



**Valuable Cargo**

Paige Tyler

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## **Blurb**

Tanna Aldrick is the captain of a deep space salvage ship in the twenty-ninth century. When she and her all-female crew stumble upon an ancient ship floating in the middle of nowhere, they figure they might be able to find a few valuable tidbits left on the decrepit spacecraft. But what they discover is more valuable than anything they could have ever imagined finding—a gorgeous hunk of a man from the twenty-second century, perfectly preserved in cryogenic suspension. Mankind has changed a lot in seven-hundred years, and six-foot-four, blond-haired, blue-eyed guys like him aren't just rare; they're nonexistent.

From the moment they revive him, Tanna finds herself falling for their handsome passenger. As logical as her reasons for not getting romantically involved with him are, however, she still finds herself inviting him into her bed.

Garrick Carlisle wakes up after seven-hundred years in hypersleep to find that everything and everyone he knew is gone. Lost and disconnected, the only thing that keeps him from completely losing it is the beautiful and sexy, dark-haired ship's captain who rescued him.

Tanna isn't the only person interested in Garrick, though. A man like him would bring a high price on the slave blocks on any number of planets and there are a lot of unscrupulous people in the galaxy willing to do anything to get their hands on him.

How far will Tanna go to protect her valuable cargo and what will Garrick do to stay with the woman he has come to love?

## Chapter One

### Year 2850, An'Ailorous System, Approximately 35,000 Light Years from Earth

From her position on the bridge, Captain Tanna Aldrick stared out at the derelict ship drifting in space. Small and not exactly what one would describe as sleek, it was like nothing she had ever seen before. She frowned as her pilot ran a scan against the computer's database.

"Anything?" she asked, glancing down at the dark-haired woman seated at the console.

Ena Daas shook her head. "Nothing, Captain. It doesn't match anything we have in our database and the markings are too worn to help us. But it definitely looks old. Five or six hundred years at least."

Standing beside Tanna, her first officer, Malana Randrick, let out a snort of disgust. "Which means it's probably already been stripped and gone over half a dozen times."

Tanna nodded in agreement. Even if they cleaned all the cargo out years ago, there could still be some valuable parts they could salvage, though.

"I know it's silly to even ask, but are there any life signs aboard?" she asked Ena.

Since there weren't any other spacecrafts in the immediate area, Tanna didn't think there would be anyone on board, but it was standard salvage protocol to confirm a ship was completely abandoned before taking possession of it.

From her chair behind the console, Ena pushed a few buttons, then waited for a read-out before giving Tanna a shake of her head. "Inconclusive, Captain. The sensors are picking up something faint, but there's no way to tell what it is. It could just be a thermal battery still giving off power or a glitch in one of the computer systems."

"Could we just bring it on board?" Malana suggested. "It's small enough to fit in the bay."

Tanna considered that. "I don't want to bring it on board until we know for sure what's on there. It could have hazardous cargo."

"I'll take a team and go check it out then," Malana said.

Tanna shook her head. "You went last time. I'll go. Have Vi and Leala meet me in the airlock."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and left the bridge, ducking her head under the low-hanging doorway as she did so. Once in the passageway, she headed in the direction of the airlock, her lug-soled boots clanking rhythmically on the metal floor.

Tanna had owned the salvage ship for the past five years and loved every minute of it. Not only was the business profitable, but the crew was the best any small-ship captain could want. Ena, Vi, and Leala had been with her from the beginning. The others, like Malana, had signed on over the years. But whether the women had been on board for a week or five years, she considered them all family. Work on a salvage ship was hard and dangerous, and most ships had high turnover rates when it came to the crews. However, hers was the lowest for any salvage ship she knew of, mainly because she genuinely cared about her people, and they knew it. Sure, the girls complained sometimes, but they all worked hard and none of them ever caused her any trouble.

When Tanna got to the airlock, she found Vi Newl and Leala Wester waiting for her. The women, tall, slender, and dark-haired like her, were already putting on their envirosuits and life-support packs. Five years ago, Vi and Leala had been working on a merchant ship for a captain neither were too crazy about when they had heard Tanna was looking to put together a salvage crew. Tanna liked both girls right away and had immediately hired them. A couple of years younger than Tanna, they treated her more like their big sister instead of their captain, but she didn't mind. She thought of them as sisters, too.

Securing her long, straight dark hair back in a low ponytail, Tanna reached for her own suit, pulling it on over her snug-fitting breeches and curve-hugging tee before zipping it up. Picking up her life-support pack, or LSP as they all called it, she shrugged it onto her shoulders. The LSP provided air and kept her warm, as well as allowed her to maneuver in the weightlessness of space.

Grabbing her helmet, she looked at the other two women before putting it on. "Let's be careful over there," she advised. "It's an old ship and there might be some stuff on it that we're not used to seeing. So keep an eye on each other."

Though Vi and Leala had taken part in hundreds of initial entries over the years, Tanna knew from their nods that they had taken her words to heart. While lucrative, salvage work could also be deadly, and she took pride in the fact that there had never been a fatal incident under her command.

Opening the airlock, they moved slowly across the space between their ship and the derelict craft. Even clipped together and tethered to the salvage ship, Tanna still got that same little queasy feeling in her stomach she always did. Some irrational part of her couldn't help but think about what would happen if the tether lines broke and they tumbled off into space. Of course, the tether lines weren't going to break, and even if they did, Malana would just send a shuttle to come get her and the other two women.

Even so, her paranoia didn't stop there. As they continued to move toward the other ship, Tanna had to fight the urge to constantly keep checking her suit for tears. Every time the cold material touched her skin, she panicked for a moment, thinking she had missed a tiny hole that was even now releasing all of the warmth and pressure in her suit out into space. Which was silly, of course. The crew always inspected the suits multiple times after each use, and there was no chance the reinforced material could suddenly tear. That knowledge didn't keep her from shivering inside her suit anyway, however. She always kept her fears to herself, though. She was the captain and her crew expected a certain level of bravado from her, after all. Of course, it didn't help that Vi and Leala thought floating in space was the greatest thing in the world. Unlike her, they were completely comfortable with being out here.

Maneuvering by releasing little shots of pressurized air, Tanna crossed the distance between the two ships as quickly as she could. Once she and the other girls had reached the derelict craft, they immediately began looking for a way to get on board. While it didn't take them long to find the door to the airlock, the thing was so ancient that they couldn't get a computer signal through to the locking mechanism. After several attempts, Tanna finally decided Leala should simply cut a hole in the hull on one side of the door and open it manually by applying power from her LSP to the door actuator circuit. As Tanna had suspected, it was completely dark inside the ship, and she and the other women automatically turned on their envirosuit lights so they could see. As their beams

played around, she saw they were in the cargo hold of the ship.

To her surprise, the derelict ship hadn't been stripped at all. There were two old looking satellites in the hold, as well as dozens of containers. They were all marked with a series of numbers and letters that didn't mean anything to her, so there was no way to tell what was in them.

Taking out her radiac, Tanna scanned the hold for radiation. If there had been anything really dangerous, the sensors on her ship would have picked it up, but she wanted to be sure. There was a little bit of reading around the satellites, but nothing significant. The containers were completely safe.

"This looks like old test equipment of some type," Vi said from behind her.

Tanna turned to see that Vi had opened one of the containers and was looking at a collection of metal instruments. Tanna didn't have a clue what any of it was, but it was ancient, which meant it was going to be worth some money.

Curious, Tanna made her way over to the box Vi had opened while the other girl and Leala went off to explore the control room. She had barely started investigating when Leala's voice came through the speaker in her headset.

"Um, Captain, I think you should see this."

Her brow furrowing at the odd tone in her engineer's voice, Tanna immediately set down the piece of equipment she'd been holding and headed for the control room. Seeing Vi standing just inside a doorway on the opposite side of the room, she quickly made her way over to the woman.

Letting the light from her torch play about the inner room, Tanna saw that it was a joint galley and med-bay.

"What did you find?" she asked as she stepped into the room. "Something valuable?"

Leala was standing in front of a glass-enclosed container of some sort. From her vantage point, Tanna couldn't see what was inside it, but there was a series of brightly colored blinking lights at the bottom of the unit.

The engineer turned to her with a smile. "Oh, yeah."

Frowning at the woman's cryptic answer, Tanna walked over to where her engineer stood, only to stare at the pod in stunned silence. Leala had wiped off the light coating of frost from the upper portion of the pod, and through the glass, Tanna saw that there was a man inside. A completely gorgeous—and from the parts she could see—very well built man who, shockingly, appeared to be in perfect health. The pod container must be some type of hypersleep chamber, she thought. She had heard of those, but no one had used them in over five-hundred years, not since the invention of the faster-than-light Tachyon drive. That meant the ship was even older than they had thought, back from the days of sub-light space travel.

The fact that the man was still alive after so long wasn't the only thing that made him unusual. Not only was he all beautifully sculpted muscle, but he was also unusually tall as well. The hypersleep chamber was at least seven feet long and the guy did a pretty good job of filling it up. That meant he was at least six-four or six-five. At five-ten, Tanna was as tall as any man she'd ever met, and taller than some, but this guy would clearly tower over her. She let her gaze run over his broad shoulders and muscular chest appreciatively. Damn, the guy was built. The hypersleep chamber must be equipped with some type of electro-stimulation to keep him in such great shape for so long.

Her gaze went to his face. His body distracted her so much that she hadn't really

spent much time looking at his face, but as she took in his square jaw and chiseled features, she decided he had to be the most attractive man she'd ever seen. She stared at his dark-blond hair, fascinated by the color. She hadn't seen that many people with blond hair in her life. And most of the people she had seen had artificially colored it. She had no doubt his was the real deal. All at once, she found herself wondering what color his eyes were. They had to be blue, she thought. That would match his hair perfectly.

Glancing at the other two women, Tanna saw he equally entranced them, and she watched breathlessly as Vi began to wipe more frost off the front of the glass to reveal a washboard stomach and lean hips.

"Vi, that's enough," Tanna ordered abruptly, pushing the other woman's hand away when she started to move lower.

Vi frowned. "I just wanted to see if he's built like that everywhere."

Tanna wouldn't have minded seeing more of him herself, especially since the only men she had seen naked in a while had been the computer-generated ones conjured up in the holo-chamber on their ship. And they definitely hadn't looked anything like him. But ogling a man while he was in a hypersleep pod just seemed wrong.

"Try to control yourself." She glanced at Leala. "Do you think he can be revived?"

Leala chewed on her lip as she eyed the equipment. After a moment, she shrugged. "The chamber's really old, but everything seems to be functioning properly. Sela would probably know more, though."

Sela Fanaday was the salvage ship's resident bio-system engineer, but she also served as their med-tech when they needed one.

Tanna turned her gaze back to the handsome man asleep inside the pod. "Is this ship safe enough to bring on board?" she asked Leala.

The girl shrugged. "I don't see why not, Captain. The sensors didn't pick up any hazardous cargo and I haven't seen anything dangerous. There's isn't even any fuel left."

Still gazing at the man, Tanna flipped over to the ship's frequency on her radio and spoke into the headset. "Malana, we're bringing the ship aboard."

"Did you find anything valuable?" the first officer asked.

Tanna only smiled. Oh yeah, they had definitely found something valuable.

\* \* \* \*

Dear God, he was absolutely perfect, Tanna thought as she gazed down at the sleeping man an hour later. The blanket that Sela had carefully tucked around him left his chest and shoulders exposed to her appreciative gaze, and she had to fight off the almost irresistible urge to reach out and run her hands over his smoothly sculpted muscles. How many hours a day would a guy have to work out to look like this?

After bringing his ship aboard, they had transferred his hypersleep chamber to their own med-bay so Sela could examine him, which the woman had done once she had gotten over her shock at seeing their cargo. Since no one used stasis chambers like his anymore, Sela had to do some research in the computer archives to figure out how to revive him. Following the procedure, she had found on the computer, Sela had slowly brought him out of hypersleep. Tanna had expected him to come awake right away, but the other girl told her that wasn't how it worked. It could take hours for him to wake up. According to the med-tech, though, his vitals were strong, which was a good sign. That didn't stop Tanna from worrying, though.

Getting her crew to focus on anything but the man laying in the med-bay had been almost impossible since then. Especially after Sela had hurried to the shuttle bay and briefed everyone in great detail about her patient and those parts of his anatomy they hadn't seen yet. Her description had brought the rest of the crew running to the med-bay so they could look for themselves. Sela was just about to pull the blanket down for a little show-and-tell when Tanna finally pulled rank and tossed the other women out of the med-bay, sending them back down to the shuttle bay to take a closer look at his ship and the salvage it contained. Anything to distract them.

A few minutes ago, Malana had called on the ship's intercom to let her know they had located the class and ident-number of his ship. According to the database, it had disappeared in the year 2104. Other than that, the computer didn't know a lot about it. Or him. Malana had found some uniforms in a storage locker, though, with the name *Carlisle* on them. There was a shoulder patch of a flag with red and white stripes and stars in the corner on one sleeve. There was another patch underneath that, this one with the letters ISEA. A search of that acronym had turned up the name International Space Exploration Administration, an Earth-based government agency that had conducted space research in the early part of the twenty-second century. Tanna shook her head. Well, whoever he was, he was going to be in for one hell of a shock when he woke up. *If he woke up.*

Tanna was just wondering if she should call Sela so the other girl could check on him again, when the man's eyelids suddenly fluttered open and she found herself gazing into the most incredible pair of blue eyes she had ever seen. She'd been right about the color, she realized a little breathlessly. And they did go perfectly with his blond hair.

He gazed up at her for a moment, and then glanced around the med-bay, confusion on his handsome face. "Where am I?" he asked slowly.

*Damn, even his voice was sexy as sin.* Which was surprising, considering he had just spent the last seven-hundred years in hypersleep. She would have thought it'd be more dry and raspy after so long. Apparently, Sela was damn good at her job. There should probably be a bonus in this for her.

"You're on a salvage ship," Tanna told him.

His brow furrowed and he looked around again. "A salvage ship? Not Space Station Eight? How did I get here?"

"We came across your ship drifting in space. You were in hypersleep," she explained. She didn't want to mention he had missed his space station by a couple hundred years. "Can you tell me your name?"

His frown deepened as if wondering why she was asking such an odd question. "Garrick Carlisle."

Tanna released the breath she'd been holding. *At least he knew his name. That was good.* Sela had said he might have trouble remembering simple things, like who he was and where he was from since he'd been in hypersleep for so long, but fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

Tanna chewed on her lower lip as she wondered what to say. She tried to imagine herself in his position and finding out that she had just spent the last seven-hundred years in hypersleep. No matter what she said, it was going to freak him out.

"A long time," she finally said.



His blue eyes narrowed. "How long is a long time?"

She hesitated again. She really didn't know what to say. But she didn't want to lie to him. Besides, he was going to find out at some point. "Over seven-hundred years."

His eyes went wide. "Seven-hundred years? But that would mean it's..."

"The year 2850," she said quietly. "Yes."

He shook his head from side to side on the pillow. Behind him, the computer sensors beeped in warning as his heart rate increased. "That's not possible. There's no way I could have been in hypersleep for seven-hundred years."

She took a step closer to the bed. "I know this must be shocking for you."

"That's putting it mildly," he muttered. "I put myself in stasis expecting to wake up two years later, and wake up seven-hundred-years later instead. Shocking doesn't even begin to scratch the surface."

Tanna's heart ached for him. She couldn't begin to imagine what he must be feeling. To wake up seven hundred years in the future and realize that everything he knew, everyone he cared about was gone...

She swallowed hard. "Why did you put yourself in hypersleep? Was your ship damaged?"

He shook his head in confusion. "No, of course not. It's the standard way to make a long distance trip. I put myself in stasis a few days after leaving Mars Base."

She had heard of the planet, of course, but she didn't recognize the name of the base. Then again, seven-hundred years ago, a base on Mars would have been a big deal. "You said Space Station Eight. Is that where you were headed?"

He nodded. "I was going there to serve a tour as station commander and bring supplies." He pushed himself upright. "I need to go take a look at my shuttle. I've got to find out what happened."

Tanna put a gentle, but firm hand on his bare chest. Beneath her fingers, his skin was warm and solid, and she felt the play of muscles beneath it as he moved. The contact made her pulse quicken. "What you need to do right now is stay in bed and rest."

Blue eyes lifted to meet her gaze. "I've been in hypersleep for seven-hundred years. The last thing I need is more rest."

"Well, according to my med-tech you do," she said. "If you push yourself too hard right away, you might hurt yourself. Now, lay back down."

For a moment, Tanna thought he would argue, but to her relief, he only let out a sigh and lay back on the bed. Reluctantly taking her hand off his chest, she reached down to press the button on the personal communicator attached to her belt.

"Sela, I need you in the med-bay. Now."

"Roger that, Captain."

Garrick's brow furrowed as he gazed up at her. "You're the captain of this ship?"

"Yes." She offered him a small smile. "I probably should have introduced myself before. I'm Tanna Aldrick."

He opened his mouth to say something in reply, but what it was Tanna didn't know because just then, Sela hurried into the med-bay.

"What...?" The med-tech stopped in her tracks to stare at Garrick. "You're awake." She glanced at Tanna. "He's awake."

Tanna couldn't help but smile. "And determined to get out of bed. Which is why I asked you to come to the med-bay." She turned her gaze back to the handsome blond

man. "Garrick, this is Sela, our medical technician."

Garrick Carlisle was even more mesmerizing now than he was when he had been sleeping, and Tanna noticed it was all Sela could do just to keep her mind on what she was doing as she checked him out. As the med-tech ran the hand-held sensor over him, Tanna automatically found herself moving closer to the bed for some reason. She couldn't explain why; she just felt protective of him.

"Everything looks good," Sela said, turning off the sensor and setting it down on the counter. She gave him a smile. "Actually, for a guy who's over seven-hundred-years old, you're in damn great shape."

If Garrick noticed the double meaning of the words, he gave no indication. "So, does that mean I can go take a look at my shuttle now?"

"No way. You still need to rest," Tanna said, then glanced at Sela. "Tell him that he needs to rest."

Sela's mouth curved into an amused smile. Probably because she was thinking Tanna was such a lousy patient herself.

"The captain's right," the other girl said to Garrick. "You've been in hypersleep for a long time and you need to let your body get used to functioning again. Besides, your shuttle isn't going anywhere."

Garrick didn't look pleased to hear the med-tech back her up, Tanna noticed, but he didn't argue.

"I'll be back to check on you later," Sela said to Garrick.

"Thanks, Sela," Tanna said as the other girl turned to go, then added, "Oh, and tell the rest of the crew that I don't want Garrick disturbed." Once they found out he was awake, the women would be right back in the med-bay, gawking at him like a bunch of teenage girls.

The med-tech nodded. "Will do, Captain."

Tanna looked down at Garrick. "I should be going, too. Can I trust you to stay in bed?"

The corner of his sensuous mouth edged up. "Yes Ma'am, Captain Ma'am."

If any other man had said that to her, Tanna probably would have been insulted, but for some reason, she found herself smiling. "Okay. Then I'll let you get some rest," she said. "I'll come by later."

Rather than turn and walk out of the med-bay right away, though, Tanna stood gazing down at him for a moment. His hair had fallen over his forehead and she had an almost uncontrollable urge to reach out and brush it back. Telling herself she needed to get out of there before she did something foolish and gave in to the impulse, she told him to have a good night and left the room.

Once outside, Tanna didn't head down the passageway immediately, however, but instead stopped to lean back against the wall. She didn't know how it was possible that no one else had ever come upon Garrick's ship in seven-hundred years, or even how a primitive ship like his had made it so far from Earth's Solar System.

She did know one thing, though. Adjusting to this new time was going to be damn hard on him. A lot had changed in seven-hundred years, and he was bound to feel lost and confused. He would need help acclimating and she decided right then that she was obligated to give it to him. *Obligated. Yeah right.* She didn't want to help him out of obligation; she wanted to help him because was the hottest damn guy she'd ever met.

\* \* \* \*

Garrick watched her go. He probably would do what he normally did around the opposite sex and turned on the charm for the beautiful Tanna Aldrick if he hadn't been so preoccupied by his present situation, but right then all he could think about was the fact that he had spent the past seven-hundred years of his life in hypersleep. To say that his life had completely changed was an understatement.

The shuttle's computer was supposed to have brought him out of hypersleep just as he was approaching Space Station Eight. Obviously, it hadn't. He supposed there could be a dozen different reasons why the automated mechanism had failed. However, the most likely one was that the shuttle's autopilot had malfunctioned on the way out to the station and sent him on the wrong trajectory. When the shuttle's computer had failed to pick up the space station's navigation signal, it would have redirected all power to the hypersleep chamber, striving to keep him alive until rescue came. It was disconcerting that the International Space Exploration Administration, the organization he worked for, had never found him. How could he have gotten that far off course? Trying to figure out what the hell had gone wrong would just be a waste of time now, of course, but he had to know anyway. He would check the shuttle's computer as soon as he had a chance. If it were intact, it would most likely tell him what had gone wrong.

His brow furrowed as an idea suddenly occurred to him. What was he going to do once he figured out what had happened? It wasn't as if he could report it to the ISEA. Hell, he didn't even know if the ISEA was still around. After seven-hundred years, it was probably gone. Just like everything else he'd ever known.

He swallowed hard as he thought of his family—his parents who had been so proud of him for his promotion to commander, and his younger sister who wanted to follow in his footsteps, and had been accepted into the space academy. He thought of his aunts, uncles, and cousins. All of them would have been devastated. His friends, too. When he disappeared, his ship would have been added to the long list of missing spacecrafts. There would have been a formal ceremony honoring him, but no one would have ever really known for certain what had happened to him. It was beyond painful imagining all the anguish his family and friends must have gone through. If he had just run one more diagnostic of the ship's computers before putting himself in hypersleep, then maybe... He shook his head. He had run half a dozen checks before he'd left Mars Base and everything had been in working order. Another diagnostic wouldn't have shown him anything different.

Garrick ran his hand through his hair. So, what did he do now? He had no money, nowhere to live, nothing but an old, decrepit shuttle. And if he were right about the ISEA being gone, then he had no job, either. He had nothing and no one. Except for the beautiful captain of the ship who had rescued him, he reminded himself. For some reason, that gave him a sort of consolation.

## Chapter Two

“I thought you were going to stay in bed and rest.”

Garrick paused in the middle of buttoning his shirt and turned to see Tanna Aldrick standing in the door of the med-bay, her hands on her hips, her dark eyes regarding him with a disapproving look. As the captain of a ship it was probably a stance she had used many times on her crew. And while it probably had the desired effect on them, for some reason, he couldn't help but find it damn sexy. The pose only drew attention to her delicious curves. And the pout of her lips, which meant to imply dissatisfaction, only made him wonder just how soft they would feel on his.

When he first opened his eyes to find Tanna bending over him last night, he was too disoriented to really look at her. He had realized she was attractive, of course, but as he took in her long, dark hair, high cheekbones and full lips, he saw how beautiful she really was. And now that he was getting a look at the rest of her body, he had to admit he liked what he saw.

“I did. All night,” he said. “Sela gave me the all-clear this morning.” He jerked his head in the med-tech's direction as he did up the rest of the buttons and tucked the shirt into his breeches. He had discovered the clothes sitting on the bottom of the bed when he'd woken up. Apparently, someone had found them on his shuttle.

Tanna turned her gaze on the dark-haired girl, who was standing by the counter typing something into the portable computer she was holding.

“I said he could get out of bed if he promised to take it easy,” Sela said, slanting him a pointed look.

“And I will,” he said, and then added, “Right after I take a look at my shuttle.”

Tanna folded her arms under her breasts—which, he couldn't help but notice, were small and perfectly rounded—and fixed him with the same disapproving look she had before. But rather than argue, she gave in, much to his surprise.

“Okay, I'll take you down to the hold to see your shuttle. On one condition.”

“What's that?” he asked warily, not sure what she had in mind.

“You agree to have breakfast with me first.”

Garrick felt the corner of his mouth edge up at the simple request. It hadn't been at all what he'd expected. But having breakfast with the beautiful salvage captain wasn't a compromise at all. He was certainly hungry and after centuries of living on the synthetic nutrients pumped into him by the hypersleep chamber, he could definitely use some real food.

“Deal,” he said, then flashed a grin. “I have to warn you, though. After seven-hundred years in hypersleep, I may have forgotten my table manners.”

Tanna laughed. “You're on a salvage ship. We're not exactly known for our table manners ourselves, so I'm sure you'll fit right in.” She glanced at the other girl. “I'll be in the mess if anyone needs me.”

Ducking his head under the low door, Garrick followed Tanna out of the room. He was going to have to be careful going in and out of the rooms on this ship or he'd end up with a concussion from banging his head. The passageways weren't small, so why were the doors so low? He wondered.

Garrick soon forgot about the size of the doors as they made their way down the passageway, though. He was starting to suspect the ship was bigger than he'd first thought it was. When Tanna had told him that he was on a salvage ship, he had naturally expected a space-faring version of a tugboat, but he now realized his analogy hadn't been a very good one. This thing was damn big.

"I'm not sure how it works with a salvage ship," he said, glancing at Tanna. "Do you own it or just captain it for someone else?"

She smiled. "He's all mine."

Garrick couldn't help but be a little amused by hearing her refer to the ship in the masculine form. He'd always thought of his ship as a "she." Apparently, things had changed in the last seven-hundred years.

"Have you owned him for a while?" he asked.

"*Andrusis*? Five years."

He blinked. "Seriously?"

She lifted a brow. "You sound surprised."

"I am," he admitted. "You don't look old enough." At her look, he quickly added, "I meant that as a compliment."

*Smooth, dude. So much for being charming.* He almost groaned.

But Tanna only laughed. "Then I'll take it as one. Of course, compared to how old you are, everyone's young."

As Tanna led the way up a set of metal steps, Garrick's gaze automatically locked on her curvy bottom as it swayed in the tight-fitting breeches she wore and his chuckle at her teasing almost came out as a groan. He felt his cock go hard. *Damn, she had a gorgeous ass.*

"Did you always work on a salvage ship?" he asked, trying to distract himself.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her long braid swinging back and forth around her hips. "I started out on cargo ships, actually. I was doing cargo registration before I was fourteen and by the time I was eighteen, I had worked in almost every department on a Merchant-Class Cargo Ship."

"Merchant Class?"

"It's a mid-size ship," she explained, as she started down the passageway. "They're designed for trips of less than twenty-five kls. They're a great ship to get started on."

Garrick had no idea what the acronym "kls" stood for, but before he could ask, she continued.

"Over the years, we had dealings with various salvage crews, so when I got the chance, I took a job as an assistant communications engineer on a salvage ship. The work was hard, but I enjoyed it, and I worked my way up to first officer on that ship."

He gave Tanna a sidelong glance, trying to figure out how old she was. She looked around thirty, making her a little younger than he was. Which meant she had worked her way up through the ranks in less than ten years. That was impressive as hell.

"I liked the captain well enough," she went on. "But I always wanted my own ship. So, I saved up every credit I made and when I heard that the previous owner of this big boy," she patted the bulkhead affectionately, "was getting out of the business, I made an offer."

"You really like salvage work, then?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I do. There are times when you don't know where your next

paycheck is going to come from, of course, but I love the thrill of the hunt. It's exciting to board an abandoned ship and not know what you're going to find."

His mouth quirked. "Or whom?"

Tanna laughed. "Or whom," she agreed. "Though I can honestly say you're the first man I've ever found on a salvage run."

She stopped outside the door to the galley and turned to face him. Garrick waited for her to speak, but instead she gazed up at him with those beautiful dark eyes of hers for the longest time. As if abruptly realizing she was just standing there, Tanna flushed and cleared her throat.

"So, what can I get you for breakfast?" she asked as she turned and walked into the room.

At the reminder of food, his stomach growled. "I could really go for some bacon and eggs, but I assume that'd be asking too much. So, I'll take whatever you normally eat for breakfast."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her lips curving into a smile. "Actually, we do have bacon and eggs. Or at least something that tastes pretty close."

Garrick wondered what she meant by that, but before he could ask, Tanna walked over to what looked like a big wall unit with lights and buttons on it. It reminded him of a really big refrigerator, only without doors. It did have a large alcove, though, inside of which she placed a sectioned tray. He watched in fascination as she pushed a series of selections on a touch screen. Her fingers moved too fast for him to follow what she was doing, but a moment later, a door slid down to hide the tray from view. There was a whirring sound, a few thuds, and then a ding like a microwave going off. He was about to ask her what the heck was going on in there, when the door slid open to reveal the tray again. On it were four pieces of bacon, two slices of buttered toast, and a large helping of perfectly cooked scrambled eggs. In one corner was a steaming cup of black coffee. The aroma hit him all at once and it was all he could do not to drool. *Damn, that smells great.*

He looked at her in surprise as she took out the tray and handed it to him. "What just happened in there?"

Tanna laughed and slid another tray in the alcove. "It's a food synthesizer. It takes simple proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, and turns them into something that looks and tastes like the real thing." Her brow furrowed. "You didn't have anything like this back in your time?"

He shook his head. "The most we ever had on the space stations were pre-packaged meals and powdered drinks. While they gave you energy, they didn't look like the real thing. And they sure as hell didn't taste like it."

"Well, we've come a long way since then."

"I guess." His gaze went to the food synthesizer. "So, what's the food selection like on this thing?"

"Even the base models can handle almost any food you could want, because they're only limited by their programming. This one has been customized a little bit so we can go in and modify the food to our personal tastes," she explained. "If you want a particular meal, seasoned a certain way, you just have to get into the computer and tell it what you want. It will remember to modify that recipe for you any time you order it."

Garrick watched as Tanna pressed the selection on the touch screen for breakfast, and then scrolled through the lengthy menu until she highlighted the word oatmeal. She

added raisins, cinnamon, and sugar, then paired it with a cup of something called Esopozian tea. The door on the alcove closed, and then opened a moment later to reveal the tray with her selections. Damn, he wished they'd had a food synthesizer like this back in the twenty-second century.

Tanna grabbed utensils for both of them, then picked up her tray and led the way over to the table. He was just about to dig in to his scrambled eggs when Sela came in, followed by a group of women.

"Everyone wanted to meet Garrick," Sela said, giving Tanna a smile.

"Uh-huh," Tanna said when two of the women hurried over to claim the chairs on either side of him. "Garrick, this is the rest of my crew. My first officer, Malana. And that's Ena, Leala, Vi, Jalena, and Naya."

Each woman gave him a nod or a smile as Tanna made the introductions and Garrick mentally paired names with faces. While all the women were pretty in their own way, none of them was as beautiful as their captain.

"Ladies," Tanna continued, "meet Garrick Carlisle."

He gave them a grin. "Nice to meet you."

Across from him, Leala leaned forward in her chair. Slender with dark, curly hair that came to her shoulders, she eyed him with blatant interest. "You look damn good for a man who's seven-hundred years old, you know that?"

Everyone laughed at the joke. Everyone except for the first officer, Garrick noticed. Though he'd just met her, he decided Malana looked like the type of woman who didn't know how to smile. And right now, she was looking at him as if he were something she had just scraped off the bottom of her boot.

Ignoring the glare she was giving him, he chuckled. "Well, I do try to eat right and work out regularly," he said, then wryly added, "And of course, I get plenty of sleep."

That earned him more laughter from the women.

Beside him, Jalena propped her chin on her hand. "Why did you put yourself in hypersleep anyway? Was your ship damaged?"

He took a swallow of coffee before answering. *Man, it tasted good.* In fact, he thought it might just be the best tasting coffee he'd ever had. Then again, it could be the fact that he hadn't had real coffee in so long.

