saw you shove Meekta into a plate of stew—”

“What? I did?” Gabie’s eyes rounded. “Wow. No wonder he was pissed off.”

Shamon opened his eyes. “What I want to know is why you threw yourself on top of Mellar when you saw him coming towards me. I could have stopped him. I was going to stop him until you let loose with that God awful yell and ploughed down on top of him. Again.”

“Oh.” She grinned and swayed close, looking up at him. “You see, I jumped him before because I love Misha as one of my best friends. One, because Paz and Olin are also my best friends.”

“Aye. But they were out of range by then.”

Gabie slid her hand up his chest and smiled up at him. “Well, I jumped him the second time because I love you.”

He looked stunned. “’Tis a reason?”

“Of course. You see, I still couldn’t decide if I loved you or not until I saw him running towards you with that bloody big carving knife, and I thought of you getting stabbed, and then, well, then I knew.”

“You knew you loved me only when you saw that carving knife?”

“I knew when the thought of you getting hurt or killed just tore me up. I can’t live without you, and that’s the real sign of love.”

He stared at her for several seconds.

“Are you still mad?” She smiled hopefully up at him.

Shamon looked up at Uleah. “I’m taking her back to my room.”

“Sure.” Uleah didn’t look too concerned.

“You know,” Gabie said as, her hand in his, she trotted along beside him, trying to keep pace with his long stride. “I’m a little disappointed that you’re not happy about my declaration.”

“Oh, I’m happy.”

“You don’t look it.”

“I want some privacy right now before we go any further with this.”

“Oh. Okay. You’re not going to start yelling, are you?”

His look was anything but angry. Hoo boy, the heat in his eyes was... hot.

“Oh!” Gabie smiled widely as understanding clicked in suddenly. “Shall we have a race for the bed?”

Shamon’s answer was to scoop her up in his arms and ignore everyone who looked at them in startled amusement, or in the case of some, annoyed recognition of Gabie.

She didn’t give a vagrat’s arse, because really, who would be game to rant at her when she was in the protective custody of this big giant?

Snuggling close, she kissed his neck.

That certainly made Shamon speed up. He swung around a corner, strode down a quiet corridor and almost kicked open the door at the end. He’d no sooner carried her inside than he kicked the door shut with his heel on the way through.

The man was definitely multi-skilled.

She expected him to throw her on the bed. Instead, he placed her on a stool which brought her on face level. She still had her arms around his neck.

Placing his hands at her waist, Shamon kissed her with restrained passion, but when she sought to break that restraint he lifted his mouth from hers.

“Shamon—”

“Nay. I have to say something first.”

“You’d be the only man in history who wants to talk first. I thought that was a woman’s domain?”

He gave that low, heat-inducing chuckle. “You make me laugh, Gabs.”

“I’ll remember that next time I make you mad. If I can get you to laugh, I’m home free.”

Shamon surveyed her seriously.

The smile slipped from Gabie’s face, and a little flicker of uncertainty filled her. “Shamon?”

He looked her directly into her eyes. “Gabie, when I saw you tackling that bastard with that knife in his hands, your fearlessness took my breath away.”

“Trust me, I was scared.”

“Aye, but you did it for Misha. For me. You say you’re scared, but you’ll fight for those you love.”

“Yeah, well...” She shifted a little.

“But I nearly died when I saw you within inches of that carving knife. Gabie, I love you. Promise me you’ll never do such a dangerous thing again.”

“Well, I can tell you what you want to hear, or I can tell you what I’ll do.”

He arched one brow.

“I promise to try and find another way.”

“Oh, God.”

“Come on,” she said. “How much trouble could I get into, stashed safely away on Daamen and only let off the planet in responsible company?”

“’Tis true.” He looked thoughtful. “But when I think of the lasses you’ll meet. Sonja, Oriel... Dana.” He gave a fake shudder. “I start to worry.”

“Everyone loves me.” She grinned.

“I’ve no doubt you’ll provide them with endless entertainment. ’Tis what you’ll teach them and vice versa that I’m worried about.”

“I’ll try to be good.” Leaning forward, she pressed a light kiss to his jaw. “I love you, Shamon. I’ll try not to embarrass you, I’ll try to be good, and I’ll try to be a proper wife.”

“Gabs, I just want you to be yourself. I love every delightful bit of you. I just want you to be a little more careful, ’tis all. I couldn’t bare to see you hurt.”

“Same here.” She nibbled her way to the corner of his mouth.

His kiss was long and drugging, and when he finally lifted his head, she groaned.

“Oh cripes, Shamon, don’t start this kissing me and stopping and starting and stuff! It drives me nuts! How about we just get naked right now?”

He couldn’t help but laugh. Merriment shone in his eyes, but so too did love. It melted her heart and she leaned against him, enjoying his strength, his protectiveness, and his unconditional love.

“Oh all right,” she said, her heart swelling with more emotion than she had ever dreamed possible. “If you want to tease me, I’ll let you just this once. Because I love you and everything. I’m all yours.”

“And ’tis all I need and want.” Shamon hugged her close. “You. Forever. In my life.”

“Aw, honey!”

Meet
Angela Verdenius

Born in Victoria, Australia, my childhood was spent in a variety of places, both in towns and the outback. Now settled in Western Australia, I work as a nurse. A love of animals has me involved in animal welfare, and certainly explains why the cats hog my bed and hot water bottle!

Reading has always been my escape, writing my dream. Horror, myths, legends, fantasy and history – there are no limits to the wonders to be found. And romance? Well, that adds the spice, hope and happiness ever after.

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