"My shuttle was fine," he said. "Or at least it was when I left Mars Base. Going into hypersleep was standard procedure on long space flights back then. A person would go nuts on a shuttle alone for that long. It also saved on the supplies the ship had to carry, meaning a lot less food and oxygen. But since I never got to where I was going, I suppose you could be right. My shuttle must have been damaged."

"Where were you going?" Vi asked.

"To the space station on the edge of the Solar System," he said, as he bit into a piece of toast.

Malana's eyes narrowed at that. "You had to go into hypersleep to go to the edge of Earth's own solar system? Your ship must have been slow as hell."

He shrugged. "Compared to modern ones, I suppose it was. It would have taken me two years to get to the space station."

The girls all looked shocked at that. On the other side of him, Ena's brow furrowed. "A space station? Is that like a way station or something?"

"I don't know since I'm not sure what a way station is. The space station was a small

research station with a few dozen scientists on it. I doubt it's even there anymore."

On the other side of the table, Naya absently twirled the end of her dark braid around her finger. Slender, with big dark eyes, she looked like she couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen. "So, are you a scientist then?"

He nodded. "My field is environmental systems. I was going to the space station to maintain its life-support systems. I was also going to work with the other scientists on the station's general mission of categorizing new planets and stars. But everything I know about other planets is probably all old news now."

"Probably," Tanna said, as she sipped her tea. "We've been colonizing planets for hundreds of years."

He lifted a brow. "How many planets are we talking about?"

Tanna shrugged. "A hundred. A hundred-and-twenty-five, maybe. More if you count the little outpost type of places."

"Damn, that's hard to believe." He frowned suddenly as a thought occurred to him. "Wait a minute. I just realized something. I'm a really long way from Earth, aren't I? Where exactly am I anyway?"

"We're in the An'Ailorous System," Tanna said. "It's hard to give you an idea of where we are in relationship to Earth without a map in front of me, but we're about thirty-five thousand light years from there."

Tanna continued to talk, but after finding out that he was thousands of light years from home, Garrick was so stunned he couldn't seem to comprehend what she was saying.

"Thirty-five thousand ... light years?" he finally managed. "How is that possible? On full thrusters, my shuttle couldn't go one light year, not even in the seven-hundred years I was lost in space. There's no way I could have gotten this far."

The women exchanged looks before Leala finally announced, "It had to be a worm hole."

Everyone nodded, as if what she said was obvious.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Tanna agreed.

It wasn't obvious to him, though. "Wait a minute. A wormhole? You mean like in the sci-fi movies. Those don't really exist. Do they?"

Leala nodded. "Of course they exist. They're just naturally occurring tears in time-space. Scientists have been aware of them for hundreds of years. Ships like ours essentially use the same phenomenon to travel faster than light. Worm holes just come about accidentally." She laughed. "Though I have to admit, you're the first person I've ever heard of who went through one of them. Too bad you weren't awake when it happened. It must have been really cool."

Garrick said nothing. It suddenly struck him then that the things he knew about modern science and space travel were more than just a little out of date. They were positively archaic. Back in his day, he had liked to think he was a pretty smart guy, but now he felt like an idiot.

He was still trying to get his mind around that when Naya spoke up.

"So," she said. "Did you have a wife back on Earth?"

The sudden change in topic threw Garrick for a moment, but then he shook his head. "No," he said, and was relieved at the fact. It was bad enough that his family hadn't known what had happened to him. Knowing he had left a wife, too, would have been



even more painful.

“What about a girlfriend, then?” Naya persisted.

His mouth quirked. “No girlfriend, either.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at that. “You’re not into other men, are you?”

Garrick almost choked on his scrambled eggs.

“Naya!” Tanna sputtered around her tea.

“What?” the younger girl protested. “I’m just trying to figure out why Garrick didn’t have a girlfriend. It’d be just our luck that we thaw out a hot hunk of a man like him, only to find out he flies on the other side of the cockpit.”

Garrick had never heard the expression before, but it was easy enough to figure out what Naya meant, and he couldn’t help but chuckle. “I might have been in hypersleep for seven-hundred years, but I think I can safely say I’m definitely interested in women.”

Leala smiled. “Just your luck, then, because you’re on a whole ship full of them.”

Garrick’s gaze slid to Tanna, lingering there for just a moment before he turned back to Leala. “So I noticed.”

While the other women eyed him hungrily, it was the slightly heightened color in Tanna’s cheeks that had him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. He hadn’t been blatant about his interest in her, but she had obviously picked up on it anyway. And though she said nothing, the suddenly sultry look in her dark eyes made him think she just might be interested, too.

As if just remembering that the other women were still in the room with them, Tanna pushed her chair back. “I’m going to show Garrick around. And since this ship doesn’t run itself, it’s probably time for the rest of you to get back to work,” she added, giving her crew a pointed look.

At the reminder, the women reluctantly got to their feet with a collective groan and headed for the door.

Once he and Tanna were alone in the room, Garrick wondered if she would say anything about the look that had passed between them earlier. But instead, she picked up both their empty trays and carried them over to the counter.

“You’ll have to ignore my crew,” she said. “They’re not used to having a man on board.”

Garrick’s mouth quirked as he got to his feet. He guessed he must have been wrong about the look he’d thought he had seen in her eyes. “I noticed there weren’t any on your crew. Is that by choice?”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Not really. It just sort of happened that way. It’s not too surprising really, considering there aren’t a lot of men who want to go into space on a ship like mine.”

He frowned. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with your ship?”

She shrugged. “Nothing at all, actually. It’s just that smaller ships have gotten a bad reputation over the years for having less radiation shielding than bigger ones.”

His frown deepened. “You’re not concerned about that?”

She shook her head. “No, because it isn’t true. But after hundreds of years of misconceptions, it’s hard to overcome that. Combine that with the reduced male population and it isn’t too hard to understand why a lot of smaller ships have all-female crews.”

“Reduced male population?” he echoed. “I’m confused. What are you talking about?”

Was there a war or something?"

Tanna leaned her hip against the counter. "No, nothing like that. For the first few hundred years of faster-than-light space travel, ships of all sizes really did have a problem with adequate radiation shielding, and that led to some unexpected side effects. Prolonged exposure caused fertility problems in men, and those men who could still father children tended to have only girls. No one even noticed it for centuries. But suddenly, people started looking around and realized there were a lot more girls being born than boys, especially out on the frontier."

"What kind of ratio are we talking about?" Garrick asked.

"It varies from planet to planet, but on average, men make up less than thirty percent of the entire population. Out here on the frontier, though, it's even less than that."

He stared at her in astonishment. "You're not serious."

"I am." She smiled. "So, when a woman out here says that a good man is hard to find, she's not kidding."

Garrick realized now why the women had been staring at him earlier. He was a hot commodity in their eyes.

"So, these days," Tanna continued, "there are a lot of men who won't go into space at all because they're worried they'll become infertile or make the percentages worse. Most of the men who do go into space prefer to work on larger ships because they believe those ships have better shielding. That's crap, but it's hard to debunk the myth."

*Damn.* Things had changed even more than he'd thought. He got the feeling he was going to be in for a steady diet of surprises for a long time to come.

"Come on," Tanna said. "I'll show you around."

When Tanna had said she was going to show him around, Garrick thought she was just going to give him a quick tour of the ship, but she took him around to see everything.

He glanced at her as they walked down a passageway on the lower deck. "Okay, before we go too far, I suppose the first thing I want to know is where the artificial gravity comes from. On my shuttle, we'd have to be floating from place to place. On here, you can barely even tell you're in space."

Tanna smiled as she stopped and crouched down in the middle of the passageway. Garrick did the same, watching as she pulled open an access cover on the floor and pointed at a series of blue metallic conduits running beneath it.

"Those are part of the artificial-gravity-inducement network," she said, glancing at him. "They're fed by a gravity generator in main engineering and run all over the ship. From engineering, we can increase or decrease the perceived gravity anywhere on the ship."

He pointed at a valve connected to the blue conduits. "What's this for?"

"Oh, that. It's a manual shut-off valve for the next room. It's just a back up in case the computer control mechanism doesn't work. If we had to, we could flip the valve and shut down the artificial gravity in the next room. It's there mostly in the event of an accident, so someone could move something heavy if they had to. We've never had to use them on this ship, fortunately."

"Damn, that's high-tech," he said.

She replaced the cover. "Yeah, it is. Without the artificial gravity generators, not only would we be floating around all the time, but our bodies would have all kinds of major health issues. Next to the faster-than-light Tachyon drive, the generators were the

most important invention in the pursuit of deep space exploration.”

Those health issues she was talking about had been a major concern back in his time, too. The human body couldn't survive without gravity. The bone-density loss alone would be enough to kill most people within a year of being in space. The only way astronauts had been able to deal with it in his time had been by taking massive amounts of calcium supplements. Garrick definitely preferred the idea of an artificial gravity generator a whole lot more. He wanted to ask exactly how they worked, but he doubted he would understand the science behind them. God, the Internet would really come in handy right now.

While everything on the ship was interesting, the engine room really fascinated him. He had expected some huge pulsating contraption out of a sci-fi movie. Instead, the room held only a few metal boxes that hummed quietly. They made him think more of computer servers than an advanced engine that somehow allowed the ship to defy the laws of physics, as he knew them. Tanna answered his questions the best she could, but somewhere between solarium containment fields and directed Tachyon particles, they concluded he was going to have to talk to Leala if he really wanted to understand how the Tachyon drive worked. Unfortunately, she was off working on the engine on one of the ship's shuttles.

Making a mental note to talk to Leala later, Garrick followed Tanna out of the engine room and up two sets of stairs to the ship's bridge. Ena was at the controls, and she glanced at them over her shoulder as they entered the room.

“I was wondering when you were going to come by,” she said, giving them a smile.

Tanna laughed. “We got a little sidetracked down in the engine room. Unfortunately, I think I may have confused Garrick more than helped him.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “Maybe I'll do a little bit better job of explaining the bridge. I think you'll find the navigation system especially interesting.”

As Garrick watched Tanna walk over to a large illuminated table that dominated the center of the room, he decided anything she showed him would intrigue him. While it was true he had been fascinated by the engine room, he had to admit Tanna's company really captivated him. He supposed he could argue that his attraction might have to do with the fact that he'd spent the past seven-hundred years in hypersleep. If that were all it was, though, then he'd be just as attracted to the rest of the women on the ship. But he wasn't. There was something undeniably alluring about Tanna Aldrick that would make any man stop and take notice. And he had definitely taken notice.

Dragging his gaze away from Tanna's curvy body, he walked across the room to stand beside her. Trying hard to ignore how good she smelled, he leaned over to look at the digital surface of the table. In a lot of ways, it reminded him of an old-time sailing chart. He could see several solar systems, including the An'Ailourous System that Tanna had mentioned earlier. With so many solar systems displayed on the screen, the planets themselves were no more than tiny dots that would light up with an identifier as Tanna moved her finger over them. He didn't recognize a single name among them.

He scanned the map, looking for some indication of where they were. Finally, he gave up. “Okay, so where are we?”

She pointed to a green square in the center of the table several inches from the An'Ailourous System. God, they had already gone farther in two days than his ship would have gone in two years. Or at least it looked like they had. He realized he had no

frame of reference when it came to distance on the chart.

“So, where is Earth?” he asked, figuring that might give him a better idea.

She moved her fingers over the keypad. A moment later, the navigation screen began to expand until their present location was almost completely lost in the jumble of tiny dots that filled the screen.

“This is where we are.” She pointed at a faint green dot on one side of the map, and then put her other finger on a second green dot on the far side of the screen. “And this is Earth.”

Garrick stared in disbelief. He’d already known they were thirty-five thousand light years from Earth, but seeing it on a map made him realize just how far from home he really was. He was literally on the other side of the galaxy.

“God, that’s a long way,” he breathed. “How long would it take to get there?”

She shook her head. “I wouldn’t even attempt it with the *Andrusis*. Trying to make time-space jumps big enough to get there in a reasonable time would burn out the drive, leaving us trapped in the middle of nowhere. There are larger ships designed for long distance travel that could do it in a couple weeks, though, maybe a month.”

He let out a low whistle. Her ship had crossed the equivalent of several solar systems in two days, and yet she was telling him it would take a much bigger ship to even attempt a trip back to Earth. He was just now really beginning to grasp how far the human race had come in the last several-hundred years.

They spent some more time looking at the chart, with Tanna showing him the normal areas they prowled looking for salvage. She pointed out the major shipping lanes and some of the larger planets, too. After that, she showed him around the rest of the bridge, having Ena explain how to fly the ship. They even let him take the controls for a while. But as much fun as that sounded at first, it turned out to be rather boring. After he had set the course and turned on the autopilot, there was no actual piloting done, just a lot of sitting there watching the screen to see if anything was wrong. Ena laughed and told him that he should come back up to the bridge the next time she landed the ship on a planet, saying it would be a lot more fun.

“Do you want to go down to the cargo bay and take a look at your shuttle now?” Tanna asked, after he had turned the controls back over to Ena.

*Damn.* He had been so distracted that he had completely forgotten about his own shuttle. He nodded. “That’d be great.”

Garrick hadn’t known what his shuttle would look like after floating in space for seven-hundred years, but it was in surprisingly good shape. Tanna followed behind him as he walked around the outside of it checking the hull. There were a few indications of meteorite impact damage, but that was certainly to be expected. The only real damage was a small hole by the door, which actually exposed the internal wiring.

“That was the only way we could get the door open,” Tanna said apologetically when he ran his hand over the hole.

He nodded. A small hole in the ship was a small price to pay for them bringing him out of hypersleep, he thought as he stepped inside. Besides, it wasn’t as if he was going to be flying it or anything. Even if they could find fuel for it, he doubted the engine would still work. Taking a look around his ship was more a trip down memory lane than for any practical reason.

Everything looked just as it had when he’d left Mars Base. The two satellites were

still in perfect condition and locked in their cradles. The crates of scientific test equipment he had been bringing to the space station also looked to be in good shape.

“What is all this stuff?” Tanna asked as he opened one of the containers.

“Scientific test equipment.” He reached inside and picked up one of the instruments. “Most of the gear was going to be used to find inhabitable planets. Mass spectrometers, gravity-deflection sensors, stuff like that.” He tossed what he was holding into the container. “I suppose it’s all just junk now.”

“Not necessarily,” she said, and then shrugged. “I mean, no one is going to be able to use any of it for scientific testing because it’s so antiquated, but I know a lot of collectors who would pay good money for it.”

When he only lifted a brow, she added, “I thought you could use some money and under current salvage laws, you’re entitled to thirty percent of whatever we make. But I think splitting it fifty/fifty with you would be more fair in this situation.”

Garrick nodded. “I appreciate that.”

Tanna gave him a small, half smile as she bent to pick up one of the spectrometers and take a closer look at it. He couldn’t help but smile himself as she curiously looked at it first one way, and then the other, obviously trying to figure out what it was.

Leaving her to look through the containers, Garrick went into the cockpit. Sitting down, he turned on the computers and tried to pull up the shuttle’s log. While he’d been in hypersleep, the computer should have recorded everything. He was hoping it would tell him what had gone wrong. Unfortunately, he couldn’t even get the computer to boot up. Not that he should be surprised. The systems weren’t meant to last seven-hundred years in space. He’d just been fortunate the hypersleep system had been over-engineered as much as it had been. Too bad he couldn’t thank the people who had designed it.

Getting up, he walked over to the storage lockers and pulled one of them open. Though he had wanted to come on board mainly to check out the ship’s computer log, he also wanted to get his personal belongings. Fortunately, some of his ISEA uniforms were still in usable condition. At least he’d have more than the clothes on his back until he found some place to buy replacements.

He had brought some other things from home as well, including a digital photo album. He gazed down at it for a long moment before picking it up. Pulling out the battery-saving tab in the back, his thumb hovered over the power button. It probably wouldn’t even work after all this time, he told himself. Even if it did, the battery was probably completely shot. Or the memory chip was corrupted. He swallowed hard at the thought. All those memories would be gone for good.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button to turn it on. The screen stared back at him blankly for so long that he began to think his fears had been right. But then, a picture slowly materialized on the display screen. It was one taken of Puget Sound, with the Cascade Mountains in the background. It looked so beautiful that it made it hard to breathe.

“What’s that?” Tanna asked.

Garrick looked up from the photo to find her curiously regarding the small computer in his hand. He’d been so engrossed in what he was doing that he hadn’t heard her come up. Now she was standing so close that they were almost touching and her nearness, along with her soft, feminine scent was suddenly making it difficult to think.

He turned his attention back to the photo in an effort to get himself to focus. “It’s a

digital photo album.”

She leaned closer to get a better look at the picture on the screen. “Is that where you used to live?”

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s called Seattle.”

“It’s beautiful. I’ve never seen so many trees.”

“Yeah, it is beautiful,” he agreed. “But those trees are nothing compared to the ones you could see up in the mountains.”

“Do you have any photos of them?” Tanna asked.

“I’m sure there are some in here. We just have to look through them.”

Garrick pressed the right arrow with his thumb, bringing up the next picture. This one was of the historical Pike’s Place Market. Back in the twentieth century, it was a place where local artisans and food vendors set up tables to sell their wares. It was the same in his day, though the things sold then were a lot more high-tech than they were a century earlier. He wondered if it was still there. Hell, he wondered if Seattle was even there.

He thumbed the button again so Tanna could see the next picture. This one was of Seattle’s famous Space Needle.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The Space Needle,” he told her. “It was originally built for the World’s Fair in the 1900’s.”

She smiled. “A whole world of people having a fair at one time? That sounds like it must have been fun.”

“I’m not quite sure that’s how it worked. I think they just called it that.” A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth as he pressed the button again, replaced by a frown when a picture of his mother and father filled the screen.

Tanna must have noticed the change in his expression because her voice was soft as she asked, “Are those your parents?”

Garrick nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Seeing his mom and dad sitting on the couch in their living room smiling back at him made it hard to believe they were gone. Had been gone for seven-hundred years.

Tanna looked up at him, her eyes searching his face. “You look like your father.”

He gazed down at the photo of his parents, taking in his father’s chiseled features and blue eyes. Tanna was right; he did look like his father. It was odd how he’d never seen the resemblance before.

“Was he in the space program, too?” she asked.

Garrick shook his head. “He was a pilot, though. In the International Air Defense Program.”

“How about your mother?”

“She was a scientist with the space program.”

Tanna nodded, but made no comment, and Garrick pushed the arrow button, changing the photo. A picture of a smiling girl with long, blond hair and blue eyes appeared on the screen.

“My sister,” he said, before Tanna could ask. “She had just gotten accepted into the space academy when I left.”

Tanna gazed at the picture, a smile curving her lips. “She’s pretty.”

Once again, Garrick could only nod. He had wanted to look at the pictures; he just

hadn't realized it would be so hard.

Beside him, Tanna put a gentle hand on his arm. "I shouldn't have asked you to look at the pictures," she said softly. "I should have realized they would upset you. I'm sorry."

Garrick shook his head. "It's all right. It was good looking at them." He turned off the photo display. He'd look at the rest later. "So, you know a lot about me now. What about you? Where's your family?"

She lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "My family isn't quite as close as your family obviously was. My father is a captain on a freighter and my mother owns a small merchandise shop on one of the way stations."

"I take it that they aren't together anymore?" he asked.

She gave him a rueful smile. "Nah. They split up when I was fourteen. My mom couldn't stand living on a ship anymore. She said she needed a place where she could put down roots."

The casual way Tanna said the words made it sound like her parents' breakup didn't affect her, but he could see the hurt in her beautiful, dark eyes.

"That must have been hard on you," he said gently. "So who did you stay with? Your mom or your dad?"

"My dad," she said. "I loved his ship and always wanted to have one of my own someday, so it just made sense that I stay with him."

He nodded. "That sounds like it must have been tough, not getting to see your mother very much."

Tanna shrugged again. "It was what it was," she said. "It doesn't matter anyway. My crew is my family now." She gestured to the locker. "How about I give you a hand taking this stuff to your cabin?"

His mouth quirked. "I didn't realize I had a cabin."

She gave him a teasing look. "You could always use the hypersleep chamber instead."

Garrick chuckled. "No, thanks. I think I'll take you up on the cabin."

Tanna laughed. "I thought you'd say that."

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Tanna chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip as she watched Garrick set his small box of personal belongings on the desk in the cabin a few minutes later. Though the cabin was a lot smaller than hers was, it was the same size as the other crew quarters, but his six-foot-four frame and broad shoulders made the room seem even smaller than it really was. Ships like hers just weren't built with men like him in mind.

She almost let out a groan as he bent over to set his extra boots down on the floor. Damn, he had a nice ass. She'd never seen a guy so well built in her life. It was all she could do not to reach out and run her hand over his butt.

Tanna felt her face color as Garrick straightened to his full height and turned to face her. Oh God, had he realized she'd been staring at his ass? She was going to have to be more careful and keep herself under control around him. She had already noticed more than once that she had a habit of standing much closer to him than was necessary. She knew for a fact the only reason she was doing it was because he smelled so damn good.

Realizing he was waiting for her to say something, she said the first thing that came to mind. "The accommodations probably aren't what you're used to, but it's the best I

can offer.”

The corner of his mouth curved into the sexiest half smile she’d ever seen. “It’s fine. More room than the hypersleep chamber, that’s for sure. So, I can’t complain.”

Tanna laughed. “When you put it that way, I guess you’re right. Make yourself at home. Feel free to use the computer, if you want to jump on the Inter-Planetary Database to look something up.” She gestured to the door on the opposite wall. “You’ve got your own private bathroom through there, along with a shower. Just give me a shout if you need a hand.”

The words were out of her mouth before she even realized what she’d said. Garrick had clearly picked up on the double meaning right away, though, because he was regarding her with that same look in his eye that he had earlier down in the galley when he had made that comment about still being interested in women. She blushed hotly.

“I didn’t mean if you needed a hand in the shower,” she said quickly. *Crap, that sounds even worse.* She needed to get out of there before she really embarrassed herself. She backed toward the door. “I’m going to go. I’m sure you can take care of yourself.”

His mouth twitched and she felt her face color even more as she realized the innuendo in the words.

“I ... um ... I’ll see you later.”

Eager to get out of there before she said anything else embarrassing, Tanna turned to go, but the sound of her name on Garrick’s lips brought her to a halt.

“Thanks,” he said. “For putting me up, and everything.”

She didn’t want to turn and look at him because she knew her face was still red. She couldn’t help but smile, though. “Of course. It’s the least I could do.”

Behind her, she heard him take several steps toward her. He stopped right behind her, so close that she could pick up that intoxicating scent of his.

“Well, I appreciate it anyway,” he said, the words coming out in a low, sexy rumble that made heat begin to pool between her thighs.

Not trusting herself to say anything, Tanna gave him a quick nod and walked out of the cabin. As the door slid closed behind her, she realized her pulse was racing as if she’d just been running. Between her legs, her pussy was trembling as if in anticipation of a good romp. What the heck was going on with her? It was as if she had never been around a man before. Then again, she thought, as she leaned back against the wall with a sigh, she supposed she hadn’t ever been around a man like Garrick. That was probably because there wasn’t another man like him around.

“Tanna? Are you all right?”

Tanna turned her head to see her first officer coming down the passageway toward her, concern in her dark eyes. Tanna pushed away from the wall to give the other woman a smile. “I’m fine. I just got Garrick settled in.”

Malana’s gaze slid to the door of Garrick’s quarters, her brow furrowing. “You gave him a cabin?”

Tanna laughed as she started down the passageway. “Of course. He can’t stay in his shuttle the whole time he’s on board.”

Malana fell into step beside her. “What about the med-bay? He could stay in there.”

Tanna gave the other woman an incredulous look, wondering if she were kidding. “Don’t be ridiculous, Malana. I’m not making him stay in the med-bay when there’s a perfectly good cabin he can use instead.”



"I suppose you're right," Malana agreed. "Besides, I'm sure he'll be getting off at the first way station anyway."

"Probably." Tanna couldn't help feeling a little ache in her chest at the thought.

Malana glanced sideways at her. "You know, there are places where we could get a lot of money for someone like him."

Tanna stopped in the middle of the passageway to look at Malana in disbelief. "You're not seriously suggesting what I think you are."

The other women lifted one shoulder in a shrug as she reached up to tuck her chin-length dark hair behind an ear. "I'm just saying that there are a lot of women, and even some men, who would pay a fortune to have a big, strong guy like that for a sex slave. There are probably even a few research centers that would pay money for him. DNA that unique has to be worth something."

Tanna's eyes narrowed. She couldn't believe Malana had just said what she had. The idea was so reprehensible that she felt like throwing up right on the spot. "We're not slavers, Malana," she said coldly. "I told you that the day I hired you."

Malana lifted her chin. "I just thought..."

"I don't care what you thought, Malana," Tanna snapped. "I'm not selling Garrick or anyone else into slavery. *Ever!* And I'm not having this conversation with you again. Are we clear?"

Malana's face turned red at the reprimand. "Yes, Captain."

"Good. Then if there's nothing else you need, I'm going to my wardroom to get some work done."

Tanna didn't wait for an answer, but instead turned on her heel and continued down the passageway to hurry up a set of stairs. The idea of selling Garrick, or anyone for that matter, into slavery was abhorrent to her. She knew a lot of ship captains who made money on the side dealing in human trafficking, but she never would. And Malana knew that. She couldn't believe the woman would even suggest such a thing.

Angrily slamming her hand to the entry pad on the wall outside her wardroom, she waited for the door to slide open. When it did, she walked inside and went straight over to the counter along the opposite wall. She made a cup of Esopozian tea from the small beverage synthesizer there, and then sat down at her desk.

Tanna had left the computer on when she'd stopped in before going to see Garrick that morning, so all she had to do was type in her passcode. When a computerized female voice announced 'access granted', she pulled up the ship's log and began to type in the entry for that day. It usually didn't take any more than ten minutes to do, but thoughts of the handsome blond man and the idea that anyone would want to make a slave of him kept distracting her.

Knowing she wasn't going to get anything productive done while she was so distracted, Tanna decided to go down to the galley and join the rest of the crew for dinner. Maybe Garrick would be there, too. She stiffened at the thought. *Where the hell had that come from?* Couldn't she go for five minutes without thinking of her gorgeous passenger? Apparently not, because just thinking about him made her pulse quicken. Shaking her head at her foolishness, she finished the log, then shut down her computer and left the room. If Garrick were in the galley, fine. If he weren't, that would be fine, too. She was the captain of the ship; she could certainly control herself.

The minute Tanna walked into the galley and saw Garrick sitting at the table with the

crew, however, her traitorous body responded like she was some sort of hormonal teenager. And when he looked up and his blue eyes met hers, the feeling only intensified.

Murmuring a greeting, she walked over to the counter and put in an order for grilled Paki-Paki bird and a green salad from the food synthesizer.

“Garrick was just telling us about the space academy on Earth that he went to,” Naya said as Tanna sat down across from the girl a few minutes later.

Tanna forced herself to ignore the little involuntary stab of jealousy she felt as Naya leaned closer to Garrick. Of course, the crew would be just as attracted to him as she was. And she certainly didn’t have any claim on him.

“Well, don’t let me interrupt,” she said with a smile. “I’d love to hear about it.”

In all honesty, she would have been content to listen to Garrick talk about anything. The space academy did sound interesting, though. They didn’t have anything like that now since private corporations did all space exploration. If a person had a ship and wanted to explore space, that was all they needed. During Garrick’s time, though, it sounded like people had to seriously prove themselves for the privilege of going into space. But somehow, despite how rigorous Garrick made the academy sound, she got the idea that he hadn’t had as many problems as most.

As interested as she was in the subject, however, she had to admit she actually spent more time gazing at Garrick than paying attention to what he was saying. Who cared what words were coming out of his mouth? Those lips of his were hypnotizing all on their own.

Looking around the table, Tanna saw that the rest of the crew was just as captivated by Garrick as she was. Except for Malana, she noticed. The first officer hadn’t said a word the entire time, but just sat there glaring at him. If their guest noticed, he gave no indication of it. Tanna wondered what Malana’s deal was. She had known the other woman for years, even before she had joined the crew, and Tanna had never seen her act like this. Was it possible that Malana still saw intergalactic credits every time she looked at their handsome passenger? Tanna hoped not. Malana was an outstanding first officer and a good friend, but if the woman ever tried to get the crew involved in slavery, Tanna would cut her loose in a second.

Ignoring the other woman, Tanna turned her attention back to the conversation. The rest of the crew was entertaining Garrick with stories of what life was like on a salvage ship, and she automatically found herself joining in. Soon, everyone was laughing and joking, telling stories heard around the table a hundred times. For some reason, Garrick’s presence just made them seem funny all over again.

At one point in the conversation, Tanna glanced at down at her watch and was surprised to see that she and the crew had been sitting there gabbing for more than two hours. They hadn’t done that in a long time. She sighed. As much as she hated to leave, she needed to go up to the bridge to do her nightly check of the ship. Reluctantly pushing back her chair, she picked up her tray and got to her feet.

“I’m going to turn in,” she announced.

Garrick pushed back his chair. “I was just about to do the same. I’ll walk with you.”

Tanna saw the other women share a meaningful look, but she ignored them as she put her tray in the sanitizer along with Garrick’s.

“After you,” he said.

Tanna couldn’t help but smile as she left the galley. She was sure the crew would

begin speculating as soon as she and Garrick were out of earshot. And probably tease her about it the next day. She might be the captain, but she was also like a sister to them, and they treated her like one.

"You have a great crew," Garrick said as they walked.

"Best in the galaxy," she agreed.

He gave her a sidelong glance, the corner of his mouth edging up. "I don't think your first officer likes me very much, though."

Tanna was hoping he hadn't picked up on that. "Malana just takes a while to warm up to people." She knew it sounded lame, but it was the best she could come up with.

He chuckled. "Right."

She reached up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind an ear. "So, did you spend any time on the IPD?"

His brow furrowed. "IPD?"

She laughed. "Sorry. The Inter-Planetary Database."

"Ah," he said. "Yeah, I did. It took me a little while to figure it out, but I think I'm getting the hang of it. I spent some time catching up on history, but seven-hundred years is a lot of catching up to do. It's going to take a while."

Garrick tagged along while she did her checks on the bridge and she answered any questions he had about what she was doing. A few minutes later, they were on their way down to his cabin. When they reached it, Tanna stood there gazing up at him for a moment before finally giving herself a mental shake.

"I guess I'll say good night," she told him. "If you need anything, my cabin is just down the passageway."

He gave her a grin. "I'll keep that in mind."

With a soft, "Good night," Tanna turned and walked down the passageway to her own cabin. Resisting the urge to glance over her shoulder to see if Garrick were still standing there watching her, she placed her hand on the entrypad and slipped into her cabin.

Locking the door, she took her personal communicator off her belt and set it down on the bedside table, then took off her boots before pulling off her clothes. Naked, she padded into the adjoining bathroom and turned on the shower. As she stood under the warm spray a few minutes later, she couldn't help but wonder if Garrick were doing the exact same thing in his cabin. Abruptly, an image popped into her head of him standing in the shower, his naked body glistening with water. She pictured herself running her hands over his muscular chest and down his washboard stomach, then going lower to his... Between her thighs, her pussy quivered.

Tanna reached out and turned off the water with a groan. She needed to stop fantasizing about Garrick or she was never going to be able to get to sleep. Grabbing a towel from the rack, she wrapped it around herself and stepped out of the shower. Banishing the tall, blond-haired hunk from her mind as she stood in front of the mirror drying her long hair a few minutes later wasn't so easy to do, though. Images of the guy naked were rather addictive.

Letting out a sigh, Tanna shut off the bathroom light and went into the bedroom. She always slept naked and as she slipped beneath the sheets, she was keenly aware of the material on her sensitive nipples. Once again, thoughts of Garrick came to mind unbidden, and she imagined him taking her breasts in his hands and rubbing his thumbs

over their stiff peaks.

With a groan, Tanna rolled on her side, pounded her pillow into shape, and closed her eyes. *Stop thinking about Garrick and go to sleep right now*, she told herself firmly. Her mind refused to obey, however, and she immediately began to fantasize about her gorgeous, blond-haired passenger again.

Okay, she thought as she sat up with a groan. There was no way she was going to get to sleep now, not with fantasies playing in her head of Garrick doing all sorts of pleasurable things to her body. Which meant she could either lay there and drive herself to the brink of sexual frustration, or she could get up and do something to take her mind off the man. She was too tired to do any more work that night, though, so that meant either browsing the IPD or going down to the fitness center to work out. But she didn't feel like doing either of those things.

She chewed on her lower lip. There was always the holo-chamber. An hour immersed in one of the computer's relaxation programs would guarantee her unwinding.

Deciding it was better than the other alternatives, Tanna tossed off the blanket and got out of bed. Grabbing her short robe from the back of the chaise, she slipped it on and tied the sash around her slim waist, then left the cabin.

As Tanna walked down the passageway to the holo-chamber, it occurred to her that one of the crew could be using it. They usually took turns in the evenings, so she might have to wait in line. But when she got there, she found the room empty, much to her relief. Tanna slipped into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Good evening, Captain," a feminine voice said.

Tanna couldn't help but smile at the holo-chamber computer's welcoming tone as it scanned her bio-rhythms and recognized her. "Hollie," she said, using the nickname the crew had given her.

"What can I do for you this evening, Captain?" Hollie asked.

"A relaxation program, please," Tanna said.

"Do you have any specific locale in mind?" the computer asked.

Tanna thought a moment. Hollie had all of her preferences in memory, so the computer knew her likes and dislikes. "Surprise me."

"Very well, Captain," Hollie said. "Initiating relaxation program."

Before Tanna's eyes, the empty room with its gray walls transformed into a beautiful white-sand beach, complete with a gentle breeze and a gorgeous sunset. Though she had been in the holo-chamber countless times before, she was always amazed at how real everything seemed. But then the program was designed to completely immerse the user in whatever scenario they chose. Which meant Tanna could not only hear the water lapping against the shore and smell the sea breeze, but she could also feel the soft sand beneath her bare feet. Of course, none of it was real, but the computer could transmit a thousand different sensory outputs every second, making a person really believe they were actually standing on the beach.

"Is that to your liking, Captain?" Hollie asked.

"It's perfect, Hollie," Tanna said. "Exactly what I needed."

In fact, Tanna could already feel herself starting to relax as she walked along the beach. Hollie had exchanged the robe Tanna was wearing for a sleeveless ankle-length dress and she automatically lifted the hem so it wouldn't get wet. Of course, the garment couldn't actually get wet, since neither the dress nor the ocean was really there. But the

scene was so realistic that Tanna couldn't help it.

Spotting a pod of dolphins frolicking a little ways offshore, Tanna stopped to watch them play in the surf. A moment later, she felt strong hands gently massaging her shoulders. Startled, she tensed, but then immediately relaxed again. While she hadn't asked for sex to be included in the program, Hollie had obviously taken the liberty of inserting a partner for her. Considering that she had come into the holo-chamber to relieve some of her sexual frustration, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. And whoever he was, the guy had magical fingers. Damn, Hollie sure knew what she was doing.

She tilted her head to the side and closed her eyes, letting out a soft sigh. "That feels amazing."

The man pressed his lips to the curve of her neck. "I'm glad you like it."

Tanna's eyes flew open at the sound of Garrick's voice. She whirled around to face him, her pulse racing. "What are you doing?"

His mouth quirked. "I was kissing your neck."

She felt her face color. "Yeah, that much I figured out. I meant, what are you doing in here?"

He flashed her a sexy smile. "Helping you relax. That was why you came in here, wasn't it?"

Tanna's brow furrowed at the words, and then all at once, her eyes went wide as understanding dawned on her. Garrick wasn't really there at all. He was the computer-generated sex partner that Hollie had inserted into the program. But how had the computer even known about Garrick? It couldn't, not unless one of the crew had input him into Hollie's hard drive. Tanna didn't have a single doubt in her mind why they had done it. Though she was curious about which one of them it had been.

Perhaps the bigger question was why Hollie had inserted Garrick into the program with her in the first place. Though Tanna supposed that was easy to figure out. He was exactly the kind of man that she usually requested in her holo-chamber fantasies. Big, tall, and one-hundred percent pure male. The moment his image had been loaded into Hollie's database, he would have immediately been connected to Tanna's preferences.

Hooking up with Garrick's computer-generated counterpart was wrong, though, Tanna told herself. No matter how much she wanted to feel those incredible lips of his on her neck again, not to mention several other places on her body, she couldn't do it. She'd never be able to look at him in real life if she made love to him here in this chamber. She stifled a groan.

Tanna opened her mouth to tell Hollie to end the program, but before she could get the words out, Garrick lowered his head and kissed her. That was definitely in her preference list—a man who didn't ask permission to take what he wanted.

His mouth was gentle and yet insistent on hers at the same time, and even as she told herself she shouldn't, Tanna found herself melting into his arms. Garrick might be a computer-generated image, but like everything else in the holo-chamber, he was real to her, and she sighed with pleasure as he slid a hand in her long hair and tilted her head back.

Tanna ran her hands up the front of his shirt, moaning as his tongue invaded her mouth to take sweet possession of hers. Her pussy spasmed. None of her other holo-lovers had ever kissed like this, that was for sure. Now that she thought about it, none of her real-life lovers had, either. Part of her wondered if the real Garrick kissed like this.

But then the computer-generated version was slowly kissing his way along the curve of her jaw and down her neck, and as his free hand cupped her breast, all thought about how his flesh-and-blood counterpart did things fled her mind.

His fingers found her nipple through the thin material of her dress, and she gasped as he gave the stiff, little peak a firm squeeze between his thumb and forefinger. He chuckled at her reaction and swung her up in his strong arms. Tanna automatically draped her arms around his neck. She started to ask where he was taking her, but found out soon enough when he gently set her down on the soft sand a moment later. She had done a lot of things in the holo-chamber, but surprisingly, making love on the beach wasn't one of them.

Her pulse quickened as Garrick dropped to his knee beside her. In the glow of the setting sun, his blue eyes were like sapphires and she caught her breath at the naked hunger she saw there.

Reaching out with both hands, he firmly began popping the buttons on the front of her dress. Damn, that was so sexy. Tanna held her breath as the material obediently parted to expose her breasts to him. She lay there before him, silently begging him to touch her, but Garrick only gazed down at her for what seemed like ages. Then, with a groan, he leaned forward and covered her mouth with his again.

Tanna slid her hand in his blond hair, burying her fingers in its thickness as she parted her lips beneath his. But he only kissed her for a few moments before pulling away.

His blue eyes glittering with desire, he lifted both of her wrists above her head and held them pinned to the sand with one hand while he gently cupped a breast in the other. Between her thighs, Tanna's pussy began to throb. While the real Garrick couldn't possibly know about her secret fantasies to have a man dominate her in bed, the computer-generated version knew her deepest desires.

Still holding her captive, Garrick bent and took one of her nipples in his mouth, suckling on it. Tanna moaned, instinctively trying to pull her wrists free of his grip, but he held her fast. His show of strength only turned her on even more, and she squeezed her thighs together to ease the ache there.

Garrick moved to the other breast, laving the nipple with his tongue before drawing it into his mouth to suckle on it like he had its twin. Tanna moved her head from side to side, sure she would go mad from how good what he was doing felt, when all at once he released her wrists and began to slowly kiss his way down her stomach to the juncture of her thighs.

Tanna pushed herself up on her elbows, mesmerized by his blond head as his mouth moved lower and lower. When he reached the dark triangle of curls between her thighs, he lifted his head to gaze up at her. The look in his eyes was just too damn realistic to ignore. She had made love to a lot of men in the holo-chamber, but never anyone that she actually knew, and she suddenly found it extremely disconcerting. It wasn't like just having a sexual fantasy about Garrick in her head. The holo-chamber made it too real, made it feel like she was violating him in some way. It just didn't feel right.

"Hollie, end program," she said, the words coming out as a gasp.

Being a computer, Hollie didn't question the order, but did as Tanna commanded, and as quickly as the beach had appeared, it disappeared, Garrick along with it.

Tanna laid back on the hard floor, breathing hard, a terrible throbbing need between

her thighs. While she was proud of herself for stopping the program, she was also damn pissed at herself, too. She had come down here to get Garrick off her mind, and now, she wouldn't be able to think of anyone but him. Of its own accord, her hand slipped between her legs and she began making quick little circles around her clit with her fingers. With the images of Garrick still fresh in her mind, she had no problem bringing herself to orgasm in seconds. She arched her back off the floor and bit her lip to stifle a cry as pleasure raced through her. The tremors wracked her body for several long moments before finally leaving her gasping and satiated on the floor of the holo-chamber.

When she got to her feet and straightened her robe a little while later, a fleeting thought entered her mind. As wonderful as the orgasm had been, she couldn't help but think how much better it would have felt if it had been Garrick's fingers on her clit instead of her own.

### Chapter Three

Garrick stood in the shower, hands braced on the wall, head bent, cold water pouring over his shoulders and down his back as he gazed at the raging hard-on between his legs. After seven-hundred years, he'd almost forgotten what it was like to wake up with one, but for the past two mornings, he had woken up hard as a rock and horny as hell. Which wasn't surprising, considering he'd spent the past two nights having extremely erotic dreams about the delightful Tanna Aldrick.

He let out a groan as an image of the beautiful dark-haired ship's captain filled his mind. The snug-fitting breeches and curve-hugging tee she wore were a far cry from the flight suits that the female officers in the ISEA used to wear, though he suspected Tanna would look sexy in just about anything. Or nothing. His cock throbbed even more at the thought of her naked body.

With a groan, Garrick reached down with one hand and wrapped it firmly around his hard shaft. As he began to move his hand up and down, he closed his eyes and imagined it was Tanna touching him. He pictured her standing there in the shower with him, her naked body wet and glistening with water as she stroked his cock. Her dark eyes would be hungry with need, her full lips parted in anticipation. *Damn, what an image.* It was almost enough to make him come right then. He was enjoying the fantasy way too much to rush it, though, so he forced himself to slow his movements.

The water ran down her body as she gently cupped his balls with one hand while continuing to stroke his cock with the other. She teasingly rubbed her thumb up and down on the sensitive area right below the head as she leaned in and pressed her lips to the underside of his jaw before slowly kissing her way down his neck. *Oh yeah.*

As his fantasy continued, Tanna trailed kisses down his chest and abs until she was kneeling before him. He imagined how sexy she would look with her long hair hanging over her shoulder to cover her breasts, the water from the shower running down her back and over that perfect ass as she leaned forward to take him in her mouth. Her mouth would be hot, her tongue soft as velvet as she moved up and down on his cock.

The vision of Tanna on her knees in front of him was so hot that Garrick couldn't control himself any longer. Tightening his grip on his cock, he moved his hand faster and faster. He threw his head back and let out a hoarse groan as his orgasm exploded. Cum shot out and splashed against the wall of the shower as his body shuddered with pleasure.

*Shit, that had been intense.* Then again, it had been building up for seven-hundred years. As the water poured over his still semi-hard cock, however, he knew that going centuries without an orgasm hadn't been the reason he'd come so hard. It was fantasizing about Tanna and that sweet mouth of hers.

He let out another groan. He'd better get out of the shower before he lost himself in another x-rated fantasy, this time with Tanna bent over and him taking her from behind. Shaking his head, he turned off the water and reached for a towel.

Garrick had just grabbed it off the rack when the buzzer beside the door of his quarters sounded, letting him know that someone was there. Not bothering to dry off, he wrapped the towel around his waist and walked into the bedroom. Going over to the door, he pressed his hand to the entrapad to open it and almost groaned when he saw that his



visitor was Tanna. Dressed in her usual tight breeches and tee, she looked as tempting as always, and it took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to toss her the towel and ask her to dry him off.

Tanna stared at his bare chest for a moment before her head jerked up. He was surprised to see a blush coloring her cheeks. He wondered what thoughts were lurking behind those beautiful eyes of hers.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I didn’t realize you weren’t dressed.”

The corner of his mouth edged up. “I just got out of the shower. Come in.”

She shook her head. “I’d better not. I’m needed on the bridge. I just came by to let you know we’re going to be docking at the way station in thirty minutes or so.”

He nodded. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll be there as soon as I get dressed.”

He noticed her gaze going to his chest again and he saw her run her tongue over her lips. While he was sure the gesture was probably innocent on her part, it had a devastating effect on his cock, which was now beginning to harden at a rapid pace beneath the towel. Down boy, he told himself. He really didn’t want to embarrass himself or her by pitching a tent in his towel.

Tanna reached up to tuck some of her longer bangs behind her ear, only to have them fall forward to frame her face again. “I’d better let you get dressed. I’ll see you up on the bridge.”

Garrick watched her go, his gaze glued to her sexy ass as it swayed. Keeping his distance from her was getting harder and harder. Not that he would have to do it much longer, he supposed. While Tanna and her crew had made him feel welcome, he couldn’t impose on them forever and the way station seemed like the logical place to get off. According to Tanna, they should make enough money from the sale of the equipment on his shuttle for him to book passage to Earth if he wanted. She had offered to forward him the money for anything they couldn’t sell at this way station. She had implied that once they sold everything, he would have enough money to set himself up anywhere he wanted to start his new life.

The problem was that he wasn’t sure he wanted to go back to Earth. Things had changed a lot in seven-hundred years and from what he’d read on the Inter-Planetary Database, Earth wasn’t the place he remembered. From the pictures, it seemed more like one enormous high-rise city than a planet. He doubted he would even recognize anything anymore. Besides, he had spent the better part of his life wanting to explore space. It seemed silly to go back to Earth now that he had the chance to do it.

Of course, exploring it with a certain sexy salvage captain would make the whole thing a lot more fun. But that wasn’t going to happen. Even if Tanna were attracted to him, she wasn’t likely to act on it. She was the captain of an all-female crew and having a relationship with the only man on board would complicate things. He understood that, even if he didn’t have to like it.

Muttering a curse, Garrick closed the door and went back into the bathroom to finish drying off. And try to get his hard shaft to fit in his breeches.

\* \* \* \*

“You’re just in time,” Tanna told him when he stepped onto the bridge twenty minutes later. “We’re starting to make our final approach.”

Eager to get a look at the way station, Garrick gazed out the window, only to frown

when he didn't see anything. "Where is it?"

Tanna pointed in the direction of the small moon just to their right. "There."

He looked again, but still didn't see it. "Is it on the other side of that moon?"

Beside him, Tanna laughed. "That isn't a moon. That's the Pend-Daar Way Station."

Garrick lifted a brow. The thing was the size of a small planet. "That's manmade?" he asked incredulously.

She nodded. "I take it that the space station you were going to didn't look like that?"

He snorted. "Not even remotely."

As they moved closer, he saw that what he had at first taken for a moon was in fact a huge manmade satellite that circled the planet below them. The thousands of portholes covering the surface were so large he could have flown his shuttle through them. It seemed unbelievable that people had been able to build something this big out in space. He shook his head in wonder. The space station he had been heading to seven-hundred years ago would have looked like a gnat compared to this thing.

Garrick watched in fascination as Ena slowly steered the ship around the way station until they came to what looked like a shimmering curtain of bright blue water.

"What is that?" he asked Tanna.

"It's an atmospheric shield," she said. "Instead of docking at an airlock, it will allow Ena to park *Andrusis* in a completely pressurized hanger with hundreds of other ships. We'll slip through the shield without letting any oxygen or pressure out of the hangar bay."

Garrick was speechless with amazement. Back in his day, the only way to get from a space shuttle to a station had been to match up the shuttle's airlock with that of the station. It had been a dangerous and time-consuming affair, and it meant that shuttles never really "entered" a station, just its occupants. The concept of an atmospheric shield was so foreign to him that it was hard to believe it was even possible. He watched in fascination as the beam of blue light slipped past the vis-screen just like a curtain when Ena maneuvered the ship through it.

"How does it work?" he asked.

"It's a coherent energy beam that molecularly bonds with the atoms of the ship as we pass through," Ena explained. "The bond is fluid enough that *Andrusis* can move through the shield without breaking the connection. That way no oxygen or pressure can slip past."

*Damn*, Garrick thought. He had known space travel had advanced since his time, but he still couldn't help but be amazed by every new thing he saw.

When they came out on the other side of the atmospheric shield, they were in a docking bay of some sort. As Ena carefully followed a small floating beacon through the maze of other spacecrafts, all Garrick could do was stare. The ISEA had had dozens of different ships in its fleet, but these modern versions were like nothing he'd ever seen before. They came in every conceivable shape and size. Some looked big enough to rival an ocean-going luxury cruise ship from back in his day, while others were as small as his tiny shuttle. Whatever their size, though, all of them made his shuttle, which had been high-tech for the time, seem like a dinosaur in comparison.

Tanna gave him a smile. "Ready to go look around?"

He grinned. "Lead the way."

As she walked toward the door, Tanna stopped beside the nav-screen to unlock a

small cabinet beside it. Reaching inside, she came out with what was unmistakably a weapon. Though he had never seen anything like it outside of a sci-fi movie, he recognized it for what it was. He frowned as she strapped it to her right thigh.

“Are you expecting trouble?”

She lifted her head to look up at him from beneath long bangs. “Not really. But way stations can be dangerous places sometimes and I just like to be prepared.”

Garrick’s frown deepened at that and he had to bite his tongue to keep from asking for a weapon of his own to carry. Despite knowing Tanna had been taking care of herself for years, he didn’t like the idea of her having to protect him if things got nasty. It might be sexist, but as a man, he liked to be the one doing the protecting. However, he made no comment as they headed down to the cargo hold, thinking she probably wouldn’t appreciate his show of chivalry. Apparently, that concept had diminished just like the number of men out here.

Down in the cargo hold, the rest of the crew had already removed the containers of scientific equipment from his ship and were setting them out on the dock. Garrick stopped to grab two of the containers before following Tanna down the gangway. He and Tanna had talked the night before about which items she thought they would be able to sell for a good price at the way station. She had said she didn’t want to dump everything at one time because that would reduce the value of all of it. So, they were only taking half of the equipment he had been carrying, and neither of the satellites.

If Garrick had been surprised by the other things he had seen so far, that was nothing compared to how astounded he was when a robot met them at the bottom of the ramp. As tall as Tanna, the slender, gray robot looked almost human in construction. It even had two big, life-like round eyes that blinked at them as they approached. Garrick stared at the thing in wonder.

“Welcome to Pend-Daar,” it said in a smooth, modulated voice. “I am PD-75. How may I be of service to you today?”

“We’re going to need a transport loader to take us into town,” Tanna said, handing the robot what looked like an oversized credit card of some kind.

The robot typed something into a hand-held computer and inserted the card in a slot on the side before handing it back to Tanna. He blinked at her again. “Very good. Will there be anything else? Repairs? Refueling? Restocking?”

Tanna nodded. “We’ll need fuel and a few other things, but my first officer will talk to you about that. She’s right there in the hold.”

“Very good,” the robot said. “Wait here for your transport, please. We’ll be happy to offload any heavy cargo you have.”

“Thank you,” Tanna said.

Garrick watched the robot walk up the ramp and into the salvage ship before looking at Tanna. “That was incredible. It sounded just like a person.”

She laughed. “He’s supposed to. He’s an android. Or more precisely, a port-droid, since his primary function is working at the spaceport.” Her dark eyes danced with amusement. “I guess you didn’t have androids like that back in the twenty-second century.”

He chuckled. “No. I mean, we had robots, but they didn’t look like that. And they sure as hell didn’t talk.”

Tanna laughed again. “Then I suppose they probably didn’t drive transports, either.”

Garrick followed her gaze to see a flatbed, open-cabin transport vehicle come to a stop in front of them, a droid at the controls. Putting the transport in park, the droid got out and walked over to them. It looked from him to Tanna.

"I am TD-88. How may I be of assistance?" it asked, in the same computerized voice as the port-droid had spoken in.

"If you could load these containers and then take us to the merchant section of town, that would be great," Tanna said.

The droid blinked at her with big eyes. "Of course."

Garrick normally would have offered to help load the heavy containers, but when he saw the droid stack four crates on top of each other, and then pick them up as if they weighed nothing, he decided the robot clearly didn't need any assistance. Beside him, Tanna smiled, but she made no comment as she climbed into the back seat of the transport. Garrick followed, taking the seat beside her.

"I thought we'd get rid of our cargo first, then I'd show you around," she said as the droid got in the front seat. "If that's okay with you."

Garrick nodded. "Sounds good."

As Tanna gave the droid an address, Garrick sat back in his seat and propped his boot up on the back of the handrail in front of him.

The way station wasn't like he thought it would be. He had expected it to look similar to the bases and space stations he had been familiar with in his time. Instead, it was more like a big marketplace. If it weren't for the fact that there was no real sunlight, he would have thought he was in the middle of one of the outdoor markets back in his hometown in Seattle. In addition to the various shops along the main thoroughfare, there were vendors with carts selling their wares on every corner. Garrick would like to have stopped at each and every one of them, but he supposed that would have to wait until he and Tanna had unloaded their cargo. He hoped it didn't take too long. He really wanted to do some exploring.

As they rode down the street, however, Garrick had to admit that watching the people from the cab of the transport was a pretty interesting way to pass the time until then. From tattoos to jewelry to clothing, they were a diverse group, and though he tried to be as casual about it as possible, he couldn't help but gawk a little. After a few minutes, he realized he didn't have to worry about appearing rude because the people on the streets were staring at him with just as much interest, if not more. He would have asked Tanna about it, but at that moment, the droid had pulled the transport to a stop in front of a large shop.

Garrick turned his attention away from the people milling about the street to the store. With its half-wood, half-metal exterior, it looked like all the others they had driven by. Over the door hung a sign with the words *Jenovia's Inter-Galactic Traders*.

"Do you need help unloading your cargo?" the droid asked.

Tanna shook her head. "No, thanks. We can get it." She glanced at Garrick as she got out of the transport. "Jenovia's mostly interested in the scientific test equipment, so we'll just bring in these two containers."

She started to reach for the topmost box, but Garrick picked up both containers before she could do so. She looked a little taken aback by the chivalrous gesture, but he just shrugged and said, "Might as well be of some use."

Tanna smiled, but didn't say anything. When they reached the door of the shop, she

stopped to gaze up at him. "If I look at you any time during the negotiations, just frown and shake your head."

He lifted a brow. "Why's that?"

"It means the buyer isn't offering enough and I want to up the price."

Garrick chuckled. "I get it. You want me to be the heavy."

Tanna laughed. "One of us has to be."

A teenage boy was working the front counter and he looked up as they entered the shop. The boy's eyes went a little wide as they took in Garrick's tall form before they quickly went to Tanna. When the teenager spoke, however, it was in a singsong language Garrick didn't recognize. Tanna replied in the same language and after a brief exchange, she turned to Garrick.

"Jenovia is in the back of the shop," she said, heading in that direction.

Filled with a variety of everything, Jenovia's Inter-Galactic Traders was an eclectic shop. While Garrick didn't recognize anything in it, he could tell it was all high-end stuff. Hopefully, that meant Tanna would be able to get a lot for the equipment they were looking to sell.

Garrick shifted his hold on the containers to maneuver through the maze of shelves more easily as he followed Tanna to the back of the store. As they stepped from between a row of expensive looking glassware, a woman came out of a back room. Short and plump, with graying hair and a lined face, she greeted Tanna with a warm smile. The two women clasped hands, speaking in the same language that the teenage boy had used. When Jenovia turned her attention to Garrick, it was to regard him with undisguised interest. After a moment, she looked at Tanna, saying something in her language. Tanna looked a little startled by whatever it was the woman had said, but then she shook her head and murmured something in reply. The two discussed something for a moment longer before Jenovia shrugged. Turning, she made her way to the back room, gesturing with her hand for them to follow.

Tanna glanced over her shoulder at him, but before he could ask what the exchange had been about, she led the way to the back of the shop.

Garrick had thought Jenovia was taking them to her office, but once inside the room, he could see it was simply another area that held more of the same knickknacks he had seen in the main part of the store.

Tanna retrieved the top box from him and set it down on one of the tables, then took off the lid. Jenovia looked over the items, pulling out first one thing, and then another to look at it. As Garrick listened to Tanna and the other woman talk, he wished he could understand what they were saying. But even though he didn't know the language, he enjoyed watching Tanna negotiate anyway. She had obviously done it a lot, and he could tell she was good at it. In fact, he was so caught up in watching her he forgot to shake his head when she turned to give him a questioning look. Abruptly remembering his role, he pretended to think for a moment as if considering the offer Jenovia had just made, and then shook his head. Tanna gave the other woman a shrug, saying something in her language.

Jenovia drummed her fingers on the table, her gaze on the scientific equipment as she debated whether to offer Tanna more money for it. Muttering something under her breath, the plump woman finally nodded her head. Taking a computerized card out of her pocket like the one Garrick had seen Tanna use earlier, Jenovia typed something into it,

and then held it out to Tanna.

Giving the other woman a smile, Tanna took out her card and pressed it against the one Jenovia had given her. Shaking Jenovia's hand, Tanna said something in the woman's language. Probably the equivalent of "nice doing business with you." "You did good in there," Tanna told him when they were outside. "You almost had me believing you could understand what we were saying."

He gave her a wry smile. "It would have been a lot easier if I actually had been able to follow the conversation. What language was that?"

"It's officially called the Kendoshee dialect," she explained as they got back into the transport. "But everyone just calls it Merchant-Speak. It's a mishmash of dozens of different languages. All the traders use it." She grinned. "I could try to teach you a few words before the next stop, but I think that strong, silent routine of yours is more effective when it comes to bargaining."

Garrick chuckled. "I'm all for being strong and silent. Less work."

Tanna just laughed. But when they walked out of the last store on their list later that afternoon, Garrick had to admit that playing the role of the strong, silent type worked out pretty well for them. As far as he could tell, they had made a lot of money.

"I thought we'd walk back to the spaceport, if that's okay with you," she said, once they were outside. "That way I can show you around. Maybe stop and get something to eat, too. I'm sure you'd like to have something in the way of food that wasn't processed from synthetic nutrients."

"Sounds good to me," he agreed.

Since neither of them had eaten since breakfast, they decided to stop for an early dinner before taking a tour of the way station. As he and Tanna were making their way down the street to a nearby restaurant, they passed a heavily tattooed, muscular woman leaning against the wall outside one of the shops. Garrick felt more than saw her eyes following him as he walked, but after having people stare at him the whole day, he paid little attention to her. It wasn't until she called out to them that he turned his head to look at her. The language she spoke wasn't the singsong Kendoshee dialect the traders used, but was harsher and more guttural sounding. Tanna clearly understood it, though, because she stopped in mid-step to turn and frown at the other woman.

While Garrick didn't know what Tanna said in reply, he could tell by the cold look in her eyes that she hadn't liked what the other woman had said. As he listened to the exchange, he realized they were having a disagreement. When the tattooed woman gestured in his direction several times, he concluded they must be arguing about him.

He was just about to interrupt and ask Tanna what the problem was when she suddenly lifted her hand and placed it on her weapon. Garrick stiffened and instinctively took a step forward, ready to protect Tanna, but the tattooed woman held up her hands in a placating gesture. Whatever the woman said next must have satisfied Tanna because she relaxed her grip on her gun.

"Let's go," she said.

Garrick fell into step beside her, but not before checking over his shoulder to make sure that the woman wasn't following them. "What was all that about?" he asked Tanna.

"Nothing."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "It didn't sound like nothing to me."

Tanna shrugged. "She thought we had some more salvage for sale. I told her we

didn't."

Garrick knew it had been more than that, but Tanna didn't seem to want to talk about it and he didn't want to press her further.

The restaurant Tanna took him to was a brightly colored building on the corner of the main thoroughfare called Noorrsay's Eatery. At least that was how she translated the sign for him. Since they were a little early for the dinner, Garrick had thought the place would be comparatively empty. While it wasn't packed with people, it was still more crowded than he'd thought it would be, however.

As he followed Tanna to an unoccupied table in the back corner, Garrick took the opportunity to look around the restaurant. The interior was just as colorful as the outside, the walls filled with holographic photos and a variety of other knickknacks, few of which he could identify.

Used to restaurants back on Earth, Garrick naturally assumed a waitress would come over after they had sat down, so he was surprised when Tanna pressed a button and a holographic menu appeared on the table between them, accompanied by a computerized voice that said something in the Kendosheean dialect he was getting used to hearing.

"Standard English," Tanna said in reply.

"Welcome to Noorrsay's," the computer responded this time. "May I take your order?"

Tanna must have noticed his look of astonishment, because she smiled. "I keep forgetting that all this technology is new to you."

He chuckled. "Even you have to admit this is pretty high-tech."

She laughed. "You haven't seen anything yet. Just wait until we order."

Garrick had been so fascinated by the menu that he'd almost forgotten the reason they were there, but at the mention of food, his stomach growled. Interested to see what the restaurant had to offer, he read over the menu, which was now in English, only to frown when he realized he still didn't recognize anything listed on it.

"Okay," he finally said. "I think I'm going to need a little help here."

Tanna looked up from the menu. "They make a really good ari-chein, if you want to try it."

"What's that?"

She gave him a sheepish look. "Sorry. It's a combination of rice, vegetables, and meat cooked in a spicy sauce. I always order it whenever I come here."

He shrugged. "Sounds good."

Lifting her hand, Tanna touched the word "ari-chein" with her finger once, and then twice. She then touched her finger to the word "Espozian tea" followed by another word he didn't recognize. He was about to ask what else she had ordered when the computerized voice spoke again.

"You have ordered two ari-chein, a cup of Espozian tea, and a mug of Bandorian ale. If that is correct, please touch yes and insert your credit chip into the pay slot."

Tanna reached out and touched the screen again, then slid her card into the thin slot on her side of the table.

"Thank you," the computer said when she was done. "Your order is complete and will arrive shortly. Enjoy your meal."

As the holographic menu disappeared, Garrick shook his head in disbelief. "That's damn impressive."

Across from him, Tanna smiled. “Not nearly as impressive as how they deliver the food.”

As if on cue, a small tray with the drinks they had ordered came floating through the restaurant toward their table. It hovered above it for a moment, before slowly setting down in front of them.

Garrick could only stare at the tray in amazement. *Damn*. Tanna picked up the mug of ale and placed it in front of him, then picked up her tea before moving the tray out of their way.

“Pretty cool, huh?” she said, smiling at him over the rim of the cup.

“I’ll say,” he agreed, picking up his mug and taking a swallow of ale as he watched another serving tray navigate around two women. “How are they controlled?”

She set down her cup. “They’re all computerized. There are sensors around the rim of the tray that keep it from running into people.”

Shaking his head in continued amazement, Garrick took another swallow of ale and looked around the restaurant. He couldn’t help but notice that once again people were staring at him, some of them quite blatantly.

“Okay, I have to ask,” he said to Tanna as he set down his mug. “Why does everyone around here keep staring at me? All that work the hypersleep chamber did while I was in there didn’t wear off, did it? I mean, I don’t suddenly look seven-hundred-years old now, do I?”

She laughed. “Hardly. It’s just that most people haven’t ever seen anyone with blond hair and blue eyes before, unless they were fake, and it’s obvious your hair and eye color are real. Combine that with your unusual height and size, and it isn’t too surprising that people find you very interesting to look at.”

Garrick couldn’t help but wonder if she was including herself in that group. His brow furrowed as he looked around the room at the restaurant’s patrons again. Now that she mentioned it, he noticed everyone did have dark hair and brown eyes. And everyone was around the same height, too.

Tanna looked like she would have said more but just then another hover-tray floated over to their table. This one was larger than the first and held two plates of food, which, Garrick noted appreciatively as it lowered to the table, smelled delicious. Handing one of the dishes to Tanna, he took the other for himself, and then picked up his fork. Spearing a piece of meat, he put it in his mouth and chewed.

“So,” Tanna asked after a moment. “What do you think?”

“It’s good,” he said, then added, “Really good.”

She smiled. “I thought you’d like it.”

Garrick scooped up some of the dark brown rice. “Is the meat chicken?”

“Udenese water-bird actually,” she said. “But you’re right. It does taste like chicken.”

As he and Tanna talked over dinner, Garrick realized this was the first time they had shared a meal together without the rest of the crew hovering around. While he liked the other women well enough, he had to admit he liked being alone with Tanna even more. As crazy as he knew it sounded, it almost felt like they were on a date.

After they had finished eating, Tanna pulled out her handheld computer, and then came around to his side of the booth to slide in next to him. Holding the computer so they could both see it, she pressed a few keys.



“Let’s see how much we made today,” she said.

Despite being interested in getting a look at their profits, Garrick had a hell of a time paying attention to what was on the computer screen. Instead, all he could seem to concentrate on was how good Tanna’s hair smelled as she leaned in close.

When he didn’t say anything, Tanna turned her head to gaze up at him. The move put her face at the perfect angle for a kiss, and he found himself leaning forward to do just that. He had to see if those lips were as soft as they looked.

But just then, Tanna’s handheld chimed, interrupting the moment, and they both turned to look at it. *Damn technology.*

Clearing her throat, Tanna reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I knew we’d get good money for all that stuff, but we got a lot more for it than I thought we would. Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand credits, to be exact.” She smiled at him. “Which means you get one-twenty-five.” She punched something into the computer and a moment later, it spit out a plastic card. It was smaller than the one she had used to buy them dinner, but it looked basically the same. “I’ve put your share on this credit chip for you. That way, you can use it anywhere you want.”

Garrick took the credit chip she held out to him. “Is one-hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand credits a lot of money?”

She shrugged. “It would be enough to let you live on this way station for a long time. You could probably even book passage on a ship back to Earth, if you wanted to.” She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, before adding, “And of course, you’ll get a lot more money after I sell the rest of the stuff.”

He was silent as he gazed down at the chip. There was no one and nothing back on Earth waiting for him, and he sure as hell didn’t think he would fit in on Pend-Daar. The reality was that the only place he felt like he did fit in was on Tanna’s ship.

Across from him, Tanna was chewing on her lower lip again. “Or,” she said slowly, “you could always stay on the ship with us if you’d rather.”

Hell yes, he’d rather. Besides feeling welcome on the ship, he also enjoyed spending time with Tanna. He certainly wouldn’t mind staying if she was okay with it. But he didn’t want to be a burden or a charity case. “You’ve done so much for me already. I don’t want to feel like I’m freeloading off you.”

Tanna laughed. “You’re not,” she insisted. “Besides, I’m sure we can find something for you to do on the ship if you’re willing to learn. And since we still have all that other stuff of yours to sell, it would probably be easier anyway.”

Garrick considered her offer for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay. As long as I can find some way to earn my keep.”

She smiled. “I’m sure we can find something that you’re good at.”

## Chapter Four

Tanna was pleased Garrick had decided to stay on board a little while longer. Actually, she was more than pleased; she was thrilled. Which made no sense, considering the man had kept her up with erotic dreams the past two nights with his mere presence on the ship. But for some reason, she didn't want him to go.

She tried to tell herself it was because she somehow felt responsible for him since she and her crew had been the ones to find his derelict ship. But deep down she knew it was more than just a sense of obligation that had made her ask Garrick to stay. She liked having him around, pure and simple. Besides, she hadn't liked the way the riff-raff on the way station had been looking at him, particularly that woman with the tattoos who had stopped them on the street.

Tanna's blood simmered as she replayed their conversation in her mind. Though the woman hadn't come out and said she was a slaver, she had the right look. And if the tattoos hadn't given her away, then her offer to buy Garrick for a hefty price would have. She hadn't seemed to want to take no for an answer, either. In fact, if Tanna hadn't been carrying a weapon, the other woman might have tried to take him by force. Though Tanna had the feeling the woman would have had her hands full if she tried.

Tanna was just glad Garrick hadn't been able to understand what they had been saying. She didn't think he'd take too kindly to the thought of someone assuming he was her property. The woman with the tattoos hadn't been the only one to make that assumption, either. Jenovia, the trader at the first shop they'd stopped at, had thought the same thing. In fact, she had asked if Garrick came with the rest of the things she was buying. That had completely taken Tanna aback and despite considering Jenovia a friend, the woman's question had gotten her hackles up.

Tanna was a little surprised by her reaction. Garrick wasn't her boyfriend or her husband, so she had no right to feel possessive of him. And yet, that was exactly how she had felt every time the women back on that way station had looked at him with obvious lust in their eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd think she was jealous. Which was just silly, of course. She wasn't interested in Garrick that way. But then the image of Garrick leaning over to kiss her in the eatery popped into her head. That was exactly what he'd been going to do; she knew it. And she would have let him. Just the thought of what his mouth would feel like on hers made her pulse quicken.

Shaking her head at the response her body had to such a simple fantasy, Tanna forced herself to stop thinking about Garrick and pay attention to what she was supposed to be doing, which was checking her messages. No sooner had she pulled them up on her computer than Malana walked into her office.

"I just saw Garrick in the passageway," her first officer said as she crossed the room to stand in front of Tanna's desk. "I thought he was getting off on Pend-Daar."

Tanna shrugged as she glanced up at the woman. "He was, but it didn't really seem like the right place for him to start his new life, so I told him that he could stay with us for a while if he wanted to."

Malana frowned and folded her arms. "And of course he took you up on the offer." Though she said nothing, Tanna was a little perplexed by the tone in the other

woman's voice. Why should she care if Garrick stayed on the ship? She would have thought her first officer would enjoy having a strong back around to get some work done.

"We didn't get very much for his crap," Malana continued, throwing herself down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. "I thought you would have been able to get more."

Tanna sat back in her seat. Her first officer had never complained about money before. "We did make a lot, but I had to give Garrick his share, too, you know."

Malana's lip curled. "And just how much was his share?"

"Fifty percent."

The other woman's eyes went wide. "Fifty percent! You gave him half?"

Tanna nodded. "It's his fair share."

"You're kidding, right? By salvage law, as the original owner, he's only entitled to thirty percent. And even that's too much." Malana let out a derisive snort. "Hell, he should pay us for thawing him out!"

It was Tanna's turn to frown. She leaned forward in her chair to fix her first officer with a hard look. "What is it with you, Malana? Is there a problem between you and Garrick that I don't know about?"

The other woman flushed. "I don't have a problem with him. I just have a problem with giving him so much money. We're not in the welfare business, you know."

Tanna's frown deepened. "Malana, all the man has is his shuttle and the stuff inside it. What did you expect me to do, give him a thousand credits, point him toward the first spaceship heading to Earth, and say have a nice life?"

Malana only shrugged, but the sullen look on her face said that was exactly what she would rather Tanna have done.

"Okay," Tanna said. "You just said you didn't have a problem with Garrick, but it's obvious you do. So, why don't you tell me what the hell it is?"

Malana was silent for so long that Tanna thought she wasn't going to answer, but then she let out a sigh. "I just think that letting Garrick stay on board is asking for trouble."

"Trouble?" Tanna echoed. Now, she was really confused. "What are you talking about?"

Malana shrugged a shoulder. "Sooner or later, he's going to start sleeping with the crew and you know what's going to happen then. This is a small ship. Something like that could tear us apart."

Tanna told herself Garrick was free to do what he wanted with whom he wanted but the thought of him having sex with Leala or Vi, or anyone else on her crew, brought on a sudden and very surprising twinge of jealousy. She forced herself to ignore it.

"He wouldn't do that," she said quietly.

Malana rolled her eyes. "Oh please! The man spent the last seven-hundred years in hypersleep. Of course he's going to want to get laid. If he hasn't already."

Despite being used to such blatant talk, Tanna still felt her face color at the other woman's crude words. Before she could say anything, however, Ena's voice came over the ship's intercom.

"Captain, you're needed on the bridge," the pilot said. "There's a communication for you."

Tanna let out a sigh, relieved at the interruption. "I'll be right there," she said to Ena, and then looked at her first officer. "I think we're done here."

Malana's jaw tightened, but she nodded and got to her feet.

Tanna had expected Malana to accompany her to the bridge so she wasn't surprised when the other woman fell into step beside her. However, she was surprised to find Garrick on the bridge talking to the pilot. He was leaning back against the bulkhead, his arms folded across his broad chest, a boyish grin on his handsome face. Tanna ignored the little stab of jealousy she felt at the sight of them. She had no right to be jealous, she told herself. Giving him a nod and a smile, she walked over to where Ena was sitting.

"What have you got?" she asked the pilot.

"You have a com from a woman named Micole Sendane," Ena told her.

Tanna frowned. "I don't recognize the name."

Ena shook her head. "I don't, either, but she identified herself as the captain of a salvage ship."

"Did you run the ship's ident-number?" Tanna asked.

"Yeah. It checks out. It's a Salvage-Class ship, but I don't show any record of any recoveries made by the ship in the past year."

Tanna nodded. "Hmm. Put her through."

The pilot hesitated, but then pushed a button on the computer console. A moment later, the image of a woman appeared on the vis-screen in front of them. Tall with short, dark hair and as broad-shouldered as most men, Micole Sendane looked about as far from feminine as a woman could get.

Tanna folded her arms under her breasts. "This is Captain Aldrick," she said. "You asked to speak with me."

The woman inclined her head. "I heard from some of my contacts on Pend-Daar that you had some merchandise I might be interested in purchasing."

Micole Sendane spoke in the same guttural language the tattooed woman on the way station had used. "I still have some antique pieces of science equipment from the early days of Earth's space exploration, including two mint-condition satellites," Tanna said in the same language. "Does that sound like something you'd be interested in?"

It wasn't necessarily unusual for a salvage captain to offer to buy haul from another captain if they had a contact they knew would pay a higher price for it. But something about the look in the woman's eye made Tanna a little suspicious.

Micole Sendane let out a harsh laugh. "I'm not talking about salvage, Captain Aldrick. I'm talking about the blond man you were seen with."

Tanna clenched her jaw. She knew there were some salvage captains who worked as slavers on the side, but hearing Garrick referred to as *merchandise* so blatantly made her skin crawl. Considering what Ena had said about the woman's ship not recording any legal recoveries, it was likely the woman was a full-time slaver.

Tanna glanced over at Garrick still leaning back against the bulkhead, glad he couldn't understand the language they were speaking. She was also glad the angle of the vis-screen didn't allow Micole Sendane to get a look at him. She wanted to keep it that way. Ignoring the curious look he was sending her way, she turned her attention back to the woman.

"I don't sell people," she told the woman coldly.

The other salvage captain regarded her silently for a moment. "You might change your mind when you hear the kind of money I'm willing to pay for him. I hear he's a truly unique specimen."

Tanna lifted her chin. "I don't care what kind of money you offer. He's a freeman and you have no claim on him. So, I'm not interested in anything you have to say."

Micole Sendane's dark eyes narrowed. "You know, there are some people out there who aren't going to be nice enough to offer you money. Someone like Iyov Koralo, for example. A person like him is just going to take what he wants, and he won't care what he has to do to get it."

Tanna tensed at the name. She had heard of Iyov Koralo, everyone had. He was the most despicable slaver in the galaxy. She lifted a brow at the woman. "Are you fronting for him, then?"

The woman shrugged. "I'm just pointing out the obvious. Just consider it a friendly piece of advice." She lifted a brow. "Are you sure you don't want to reconsider selling him?"

"This conversation is over," Tanna said.

"If you change your mind—"

Tanna didn't let the other woman finish. Glancing at Ena, she gave the pilot a nod, indicating she should close the com channel. Ena reached out and touched a button on the console and the vis-screen immediately returned to its usual dark blue color.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Garrick push away from the bulkhead. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just a misunderstanding about some of the salvage we sold back at the way station," Tanna said, glancing at him. Ignoring the look of annoyance on Malana's face, she turned to Ena. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in my quarters."

Turning on her heel, Tanna hurried out the door before either Garrick or the two women could say anything. She had just reached her cabin when heavy footfalls echoed on the metal floor of the passageway.

"Tanna, wait up!"

She paused at the sound of Garrick's deep voice, her hand poised on the entrypad near the door. She should have known he would follow her. Taking a deep breath, she took her hand off the pad and turned to face him, intending to tell him she was tired and would see him in the morning. But from the determined expression on his face, she knew she wasn't going to be able to blow him off like she had up on the bridge.

"What were you and that other woman arguing about up there?" he asked. "And don't say *nothing*, because I saw the look on your face when you were talking to her. You look like you wanted to kill her. Ena had the same look on her face."

Tanna sighed. She supposed she had to have this discussion with Garrick sooner or later. But how exactly was she supposed to tell him that there were people out there who were interested in making him a slave? Or worse.

"All right," she said. "Come in."

Pressing her hand to the entrypad, Tanna waited for the door to open, and then walked into her cabin. When she turned to look at Garrick, it was to find him standing with his arms crossed over his broad chest and regarding her with those gorgeous blue eyes of his. The thought of anyone making him a slave sickened her.

She leaned back against the desk, placing her hands on either side of her hips. Where should she start? "That woman I was talking to wanted to buy something from me," she finally said.

He nodded. "Okay. So, what was the problem?"

“I wasn’t interested in selling what she wanted.”

“And she didn’t want to take no for an answer?” he prompted, when she didn’t offer any more information.

Tanna let out a sigh. She was doing a really crappy job of this. “Garrick, she wanted to buy you.”

He frowned. “Me? I don’t follow you.”

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment. “Remember when I told you there weren’t a lot of guys like you around?”

“Blond and blue-eyed, you mean? Yeah.”

*Or as tall, well-built, and good looking*, she added silently. “Well, there are a lot of people who would pay good money to possess someone like you.”

His frown deepened. “Possess me? Do you mean own me?”

She nodded.

“Like a slave.”

Though it wasn’t a question, she nodded again anyway. “Though slavery is outlawed on almost all civilized worlds, out here on the edges of the galaxy, it’s still tolerated, not to mention lucrative for those willing to stoop to that level. Some captains, like Micole Sendane, are better known for their willingness to buy and transport slaves than they are for their salvage work.”

She didn’t even want to mention Iyov Koralo and other people like him. They made their living by selling men, women, and even children to the highest bidder without ever losing a moment’s sleep. They made captains like Micole Sendane seem positively pleasant in comparison.

Garrick said nothing for a moment. “That woman with the tattoos you were arguing with back on the way station. Did she want to buy me, too?”

Tanna nodded. “Yes, and every time I told her that you weren’t for sale, she just thought I was trying to push up the price. Getting her to understand that no meant no was rather difficult.”

“I kind of figured that much when you put your hand on your weapon,” he said, giving her a wry smile.

Tanna’s mouth tightened. “I was just letting her know she wasn’t going to be getting you without a fight.” At his raised brow, she added, “Not that I don’t think you can handle yourself. I just meant that I had the gun. Besides, you didn’t even realize you were in danger. I would have...” Her voice trailed off as she abruptly realized what she had almost said.

His brow went up a little higher. “You would have what?”

She felt her face color. “Nothing,” she said, and then shrugged. “I mean, I would have done the same for any member of my crew.”

He nodded. “I see.”

“As long as you’re out here on the frontier, it’s going to be something you’ll have to constantly be aware of,” Tanna said. “So, be careful, okay? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

The corner of his mouth edged up in a smile that made her heart flutter. “It’s nice to know you care about me.”

She looked away, afraid that he would see the desire in her eyes. “Of course, I do. Since I was the one who found you, I feel responsible for you. Besides, I’d like to think we’re friends.”

“Friends,” Garrick echoed. “Being friends is good. We could be more than that, though.”

He took a step closer as he spoke, his eyes turning a sexy, smoky blue. How did he do that? Tanna wondered. One moment they were teasing, the next they were smoldering so hotly it made her want to throw herself at him and beg him to take her. She swallowed hard, trying to banish the provocative image from her mind. “I-I’m not sure what you mean.”

He reached out to gently tuck her hair behind her ear. “I think you do. There’s something between us, Tanna. I can feel it. And I think you do, too.” He slid a gentle finger beneath her chin. “I want you. And you want me.”

As he spoke, Garrick leaned in so close that she could feel his breath stir her hair. He smelled so damn good that she just wanted to bury her face in the crook of his neck and breathe him in. God, how she wanted to make love to him! But she couldn’t do that. Malana had been right in that regard. Tanna knew what kind of effect sleeping with him could have on the crew. She had been on ships when these kinds of things went badly, and she didn’t want it happening on her ship.

“We can’t,” she said, the words coming out a groan.

He moved even closer, resting a hand on the row of cabinets behind her. “Why not?”

Being so near to him was making it difficult to think and it took a moment before she could answer. “The crew.”

“I understand. But they don’t have to know,” he said softly. His mouth was hovering dangerously close to hers now. “We could be discreet.”

*God, he was good at this.* She opened her mouth to protest, but Garrick must have grown tired of their verbal foreplay because he bent his head to silence her with a kiss before she could manage to get the words out. She instinctively placed her hands on his chest, intending to push him away, but when he lifted his hand to cup the back of her head, she felt herself melting against him instead. It was like she was completely powerless to stop him. Probably because she didn’t really want to.

Garrick’s mouth was gentle on hers, his lips so warm and coaxing that Tanna forgot about all the reasons she shouldn’t be letting him kiss her and enjoyed what he was doing to her instead. Since getting the holo-chamber installed, she’d had so many more computer-generated lovers than real ones that she had almost forgotten what kissing a real man felt like. This was so much better than the holo-chamber. So much better than any kiss she’d ever had from any man. It was like a drug, leaving her breathless and wanting more. A lot more.

As he pulled away to trail hot kisses along the curve of her jaw, Tanna wanted to forget about who she was and give in to the pleasure rushing through her. That was when all resistance crumpled. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, she told herself. So why shouldn’t she have sex with him? Before she took the next step, though, she had to make sure he really understood what this could cost her if anyone found out about it. Sliding her hand in his thick hair, she gently pulled his head up and urged him to look at her.

“No one on the crew can ever know about this,” she said softly.

His eyes were serious as he gazed down at her. “They won’t hear it from me. I promise.”

Satisfied that what was going to happen between them really would remain a secret,

Tanna pulled him down for another kiss. This time, she was the aggressor, her tongue delving into his mouth to tangle urgently with his.

Garrick slid his hand up her shoulder and around to the back of her head, finding the piece of leather she had used to tie her hair back in a loose bun that morning and giving it a gentle tug. Free of its binding, her long hair tumbled down her back and he buried his hand in it. At his urging, Tanna tilted her head back, letting his kiss his way along the curve of her jaw and down her neck.

She ran her hands up the front of his shirt to grab onto his shoulders, letting out a moan as the muscles there rippled underneath her fingers. The desire to touch his bare skin was suddenly all consuming and she slid her hands back down his chest. She had intended to unbutton his shirt, but his hand cupping one of her breasts through her T-shirt distracted her. Beneath her bra, her nipple hardened, and she sighed as he made slow circles around the stiff peak with his thumb.

He moved his hand lower, tugging at the hem of her shirt to slide underneath it, and she caught her breath as his fingers glided over the sensitive skin of her stomach. He pushed the material up higher, teasing her nipple through her silky bra. Tanna gasped at the sensation. How she wished he would just tear off her top and bra already! She needed to feel his hands on her bare skin.

As if reading her mind, Garrick stopped what he was doing and pushed up her shirt, lifting it over her head and tossing it on the desk behind her. She started to reach back to unclasp her bra, but the look of male appreciation on Garrick's face as he gazed down at her breasts made her stop and catch her breath. Though modest in size compared to most women, the style of bra she wore made her breasts seem bigger than they actually were, not to mention gave her great cleavage. Something Garrick clearly found sexy.

Reaching out, Garrick cupped a breast in each hand. Excited by his touch, her nipples hardened inside her bra, pressing against the silky material. Tanna caught her bottom lip between her teeth to stifle a moan. While part of her wanted him to tear off her clothes and take her, a bigger part of her wanted to make this last all night. Garrick must have wanted to savor their lovemaking, too, because he took his time making lazy little circles on her satin-covered nipples with his thumbs. It felt so good that she thought she would go crazy from the sensations, and it got even more pleasurable when he bent his head and pressed his warm mouth to the top of one breast a moment later.

Tanna lifted her hand to the back of his head, her fingers finding their way into his thick hair. *Oh, yes.* He was definitely going to drive her crazy, she thought as his velvet tongue dipped into her cleavage.

"Garrick, please..." she breathed, her fingers tightening reflexively in his hair.

He lifted his head to gaze down at her with hunger in his blue eyes. "Is that your way of telling me that you want me to stop?"

"Stop?" she echoed in confusion. "God, no!"

His mouth curved into a sexy grin. "Good. Because I'm just getting started."

*Thank God!* Her pulse racing with anticipation, Tanna waited for him to go back to what he'd been doing, but instead Garrick teasingly ran a finger along the skin above her breeches. While his touch felt good, it also tickled a little, and she couldn't help but shiver. Garrick chuckled, but said nothing as he tugged open her belt.

Tanna watched breathlessly as he slowly undid the buttons on her breeches and then pushed them down. Because they were so snug, she had to help by wiggling her hips a



little, but from the look on Garrick's face, she didn't think he minded the show.

Abruptly remembering her knee-high boots, Tanna wondered if she should help with those, too, but Garrick made quick work of them. Now naked, except for her skimpy bra and panties, she leaned back against the desk and let him gaze at her. Despite having had other lovers, she felt herself blush at the predatory look in Garrick's blue eyes as his gaze slowly caressed her body. He looked like he wanted to eat her up. Knowing how much he wanted her made her so damn hot.

"I've been trying to figure out what you wore under those T-shirts and tight breeches of yours ever since I first saw you," he said softly. "But my imagination was definitely nowhere near as sexy as the real thing. You'd put a Victoria's Secret model to shame."

She'd never heard of a Victoria's Secret model, but from the way he'd said the words, she knew it must be a compliment.

"In fact," he said, reaching out to trail a finger along the edge of her panties, "it's almost tempting to leave these sexy little things on while I make love to you."

Tanna blinked in surprise. She'd never had a man do that before, didn't even know if such a thing were possible. But the idea of Garrick doing things to her while she was wearing the silky under things had heat pooling between her legs and she had to squeeze her thighs together to ease the ache there.

He teased her pussy through the satin material of her panties as he bent his head to brush her mouth with his. "Would you like that, Tanna?"

She had the feeling she would like anything he did to her. But all she could manage was a soft moan.

"I think you would," he said, answering for her. "I would, too. But I don't think I'm patient enough to handle that right now." He kissed the curve of her jaw. "Right now, I need to see every inch of this gorgeous body of yours."

As he spoke, Garrick reached around with both hands to unclasp her bra. The garment fell away at his touch and Tanna let out a little sigh of pleasure as her breasts spilled into his waiting hands. After all the teasing, her nipples seemed even more sensitive than usual and they tingled where he touched them.

Gently rolling one nipple back and forth between his thumb and forefinger, Garrick bent and took the other in his mouth. Tanna gasped, and then moaned as he began to suckle on the sensitive tip. That felt incredible.

Lifting her hand, she threaded her fingers in his hair, holding his head in place. Not that she really needed to, she realized. Garrick clearly had no intention of stopping until he had driven her out of her mind with his mouth. When he finally succeeded, it was only to focus his attention on her other nipple and do the same exact thing.

By the time he lifted his head, her nipples were plump and glistening, and as red as ripe berries, and she was practically dizzy with pleasure.

Garrick gazed down at her, a smile playing about the corner of his mouth. "Did you like that?"

"Mmm," she breathed.

He ran his hand down her side to trail his finger along the edge of her black panties. "And how about this?"

Even though she was leaning back against the desk and therefore in no danger of falling, Tanna was sure she felt herself sway and she grabbed at his shoulder to steady herself. "Yes," she sighed.

He moved lower, his hand gliding over the triangle of material to cup her throbbing pussy through the satin. "What about this?"

She lifted her hips, arching against him. He was an expert at getting her all hot and bothered. "Oh yes!"

The words muffled against his mouth, however, because Garrick chose that moment to bend his head and kiss her. Not that the words would have been very intelligible anyway since he had also started to rub her pussy through her panties. While what he was doing felt amazing, she soon discovered that it was a kind of torture, too. A very delicious torture, but torture, nonetheless. One apparently designed to push her closer and closer to the edge.

"You're wet," he murmured against her mouth.

She rotated her hips, grinding her pussy against his hand. "Really? How wet?"

Garrick chuckled, the sound soft and husky. "Maybe I should just take off your panties and see," he said between kisses. "Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

She tightened her hold on his shoulder as he hooked his thumbs in her panties and slowly eased them down her legs. Sliding his hand up the inside of her thigh, he cupped her pussy in his palm and slowly slid one finger deep inside her. She couldn't stifle the moan that escaped her lips this time.

"Just as I thought," he said softly. "You're very wet."

She began to grind against his hand, but to her dismay, he slid his finger out. Thinking this must be the part where he picked her up in his strong arms and carried her over to the bed, Tanna was surprised when he instead put his hands on her waist and lifted her up on the desk, then got down on his knees in front of her.

As Garrick's blue eyes met hers, Tanna caught her breath at the hunger she saw in their jewel-like depths. She had never had a man look at her with such heated desire like that. She knew right then that the sex they were about to share would be different than any she had ever had before. This was going to be completely amazing; she just knew it.

Putting his hands on her knees, he gently spread her legs. Tanna automatically drew up one leg to rest her foot on the desk, opening herself up to him. Garrick immediately leaned forward to press his lips to the inside of her thigh. She caught her lower lip between her teeth to stifle a gasp as he trailed a path of hot kisses down her thigh to the dark, neatly trimmed curls between her legs.

Using his thumbs to spread her pussy lips even wider, he slowly ran his tongue up one side of her folds. Tanna bit down on her lip harder, trying not to make too much noise as she waited breathlessly for him to reach her throbbing clit. But instead, he stopped just below the plump, little nub to move his tongue up the opposite fold. He repeated the motion again and again, gliding his tongue up one side, and then the other, so many times she thought she would go insane if he didn't lick her clit soon.

Tanna was just about to demand he stop teasing her and get to work on her clitoris when she felt Garrick's tongue do just that. Not about to let him pull away this time, she locked her fingers into his blond hair, holding him tightly in place as he began making lazy, little circles around her clit. She moaned and tightened her grip on his hair even more. Unable to help herself, she began to wiggle her hips in time with his movements.

Keeping one hand on her leg, Garrick reached around with the other to cup her ass cheek, holding her still while he lapped at her clit. With all of the teasing he had been

doing, there was no slow build-up to climax. Instead, she went from zero to warp-speed in seconds. The orgasm that burst through her was so powerful she thought she might actually pass out from it, and she let her head fall back to rest against the cabinet. As he continued to move his tongue, wave after wave of pleasure washed over her, sending ripples of ecstasy coursing through her body. If Tanna had been anywhere but on her ship within hearing distance of her crew, she would have screamed out her pleasure for the entire world to hear. Knowing she couldn't do that, though, she bit down on her finger and let out a long, low moan instead.

Garrick continued to swirl his tongue round and round her clit as he coaxed one orgasm after another out of her. Only when she was so sensitive that she couldn't take any more did he finally stop. Even then, he didn't lift his head completely. Instead, he pressed his lips to the inside of one trembling thigh for a long moment before finally looking up at her.

Tanna gazed down at him from beneath lowered lashes, too spent to do more than that. But as the after-effects of her multiple orgasms gradually began to subside, she became aware of a desperate aching need between her legs. Leaning down, she kissed Garrick long and hard on the mouth before lifting her head to gaze at him again.

"I need you inside me," she begged in a throaty purr.

"I can do that," he said softly.

Getting to his feet, Garrick swung her up in his strong arms and carried her across the room to gently set her down on the bed. Lying back against the pillows, Tanna decided that while there was something very sexy about being naked while he was completely dressed, she couldn't wait to see that gorgeous body of his again. In fact, she was tempted to sit up and go to work on the buttons of his shirt when he started on them himself.

Mmm, she thought, her eyes taking in every inch of his perfectly sculpted body as he exposed it to her eager gaze. Maybe lying there and watching him undress for her was even more fun than doing it herself. First, he took off his shirt, revealing his broad chest and rock-hard abs. Then he shoved down his breeches, treating her to long, well-muscled legs. Her breath caught when his hard, throbbing cock finally sprang into view.

*Daaaaammnn!* He was bigger than any other man she had been with, either in real life or in the holo-chamber, and she could only imagine how exquisite he would feel inside her. Not that she would have to imagine for long, she thought as Garrick climbed onto the bed with her.

Tanna's pulse fluttered as he braced himself with a hand on either side of her head. He might tower over her while they were standing, but in this position, she felt positively engulfed by his masculine presence. The effect was intoxicating, and her breathing quickened as he settled himself between her thighs. Before she could say anything, though, he bent his head and covered her mouth with his. Whatever she had been about to say was forgotten as his tongue slow-danced with hers, and she let out a sigh of pleasure instead.

A moment later, Garrick lifted his head with a groan. "Shit," he muttered.

Tanna blinked up at him in confusion. "What is it?"

"I forgot about a condom," he said, his breathing ragged. "Please tell me you have one."

Her brow furrowed. "A condom?"

He nodded. "Yeah. You know—protection."

"Oh!" Understanding dawned on her and she shook her head. "We don't need it. I've been vaccinated against STDs and we scanned you when we brought you on board. You're clean."

He lifted a brow, clearly surprised by the technology. "What about pregnancy, though? Are you on some sort of contraceptive?"

"In a way," she said. When he frowned, she explained, "I have a computer chip implanted that prevents me from getting pregnant unless I want to."

He looked even more surprised at that. "You're kidding."

She shook her head again. "Nope. Everyone does it. It's all very high-tech."

"I guess so," he said, but still looked amazed.

She smiled up at him. "Well, now that we've gotten that out of the way, where were we?"

He grinned. "I think I was kissing you."

"Yes, you were," she agreed. "And I think you were also just about to slide that big cock of yours inside me, too."

Garrick chuckled. "Was I?"

Tanna opened her mouth to reply when she felt the head of his cock press against the opening of her pussy. That part of her body began to throb in anticipation. Instead of entering her right away, however, Garrick slowly slid his cock up and down her wetness, teasing her over and over. She ran her hands up his muscled chest to grab onto his shoulders, silently pleading with him to slide inside. But he was either oblivious to what she was trying to tell him, or simply determined to torment her, because he only continued to rub the head of his shaft up and down her outer lips.

He was really going to drive her insane, Tanna thought. Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, Garrick stopped torturing her and slowly eased himself into her pussy.

Tanna gasped as his cock entered her. She had never been with a man who filled her so completely and so perfectly. It was as if Garrick had been made just for her.

She waited for him to move and when he didn't she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him in as deep as he would go.

"God, you're so tight," he said, the words a ragged whisper as he squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm almost afraid to move."

"Why?"

He opened his eyes to gaze deep into hers. "Because you feel so damn good wrapped around me that I'm afraid I might come much faster than either of us wants."

She lifted her head off the pillow just enough to kiss him gently on the mouth. "Then why don't I do the moving for now?"

Tanna didn't give him a chance to answer, but instead slowly began to rotate her hips. The movements made Garrick groan, but he didn't ask her to stop, and it wasn't long before he started to thrust. He matched his rhythm to hers, keeping it nice and slow, but while it felt delicious, she wanted it faster.

"Harder, Garrick!" she demanded. "Fuck me harder!"

Garrick complied, responding to her request with a forceful thrust that almost took her breath away.

"Oh, yeah," she gasped, her head falling back on the pillow as she lifted her hips up

to meet his. "Just like that. Don't stop!"

He didn't. Instead, he pumped into her so hard and fast it made the bed shake against the wall. Then, all at once, he rolled onto his back, taking her with him. The change in position surprised her so much that it took her a moment to catch her breath. She had never experienced that particular mattress-move before, but she definitely liked it.

Garrick's blue eyes were hot with desire. "Ride me," he commanded.

He didn't wait for her to obey, but cupped both her ass cheeks in his hands and urged her up and down on his cock. Being on top made it feel like he was going even deeper than he had been before and Tanna let out a little moan of pleasure each time she came down on his shaft. Oh yeah, he had definitely found her G-spot, for sure.

"Faster," Garrick ordered in a hoarse voice. "Ride me faster, Tanna."

She obeyed, bouncing up and down on him so hard that the sound of her ass smacking against his hips as he drove up into her echoed around the cabin.

"That's it," he rasped. "Come for me."

She did, throwing back her head and crying out her pleasure, unable to stifle her screams this time. Right then, she didn't care if the whole ship heard her climax. Garrick came with her, his groans of release hoarse in her ears as her own orgasm exploded inside of her to leave her completely and utterly satiated.

Thoroughly replete, she collapsed on his chest. "That was absolutely amazing," she finally managed once she had caught her breath.

Garrick chuckled, the sound a deep rumble beneath her ear. "Yeah, it was."

Tanna smiled, but didn't say anything in return, more than content to snuggle up against him. She had never felt the urge to cuddle with another guy after having sex, not even the few boyfriends she'd had when she had worked on other ships. She usually got up, put on her clothes, and went back to her own cabin afterward. But being in the warmth of Garrick's arms felt so good that she wanted to stay there forever.

He seemed happy to let her stay there, too. For a few moments anyway. "I hate to have to go, but I should get back to my cabin," he said softly. "I don't want the crew finding me here."

She knew he was right and that it would be the smart thing to do, but she didn't want him to leave her bed. Not yet.

Tanna pushed herself up on one elbow to look down at him. "You could stay until morning."

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "The crew is more likely to see you if you go back to your cabin now than in the morning. It would make more sense for you to sleep here."

Actually, the crew got up early, so she and Garrick would have to be careful either way, but there was not a greater chance of someone catching them if he spent the night with her.

A grin tugged at the corner of Garrick's mouth as he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. "If you're sure. Though I don't think we're going to be getting much in the way of sleep if I stay."

Tanna laughed, but the sound muffled against his mouth as he pulled her down for a kiss. Sleep was highly overrated anyway.

## Chapter Five

As it turned out, she and Garrick didn't get any sleep at all that night. Not that Tanna minded, of course. She would gladly give up a little sleep for a chance to make love to a hot guy like him every night. As she watched him tuck his shirt into his breeches the next morning, she wished she could figure out some way for them to hide out in her cabin for the rest of the day. But she couldn't. She had work to do.

When he was finished dressing, Garrick walked over to where she stood by the door. "So, is the coast clear?"

She gave him a small smile. "I haven't checked yet."

"Well, in that case..." He didn't finish the thought, but bent to give her a long, lingering kiss on the mouth. A moment later, he lifted his head with a ragged groan. "If I don't go now, I'll never leave."

Tanna didn't want to let him leave. The longer Garrick stayed, though, the harder it would be for him to slip out of her cabin unnoticed. Going up on tiptoe, she gave him a quick kiss, then reluctantly turned and pressed her hand to the entrypad beside the door. Reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear, she cautiously peeked out into the passageway. She leaned out a little more, and then looked both ways. To her relief, no one was in sight.

She turned back to Garrick. "It's all clear."

He walked past her into the passageway, but rather than head for his cabin, he looked both ways, then turned back to kiss her again. Tanna knew she should pull away before they both got caught, but instead she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

"I couldn't resist," he said when he finally lifted his head.

She smiled up at him. "Obviously not. I'm irresistible."

Garrick chuckled. "True. So, what do you say we...?" he began, only to stop when there was a noise at the far end of the passageway.

Startled, Tanna turned her head just in time to see Naya round the corner and head in their direction. Blushing hotly, she hastily stepped away from Garrick, one hand automatically checking to make sure her short robe hadn't fallen open while they had been kissing.

"Thanks for coming by to let me know about that," she said to him in an overly loud voice. "I'll meet you down in the galley and we can discuss it over breakfast." Sheesh, could she sound any more fake?

"Sounds good," he said, then cleared his throat and gave her a nod. "I'll see you later, then."

As he turned and strode down the passageway, Tanna had to force herself not to watch him go, afraid that if she did, Naya might see the lust on her face. She would have ducked into her cabin, but then realized it might look odd if she did. So instead, she waited by the door and gave the younger girl what she hoped was a natural smile.

"Morning, Captain," Naya said, returning her smile.

Naya's tone was normal enough, but there was something in her dark eyes that made Tanna wonder if the other girl had seen something she shouldn't have, and she had to

fight the urge to blush. "Good morning, Naya."

Tanna held her breath, waiting for Naya to say something else, but the girl merely continued on her way. Breathing a sigh of relief, Tanna hurried back inside her cabin and closed the door. That had been close. Too close. She and Garrick were going to have to be more careful next time.

That thought made her pause. Having sex with Garrick last night had been impulsive and while she certainly didn't regret it, she knew she probably shouldn't do it again. But how could she not? He was six-foot-four inches of walking, talking temptation, a real-life version of the computer-generated lovers she acted out her wildest fantasies with so often in the holo-chamber. She let out a groan. Whom was she kidding? She had to face it. After last night, there was no way she was going to be able to stay away from him. She might as well stop fighting it. Letting out a sigh, Tanna untied the sash on her robe and walked into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, Tanna was dressed in her usual T-shirt and breeches with her hair back in a loose bun at the nape of her neck. Shoving her feet into her knee-high boots, she stuck her com on her belt and left the cabin.

Tanna thought she would have the mess to herself since she was having breakfast later than she usually did, but she was surprised to see that Vi and Leala were still there. The two women greeted her with smiles and "good mornings" as she made her way over to the food synthesizer.

"So," Vi said as Tanna sat down a few minutes later. "Did you sleep well?"

Tanna sipped her Espozian tea before answering. A combination of black tea and sweet spices, it was the perfect compliment to any meal as far as she was concerned. "Yes, thanks."

Leala toyed with the handle of her mug. "Really? Because you look a little tired."

"Yeah," Vi agreed. "Kind of like you do when you spend the whole night in the holo-chamber."

Tanna almost laughed. Vi made it sound like she did that on a regular basis, when in reality, she had just done it once. Hollie had come up with such a hot guy and a sexy scenario that time had gotten away from her. Vi and Leala loved to tease her constantly about it.

She stirred her oatmeal. "Well, I didn't spend the night in the holo-chamber. As a matter of fact, I went to bed early."

At the other end of the table, Vi and Leala exchanged looks that could only be described as amused. "That's not what we heard," Vi said.

Tanna tensed, the spoon of oatmeal halfway to her mouth. "What do you mean?"

Vi shrugged. "Naya told us that she saw Garrick coming out of your cabin this morning."

*Damn.* If the girl had seen Garrick leaving her cabin, had she seen them kiss, too? Tanna quickly spooned the oatmeal into her mouth and dipped it back into the bowl for another. "Naya's mistaken. Garrick stopped by to talk to me about something, that's all."

"Then I guess Naya's mistaken about the kiss she saw, too, huh?" Leala asked, her lips curving into a knowing grin.

*Double damn.* Tanna opened her mouth to deny it, but the other women were grinning and shaking their heads.

"Don't even try and deny it," Leala laughed. "It's written all over your face. I know

the look of a satisfied woman and you have it. Mr. Tall, Blonde, and Hunky spent the night in your bed.”

Tanna chewed on her lower lip as she considered her options. She could still try and deny it, she supposed, but she knew they wouldn’t believe her. She was a horrible liar.

“Is she actually blushing?” Vi asked, looking at Leala.

If Tanna hadn’t been blushing before, then she definitely was now. She could feel the heat rushing to her cheeks even as Leala tilted her head to the side and regarded her thoughtfully.

“You know, I think you’re right, Vi,” Leala said after a moment. “She is blushing.”

“I am not!” Tanna protested.

“Yes, you are,” Vi said. She leaned forward in her seat, her eyes full of excitement.

“So, what’s he like in bed?”

Tanna’s eyes went wide. “That’s none of your business!”

Vi’s grin was triumphant. “So, you did sleep with him.”

Tanna sighed and slumped back in her seat. There was no use denying it. “Who else did Naya tell?”

“Just Vi and me,” Leala said. “Oh, and Jalena.”

“Sela and Malana, too,” Vi added.

Tanna fixed them with a frown. “So, basically, everyone knows.”

Leala grinned. “Everyone except Ena. But Naya is probably up on the bridge right now filling her in.”

Tanna groaned. They were enjoying this, she thought, looking from Leala to Vi.

“Dammit,” she muttered. “I didn’t want anyone to know.”

Vi’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

Tanna absently stirred her oatmeal. “I didn’t want there to be any tension on board.”

“Because you’re sleeping with Garrick, you mean?” Leala asked.

She nodded.

“That’s silly. There isn’t going to be any tension,” Vi said. “I mean, do we all wish we were the ones knocking boots with Garrick? Hell, yeah. But we all figured out from his first day on board that he was into you.” She let out a dramatic sigh. “I guess the rest of us will just have to make do with the holo-chamber version of Mr. Tall, Blonde, and Hunky.”

Tanna’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at the mention of the holo-chamber. “So, you’re the one who programmed him into Hollie!” she said accusingly.

Vi lifted her chin. “I never said it was me.”

“Who cares who did it?” Leala chimed in, leaning forward. “What I want to know is how you happened to find out about it, Cap’n? Were you getting busy with Garrick virtually before you started doing him literally?”

Tanna felt her face color even more. “No, of course not!” she protested, though she had no idea why she didn’t just admit it. The other girls already knew she and Garrick were sleeping together. “I ... I was in there running an ... exercise routine and Hollie just dropped him into the middle of it.”

Leala laughed and sat back in her seat. “Exercise. Right. I’ve never heard it referred to as that, but if that’s what you want to call it, fine by me.”

Tanna opened her mouth to reply, only to snap it shut when Garrick suddenly walked in. His eyes held hers for just a moment before he gave Leala and Vi a nod.



“Good morning,” he said, walking over to the food synthesizer.

“Morning,” Vi and Leala said in unison.

The two women exchanged knowing looks before they both pushed back their chairs and got to their feet.

“We’ll see you later, Cap’n,” Vi said.

“Yeah,” Leala added, and then gave Tanna a grin. “We’re going to go to the holo-chamber to *exercise*.”

Tanna shook her head as the two women giggled and left the room. They were incorrigible.

“What was all that about?” Garrick asked as he set down his tray of bacon and eggs and took a seat across from her.

She gave him a rueful smile. “It seems the crew knows about us.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Naya?”

Tanna nodded. “She saw us kissing.”

Garrick let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry, Tanna. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have kissed you right outside your cabin like that.”

She laughed. “It’s not like I pushed you away, you know,” she pointed out. “Besides, it’s probably better that it’s out in the open anyway. The crew seems to be okay with it.”

He lifted a brow. “They are?”

She nodded. “So far.”

He leaned forward in his chair, a grin playing about the corners of his mouth. “So, does this mean I don’t have to sneak into your cabin at night?”

She gave him a teasing look. “What makes you think I want you to come to my cabin again?”

Garrick put on a hurt expression. “I know I was a little out of practice after seven-hundred years, but I wasn’t that rusty, was I?”

Tanna laughed softly. “Rusty is definitely not the word I would use to describe you. Amazing, yes. Outstanding, definitely. But rusty? No.”

He chuckled. “That’s good to know. For a minute there, you had me worried.”

“Well, no need to worry.” She ran her finger around the rim of the mug. “But I still want to be discreet about our relationship.”

Garrick nodded. “I understand. No kissing by our lockers, then.”

She looked at him in confusion. “Lockers?”

He laughed. “Forget it. It’s an old joke back on Earth. Or it was seven-hundred years ago. I’m just saying that I won’t do anything blatant in front of your crew.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “But when I have you alone, I intend to have my way with you.”

The silky promise in his words made her pussy spasm and Tanna had to bite her lips to stifle a moan. She was tempted to suggest they skip the remainder of their breakfast and go back to her cabin right then. She actually might have done it if Malana hadn’t chosen that moment to walk into the galley. Despite everyone on the crew including Malana knowing she and Garrick were sleeping together, something made Tanna flush and quickly sit back in her seat.

She didn’t do it because she was embarrassed, though. She did it because it was the right thing to do. Everyone might know she and Garrick were sleeping together, but that didn’t mean she wanted to flaunt it in front of them. Regardless of what Vi and Leala had

said, it wouldn't be good for crew morale if she started making calf eyes at a man like some goofy teenager. Based on the look of disapproval in Malana's eyes, it was obvious her first officer was thinking the same thing. That wasn't really surprising considering the conversation she'd had with Malana yesterday. For some reason Tanna couldn't understand, Malana didn't like Garrick. So, while the rest of the crew might not have a problem with her having a little fun with him, her first officer probably wasn't included in that group.

With that thought in mind, Tanna reluctantly dialed her lust down a notch and told Garrick that she had some work she needed to do. But when Malana turned her back to get something out of the food synthesizer, Tanna leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"When we get to my cabin tonight, I intend to let you have your way with me. I just hope you're up to the challenge."

She didn't give him a chance to reply, but turned and headed for the door. Before stepping through it, however, she glanced over her shoulder at him. The look of lust in his eyes was enough to make her pussy start to purr. Something told her that Garrick was definitely going to be up to the challenge.

As she walked down the passageway toward the bridge, a thought abruptly came to her. If she were going to be spending every night making love with Garrick, when was she ever going to get any sleep? She just might have to trade in her Espozian tea for one with a little bit more caffeine in it.

\* \* \* \*

As it turned out, Tanna needed to start drinking tea with a lot more caffeine because Garrick kept her up late that night and every night after. Not that she was complaining, of course. She loved spending time with him. And it wasn't just because he was great in bed, either. While the sex was absolutely incredible, she enjoyed the time they spent simply laying in bed talking just as much. Though she was friends with the women on her crew, she'd never been able to confide in any of them about anything personal since she was the captain of the ship. But Garrick wasn't an official member of the crew, he was her lover, and that made her feel as if she could tell him anything.

They talked about work-related stuff, of course, like what he had done on space missions back in the ISEA and what it was like for her to be the captain of her own ship. But they also talked a lot about their personal lives. He told her about what it had been like to grow up on Earth while she opened up to him about her parents' dysfunctional relationship and how it had affected her. She even confessed about how scared she had been on her first spacewalk, and how difficult it was to have a love life as the captain of a ship that spent almost every minute in deep space.

The fact that she enjoyed spending so much time with him, both in and out of bed, surprised her and made her a little uneasy at the same time. She had never fallen for a guy like she was falling for Garrick and it scared her a little. She was worried she was going to get attached to him, only to have him get off the ship at the first real port they came to.

However, Garrick seemed to like being on the ship, so she told herself to stop worrying and just enjoy it. He fit in with the crew so well that she could almost believe he might stay with them for a long time to come. She hoped so.

Tanna was actually kind of amazed at how quickly the rest of the crew took him in. Everyone except for Malana went out of their way to teach Garrick everything he needed

to know about living and working on a modern ship.

Leala took it upon herself to teach him the science behind the Tachyon engines. She downloaded books and tech-manuals from the ship's computer, starting him off with basic theories. After he got those down, she had him crawling around the engines showing him how the theories were actually applied. She even shut down the engines for half a day so she and Garrick could tear them open to see how they were built. When he got that under his belt, she took him into the holo-chamber, where they were able to go inside a virtual working engine. According to Leala, Garrick had been more fascinated with the workings of the holo-chamber than with the Tachyon engines themselves.

In between that, Sela showed him how to work the equipment in the med-bay. Jalena taught him how to work the communications gear, and Vi and Ena gave him lessons on how to fly the shuttles. Even though Naya didn't have a particular area of expertise yet, she was able to teach him how to run the loading equipment in the cargo hold. Garrick paid just as much attention to her instruction as he had any of the other women, something which Tanna appreciated. Having been in the younger girl's position on a ship herself, she knew how important it was for her to feel her contributions were just as important as everyone else's.

No matter how much time he spent with the crew, though, Garrick always stopped by Tanna's office or the bridge to see how her day was going. And at night, after she finished all of her duties, Garrick would come to her cabin, where they would make love for hours in her big bed. Or in the shower. Or on the desk. Or on the plush chaise that was in one corner of the room. They even had sex up against the wall a few times, something which, Tanna had to admit, was starting to become her new favorite position. She had never been with a man so skilled at pleasuring a woman.

As much as Tanna enjoyed being with Garrick, though, she tried her best to keep her heart protected. People came and went on every ship, and though he obviously liked being there, once he figured out what he wanted to do with his life, he would most likely leave. That was just the way things worked. She knew that and promised herself she wasn't going to fall in love with him, no matter easy it would be. Or how much she wanted to.

\* \* \* \*

Garrick couldn't believe how quickly he had fallen into a routine. Or how easily he fit in with the crew. When he had first woken up to find himself seven-hundred years in the future, he had felt lost and disconnected, not to mention alone. Knowing that everyone and everything he had known was gone had been a shock that had taken some time to get used to. While he still thought about his old life, he could finally look at the pictures in his digital photo album without feeling like he'd just been punched in the gut. He had Tanna and the crew to thank for that. They had gone out of their way to make him feel like part of the crew, and after being on the *Andrusis* for a week and a half, he was starting to think of himself that way, too.

Though he didn't have a specific job to do, Tanna and the other women had taught him enough so he could at least make himself useful. He was grateful to them for taking the time to teach him, not only because he wanted to learn as much as he could, but because he liked to feel as if he were pulling his own weight. He didn't want the crew thinking of him as a charity case. Or the captain's boy-toy.

Then again, if being Tanna's bedmate were an actual occupation on the ship, he would be the first one to sign up. His mouth curved as he thought of the beautiful ship's captain. He had never met another woman like her. She was smart, confident and independent, not to mention amazing as hell in bed. He couldn't remember ever enjoying being with a woman as much as he enjoyed being with her. Like other relationships he'd had, it was just about the sex for both of them, but he wouldn't mind if it turned into more than that.

When Naya had asked him that first day why he hadn't had a wife back on Earth, he hadn't gotten around to answering her question. But the reality of it was that he had never been in a long-term relationship with any woman. Sure, he'd had girlfriends, a lot of them actually, but while they thought sleeping with an astronaut had been cool, none of them had wanted to get involved with him once he told them he was going to serve on a space station for two years. He hadn't been able to blame them.

He didn't have that problem with Tanna, though. She spent her life in space. And if there were ever a woman he really meshed with, it was her. He shook his head. What the hell was he thinking? There was no "meshing" going on. This thing with Tanna was just a fling, nothing more.

Garrick was still thinking about that when Tanna came down the passageway heading in the opposite direction.

She smiled. "You're in luck. You're finally going to get to see what a salvage crew actually does for a living."

"You've found an abandoned ship?" he asked, falling into step beside her.

Tanna nodded. "Ena picked it up on the scanners about an hour ago," she said, as she led the way to the bridge. "What have we got?" she asked the pilot when they got there.

"A Yulon-Class Cargo Freighter," Ena said, glancing over her shoulder at Tanna. "The distress beacon says there was total engine failure and that the entire ship had to be evacuated. It's already in the outer ring of a planet's atmosphere, though, and the ship's orbit is starting to decay. Looks like the crew must have bailed early. They were probably worried if they waited too long their shuttles wouldn't have the power to pull out of the planet's gravity well."

Tanna's brow furrowed as she gazed out the vis-screen at the big ship. "Who does it belong to?"

"A company called Hyberion Enterprises," Ena said.

"Hyberion Enterprises," Tanna echoed. "They're big-time technology transporters. I don't suppose we have anything on what kind of cargo they were carrying, do we?"

The other girl shook her head. "No. But their last port of entry was Rando Five."

Tanna's eyes lit up at that. "Really?"

"What's so special about Rando Five?" Garrick asked.

Tanna turned to face him. "Rando Five is the home planet of one of the most high-tech manufacturers of advanced computer equipment in the galaxy. If that ship picked up anything at all there, then their cargo is worth a fortune."

"And I bet that since they left in such a hurry," Ena added, "they didn't have time to take any of it with them."

Tanna nodded, but before she could say anything, Malana and Vi walked onto the bridge.

"What have you got?" the first officer asked, looking out the vis-screen at the other

ship.

Tanna quickly explained, then turned her attention to Vi. “Do you think our grapple lines could pull the freighter back into a stable orbit?”

Vi read over the specs that Ena had pulled up on the computer, then shook her head. “Not a chance. That thing’s way too big. And it’s already too far into the planet’s gravity.”

“Damn,” Tanna muttered. “Even if there isn’t any cargo, the ship itself is worth a small fortune.”

“Well, if we’re going to do something, we’d better do it soon because that ship’s orbit is getting worse,” Ena said. “If the angle of entry gets any more severe, it’s going to start to tumble and the hull will break up pretty damn quick after that.”

Tanna glanced at Vi. “If the grapples can’t pull that thing, could they at least help keep it stabilized long enough for us to get some stuff off?”

Vi gazed out at the freighter as she considered the question. After a moment, she sighed. “Maybe. It’d be touch-and-go at best, though. And it wouldn’t give us more than a couple of hours to get the stuff off.”

“That’s more than enough time,” Tanna said. “Get the grapples on that thing, and then grab Naya and meet me in the airlock.”

Garrick caught Tanna’s arm when she turned to go. “This sounds dangerous,” he said softly.

“Not really,” she said. “It’s how we got on your ship, too.”

“But my ship wasn’t about to tumble into a planetary atmosphere,” he argued.

Tanna opened her mouth to reply, but Malana interrupted her. “He’s right, Captain. This is risky, especially since we don’t know if there’s anything even over there worth risking our lives for.”

Garrick glanced at Malana to see that she looked as worried as he felt. “Can’t you take a shuttle over and try to hook up to their airlock?” he asked Tanna.

She shook her head. “It won’t work. The freighter is already too deep in the atmosphere for that. There’s going to be a lot of turbulence and trying to match up a shuttle airlock with the ship’s would be too difficult and take too much time. If that freighter were to buck up at the wrong time, it could smash the shuttle to pieces. We don’t need to take that chance. All we have to do is shoot a guideline over there and we can be inside in ten minutes.”

It still sounded dangerous as hell to Garrick. But he could see Tanna was determined. “Okay. I’ll go with you then.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, and then before he could protest, added, “Not unless you can hold your breath for a really long time. We don’t have any envirosuits that would fit you, remember?”

*Shit.* Garrick had forgotten about that.

“Then maybe I should go with you,” Malana said.

Tanna shook her head. “Malana, you know how this works. The first officer always stays on board if the captain is on the away team. And you know I’m going.” She gave both of them a smile. “Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Malana looked like she wanted to protest, but she only nodded and walked over to talk to Ena and Vi.

Glancing at the other women to make sure they had their backs to them, Tanna

leaned close to give Garrick a quick kiss on the mouth. “Seriously, don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Garrick frowned as he watched her walk down the passageway. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to go after Tanna and try to talk some sense into her. He hadn’t offered to go with her because he was old-fashioned or chivalrous. He had done it because he was worried about her and because he wanted to be there in case anything went wrong. But this was what came with sleeping with the captain of a salvage ship, he reminded himself. Sometimes, she was going to do some dangerous things, and he just had to accept it. He didn’t have to like it, though.

Swearing under his breath, Garrick turned back to watch as Ena approached the other ship and Vi fired off the grappling hooks. After making sure they were secure, Vi took off for the airlock at a run.

Ena took in the slack on the lines and within a few moments, he heard the strain on the salvage ship’s engine as it fought to hold the big freighter steady. Garrick leaned forward to look out the vis-screen window. From where he stood, he could see two thin strands of cable attached to the top of the freighter. To his relief, they seemed to be holding the big ship a little more steady. He was amazed such lightweight cables could hold up under the stress.

Beside him, Malana must have seen the concern on his face because she said, “Don’t worry about the cables. They’ll hold up.”

Garrick nodded, but said nothing. If he weren’t so worried about Tanna, he would have been surprised Malana had spoken to him. The first officer hadn’t said more than two words to him the whole time he had been on the ship. She was probably just as concerned for Tanna and the crew as he was, so maybe saying the words aloud was a way to reassure herself as much as it was him.

He would have felt better if he had been able to see Tanna and the other women cross over to the freighter, but the angle wasn’t right for him to do that, and so he spent a tense ten minutes waiting for them to radio back to the salvage ship saying they had made it safely aboard. When Tanna and her team finally did, he let out a sigh of relief. *Thank God.*

“The cargo hold is packed,” Tanna told them excitedly. “And Vi thinks she might be able to repair the engines. This is going to be a big haul for us.”

Garrick expected some kind of play-by-play of what was going on over on the other ship, but after that initial contact the only communication coming from Tanna were terse orders to Ena to adjust the freighter up, down, left, or right. Garrick almost went crazy with worry and found himself constantly leaning over the vis-screen to check to see what the freighter was doing. Every once in a while, Malana would look at a monitor and announce that everything was still stable.

They were barely an hour into the operation when the salvage ship suddenly bucked. “What the hell was that?” Garrick asked.

His gaze darted to the vis-screen and his eyes widened as he saw that the twin cables and guideline had come loose and were now floating loosely in space. Free of their hold, the freighter had started to go nose-down into the atmosphere. *Shit.*

“What happened?” Tanna shouted over the radio.

“The grapples couldn’t hold up under the strain,” Malana yelled back. “The magna-couples gave out. The guideline gave way, too. We’re going to bring the grapples back in

and try to get them reattached.”

“That’s never going to work,” Tanna said. “We’re already slipping into the atmosphere. We’ll be starting to tumble before you can get the cables back in and set up for another shot.”

Garrick glanced at Malana. “What about the guideline? Can we get that reattached?”

She shook her head. “Not a chance. Captain, I’m going to bring the *Andrusis* in close and latch on with our skid plates. They should hold long enough for us to get you out.”

“The *Andrusis* was never meant to handle this kind of reentry. It’s too steep,” Tanna pointed out. “You’ll strip off the hull plates long before you can get close enough to try it. I won’t let you do it.”

Garrick felt his gut clench. He might not know as much as Tanna did when it came to the salvage ship, but he had learned enough the past few days to know she was right.

Ena gave Malana a worried look. “What are we going to do?”

The first officer said nothing for a moment, but her face was tight with worry. “Captain,” she said to Tanna. “What’s the status of the freighter’s engines?”

“They’re not on-line yet,” Tanna answered. Her communication was already starting to break down as the freighter entered the atmosphere and Garrick could barely hear her.

He swore under his breath. “We’ve got to go get them,” he said to Malana.

“Definitely not!” Tanna ordered. “It’s too dangerous. I won’t risk anybody else on this mission.”

“That’s not your call,” he shouted back at her. “I’m coming to get you.”

“It is my call! I’m the captain. Remember? And I say you’re not coming to get us,” Tanna said, yelling to be heard over the crackling of the radio. “That’s an order, Garrick! Vi will get the engines fixed in time.”

Garrick clenched his jaw. That was bullshit. Even if Vi got the engines on that freighter fixed, there was no way they would be able to pull out of the atmosphere now. They were too out of control and Tanna knew it. If he didn’t do something, she and the other women were going to die over there. “Fuck this,” he muttered.

Turning on his heel, he started for the door.

“Where are you going?” Malana asked.

He didn’t stop running, but glanced at Malana over his shoulder as he raced out of the room. “I’m taking one of the shuttles and going over there to get them.”

She ran after him. “Are you crazy? No one could synch up a shuttle with a tumbling ship in this kind of atmosphere.”

Garrick gave her a sidelong glance. “I can.”

He knew he sounded damn confident for someone who had only flown a shuttle one time before, and that was with Ena, but he’d never found a ship he couldn’t fly. And he damn sure had good motivation to figure out how to do it now.

Garrick was so preoccupied with worry that he didn’t realize Malana was still following him until she stepped onto the shuttle.

“I’m coming with you,” she said in answer to his questioning look as she sat down. “You might be as good a pilot as you say, but you can’t fly this thing and operate the airlock at the same time. Not in these conditions.”

Garrick didn’t have time to argue, especially considering she was probably right, so he nodded and turned back to the controls.

“Can you get Tanna on the radio?” he asked as he guided the shuttle out of the

docking bay. It probably wasn't the smoothest of launches, but he was still learning on the fly.

Malana nodded and pushed a few buttons on the console in front of her. A moment later, a hiss from the radio filled the small cockpit.

"Tanna," he said. "If you can hear me, get everyone by the main airlock. I'll be there with the shuttle in a few minutes."

As he spoke, he got his first look at the freighter since leaving the bridge, and what he saw made him curse. It was well below him now and had tipped completely over, heading into the atmosphere tail first and upside down.

Malana glanced at him worriedly. "Can you really hook up with their airlock when they're in that position?"

"We're about to find out," he said, steering the shuttle's nose down toward the cargo ship.

A red glow was already starting to develop around the rear of the vessel as it began to heat up from reentry. Shit, they didn't have much time, he thought.

There was another hiss on the radio as Tanna opened the channel on her end. "Damn you, Garrick, don't you try this!" she shouted. "You'll get yourself killed for no reason."

"I'm coming to get you, Tanna, whether you like it or not," he told her. "You'd just better have everybody ready to get off that ship. I won't be able to stay attached to the airlock for long."

Though Tanna shouted something in reply, there was too much static on the radio to hear what it was. But before the radio cut out completely, he managed to pick up the words "damn fool" along with a long string of expletives.

He glanced at Malana. "You might want to get ready at the airlock. We'll be there in a minute."

The small shuttle began to buck violently as they got closer to the freighter and it only got worse as they moved underneath it. Garrick's hands tightened on the controls as he fought to get them near the airlock. He was more than a little worried; he was terrified. Regardless of what he had told Malana, he had never tried anything even remotely as dangerous as this. Docking with a space station in Earth's orbit was nothing like trying to dock with a moving ship while it entered an atmosphere. And if that freighter suddenly tumbled again while he was close to it, then their small shuttle would be smashed to pieces. But he sure as hell had to do something. That freighter wouldn't hold together ten more minutes at the rate it was going, and Tanna was too important to him to lose.

He could barely see the airlock of the freighter through all of the reentry smoke, but he guided the shuttle in the direction where he knew it had to be. His first attempt at docking bounced the shuttle right off the other ship and he heard Malana curse as she was thrown to the floor. He glanced over his shoulder to see her scrambling back to the controls. Turning back around, he nudged the shuttle closer more slowly and was relieved when they touched down this time without ricocheting off.

"We're down!" he shouted. "Lock in and get the door open!"

At his words, Malana slammed her hand down on the button that magnetically locked the two ships together. A moment later, the hatch opened with a whoosh of air. When he heard a similar sound coming from outside, he knew Tanna had opened the freighter door as well.

He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, expecting to see Tanna, Vi, and Naya



come rushing on board, and was surprised when the first half dozen things through the airlock were large metal boxes instead. Finally, Naya came into view, a large box in her hands.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded. “I can’t hold the airlock much longer.”

“The Captain’s just grabbing a few more things,” Naya said breathlessly. “She didn’t want to leave empty handed.”

Garrick ground his jaw. Damn Tanna and her foolishness! That little idiot was going to get them all killed if the seal to the airlock broke loose. He could barely see out of the shuttle now; it was one complete flaming-red haze out there. Abruptly, he heard a creaking sound and knew that the big freighter was starting to break apart. *Shit!* He swore that if he got the crew back alive, he was going to tan that woman’s hide. She wasn’t going to be able to sit down for a week!

Vi finally came tumbling through the airlock carrying two more boxes and holding a big braid of metal wire in her teeth. She spit it to the floor, and then gasped for breath.

“Where’s Tanna?” he asked.

“She’s getting the plasma container pod,” Vi told him as she tried to stow the boxes on the bucking shuttle.

Garrick swore in frustration. Leala had mentioned what a plasma container pod was when she was teaching him about engines, but it sounded like a stupid thing for Tanna to risk her life for.

“I don’t think the couplers can take much more of this!” Malana yelled. “We’re going to lose our seal any second!”

“I know, I know,” he growled. “Someone tell Tanna to hurry the hell up!”

But there was no need because just then Tanna came stumbling through the airlock, dragging a metal canister almost as big as she was. Malana didn’t wait for any further direction, but slammed the release button on the console once the door closed.

“We’re free!” she shouted. “Get us out of here!”

Garrick didn’t wait for the women to buckle their safety belts, but instead pulled the shuttle away from the freighter the minute they threw themselves into their seats. Or at least he tried to. There was so much turbulence that the force of the air stream wrapped around the freighter kept the small shuttle trapped where it was. He went to full thrusters, hoping that would help them break free of it. After a few long, tense moments, the shuttle finally separated from the freighter. They weren’t out of danger yet though, and the women were quiet as Garrick struggled to get the shuttle out of the planet’s atmosphere. They had fallen a long way while attached to the cargo ship and it took everything the shuttle had to pull itself back up into space.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the shuttle finally stopped bucking. Behind him, the women let out a cheer and Garrick glanced over his shoulder to see them grinning and high-fiving each other. At least that’s what Vi, Naya, and Malana doing. Tanna, however, was regarding him with an angry look on her face. He returned her scowl with one of his own. He had to resist the urge to shout at her right there and tell her how foolish it had been to go for that stupid canister, but he wouldn’t berate her in front of her crew. When he got her alone, though, she was going to be in for one hell of a lecture.

The rest of the crew was waiting for them when they got back to the salvage ship. After giving Garrick a round of applause for the daring rescue, they “ooohed” and “aaahed” over the salvage Tanna and the other women had brought back. Tanna only let

them celebrate for a few minutes, however, before giving them orders to stow the salvage in the hold, and then check the shuttle for damage. When the crew moved to obey, she turned to Garrick.

"After I get this envirosuit off, I want to talk to you in my quarters," she told him stiffly. She didn't wait for an answer, but turned and stormed off.

Garrick's mouth tightened as he followed. Damn right they were going to talk.

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell were you thinking?" Tanna demanded, rounding on Garrick the minute they were in her cabin. "You risked not only your life, but Malana's as well, on some stupid rescue mission that I specifically ordered you not to attempt. Are you out of your mind?"

Garrick's jaw clenched. "Maybe I should be asking you the same question," he shot back. "You're the one who risked your life to go after some stupid plasma container when you knew we were all waiting on the shuttle with a port-lock that was about to break loose."

She folded her arms. "That stupid plasma thing is worth a quarter-million credits!"

"And that's worth more than your life?" he demanded. "Or the life of your crew?"

She felt herself flush. God, how could he be so dense? "We're a salvage crew, Garrick. Risking our lives comes with the job description. It's not like we haven't done it before." She waved her hand dismissively. "You should have seen the time we were getting salvage off a ship that was heading into a black hole."

Garrick swore. "Dammit, Tanna! I can't believe you're being so cavalier about this."

She put her hands on her hips. "And I can't believe you're making such a big deal about nothing. Sure, we risked our lives, but the payoff was huge and we're all fine. So, stop your complaining." Turning her back to him, she reached up to pull off her ponytail holder and dropped it on the desk, then ran her hand through her long hair. "What I really want to talk about is how you disobeyed my direct order—"

"We're done talking," he growled.

As he spoke, Garrick grabbed her arm and spun her around. Tanna opened her mouth to ask him just who the hell he thought he was, but all that came out was a startled gasp as he sat down in the desk chair and flung her over his knee. She was so stunned that all she could do for a moment was lay there. She recovered quickly enough, though, and when she did, she immediately pushed herself upright with a hand on his muscular thigh. Or would have if a firm hand on the small of her back hadn't pushed her back down. *What the hell?*

"Garrick..." she began, but once again, her words ended abruptly as his hand came down on her upturned bottom.

Her eyes went wide. *He did not just do that!* She craned her neck to look at him over her shoulder. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Spanking some sense into you," he ground out, bringing his hand down firmly again, this time on the opposite cheek.

"Owww!" she squealed. "Don't be ridiculous. You can't spank me. I'm not a child. I'm the captain of this ship. Now, stop this and let me up!"

He gave her another smack, harder this time. "I don't think so. I'm not going to let you up until you admit how foolish you were being and promise me that you'll never do

anything that stupid again.”

She bit back another cry of protest as his hand connected with her ass yet again. *Ouch, that stung!* But while it might sting like hell, there was no way she was ever going to admit she had done anything wrong. Garrick screwed up, not her. “Garrick, I’m serious. I’m not going to argue with you while I’m over your knee. Let me up right now!”

Garrick ignored her, instead delivering smack after smack after smack to her upturned ass while she squirmed unsuccessfully to free herself. She found it hard to believe the spansks could sting so much, especially through her breeches. It felt like her whole bottom was on fire!

Just then another thought occurred to her, and her face colored hotly as she imagined the picture she must be making draped over his knee and wiggling while he spanked her. She was the captain of the ship, dammit! He couldn’t treat her this way. It was embarrassing.

“Okay, Garrick!” she said. “You’ve ... *owww!* ... made your point! Let me up and we can talk about this like adults.”

“When you start acting like one, I’ll think about it,” he said, his hand coming down on her bottom again. “Right now, you’re acting like a willful brat, so I’m going to treat you like one.”

Tanna gasped. *Willful brat!* When she opened her mouth to deny it—as well as call him a few choice names—all that came out was a long series of “owwww’s” as he spanked her harder, and she found herself kicking her feet just like the willful brat he claimed she was. Damn caveman, she thought as she let out another squeal. Maybe she should just admit she was wrong so he would let her up. Then she could finally have her say.

As much as it grated on her to surrender, she was about to do just that when Garrick abruptly took her arm and set her back on her feet. She automatically reached back to rub her stinging ass cheeks, all set to yell at him as he got to his feet. But the words died on her lips when he tenderly cupped her face in his hands.

“When I thought you were going to die out there, I just about lost my mind, Tanna. You’re the only thing I have going for me in this new world that I woke up in and I’m not about to let anything happen to you,” he said hoarsely. “I’m sorry I spanked you, but you have to promise me that you won’t ever do anything so crazy again.”

The anguish in Garrick’s blue eyes was so heartrending that Tanna completely forgot all about the spanking he had given her. *Dear God!* Garrick had been genuinely afraid for her, she realized. That was why he had been so furious. She had thought he’d just been angry because she had pulled rank on him, but it was more than that. She could see it in his eyes. He truly cared about her.

Tears suddenly welled in her eyes. No one had ever cared about her like that, certainly not any man she’d ever been with. Hell, she wasn’t sure her parents even cared about her like that. But Garrick had been so afraid of losing her that he had risked his own life to rescue her. He could have died trying to save her from her own foolishness and it would have been her fault. The realization of what she had almost just lost was enough to nearly stop her heart. Stifling a sob, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, burying her face in his chest.

Garrick put his arms around her, his hand gentle as he rubbed her back. “God, Tanna. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You didn’t,” she said softly, the words muffled against his shirt. “You’re right. I was stupid for going over to that freighter. You could have been killed coming to rescue me and it would have been all my fault.” She tilted her head back to look up at him. “I’m sorry. I promise I’ll be more...”

“Shh,” Garrick said, lifting his hand to gently wipe away her tears with his fingers. “It’s okay.”

The gesture was so tender that it brought fresh tears to Tanna’s eyes. She opened her mouth to tell him again that she wouldn’t do anything so stupid next time, but Garrick lowered his head and silenced her with a kiss.

At first, Garrick’s mouth was slow and gentle on hers, but then the kiss became more urgent, as if he couldn’t get enough of her. Tanna couldn’t get enough of him, either, and suddenly, she didn’t want to talk anymore. She just wanted him to make love to her.

She slid a hand into his thick hair, kissing him hard, her tongue pushing into his mouth. With a muffled groan, he urged her back until she was pressed up against the wall. She let out a moan as his hands reached for the bottom of her T-shirt and hastily pushed it up and over her head, throwing it across the room. Her bra quickly followed, leaving her breasts bare, and he reached out to cup them with both hands. She sighed with pleasure as he took each nipple between a thumb and forefinger and gave them a firm squeeze that sent tingles straight to her pussy.

Burying his face in the curve of her neck, Garrick trailed hot, wet kisses up to her ear and swirled his tongue inside. The feel of it sent shivers of arousal up and down her body, and she let out a sound that was somewhere between a throaty giggle and a girlish squeal.

Garrick lifted his head and gazed at her with a molten look, his hands moving down her stomach to quickly unbutton her breeches. The buttons mustn’t have obeyed fast enough for his liking, because a moment later, he yanked them open with a growl. Tanna thought she heard a button hit the floor and roll across it, but she paid no attention to it as Garrick thrust his hands inside her breeches and hastily shoved them over her hips and down her thighs. Eager to have him inside of her as he was to be there, she quickly kicked off her pants and boots, then pushed down her panties.

Reaching over his shoulder, Garrick grabbed a handful of shirt and yanked it over his head, then quickly went to work on the buttons of his breeches. Tanna wondered if she should help, but then decided against it. Watching him undress was quickly becoming her favorite pastime.

Unable to resist the sudden tingling in her pussy, she ran a hand down her stomach and slipped it between her thighs to touch herself while she waited for Garrick to finish getting his pants unbuttoned and free his hard cock. He must have caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, because he shoved his breeches down with an impatient growl.

Giving him a sultry smile, Tanna started to take her hand away, but Garrick surprised her by covering it with one of his own. She opened her mouth to ask what had happened to that impatience he had exhibited a minute ago, but all that came out was a gasp as he used one of his fingers to firmly guide one of hers into her pussy.

“Feel how tight you are?” he asked in a husky voice. “How wet?”

She could only wrap her free hand around his shoulder and nod her head.

Gazing deeply into her eyes, he began to move both of their fingers in and out of her wetness. The fast, steady rhythm of the movement had Tanna letting out a moan and

grinding against both their hands. She wondered if Garrick was going to make her come like this, but instead, he slid both of their fingers out.

Tanna watched mesmerized as he lifted her hand and drew her wet, glistening finger into his mouth and greedily licked her juices from it. Between her legs, her pussy quivered anew. She had never seen anything so erotic in her life. When Garrick finally slid her finger from his mouth, she waited breathlessly for him to do the same with his own. But instead, he held it to her lips.

“See how good you taste,” he said softly.

Tanna gazed down at her finger. All the times she had touched herself, she had never once thought to put her finger in her mouth and lick it clean of her own arousal. But the idea of doing it now, with Garrick watching, was unbelievably erotic.

Her eyes locked with his, she wrapped her lips around the tip of his finger and slowly drew it into her mouth. Her arousal tasted sweet and just a little bit musky, and she let out a little moan as she swirled her tongue round and round his finger.

Garrick’s eyes went from their usual soft blue to a deep sapphire. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?” he asked in a gruff voice.

Tanna toyed with the idea of pointing out that he was the one who suggested she lick her juices from his finger, but she didn’t have a chance because Garrick covered her mouth with his again. Grasping her ass in both hands, he lifted her up against the wall and sheathed his cock inside of her in one forceful motion.

She gasped as his length filled her and she wrapped both legs around him and squeezed him tight. All the emotions she’d felt earlier seemed to make their joining that much more intense, and she clung to Garrick as he began to fuck her hard and fast. Each thrust slammed her back against the wall so fiercely that it had her gasping for breath, but she didn’t care. What he was doing felt so damn good. She never wanted him to stop. She just wanted him to fuck her hard like this all night long.

Garrick bent his head to kiss the curve of her neck. His mouth was hot on her skin, his wet tongue sending shivers of pleasure through her body, and she moaned.

Tanna grabbed his head in both hands, intending to pull him up for a kiss, but instead of kissing her, he grabbed her wrists in one hand and pushed them up to pin them against the wall above her head. Supporting her now only with one hand, he held her captive with the other as he went back to thrusting into her again. Whether he knew it or not, he was playing right into her secret submissive fantasies she had only previously played out in the privacy of the holo-chamber. His hold on her wrists had her so turned on that she thought she might just explode from the thrill of it.

“Harder,” she demanded her voice husky and breathless as he pumped into her. “Fuck me harder!”

Garrick immediately complied. The force of his thrusts slammed her back against the wall even harder and she felt his hand tighten on her bottom. His grip sent tingles of pleasure shooting over her freshly spanked ass, reminding her that just a few minutes ago she had been draped over his knee getting her bottom warmed. While he’d been doing it, she hadn’t even thought of the submissive aspect of the act, but she did now, and for one crazy moment, she wanted to ask him to spank her again. Just the thought of such a wicked request sent her completely over the edge and she threw back her head and cried out with pleasure as the most powerful orgasm of her life coursed through her.

“That’s right,” Garrick grunted as he drove up into her. “Come for me, baby.”

And she did. Over and over, wave after wave of ecstasy making her tremble. Garrick's hoarse groans of release were lost in the sounds of her screams, but she was barely aware of them as she felt his hot cum splash inside her. The intensity of their lovemaking on the heels of such an emotional revelation brought tears to her eyes. She had never felt as close to another man as she did to Garrick at that moment. If this wasn't love, she decided, then she didn't know what was.

Even after their orgasms had subsided and she had slid her legs down to stand on her own, Tanna didn't move. Instead, she rested her head on his chest and enjoyed the feel of his arms around her. After a moment, he slipped his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face up. His blue eyes were so tender and full of emotion as he gazed down at her that her heart started doing little back flips. She held her breath, wondering if he were going to voice what she had been thinking just moments earlier. But he only kissed her lingeringly on the lips, then picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed.

## Chapter Six

“Is that the planet we’re going to?” Garrick asked, catching sight of something on the vis-screen as he stepped onto the bridge.

At the sound of his voice, Tanna turned to give him a smile. “I thought you were down in the com room with Jalena.”

“I was, but Ena said she was going to show me how to land *Andrusis* on a planet’s surface.” He jerked his head toward the vis-screen. “So, is that Xandori?”

The day after the misadventure on the freighter, the crew had congregated in the mess to go over their haul. Though Tanna had already told him how valuable the plasma container was, he was surprised to discover the half dozen boxes of electronic equipment they’d managed to drag back with them brought the grand total close to half a million credits. Even after the standard shipboard split, that was a lot of money.

Once they learned how much money they were going to get, Vi had suggested going somewhere to celebrate. The rest of the crew had immediately latched onto the idea, practically begging Tanna to agree. Tanna and Malana had attempted to convince them it would be smarter to save most of their money, but the crew wasn’t in the mood to be fiscally responsible. They wanted to party and they knew exactly where they wanted to go—a planet named Xandori. According to their description, it was a pleasure planet that had something for everyone—no matter how wild, kinky, or outlandish they wanted to get. It sounded a lot like Las Vegas to him, only bigger. Tanna finally relented, especially when he sided with the women. It sounded like fun to him. He wouldn’t mind getting a little wild with Tanna, that was for sure.

Tanna nodded in answer to his question. “Yes, that’s Xandori. And since we’re going to be there in a few minutes, I’ll leave the landing part to you and Ena while I go get changed.”

Garrick lifted a brow. “Changed?”

She laughed. “We’re going to one of the most exclusive and expensive pleasure planets in the galaxy, Garrick. You didn’t think I was going to wear a T-shirt and breeches, did you?”

Garrick hadn’t given it much thought one way or another, but since Ena laughed right along with Tanna, he decided it must be a woman thing. As far as he was concerned, Tanna looked damn sexy in those breeches and T-shirts she wore. But as his gaze followed the sway of her curvy hips as she walked down the passageway, he found himself picturing her in something tight and slinky, and he suddenly decided he couldn’t wait to see what she changed into.

Ignoring his rapidly hardening cock, he turned around to find Ena regarding him with amusement.

“Damn, you’ve got it bad,” she said.

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to me,” she said, then grinned as she added, “And to every other woman on board.” She swiveled back around to the controls. “But don’t sweat it. You and the captain are good together.”

Garrick felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth at her words. Ena was right. He

and Tanna were good together. And not just in bed, either. While it had definitely started out that way, something had changed since he saved her from certain death on that freighter a week ago. He still couldn't explain what the hell had possessed him to put her over his knee and spank her. Other than the fact that he'd been terrified over almost losing her, of course. In all honesty, he had half expected her to throw him out of her cabin for going all Neanderthal on her like that. But instead, they made love with a desperation and connected on a level that was unlike anything he had ever experienced with another woman. Though Tanna hadn't said anything as they lay in bed entwined in each other's arms afterward, he could tell she had felt it, too.

"So," Ena said, glancing at him over her shoulder. "You going to come learn how to land this big boy or what?"

He chuckled. "Thought you'd never ask."

Actually, landing *Andrusis* on Xandori was a lot like landing a shuttle back on Earth, only easier. The computer-controlled reentry through the planet's atmosphere was amazingly smooth, and landing at the spaceport required nothing more than following a robotic floater to a designated parking space and setting down the ship. It was sort of boring, really. Garrick had expected it to be more exciting, not to mention challenging.

Wondering if Tanna had finished changing yet, Garrick told Ena he'd see her later, then headed down to the lower deck. Despite sharing her cabin ever since that first night they'd made love, he still found himself ringing the door buzzer instead of walking right in.

"Come in," Tanna called.

At her words, Garrick opened the door, but instead of walking inside, all he could do was stand there and stare. Tanna was in front of the full-length mirror, her back to him as she put on a pair of dangling earrings. She was dressed in a short black dress made of some slinky material that hugged her curves and showed off her shapely legs. Her long, dark hair hung down her back like a waterfall of black silk to dance and sway provocatively around her hips, and he almost let out a groan as she pivoted on her stiletto heels to look at him. He hadn't even known she owned any high-heels. And her make-up was so sultry that it was almost enough to bring him to his knees. She usually wore very little make-up, but for their night out on Xandori, she had gone all out, accentuating her dark eyes with black eyeliner and lots of mascara, and painted her lips a pale peach that made them seem even fuller than they normally were. The end result was just plain hot.

"Damn," he breathed. "You look beautiful."

Tanna slowly walked across the room to stand in front of him. "I'm glad you think so," she said, giving him a sexy smile.

The scent of her perfume was like a drug to his senses and he had to fight the urge to grab her and start pulling off her clothes. "I definitely do." He grinned. "In fact, I think you should wear a dress more often."

She laughed and stepped closer to slide her hands up the front of his shirt and around his neck. "That might be a little difficult to do on the ship, don't you think? It's not exactly a work uniform."

"I suppose you're right. I guess that means we'll just have to stop for some R and R more often." He bent his head to nuzzle her ear. "Although, as sexy as you look, I'm tempted to say to hell with Xandori and take you to bed instead."

Tanna let out a breathy moan. "I'm tempted to let you. But this is the first planet



we've stopped at since you came on board and I want to show you around." She coaxed his head up with a gentle hand in his hair. "Besides, I had to pull a lot of strings to get us reservations at a really exclusive restaurant and I don't want them to go to waste."

"Exclusive restaurant, huh?" He lifted one eyebrow suggestively. "Does it have a bed?"

She laughed. "No. But it does have very private booths."

"How private?" he asked.

She looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. "Private enough for you to slide your hand underneath my dress and see how wet all this talk has made me."

Garrick groaned and would have slid his hand underneath her dress right then, but Tanna must have known what he was thinking because she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the passageway with a husky laugh.

They were just heading down the corridor when Malana came around the corner. Since the daring rescue on the freighter, Malana hadn't been as icy toward Garrick, but he still wouldn't call her friendly. Since she was still wearing her usual shipboard clothing, he guessed she wasn't going ashore. He wondered why. He would have asked her, but the look she gave him and Tanna as she walked past them made him think she wasn't in the mood to chat.

Once Malana was out of earshot, he glanced at Tanna. "Malana's not going ashore?"

Tanna sighed. "I guess not. We usually hang out together whenever we dock, so maybe she doesn't feel like going out by herself."

Garrick frowned. Even though he and Malana weren't friends, he felt kind of bad for her. Who would want to hang around the ship when there was a planet like Xandori to explore? While he wanted to be alone with Tanna, he found himself asking the question anyway. "Do you want to invite her to come along?"

Tanna shook her head. "I don't think she wants to be a third wheel. Besides," she said, taking his hand and giving him a smile, "I want to be alone with you. Malana will probably end up tagging along with someone else."

Vi and Leala were in the cargo hold when he and Tanna got there, and both women let out a low whistle at the sight of their captain. To Garrick's surprise, her face colored at their teasing.

"I'll have my com with me," she said to them. "So, if you or the rest of the crew run into any trouble..."

"We'll call Malana," Vi said firmly.

Leala nodded. "That's right. As of now, you are officially off duty."

Garrick almost laughed. Tanna, however, looked like she wanted to protest, and he urged her toward the door with a gentle hand on the small of her back before she could.

"Have a good time," he told Vi and Leala over his shoulder.

"You, too," they said in unison before Vi teasingly added, "And Captain, don't do anything we wouldn't do!"

"Of course, there isn't anything we wouldn't do," Leala pointed out. "So, I guess that means you're going to have a damn good time."

Tanna shook her head as they walked down the gangway. "Honestly, those two are incorrigible."

Garrick chuckled and slipped his arm around her waist. "They just tease you because they love you so much."

“Yeah, I know,” Tanna admitted with a laugh.

He stopped at the bottom of the gangway. “So, where to?”

She turned to face him. “Well, our dinner reservations aren’t for a couple hours, so I was thinking maybe you’d like to take a harbor cruise.”

He lifted a brow in surprise. “On a boat?”

She smiled. “Kind of.”

His eyes narrowed. Okay, that had him curious. Tanna, however, was clearly determined to keep him in suspense because when he asked what she meant, she merely laughed and led the way down the space dock.

Garrick found himself looking around for a port-droid similar to the one that had greeted them when they had arrived on the way station, and was surprised when he didn’t see one. In fact, there wasn’t a droid in sight. He intended to ask Tanna where they all were when she stopped at a kiosk, pulled out her credit chip, and inserted it into one of the slots. A moment later the computer screen in front of her lit up to reveal a menu with several selections. Garrick leaned closer to read them, but before he could, Tanna pressed her finger to the touch screen and the menu disappeared.

“What did you do?” he asked.

She glanced at him as she put her credit chip back in her purse. “I ordered us a cab.”

“Oh.”

He hadn’t expected her to say something so ordinary. On the other hand, he had to admit that getting a taxi from a computerized kiosk still beat doing it the old-fashioned way.

After everything else he had seen, Garrick knew it would be foolish to assume that taxi cabs would look the same as they had seven-hundred years ago, but when a sleek hovercraft pulled up beside the curb a few minutes later, all he could do was stare.

“You really have to stop doing that, or people are going to start figuring out that you’re not from around here,” Tanna teased. She took his hand and gave it a tug. “Come on.”

Garrick had been so busy looking at the outside of the hovercab that he hadn’t realized there wasn’t anyone driving it until he and Tanna were inside. He supposed he shouldn’t be that surprised. Even his antiquated ship had been equipped with autopilot. Of course, the autopilot on his ship hadn’t spoken in a voice that sounded so human, Garrick thought, as the computer asked where he and Tanna wanted to go. As he sat back in the seat and put his arm around Tanna, he had the feeling it was going to be an evening filled with quite a few new experiences.

The space dock was on the outskirts of the city, which meant they had a good ten minute ride to the harbor, and Garrick gazed out the window in fascination. When Tanna announced they were going to be stopping on Xandori, he had looked up the planet on the IPD, but the pictures he found on the computer didn’t compare to the real thing.

In some ways, it reminded him of San Francisco harbor, but with a few slight differences. For one thing, the buildings that covered the hillsides surrounding the harbor were much more modern looking, all of them gleaming glass and metal. For another thing, the skies were filled with darting hovercrafts that seemed constantly on the verge of running into each other. He imagined there must be some method to the madness of it, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what it was.

One thing was very familiar, though. As they passed over a beachfront area, he

looked out and saw hundreds of people playing in the surf. He couldn't help but smile. A lot of things might have changed in seven-hundred years, but it was nice to see that something as simple as splashing in the water was still just as much fun as it had ever been.

Tanna had been concerned the cruise would be sold out, especially since it was such a popular tourist attraction, but they had no problem getting on board. Though there were seats available, he and Tanna decided to stand by the railing instead, and he slipped an arm around her slender waist as the hovercraft lifted off the dock with a hum and skimmed along the water.

Though the surrounding scenery was different, the harbor cruise reminded Garrick of the ones they used to have on Puget Sound back in Seattle, except for the fact that the ship they were on hovered above the water, of course. What really blew his mind was when the thing suddenly dived underwater. It took him a moment to realize an invisible shield had gone up around them, but by then, Tanna was already laughing at his reaction. With any other woman, he would have been concerned the whole thing had ruffled his cool exterior, but instead he found himself laughing with her.

"You could have told me this thing turns into a submarine," he said.

She smiled. "I could have, but it was more fun seeing the look on your face."

He chuckled and pulled her into his arms for a kiss. And after his momentary start of surprise, he had to admit the underwater portion of the cruise was amazing. They had some really bizarre looking sea creatures on Xandori. He just hoped none of them showed up on the menu at dinner. He'd never been much for seafood.

Since the restaurant they were going to wasn't far from the harbor docks, he and Tanna decided to skip getting another hovercab and simply walked instead. Garrick was all for that idea, since it gave him plenty of opportunity to watch Tanna walk in those skyscraper heels of hers. They did some incredible things to her legs and put a wiggle in her walk that was truly mesmerizing.

While they were a little early, the impeccably dressed maître'd at the restaurant had no problem taking them straight to their table the moment they walked in. Even though the place was much fancier than the café they had gone to on the way station the week before, for some reason Garrick had expected to find the same computerized menu, albeit with different dishes on it, and he was surprised when the man handed a large, leather-bound menu to each of them. Garrick opened it, expecting to see a traditional menu, but it wasn't like any kind of menu he'd ever seen. Inside the leather cover, it looked more like an extremely thin hand-held computer than a normal menu. Pictures of each selection would phase in and out on different parts of the screen. They were so realistic looking that Garrick almost swore he could smell them. There was some text accompanying the pictures describing each of them, but that didn't help much since he didn't recognize any of the dishes, or what was in them. So, he let Tanna choose the dishes like he had done on the way station. As usual, she had great taste. The food she picked out was delicious.

While the food was fantastic, though, Garrick was more interested in Tanna. As she had promised, the booths in the restaurant were very private. Of course, she had forgotten to mention that each table came with its own waiter, who was constantly nearby, ready to serve them. While the man obviously tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, Garrick couldn't help but feel as if he were hovering. The waiter did disappear long enough between dinner and dessert, however, for Garrick to slide his hand up Tanna's bare leg

and underneath her short skirt. He had planned to slip his fingers underneath her panties, but instead his fingers found nothing between him and the downy curls at the juncture of her thighs. He groaned. He certainly hadn't expected that.

"What a bad girl you are, not wearing any panties," he admonished softly.

Tanna opened her mouth to reply, but all that came out was a little moan as Garrick gently urged her legs apart and teasingly ran his finger along the folds of her pussy.

"You're very wet," he whispered.

She didn't reply, but only bit her lip. No doubt to stifle another moan, he thought. He leaned in closer, pressing a kiss to the sensitive spot behind her ear as he slowly eased a finger into her pussy. She didn't try to stifle her moan this time, Garrick noticed, and he couldn't help but smile at the sexy sound that escaped her lips. When he wiggled his finger back and forth, he heard her breathing quicken, and he wondered if he could make her come right there in the middle of a crowded restaurant. Something told him he could. At least he would have been able to if their very attentive waiter hadn't chosen that moment to appear at the table with their dessert.

Beside him, Tanna stiffened and tried to push his hand away, but Garrick stayed where he was. To his annoyance, so did the waiter.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" the man asked.

Garrick glanced at Tanna, who was blushing furiously. "We're good," he told the man. "Thanks."

Giving them a nod, the waiter turned and walked across the dining room to take up his post near the wall. From where he was standing, the man would be able to see everything he and Tanna did. Which was why Garrick reluctantly slid his finger out of her pussy when she gave his hand a light smack.

Garrick didn't know how he was supposed to concentrate on dessert now that he knew Tanna wasn't wearing any panties beneath that sexy dress of hers, though. It didn't help when she let out a little moan as she took a bite of the decadent chocolate cake. From the flirtatious look in her eye, he suspected she was probably making the sexy sound just to torment him. Two could play that game, he thought. When he got her back to the ship, he was going to tease her until she was so hot she couldn't take it anymore. If he could hold out that long himself. Stifling a groan, he shifted in the seat to ease the ache in his groin. Just a few more bites of cake and they would be on their way.

After dessert, however, Tanna announced she had tickets to see a show, much to Garrick's dismay. He would much rather have gone directly back to the ship, but Tanna was so excited she had been able to get tickets to such a popular show he didn't have the heart to tell her that he'd prefer to skip it. He stifled another groan. Taking her to bed would have to wait.

Even as sexually charged as he was, Garrick had to admit the show was pretty spectacular. A combination of dance and acrobatics, it would have been entertaining to watch back in his day, but the fact that the performers wore anti-gravity belts while doing their dazzling routine made the whole show even more fascinating.

Of course, that didn't mean he wasn't glad when the show was over and he and Tanna could finally go back to the ship. However, his plans to get her into bed were once again thwarted when they walked past a nightclub on the way to the spaceport.

"Let's go inside," Tanna suggested.

She didn't wait for a reply, but gave his hand a tug and led him toward the door. Or

more precisely, to the line of people in front of it waiting get into the club. Great, Garrick thought. They'd be there half the night waiting to get inside. The guy working the line took one look at Tanna, though, and ushered them into the club a few minutes later. While Garrick's possessive side was jealous of the way the guy looked at her, he told himself to just be grateful they had gotten inside so quickly.

Except for the hover bar encircling the huge, round dance floor, and the waitresses zipping back and forth ten feet above the crowd delivering drinks, the nightclub looked like all the others he had been to, right down to the colored strobe lights and loud music. Finding a table in the corner, they ordered drinks from the scantily dressed waitress, and then sat back to watch the people gyrating on the dance floor. The dancers weren't following any particular step that he could see, but were just moving to the rhythm of the music.

"It's good to see that dancing hasn't changed in seven-hundred years," Garrick remarked as he took a swallow of ale.

Tanna's eyes danced over the rim of her frosted cocktail glass. "Think you still remember how to do it?"

"Dance?"

She nodded.

He chuckled. "One way to find out."

Pushing back his chair, he got to his feet and held out his hand. Tanna smiled and took his hand, following him out onto the crowded dance floor. Finding a clear space, Garrick put his hands on her waist and pulled her close. She reached up to loop her arms around his neck, her body automatically swaying to the slow, sultry beat of the music. While he preferred to go straight back to the ship, Garrick had to admit that slow dancing with Tanna was the next best thing to having sex. Beneath his breeches, his cock began to harden in response to her body and he pulled her a little closer.

Abruptly, the music changed to a fast techno-beat. Tanna changed with it, taking a step back to lift her arms over her head and wiggle her hips. While the dance move was certainly a turn-on, Garrick decided it was the seductive look on her face that had him hard as a rock. With her eyes half-closed and her lips parted, she was the image of sexiness.

As they continued to dance, Garrick realized the house lights had dimmed to the point it was almost completely dark. The leisurely moving strobe lights were now the primary source of illumination in the club and the only people he could see were the dancers closest to him and Tanna. To add to the sense of isolation even more, a slow moving fog had started to roll in and was now swirling around them and the other dancers. The way the strobe lights bounced off the fog made the club seem almost otherworldly somehow.

The music started to slow again and Tanna closed the distance between them. But instead of facing him, she turned around so her back to him. Garrick automatically wrapped his arms around her waist to pull her close, his hips moving in rhythm with hers. As they dipped and swayed, her ass rubbed rhythmically against his cock, and he let out a low groan in her ear. Much more of this and he was going to explode right in his breeches. And if the soft, sexy moans Tanna let out were any indication, she was just as aroused as he was.

He was still completely focused on Tanna and the way she was undulating against

him when the fog momentarily thinned in front of them to expose a group of nearby dancers. Only they weren't exactly dancing. Instead, the three people in front of them, two dark-haired men and a slender, beautiful woman, were in the middle of making out on the dance floor.

The woman was dancing between the men, her arms looped around one partner's neck while the other pressed up against her from behind, his hips moving in time with hers. As Garrick watched, the man at her back ran his hands over her hips, pulling up her skirt to reveal long, slender legs and a shapely ass. Holding her skirt in one hand, the man then slid the other between the woman's legs to play with her bare pussy. In response to his ministrations, the woman thrust out her ass and spread her legs a little bit more, all while continuing to move her body to the music. Her other partner bent his head to nibble at the side of her neck, one hand coming up to caress her breast through the sheer blouse she was wearing. The attention the two men were paying her had her throwing her head back and moaning in pleasure. Before long, she gave up any pretense of dancing and began to grind her pussy against the hand of the man behind her.

Garrick turned his attention to the man at her back to see him reach down to undo his breeches with his free hand and pull out his hard cock. A moment later, he slid into the woman from behind in one smooth thrust.

While Garrick wasn't naïve to the concept of a ménage, he was a little surprised the trio was having sex so openly right there on the dance floor. Maybe it was all the fog and low lighting in the club. It did give the patrons a sense of privacy, he supposed. When he glanced around the dance floor to see if anyone else had noticed the threesome, however, he realized the woman and her two lovers weren't the only ones having sex. Though it was difficult to tell with all the fog swirling around, it appeared that most of the dancers on the floor were engaged in some form of sexual activity.

Glancing down at Tanna to see what she thought of the whole situation, he saw her eyes fixed on the ménage going on in front of them.

"Does that turn you on?" he asked softly, his mouth close to her ear.

Tanna nodded. "Watching it is exciting, yes," she admitted, then gave him a meaningful look over her shoulder. "But not doing it. I'm not into sharing. So, don't get any ideas."

Garrick chuckled and nuzzled her ear. "That's good to know because I never learned to share, either."

"It's not necessarily only the idea of a threesome that turns me on, though," Tanna continued, her gaze going back to the trio. "It's the fact that they're having sex out in public like this."

Garrick lifted a brow, surprised. This was a whole new side of Tanna that he'd never seen before. He was glad they had come in here. Unable to control himself, he ran his hands around the front of her body, cupping her breasts in his palms and squeezing them gently. Bending his head, he pressed his mouth to the sensitive skin on the side of her neck.

At her indrawn breath, Garrick stopped what he was doing and lifted his head to see that the trio had shifted positions. The woman had bent over and was now taking the cock of the man in front deep in her mouth as the other man began to pump into her even faster. Feeling his own cock stiffen so much it was almost painful, Garrick took his hand away from one of Tanna's breasts and slid it underneath her short skirt. Finding her clit

among the downy curls, he began to make slow circles round and round the plump, little nub. Tanna moaned, grinding against his hand as she reached back with her own to rub his cock through his breeches.

Garrick let out a groan. *Damn, what she was doing felt good.* It also made it very hard to concentrate, he discovered. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to lift her skirt and plunge himself into her right there on the dance floor. Tanna must have felt the same way because she turned her head to whisper in his ear.

"Maybe we should go back to the ship," she suggested.

An hour ago, Garrick would have been all for it, but as turned on as he was, he wasn't sure he could make it that far. And he really didn't feel like stopping to make out in an alley on the way back to the ship. "I have a better idea."

Taking her hand, he led her through the maze of dancers back to their table, which was, thankfully, unoccupied. Not to mention half hidden in the swirling fog. Perfect for what he had in mind, Garrick thought.

"What..." Tanna began, but he silenced her with a kiss.

"You said you were turned on by the idea of having sex in public," he said softly. "How 'bout we try it ourselves and see what you think of that?"

Tanna's beautiful eyes went a little wide at that, but she didn't protest when he took her hands and backed toward a chair. Giving her a sexy grin, he sat down and unbuttoned his breeches. Released from its confines, his cock sprang free to stand tall and proud.

Garrick held out his hand to Tanna, but though she took it, she didn't straddle him right away. Instead, she dropped to her knees before him and bent her head to take his shaft in her mouth. The move caught him completely by surprise and he gasped aloud at how exquisite her mouth felt. Groaning, he wrapped his fingers in her hair and slowly guided her up and down. But she clearly wasn't interested in being guided, because she began to move exactly the way she wanted to, heedless of the hand he had in her hair. *God, her mouth felt unbelievable!* She seemed to have no interest in giving him slow, gentle licks, either. Instead, she was determined to take as much of his cock in her mouth as possible. With that kind of enthusiasm, it wasn't long before he was so deep down her throat he was sure he was going to explode. Not wanting the pleasure to end so quickly, he tightened his grip in her hair, urging her head up. As his length popped out of her mouth, she looked up at him quizzically.

"Much more of that and I'm going to be done before we even start," he warned.

She gave him a coy smile. "Maybe we should dance some more and let you cool off then."

"I don't think so," he said, taking her hand and gently pulling her to her feet.

Tanna didn't need any more encouragement. Hitching up her skirt, she straddled him and slowly lowered herself onto his cock. Garrick let out a groan as her pussy sheathed him, and he automatically cupped her ass cheeks in his hands to set the pace as she began to ride up and down on him.

He was so caught up in what they were doing he didn't realize another couple was now occupying the table next to them, until he heard a light smacking sound, followed by a woman's high-pitched moan. Still urging Tanna up and down, he glanced over to see a leggy brunette bent over the table, a dark-haired man taking her from behind. Every so often, the man would lift one hand and spank the girl on her pink ass as he pumped into her.

Garrick turned back to Tanna, intending to point out the new attraction, only to discover she had already noticed the other couple and was obviously interested by what she saw. As if just realizing he was watching her, she turned to give him a slow, sexy smile.

“Well, that certainly makes me look at the spanking you gave me the other day in a whole, new light,” she said softly.

He lifted a brow, a little surprised. Yet another side to Tanna he was just now getting to see. Getting her away from the ship and all her responsibilities was definitely bringing out her inner bad girl. “Does that mean you wouldn’t mind a playful smack on the bottom now and then?”

Smile widening, she leaned over to put her mouth close to his ear. “Only when I’m being bad,” she said in a sexy voice. “And if you haven’t noticed, I’m being very bad right now.”

He chuckled. “I’d definitely have to agree.”

Lifting his hand, he gave her left ass cheek a firm smack. Tanna gasped, her pussy squeezing tightly around his cock as she rolled her hips. Curious to see if he’d get the same response, Garrick spanked her again, only to let out a hoarse groan when her pussy tightened around his shaft again. *Oh yeah.* “Harder,” she demanded in a husky voice.

He gave her ass another smack. “Are you saying you want me to fuck you harder or spank you harder?”

She moaned. “Spank me. Fuck me. Both. Just do it harder.”

Garrick obeyed, his hand connecting with her ass more firmly as he thrust into her harder.

Tanna began to ride him faster, her hips undulating in a steady up and down motion that moved him closer and closer to the edge every time she came down on him.

“Don’t stop,” she begged.

He continued to spank her ass, his smacks matching her rhythm perfectly as she rode up and down on him. Garrick clenched his jaw, trying to hold off as long as he could, but Tanna’s pussy felt too amazing, her moans of pleasure too damn hot. Before long, there was no holding back the orgasm building deep in his balls. Giving her one more hard spank on the ass, he locked his hands firmly on her hips and began to pull her forcefully down on his pulsing cock, driving himself into her to the very core each time.

She moaned with each of his thrusts, her voice deep and husky as she breathed, “God yes! Just like that. Don’t stop, don’t stop.”

He couldn’t have stopped now if he tried. He was too far past the point of no return. With a hoarse cry, he threw his head back and exploded inside of her, his whole body going rigid as he filled her hot pussy with spurt after spurt of his cum.

Garrick was dimly aware of Tanna coming with him, her cries as wanton and passionate as his own. It was only when she slumped against his chest, gasping for air afterward, that he thought about how loud they had been. He looked around the club, but no one seemed to have noticed, even the couple at the next table was oblivious. Everyone was too intent on their own pleasure to care about what anyone else was doing, he realized.

Tanna lifted her head from his shoulder to gaze down at him. “That was incredible.”

He threaded his hand in her hair to pull her down for a long kiss. “You’re the one who’s incredible,” he said softly. “What do you say we go back to the ship and continue



this there?"

"Mmm," she murmured against his mouth. "I like the way you think."

When Tanna had climbed off his lap, Garrick quickly buttoned his breeches, then took her hand and headed for the door. They were both still laughing about what they had done as they stepped out of the club and started up the street. They were both so eager to get back to the ship that neither of them noticed the four men who stepped in their path, until they were almost right on top of them. Garrick pulled Tanna to a halt and instinctively pushed her behind him. Much to his annoyance, however, she refused to stay there. Out of the corner of his eye, Garrick saw the other people on the street quickly moving away from them. They obviously recognized trouble coming when they saw it.

"What do you want?" Tanna demanded of the men. "If you're looking for money, you've picked the wrong couple. We just spent everything we had on dinner and a show."

The man in front pulled a gun from the holster on his hip, holding it loosely at his side. "We're not interested in your money. We just want him."

Garrick stiffened. Tanna had said there were people who would pay a lot of money to get their hands on someone like him. Before he could say anything, though, Tanna spoke again.

"That bitch Micole Sendane sent you after us, didn't she?"

The man with the gun smirked. "We work for Koralo, not for any woman. If you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of this and let us get what we came for, or else you're going to end up getting hurt."

Garrick didn't know who the hell Koralo was and he didn't care. All he knew was that the men didn't look like the kind who would listen to reason. Which meant there was only one thing he could do. He just hoped Tanna would be sensible enough to do as he told her.

Without warning, he reached out and gave Tanna a shove. "Run!"

Not waiting to see if she obeyed, he launched himself at the man with the gun. The man didn't even have time to raise his weapon much less pull the trigger. Drawing back his fist, Garrick hit the man square in the jaw with one solid punch. The man slumped to the ground, out cold, his weapon skidding harmlessly across the pavement. Garrick glanced at the pistol, wondering if he should try to go for it or throw himself at the other men. Before he could decide, the three remaining men rushed him, knocking him to the ground. *Shit.*

Garrick got in half a dozen satisfying blows to each of his opponents before things went to crap. He supposed three against one was too much to go up against, though, even for a man his size, and he took several punches to the jaw before a heavy boot slammed into his ribs. He grunted, but ignored the pain as he lashed out with his fist again. As it connected with the jaw of one of his attackers, he caught sight of another going for his pistol. Garrick tried to grab the man's arm, but the third attacker landed a punch to his jaw that made his head smack against the ground so hard he literally saw stars. Grimacing, Garrick pushed himself upright to see the man who had drawn his weapon leveling the pistol at him. Garrick braced himself. At least Tanna had gotten away.

From somewhere behind him, Garrick heard a humming sound and then saw a flash of light. A moment later, the man with the pistol flew backward and slammed into the wall of a building. Two more deep hums followed the first, close enough this time that Garrick could feel the heat that went along with the glowing flashes of light. *Shit.*

Someone was firing a weapon right over his head.

He jerked around to see who had come to his aid and was stunned to see Tanna standing behind him, both hands firmly holding the pistol the first man had dropped. He barely had time to duck as she fired several more shots, and when he lifted his head again, it was to see the last two men hauling ass down the street. They disappeared around the corner before she could get another shot at them.

If his scuffle with the men hadn't sent the other tourists running, the shots certainly did, but Garrick barely paid attention to them as he turned to look at Tanna. She tossed the pistol on the ground and ran over to drop to her knees beside him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, reaching out to gently cup his cheek.

His face hurt like hell, but right then, he was more concerned with what she was doing there. "I'm fine," he said, his mouth tight. "I thought I told you to run."

She dropped her hand to regard him with annoyance in her dark eyes. "It's a good thing I didn't or you'd be loaded in a hovercraft heading for Koralo's ship right now."

He scowled. She was probably right, though he sure as hell wasn't going to admit it. "I thought you promised to be more careful and listen to what I say."

She lifted her chin. "I promised to be more careful, but I never said I would do what you told me. Now, come on, we don't have time to talk about this. Those two that got away are probably going for reinforcements. We have to get out of here and back to the ship."

Garrick clenched his jaw. He would much rather have argued the point, but he realized Tanna was right. *Again*. Staying there would just put her in more danger. He took her hand to help her to her feet and together they ran down the street, leaving the two men where they lay.

While he kept an eye out for more of Koralo's men, Tanna pulled her com from her purse and told Malana to get everyone back to the ship on the double. To his surprise, Tanna made pretty good time in those high heels of hers and they were back to the spaceport faster than he would have thought possible. Without encountering any more thugs, luckily.

"Is everyone back?" Tanna asked Malana as soon as they ran on board the ship.

The other woman looked from Tanna to Garrick, a frown on her face and concern in her eyes. "Yes. Why?"

Tanna ignored her question. "I'll explain later. Just tell Ena to get us out of here."

Malana hesitated for a moment, but then took out her com and gave the command. "What happened?" she asked as she clipped the handheld radio back on her belt.

"We got attacked on the way back to the ship," Tanna said.

The other woman hurried over to Tanna, her eyes wide. "Attacked! Are you hurt?"

Tanna shook her head. "No, we're fine. Garrick and I fought them off."

The first officer slanted him a hard look, but said nothing. Instead, she turned back to Tanna. "You should have Sela check you out anyway to make sure you're okay. I'll have her meet you in the med-bay."

Tanna shook her head again. "I'm fine. All I need is a hot shower. And," she added, giving Garrick a smile, "a night in bed. A visit to the med-bay is a good idea, though. I want her to check Garrick out."

Malana's mouth tightened, but she didn't press the issue. Instead, she just watched Tanna walk toward the steps that led to the deck above. Garrick started to follow, only to

stop when the first officer caught his arm.

“This is your fault,” she hissed. “Tanna could have been killed because of you.”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

Her lip curled. “They never would have attacked Tanna if she weren’t with you. You’re a walking, talking target to anyone who wants to make some quick money. And as long as you’re with Tanna, she’s a target, too.”

He clenched his jaw. He wanted to argue, but deep down, some part of him knew Malana was right.

“Garrick?”

At the sound of Tanna’s voice, Garrick glanced in her direction to see she had stopped midway up the stairs and was regarding him with a questioning look.

“I’m coming,” he said.

Giving Malana a hard look, he turned and walked over to the set of steps to join Tanna.

“What was that about?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Malana just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Tanna looked skeptical. “I’m fine. But like I said, I want Sela to take a look at you.” She reached up to tenderly touch his cheek. “Those guys smacked you around pretty good.”

“Nah, I’m fine.” He ignored the soreness in his jaw to give her a lopsided grin.

“Besides, I had them right where I wanted them.”

“Uh-huh.” She shook her head, a smile curving her lips. “All the same, I want Sela to take a look at you. Captain’s orders.”

He lifted a brow. “Is that so?”

“Yes. Now, come on,” she said, taking his hand. “The sooner Sela checks you out, the sooner we can go to bed.”

As Tanna led him up the stairs, Garrick glanced back to find Malana watching them, her eyes filled with undisguised hatred. He shouldn’t be surprised. The woman had detested him from the first day on board and now she despised him even more for putting her captain in danger. Something told him Malana’s dislike went even deeper than that, though. And for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why.

As Tanna lay sleeping in his arms later that night, however, Garrick decided that figuring out why Malana hated him wasn’t important. The first officer was right about one thing. As long as he was with Tanna, she would be in danger.

## Chapter Seven

Tanna wasn't sure exactly what woke her, but when she turned over to snuggle up closer to Garrick, she was surprised to find the bed empty. Lifting herself up on an elbow, she pushed her hair back from her face with one hand and looked sleepily around the darkened cabin for Garrick. He was standing near the desk, his back to her as he shrugged into a shirt, but at the rustle of blankets, he turned to face her. Thanks to Sela's ministrations and modern medical technology, he didn't have so much as a bruise to show for the fight with Koralo's men.

Even though Garrick was fine now, she still shuddered every time she thought of what could have happened to them. If Koralo's men had stunned first and asked questions later, Garrick would be the slaver's captive right now. She didn't want to think what would have happened to him after that.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," he said apologetically.

"You didn't." She glanced at the clock. "What are you doing up so early?"

He looked down as he buttoned his shirt. "I never went to sleep."

Something about the way he said the words made her frown. "Why not?" she asked, pushing back the covers. Getting to her feet, she grabbed her short robe from the arm of the chaise and put it on, then tied the belt around her waist. "Couldn't you sleep?"

He didn't look at her as he tucked his shirt into his breeches. "I was thinking."

She reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. "About what?"

"About us."

Her brow furrowed. She didn't like the sound of that. "What about us?"

Garrick was silent for so long Tanna thought he wasn't going to answer, and when he finally lifted his head to look at her, his blue eyes were the saddest she had ever seen them. "I can't do this, Tanna."

A weight suddenly settled on her chest. "What do you mean?"

He let out a heavy sigh. "I can't be with you anymore."

Whatever she had expected him to say, it wasn't that. The weight on her chest became even more crushing, making it hard to breathe, much less think. She couldn't do anything but stand there and stare at him. "I d-don't understand," she finally managed.

"I can't keep putting you in danger, Tanna. It's not fair."

"Danger?" she echoed. "What are you talking about?"

He ran his hand through his hair. "Tanna, those men back on Xandori wouldn't have attacked us if they hadn't been trying to get their hands on me. I couldn't live with myself if you got hurt because of me. Which is why I'll be getting off the ship at whatever place we stop next."

"You don't have to do that. I wasn't hurt," she protested. "We'll just be more careful next time." Tears welled in her eyes. She couldn't let him walk out of her life. She *wouldn't*.

Garrick reached out to gently cup her cheek in his hand, wiping a tear away with his thumb. "Please don't make this any harder than it is. I can't bear it if you cry."

She pushed his hand away angrily. "Don't I get a say in this?" she demanded. "Dammit, Garrick, I love you. Doesn't that matter to you?"

“Of course it does. I love you, Tanna, too much to let you get hurt,” he said hoarsely. “Which is why I have to get off this ship.”

Tanna hadn’t even realized how much she wanted to hear Garrick say he loved her, but in all her wild imaginings, she never dreamed it would come out like this. It should have made her happy, but all it did was make her want to cry. She wasn’t going to let it end like this. Before she could say anything, though, the ship’s intercom beeped and Ena’s voice interrupted her.

“Captain,” she called her voice urgent.

Tanna swallowed hard. “Yes.”

If Ena thought her voice sounded a little funny, the other girl made no mention of it. “You need to get up to the bridge, Captain. We have a big problem.”

Tanna sighed. “I’ll be right there,” she told Ena, then waited until the other girl had closed the com before giving Garrick a pointed look. “This conversation isn’t over.”

She didn’t wait for a reply, but instead walked over to the built-in along the wall and grabbed a fresh pair of panties from the drawer. She wasn’t letting Garrick go without a fight, and after she took care of whatever it was up on the bridge, they were going to continue their discussion. He wasn’t getting off this ship, she promised herself, even if it meant not docking anywhere for the next year. Or at least until she could get him to see reason.

\* \* \* \*

Tanna and Garrick were just making their way toward the bridge when the floor began to pitch wildly, knocking both of them hard against the wall of the passageway.

“What the hell is Ena doing?” Tanna muttered as she righted herself and continued down the hallway, hugging the wall more closely this time.

As if in answer to her question, Ena’s voice came over the ship’s intercom. “Captain, you really need to get up here!” she shouted. “We’re in a lot of trouble.”

Tanna frowned. She had never heard that tone in her pilot’s voice before and it worried her. She glanced at Garrick as she quickened her step. “We need to hurry.”

She and Garrick had just stepped onto the bridge when a heavy clanking sound reverberated throughout the entire ship. *Andrusis* shook so violently they both almost fell and she had to grab the back of Ena’s chair to keep her balance.

“What the hell is going on?” Tanna demanded.

Ena cursed under her breath as she fought to keep *Andrusis* steady. “I’m not exactly sure which really shitty situation to describe first, Captain—that three ships are attacking us, that at least one of them seems intent on docking with us, or that they’re herding us straight toward a really nasty asteroid belt. No matter which one you pick, I’d say we’re really screwed.”

Her stomach clenching, Tanna leaned forward to look out the vis-screen. Her eyes went wide as a sleek looking merchant vessel came into sight above *Andrusis*, effectively cutting off Ena’s escape maneuver in that direction. To the left, she could just make out a smaller ship that looked like a shuttle. It was flying so close to them that it blocked Ena from going in that direction, either.

Tanna turned her attention back to the merchant ship bearing down on them from above. At first glance, it appeared to be just like any other ship in its class, but when she looked more closely, she noticed little modifications on it that made her heart pound even

harder with fear. The engine nacelles were too large by half for a ship of that size, meaning it was meant for hauling ass. And those little openings on either side of the nose looked suspiciously like weapon ports.

"Damn," she muttered.

Beside her, Garrick leaned forward to look out the vis-screen. "Who are they? What do they want?"

"They're pirates," she told him. "And I'm not talking about the cheap little snatch-and-grab kind, either. That ship of theirs is expensive and can probably outrun and outgun almost anyone else within a few thousand light years. These creeps are serious trouble." She turned her attention to her pilot. "Ena, can you get us out of here?"

Ena shook her head. "I've been trying; Captain, but they picked the perfect place for this ambush. Between those three ships and that asteroid field in front of us, they've got us pretty much trapped. I'm doing everything I can just to keep them away from our docking airlock. Speaking of which, where the heck is that third ship?"

As if in answer to her question, something slammed into *Andrusis*. Following the impact was the horrific screech of metal on metal that made the ship vibrate so violently Tanna could feel it all the way down to her bones.

"Crap," Ena said. "I think I just figured out where that third ship went."

Before Tanna could say anything, Naya's voice came over the ship's intercom. "Captain, I'm by the main airlock. Someone's got a shuttle attached back here and they're trying to manually open the door. What's going on? What should I do?"

Crap, crap, and double crap, Tanna thought. "They're trying to board us," she muttered. "Naya, don't let them get that door open. Weld the door shut if you have to." Leaning forward, she pushed the announcement button on the intercom. "Ladies, if you haven't figured it out yet, we're being boarded by pirates. Get yourselves and every weapon we have back to the main airlock. And make it fast!"

Turning around, Tanna hurried across the bridge and began rummaging through the weapons locker beside the navigation table. Grabbing one of the blast-pistols, she handed it to Garrick, then dumped a handful of metal cylinders in his free hand.

"Ena," she said, glancing at the other girl. "Try to get us out of here. And don't let them get another ship attached to us. If they do, we're all dead. Speaking of which, do your best to stay away from that asteroid field while you're at it. Get too close and one of those things will smash us to bits faster than any laser blast."

"Sure, no problem," Ena said. "How hard can all that be?"

Tanna knew it was a lot to manage, but Ena was one of the best pilots she knew. If anyone could do it, Ena could. Tanna made no comment as she grabbed another pistol from the weapons locker, though.

She glanced at Garrick as she got to her feet. "Let's go," she said, then took off down the passageway at a run.

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Garrick raced after her, stuffing the cylinders into his pocket while he tried to figure out how the pistol worked. Any resemblance to an old-fashioned pistol ended with its basic shape. It didn't have a cylinder like a revolver, or anywhere to slide in a magazine like an automatic weapon. If that weren't enough, there were three switches on the side he was completely clueless about. He wished he had asked someone to show him how to use the thing before now.

“How do the hell do you use this damn thing?” he finally asked Tanna when he caught up with her.

She didn’t stop to answer, but scrambled down the stairs leading to the airlock in the cargo bay area. “The first switch turns it on,” she explained quickly. “The second one selects the power. Up for high, down for low. High power will kill someone; low power will stun them. But high power uses up the cartridges faster. When the third switch starts to flash, it means you’re almost out of power. Plug one of the cylinders that I gave you into the receptacle at the base and push the flashing button to recharge. It can take about thirty or forty seconds to recharge, so make sure you’ve got cover while it’s charging.” At the bottom of the stairs, she turned to look at him. “Got it?”

Garrick had been trying to look at the pistol as she explained the functions, but quickly gave up. He knew how to turn it on; he’d figure out the rest as he went. “Yeah.”

He and Tanna got to the cargo bay just in time to see the crew dragging boxes in front of the airlock door, trying to set up some kind of fortification to hide behind. While they were doing that, Naya was intent on beating at the controls with a large pry bar, but it wasn’t doing any good. The large metal door was sliding open even as he and Tanna stumbled to a halt behind the boxes.

Garrick instinctively pushed Tanna down behind the crates as he thumbed on his pistol. Glaring at him, she pushed his hand away in annoyance and levered herself up to aim her weapon at the airlock door like the rest of the crew was doing. He clenched his jaw, but said nothing as he took up a position beside her.

He held his breath, waiting for the pirates to burst in, but they didn’t. He strained his ears, trying to pick up the sound of footsteps in the airlock, but all he could hear was the sound of the crew’s heavy breathing. He was just starting to think maybe this attack on the airlock had been a diversion when an object sailed through the open door and into the cargo bay.

“Grenade!” Naya screamed.

At the word, Garrick grabbed Tanna’s arm and pushed her to the floor, shielding her body with his own. This time, she didn’t push him away and he felt her tremble beneath him as the blast shook the cargo bay. Luckily, the grenade had landed in front of the crates, but the blast still made his ears ring and blurred his vision, not to mention made his skin sting like it was on fire. Strangely, though, the grenade didn’t cause as much damage as he thought it would. With all the other technological wonders he had seen, he expected the thing to tear the place apart. Apparently, it must be some kind of concussion grenade. Which meant the pirates were more likely after slaves than any cargo the *Andrusis* was carrying. Abruptly, Malana’s words came back to him. *Tanna is in danger as long as she’s around you. Shit.* The pirates were after him. Why the hell hadn’t he just stayed on Xandori? Because he was a jackass, he thought. It was too late for recriminations now, however, especially since those bastards would be storming the ship at any second.

Determined to protect Tanna, he jumped to his feet and began shooting through the smoke in the direction of the airlock door. That didn’t stop the pirates from boarding the salvage ship, though. A group of at least a dozen black-clad men and women burst out of the airlock, weapons blazing. If it weren’t for the partially demolished crates that still stood in front of Garrick and the rest of the crew, the pirates would have taken them down within seconds. Garrick couldn’t quite get the aiming technique down with the

unfamiliar weapon at first, but at least his shots slowed down the pirates long enough for Tanna and the rest of the crew to start returning fire.

To his relief, some of the pirates began to go down under the barrage. Garrick had no idea if his pistol was set to stun or kill, and he didn't have time to check. Nor did he really care. He was going to do whatever was necessary to protect Tanna and the other women.

Though the pirates were more heavily armed and outnumbered the crew, they were also at a disadvantage because they had to come through the door in groups of one and two. After a few more pirates went down, the remainders were forced back inside the airlock. Garrick was just beginning to think he and the crew might actually be able to fight them off when Ena's voice came through the intercom.

"Captain!" she shouted. "Another ship latched onto us at the shuttle bay emergency-exit hatch. I tried to stop them, but I couldn't. They were just too damn fast."

Fuck, Garrick thought. If he and the crew weren't in trouble before, they sure as hell were now. If the pirates took over the shuttle bay, there was nothing to stop them from bringing one of their ships right inside the *Andrusis*. If that happened, who knew how many of the bastards would come aboard?

"Damn, damn, and double damn!" Tanna muttered.

"I'm on it, Captain," Malana said. "Leala, come with me."

"I'll go with you, too," Tanna said.

Garrick opened his mouth to protest, but Tanna was already running down the passageway after Malana and Leala. He started to follow, but then stopped. As desperate as he was to protect Tanna, he knew she was depending on him to make sure the rest of the pirates on this part of the ship were neutralized first.

"Grenade!" Naya shouted from behind him.

Garrick hit the floor without even pausing to turn around. The pirates charged out the airlock door once more, and from the corner of his eye, Garrick saw Naya go flying backward.

Hoping to God the girl had only been stunned, Garrick ground his jaw and returned fire. He was so intent on shooting as many of the bastards as he could that he almost didn't notice the red light on his pistol start to flash. Remembering what Tanna had said about recharging, he ducked down behind the crates and dug one of the cylinders out of his pocket. Shoving it into the small receptacle at the butt of the weapon, he pushed the recharge button and waited impatiently. The damn thing took forever to charge, though, and by the time the light finally turned green, he looked up to see Sela slumping to the floor.

Muttering a curse, Garrick jumped up and began firing as fast as his finger would let him.

Four of the pirates managed to make it across the cargo bay and were only a few feet away from the boxes when Garrick came up blazing away. Which was when he discovered his pistol was set to kill instead of stun. As one of his blasts found its mark, the pirate in front of him went flying backward with a hole bored cleanly through the center of his chest. The two pirates behind the first one paused for only a moment before they lifted their weapons to fire at Garrick again. But that was enough time for him to put three shots through each of their chests at almost point-blank range. He cringed as he realized one of them was a woman. He knew it shouldn't matter, especially since she had



been shooting at him, but it did.

Suddenly, everything went quiet as the gunfire ceased. While that should have made him feel better, it didn't. For all he knew, it could be some kind of trick.

He glanced at Vi and Jalena. "I'll cover you. Check on Sela and Naya."

As Vi and Jalena hurried over to the other women, he moved around the shattered crates toward the airlock. He peered through the smoke still coming from the airlock door, but didn't see anyone inside.

"They're just stunned," Jalena said, getting to her feet as he turned around. "These pirates must be slavers; otherwise they would have killed us."

Garrick supposed he should be thankful for that. He gestured to the airlock door with his pistol. "Make sure that ship is clear," he told Vi and Jalena. "And if any of those bastards we shot are still alive, get them tied up and toss them in a room, then meet me in the shuttle bay as fast as you can. I'm going to help Tanna and the others."

He didn't wait for a reply, but took off running toward the front of the ship, recharging his pistol as he went. As he got closer to the bay, he was surprised he didn't hear any weapon fire. When he arrived, he saw why.

Leala was out cold, a female pirate dragging her toward the shuttle bay emergency airlock. Beyond them, Garrick caught a glimpse of Tanna, kicking and screaming as two pirates pulled her through the hatch on the far side of the airlock and into their shuttle. There was no sign of Malana.

Garrick's blood turned to ice. Tightening his grip on the trigger, he raced toward the airlock, firing at the woman dragging Leala. The pirate went down, but at the sound of gunfire, one of the female pirates who had been dragging Tanna turned and began to shoot at him. Behind her, two more pirates came out of the shuttle and started shooting at him, too. Garrick had no choice but to duck back out of the shuttle bay to avoid being hit.

Vi and Jalena chose that moment to charge into the passageway. But with so much laser fire coming their way, none of them could even get into the shuttle bay to get close to the airlock.

"Fuck!" he swore. "We have to get in there."

Taking a deep breath, Garrick stepped out from behind the doorjamb he had been using as a shield. He had intended to just take off across the shuttle bay at a full run, hoping he could get the pirates before they got him, but he ended up almost taking a blast pulse right in the head before he got so far as a single step. Shit, he thought, ducking back behind the doorframe. There was no way they were going to be able to get in there. The pirates would be able to pick him and the women off before they could even get across the shuttle bay. He had to do something, though. He had to get to Tanna.

That's when he glanced down and saw the panel on the floor. Remembering the artificial gravity conduits that Tanna had shown him his first day on board, he quickly kneeled down and yanked up the cover.

He looked at Vi and Jalena. "Get ready to shoot."

He didn't wait for them to reply, but reached down with one hand and turned the valve into the off position. The effects were immediate. Everything that wasn't bolted down floated into the air, including the pirates, looks of confusion clear on their faces. Garrick and the women began firing at them before the pirates could figure out what happened.

After he was sure they had hit every pirate at least once, he flipped the valve back

on, sending everything and everyone falling to the floor.

Desperate to get to Tanna, Garrick ran toward the airlock door, but it was already sliding closed. Outside it, he could hear the shuttle pulling away. He swore savagely and slammed his open hand against the door.

"Where are the Captain and Malana?" Vi asked as Jalena knelt down to examine Leala.

Garrick clenched his jaw. "Those bastards took them."

Both Vi and Jalena stared at him in stunned silence, their eyes wide with fear.

"What are we going to do?" Jalena finally managed.

Before he could answer, Ena's voice came over the intercom. "Captain, the pirates' shuttle just pulled away and my sensors are showing that the main ship is powering up their weapons to fire at us. What do you want me to do?"

Shit, Garrick thought. "They have Tanna and Malana on that shuttle. Can you intercept it, Ena?"

He heard Ena curse. "Not a chance," she said. "They're already slipping into their own shuttle bay as we speak. Garrick, we have to do something. We don't have the hull plating to deal with laser blasts. A couple of hits and we're all dead. What do you want me to do?"

Garrick ground his jaw, surprised that the usually confident Ena was asking him what to do. "Take every evasive maneuver you can think of. I'm coming up to the bridge right now. Try to keep us alive until I can come up with a plan."

Vi followed him as he headed up the steps. "We're going to get the captain and Malana back, right?"

"Damn right we are."

By the time he and Vi got to the bridge, Ena practically had *Andrusis* doing barrel rolls and back flips to avoid the pirate ship's weapon fire. Even from inside, Garrick could hear the sound of the laser beams as they just missed their mark. Ena was doing her part; now he had to do his. Which meant he had to come up with a way out of this. It was hard to think about anything but Tanna at the moment, though. He was sure those bastards had been after him. So, why the hell had they taken Tanna and Malana?

"What's our status?" he asked Ena.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "I've been doing everything I can, but they're getting closer with every shot. I can't keep this up for long."

The words had barely left her mouth when the *Andrusis* bucked wildly under a direct hit from the pirate ship.

Ena glanced over his shoulder at the console behind him. "Dammit! That shot punched a hole clean through the forward cargo hold and we're bleeding atmosphere. I'm shutting all the emergency bulkheads in that section. There's nothing critical in there, but if we don't get out of here and get it patched up soon..."

"Then get us out of here," Garrick said.

Vi looked at him in surprise. "What about the Captain and Malana? We can't just leave them."

Garrick swore under his breath. As much as he hated the idea of leaving Tanna and Malana in the hands of those scumbags, he couldn't see any other way around it, at least not right now. If the *Andrusis* were destroyed and them along with it, there would be no one left to rescue Tanna and Malana.

“We don’t have a choice right now,” he told Vi. “Without something to fire back with, that’s all we can do. We have to go.”

“Go where?” Ena asked. “Their ship is just plain faster than ours. No matter where I go, they’re going to be able catch us.”

*Damn it all, she was right.* Garrick scanned the star field in front of them, trying to come up with something. *Anything.* “There,” he pointed toward the vis-screen. “Put us right in the middle of that.”

\* \* \* \*

“Let go of me, you...” Tanna demanded, but the words ended in a howl of pain as the pirate dragging her down the passageway stopped in mid-step to grab a handful of hair and viciously yanked her head back.

“Shut the fuck up and stop struggling or I’m really going to hurt you,” he snarled in her ear. “Got it?”

She opened her mouth to tell him to go to hell, but all that came out was another cry of protest as he tightened his grip on her arm and marched her down the passageway. Tanna glanced over her shoulder to see a female pirate manhandling Malana the same way. At least Tanna could console herself with the fact that Garrick and the rest of her crew were safe.

Giving Tanna a shove, the pirate pushed her through the doorway and onto the ship’s bridge. There was a man standing with his back to them in front of the vis-screen and he turned at their entrance. About her height, he had a stocky build and graying hair. Though Tanna had no clue who he was, it was obvious from his demeanor he was the captain of the ship. He regarded her and Malana with eyes that were dark and devoid of emotion, and Tanna had to force herself not to look away.

“Who the hell are they?” he demanded, his gaze going from one pirate to the other. “Where’s the man you were supposed to grab?”

“Their crew was much better armed than we were led to believe, Sir,” the pirate holding Tanna explained. “And they sure the hell didn’t fight as if we had taken them by surprise. Clea’s whole shuttle crew was wiped out and they were starting to do the same to mine. I figured it was time to get the hell out of there. I thought that at least we should grab these two so we don’t have to go back to Koralo empty handed.”

Tanna’s heart skipped a beat when she heard the name *Koralo*. Of all the pirate crews to come after them, why did it have to be Iyov Koralo’s? She and Malana were as good as dead. At least they hadn’t gotten Garrick, though. *Thank God.*

The captain grunted at his man’s explanation, his dark eyes raking over Tanna and Malana again. “I don’t think that’s the excuse you want to be give Koralo, is it? We’re not leaving until we get what we came here for.” He glanced over his shoulder at the woman seated at the controls. “Cease firing on the ship,” he ordered, before turning his attention to the men holding her and Malana. “Throw those two in a holding cell, and then get your asses back out there and get that man.”

Tanna opened her mouth to tell him to stay the hell away from Garrick and her ship, but before she could get the words out, her first officer spoke.

“Damn you, Traggin!” Malana snarled. “You would have been able to capture Garrick without a single shot fired if you had just done as I told you and waited until we got to Tertious Prime. He would have never even have expected it. Why the hell couldn’t

you just listen to me? Why attack us in open space?"

Tanna jerked her head around to look at the other woman in confusion. Surely, she hadn't heard right. "What did you just say?"

Malana blinked as if suddenly just realizing that Tanna was there. "Captain, I..." she stammered. "I..."

"What your first officer is so smoothly trying to tell you," Traggin interrupted, "is that she betrayed you."

"She wouldn't do that!" Tanna snapped, her gaze going to Malana again. "Tell me that he's lying. Tell me that you didn't betray us to this bastard."

Malana didn't answer. She didn't need to. The expression on the woman's face told Tanna all she needed to know.

"You greedy bitch!" Tanna screamed. She struggled against the pirate that held her so she could throw herself at Malana, but the man's grip was too tight, and when she couldn't get free, she swore in frustration.

"Tanna, please," Malana begged. "It wasn't like that. I can explain..."

Tanna narrowed her eyes. "Don't even try to justify what you did!"

"But..." Malana began, before the ship's pilot interrupted her.

"Sir, we stopped firing, as you ordered, but the salvage ship just disappeared into the asteroid field."

At the words, Tanna turned her attention to the vis-screen, craning her neck to see around Traggin. Even though the *Andrusis* was small and maneuverable, it was still unspeakably dangerous to try to fly into an asteroid belt. Many of the rocks were larger than her ship and tumbled in an unpredictable pattern. If Ena wasn't careful, one of those tumbling rocks would crush the ship. What was her pilot thinking?

Tanna's gaze remain fixed on the vis-screen as she waited for a glimpse of *Andrusis*, but her ship never reappeared. Then suddenly, there was a large, blindingly bright explosion from within the belt. Tanna's heart plummeted. *Dear God, no.*

Traggin swore. "Are you picking up any life signs?"

Tanna held her breath as the woman scanned her computer.

"It's hard to tell with all the interference from the asteroids, Sir. But I would say no."

Traggin swore again, but Tanna barely heard him as she slumped back against the pirate who held her. Tears welled in her eyes. Garrick and her whole crew were gone. No, they couldn't be, she told herself. They just couldn't be. But through her tears, she saw the wreckage from her ship as it drifted out from between the asteroids, and she knew it was true.

The pirate captain turned to face her again. "It looks like Koralo won't be getting what he wanted after all, and I have a feeling he's going to take that out on you and your first officer." He glanced at the man holding her. "Put them in a cell. We'll give them to Koralo as a consolation prize when we get back to Mercaron. Hopefully he'll be satisfied and won't decide to kill us all for failing him."

This time, Tanna didn't resist when her captor jerked her around and shoved her into the passageway. She had no more fight left in her. Considering that she was heading into Koralo's less than tender mercies, she should have been terrified, but after what had just happened, she was too numb to care. Her ship was gone. Her crew—her family—was gone. And most heart wrenching of all, Garrick was gone. Nothing mattered anymore. It would almost be a kindness if Koralo did decide to kill her.

Keeping a tight grip on her with one hand, her captor placed his hand on the entrypad beside a nondescript door, then waited for it to open. The moment it did, he roughly shoved her inside. Unable to keep her balance, Tanna fell to her knees. Ten minutes ago, she would have jumped to her feet, her eyes shooting lasers at him for manhandling her. Instead, she stayed where she was, head bent, her arms around her middle, sobs wracking her body as the door slid closed.

“I never meant for anyone to get hurt,” Malana said softly.

Tanna stiffened at the sound of the other woman’s voice. She hadn’t realized they put her and Malana in the same cell. She lifted her head to see that her first officer had come over and was now kneeling down in front of her. The woman’s eyes were wet with unshed tears.

“Anyone but Garrick, you mean?” Tanna sneered. When Malana said nothing, she continued. “So, was the money Koralo was going to pay you worth the lives of Garrick and the crew?”

Malana flushed. “I didn’t do it for the money.”

Right, Tanna thought. She angrily wiped the tears from her cheek. “If you didn’t do it for the money, then why did you do it?”

The other woman didn’t answer.

“Well, it can’t be jealousy, because you couldn’t even stand Garrick.” Understanding suddenly dawned on Tanna. “Or was that why you did it? Because you hated him so much?”

Once again, the look on Malana’s face spoke volumes.

“Oh God. I’m right, aren’t I? You did it because you hate him.” Tanna swallowed hard. “What did he ever do to make you hate him so much, Malana?”

Malana said nothing for a moment and when she finally spoke, her words were so soft Tanna barely heard her. “He had you.”

Tanna frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

A tear trickled down the other woman’s cheek. “I love you, Tanna. I’ve loved you since the day I first met you all those years ago.”

Tanna stared at Malana, too stunned to do more than that. She had no idea her first officer was into women. How could she have known? In all the time Tanna had known Malana, she never once heard her talk about having a relationship with anyone, male or female. She had always thought Malana was just too private to discuss that part of her life.

“Even if you preferred women to men, I knew we could never be together, since I was your first officer,” Malana continued. “But Garrick wasn’t some computer-generated lover that Hollie made up for you. He was real. And knowing he was spending every night in your bed, touching you, kissing you, making love to you, while I lay awake dreaming of doing those same things to you, was killing me, Tanna. I just wanted him off the ship and out of your life.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “When it was obvious he wasn’t going to leave, I knew I had to do something. That was when I remembered what Micole Sendane said about Koralo being interested in someone like Garrick. When Garrick fought off his men on Xandori, Traggin was supposed to try again on Tertious Prime, not attack the ship. I was supposed to make sure Garrick would be alone during the prearranged ambush. I never meant for them to attack us in open space like they did, Tanna. I loved that crew. They were my family, too. You have to believe me.”

“Well, they did attack us,” Tanna said. “And because of that, Garrick and my crew are dead. I can never forgive you for your part in it, Malana. Never.”

Malana shook her head, tears spilling onto her cheeks. “Please don’t say that, Tanna. Please don’t hate me. I couldn’t bear it if you hated me.” She reached out a placating hand, only to let it fall to her side when Tanna shrank back from her touch.

“Hate doesn’t even begin to describe what I feel for you right now,” Tanna said. “Just leave me alone and let me grieve for Garrick and the crew in peace.”

When Malana didn’t get up right away, Tanna thought she would have to be the one to move, but to her relief, the other woman finally got to her feet and walked to the far side of the small cell. Tanna closed her eyes, the tears running freely down her cheeks as she thought about all she had lost.

## Chapter Eight

“What do you mean, you can’t track them?” Garrick asked Ena.

It had been over an hour since the pirates attacked the ship. Much to his relief, his plan to fool them into thinking the *Andrusis* had collided with an asteroid had worked. Once Ena had guided the salvage ship deep into the asteroid belt and attached it to one of the larger rocks with the grapples, he had her release the pirates’ shuttle from the airlock. It had only traveled a short distance before a huge, spinning rock crashed into it. The explosion had been spectacular, just as he had been hoping it would be.

Unfortunately, the second part of his plan, the part where they slipped out of the asteroid field and followed the pirate ship, hadn’t worked out as well. When they finally emerged, it was only to have Ena inform him that there was no way to tell where the pirates had gone.

“The *Andrusis* just doesn’t have that capability,” she said helplessly. “We’re a salvage ship, not a military vessel. I can tell you that there are ships out there, but I can’t tell you which one is the pirate ship. I wish I could.”

Garrick swore under his breath. If he had known that, he would have taken one of the shuttles and attacked the pirate ship all by himself. It made him crazy to think what those bastards were doing to Tanna right now. He’d be damned if he was going to just stand around and imagine the worst, though. He was going to find out who had her and where they were going.

Grabbing the pistol from the computer console where he placed it earlier, he turned and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Ena asked.

He threw her a glance over his shoulder as he tucked the pistol in the back of his belt. “To talk to those pirates we captured. I’m going to find out where those bastards took Tanna and Malana.”

Ena didn’t ask any more. Which was good, because he didn’t really want to take the time to explain how he planned to get the information he was after. Every minute they wasted put more distance between them and that ship.

As he made his way down the passageway, Garrick thumbed the button on his com. “Sela?”

“Go ahead,” she said after a moment.

“Meet me in the shuttle bay,” he said. “Our prisoners are going to be in need of a medic.”

Silence, then a quick, “Copy that.”

Garrick thumbed the button again. Actually, if the four pirates they had tied up in the bay didn’t tell him what he wanted to know, they weren’t going to need a medic. They were going to need a body bag.

Sela caught up with him just as he started down the stairs to the shuttle bay, but when he glanced her way, she didn’t say anything. Instead, she just followed him down the steps, stony faced.

Garrick eyed the four pirates that had been stunned during the attack. It was probably a good thing the rest of the crew had been nice enough to set their weapons to stun, or

else he wouldn't have had anyone to question. He was also glad he hadn't followed through on his first instinct and thrown them in their shuttle before he had Ena release it into the asteroid field.

He eyed the four prisoners, two men and two women, trying to decide which one would be the easiest to break. From the defiant way the men returned his gaze, he doubted they were going to be very forthcoming. Even with Tanna's and Malana's lives on the line, though, he still knew he'd have a hard time hurting the female pirates. He hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Going over to the stockier of the two men, Garrick folded his arms across his chest and glared down at him.

"I'll make this simple," he said. "Who do you work for and where are they heading now?"

The man didn't answer, but instead fixed Garrick with a smug look.

Garrick drew back his fist and punched the man solidly in the jaw. Though the blow drew blood, the man only gave him a hateful glare.

Garrick grabbed the man by the front of the shirt and yanked him up so hard the chair he was tied to almost came off the floor.

"I'm going to ask you again and if you don't answer me this time, I'm going to start getting nasty," he ground out. "Now, tell me who the hell you work for."

The man's lip curled. "Fuck you."

Garrick clenched his jaw. Releasing the man, he took a step back and pulled out the blast-pistol he'd brought with him. He hadn't wanted to do this, he really hadn't, but he would do whatever it took to get Tanna back. And that including killing every last one of these pirates.

Leveling the weapon at the pirate's groin, he quietly asked, "Right or left?"

The pirate squirmed in his seat as he eyed the pistol. "What the fuck are you talking about? Right or left what?"

"Leg," Garrick said. "I figured I'd let you choose which one I blow a hole through."

The man regarded Garrick for a moment in silence, as if trying to decide whether he was serious or not. "Go to hell," he finally said.

Garrick didn't hesitate, but moved his arm slightly to the right and squeezed the trigger.

The pirate screamed in pain as laser fire sliced through his left thigh. "What the fuck? You crazy bastard!"

Garrick pressed the hot barrel of the weapon against the man's forehead. "I'm just getting started. Unless you tell me what I want to know, I'm going to keep putting holes in you until I get to a part you really care about. Now, who the hell do you work for?"

"You can go to hell, just like I told you. Whatever you dream up won't even compare to what my boss would do to me if I talk. You might as well go ahead and kill me because I'm never going to tell you anything. And neither will the rest of my mates."

Garrick swore silently. This was worthless and a waste of time. He had to find out who had Tanna and where they were heading, and he didn't have time to play around. He had to make the pirates fear him more than the person they worked for, and there was only one way to do that.

He reached his arm behind him and shoved the pistol back into his waistband. "You know what? I believe you. I don't think you're ever going to tell me what I want to



know.”

The man gave him a smug smile. “Damn right I’m not. So, just untie us and we’ll be on...”

He stopped abruptly when Garrick tilted his chair back and began to drag it toward the emergency airlock.

“What are you doing?” the pirate asked in alarm, trying to see over his shoulder.

Garrick slapped his hand on the entrypad and opened the hatch, then dragged the man into the airlock. “I’m letting you go.”

The man’s eyes went wide as realization struck him. “Y-you can’t—”

The rest of his words muffled as Garrick closed the door. Ignoring the man’s shouts, he fixed the remaining pirates with a hard stare and thumbed his com. “Ena, open the outer hatch to the shuttle bay emergency airlock.”

There was a moment’s hesitation before Ena replied. “Why?”

Garrick ground his jaw. “Ena, open the hatch.”

Another hesitation. Then, “Yes ... Sir.”

Garrick didn’t turn around to watch the airlock open. Instead, he kept his attention fixed on the other pirates. Their faces turned ashen as the airlock explosively decompressed, ejecting the air and everything else that had been in it including the pirate out into the vacuum of space.

Walking over to the three remaining prisoners, Garrick came to a halt in front of one of the women. About Naya’s age, she stared up at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“Your turn,” he said coldly. “Who do you work for and where are they heading?”

The girl swallowed hard. “Our captain is called Traggin, but we work for Iyov Koralo.”

Garrick frowned at the name. The men who had jumped him and Tanna on Xandori said that they worked for a man named Koralo. They must have tracked the salvage ship from the pleasure planet.

“Miinu, you stupid bitch, shut up!” the other woman snarled.

“Screw you, Gyla!” Miinu said, turning to look at the woman. “Didn’t you see what he did to Breen? I’m not going out like that. Not after Traggin left us like behind like that. You can die for Koralo, but I’m not.”

The woman named Gyla opened her mouth to reply, but Garrick cut her off. “So where is Traggin taking the two women he captured?”

“Miinu, don’t say another word!” the male pirate warned.

Garrick turned his attention from Miinu to the man. “You seem more than a little eager to take this information to your death. Let me help you out with that.”

Walking around to the back of the man’s chair, Garrick tilted it back and started to drag it toward the airlock door.

“Wait!” the man yelled. “I’ll tell you what you want to know! Koralo runs his slave operation out of Mercaron. That’s probably where Traggin took them.”

Garrick stopped and let the man’s chair drop to the floor with a thud. “Is he taking them to a slave auction?”

The man glanced at Garrick over his shoulder. “I don’t know.”

Like hell, Garrick thought. Tilting the chair back, he started for the airlock door again.

“Wait! Please!” the man begged. “I don’t know, I swear it! He might have them sold

at any one of a dozen auction houses on Mercaron or he might do it from his compound. Koralo has VIP buyers go there to bid on merchandise if it's unusual."

Garrick let the chair drop and walked around the front of it to give the man a hard look. "If I find out you're lying to me, you're going to pray for me to put you in an airlock, just so the pain will stop. Got it?"

The man swallowed hard and nodded. "What are you going to do to us?"

Garrick let out a snort of disgust. "I haven't decided yet."

Turning on his heel, Garrick strode over to where Sela stood. "Lock them up in a storage room. We may need to talk to them again."

Garrick didn't wait for a reply, but headed for the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Once on the upstairs landing, he ran down the passageway to the bridge. Ena was pacing back and forth in front of the controls, worry etched on her face, and she looked up as he burst through the door.

"Some guy named Koralo's taken them to Mercaron," he told her. "How soon can you get us there?"

She swiveled her chair around and sat down. "Half a day if I push *Andrusis* hard."

"Then push him."

She typed something into the computer, then glanced at him over her shoulder.

"What's the plan once we get there?"

"We get Tanna back," Garrick said simply. "And we kill this Koralo asshole and anyone else who gets in our way."

\* \* \* \*

When they had arrived on Mercaron, Traggin immediately delivered Tanna and Malana to Iyov Koralo. A big man with a wicked tattoo covering half of his face, the slaver had been less than pleased to see them instead of Garrick. When Traggin explained that Garrick had been killed trying to escape, Koralo reprimanded the pirate captain, and then casually executed him right in front of everyone. The most frightening part was that no one else in the room even let so much as a flicker of emotion cross their face. Apparently, that was how Koralo dealt with people who displeased him. Tanna had fully expected him to kill her and Malana next, but he had instead informed them they would be taking Garrick's place at the private auction he had set up, then ordered his thugs to put them in a cell. Tanna hoped their captors would put her and Malana in different cells, but after hearing Tanna knew about the other woman's betrayal, Koralo laughed and ordered his men to throw them into the same room. Locking Tanna up in the same cell with the woman who had gotten her crew killed seemed to amuse him.

Tanna stiffened as Malana walked across the small room to lean back against the wall beside her. Since the cell had no windows and she wasn't wearing a watch, Tanna had no idea how long they had been there. It felt like forever, but it could just as well have been only a few hours. She knew one thing, though. She was getting really tired of Malana trying to apologize all the time. And it looked like she was about to do it again.

"I know you said you wouldn't forgive me," Malana said softly. "But I want you to know I truly am sorry for what I did."

Tanna snorted. "You're just sorry I found out about your involvement in it. If Koralo's men had grabbed Garrick on Xandori, you'd have been patting yourself on the back right now."

Malana shook her head. "That's not true. If I had known how much losing Garrick would hurt you, Tanna, I would never have done what I did. I didn't realize how much you loved him."

Tears blurred Tanna's vision. She didn't want to talk about Garrick. Not with Malana. She thought about walking over to the other side of the small, windowless room to get away from her first officer, but since the cell wasn't more than ten feet across, she wouldn't be able to get very far away. Besides, she didn't have the energy to move.

"He was going to leave, you know," she heard herself say.

Malana gave her a sidelong glance. "Garrick?"

She nodded. "After what happened on Xandori with Koralo's men, Garrick thought if he stayed he would put me in danger, so he was going to get off on Tertious Prime. We were arguing about it when the pirates attacked." Her heart squeezed painfully at the memory of that conversation.

Beside her, Malana choked back a sob. "I'm so sorry, Tanna."

Tanna saw Malana reach out toward her. Tanna stiffened and started to pull away, but the door to their cell suddenly opened, and Malana let her hand fall back to her side. Tanna lifted her head to see Iyov Koralo come into the room, flanked by two of his people, and she pushed herself away from the wall to stand up straighter.

"The buyers will be arriving soon," he announced. "You two won't bring nearly as much as the man would have, but I have some regular customers who'll offer good money for you. It should at least help defray the cost of the debacle that was your capture."

Tanna's heart began to pound. Back on Traggin's ship, she hadn't cared whether she lived or died, but the realization that she was about to be sold into slavery made her self-preservation instinct kick in. Before she could say anything, however, her first officer stepped forward.

"Do whatever you want with me, Koralo, but Tanna doesn't deserve this. She's already lost everything. She doesn't need to lose her freedom, too." Malana's eyes glistened with tears as she beseeched him. "Let her go. Please."

Tanna stared at her first officer in disbelief. Malana genuinely seemed willing to sacrifice herself to see Tanna go free.

Malana's tears, however, didn't move Koralo. He regarded her in silence for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed.

"And let several thousand credits walk out of here with her? I don't think so," he said. "A man would pay a lot to have a woman like her in his bed spreading her legs for him every night."

Tanna lifted her chin, about to tell him she was no man's whore when Malana let out a cry of rage and launched herself at Koralo, her fists clenched.

Koralo moved faster than Tanna would have thought possible. One minute, he was standing there, his arms folded across his chest, and the next, he had pulled a stun-stick from the holster on his belt and shoved it against Malana's chest. Tanna had heard pirates used the weapon to keep slaves in line, and though she had never seen it done, she knew enough about it to know it could deliver different levels of electrical current. On low power, it would have given Malana a painful, but non-lethal jolt that would have made her jump back. Koralo must have had it set on the maximum setting, though, because Malana's body shuddered violently the moment he touched her with it.

He was going to kill her, Tanna realized. Part of her wanted to say it was no more than the woman deserved for what she had done, but that didn't prevent Tanna from throwing herself at the bastard to get him to stop. The other two pirates in the room immediately blocked her path, though, and all she could do was scream as Koralo tortured Malana.

When Koralo finally pulled the stun-stick away, Tanna watched helplessly as Malana crumpled to the floor. Her first officer gazed up at her, all life and warmth completely gone from her eyes. Tanna didn't have to check for a pulse to know Malana was dead.

She would have rushed to Malana's side, but Koralo caught her by the arm before she could take more than a few steps. Spinning her around, he twisted her arm behind her back and shoved her up hard against the wall. Tanna struggled to free herself, but immediately went still when Koralo jerked her arm up even higher. Pain shot through her shoulder and down her arm and she bit her lip to stifle a cry.

Koralo pressed his stun-stick up against the wall so that it was in her line of vision. "Try anything stupid like your first officer and you're going to end up like her. Understand?"

He was standing so close that Tanna could feel his foul breath stir her hair and she had to force herself not to cringe. But even in her present position, she refused to cower before him. "Kill me and you're out of those several thousand credits you talked about," she pointed out.

Koralo chuckled. "True. But there are other ways to keep you in line. I usually don't make a habit of sampling the merchandise, but I think I might make an exception for you." Sticking his stun-stick back in the holster at his waist, he grabbed her ass cheek and gave it a rough squeeze. "Ever been fucked in the ass, bitch?"

Fear made Tanna go cold. She'd rather die than let him rape her. "Go to hell!"

Koralo didn't reply, but reached around to yank open the belt on her breeches. Tanna struggled, ignoring the pain that shot through her arm, but it did no good. Koralo was stronger than she was, and with her arm twisted behind her back and him pressing her up against the wall, she could hardly move. Tears welled in her eyes and she squeezed them shut. He was going to rape her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Sir," the female pirate said from behind them. "The buyers are starting to arrive."

At the words, Koralo went still. Tanna held her breath.

"Saved by the bell," he sneered. "Or maybe not. Some of my customers have unique, if brutal ways of breaking beautiful women like you. I almost envy them. I have the feeling you would be a difficult woman to break."

Giving her arm one last twist, Koralo released her. "Bring her."

Tanna barely had time to get the belt on her breeches buckled again before someone grabbed her arm and spun her around. She looked up to find herself in the grip of the massive, muscular woman who had informed Koralo about the buyers' arrival. The woman snapped a pair of metal shackles on her wrists, then locked them with a key, which she put back in her pocket when she was done. Taking Tanna roughly by the arm, she sidestepped Malana's lifeless body, dragging Tanna with her. Tanna's gaze went to her first officer almost against her will, and she swallowed hard. Despite what Malana had done, she and Tanna had been friends once. And in the end, Malana had tried to save her. Tanna would never forget that.

Once outside the cell, the female pirate shoved Tanna down the passageway. At the

end of the hall, the woman pushed Tanna up a set of steps, then down another passageway and into a large, unfurnished room. Tanna blinked in surprise when she saw there were other prisoners in it. Five men and four women, they all had manacles on their wrists like she did. They regarded her with a combination of fear and pity in their dark eyes before lowering their gazes to stare down at the floor, clearly resigned to their fate.

Tanna gave the pirate beside her a sidelong glance, wondering if she could get the blast-pistol out of the holster on the woman's hip before the other pirates in the room realized what she was doing. She didn't really have a plan after that, other than shooting her way out of Koralo's compound. She took a deep breath and was about to reach out and try to grab it when a door on the other side of the room abruptly slid open. Startled, Tanna jerked her head up to see a short, stocky man standing in the doorway.

"Bring them."

Tanna had never been to a slave auction before, but she had heard horror stories about what they were like, and she could only imagine what was waiting for her in the next room. When she tried to resist, though, the female pirate simply gave her arm a sharp tug and led her out of the room, along with the rest of the captives.

Tanna had known slavery was commonplace on the planets in the outer fringes of the galaxy, but she was still stunned at how many people were in the next room. In addition to Koralo and the people who worked for him, there were at least twenty prospective buyers by her count. A mix of men and women, the group eyed her and the other prisoners with obvious interest as the pirates dragged them onto the dais in the front of the expensively furnished room. Tanna forced herself to meet their eyes, hoping her show of defiance would make her less attractive as a slave. At the amused looks on some of their faces, however, she knew her plan had backfired. If anything, she might have made them want to possess her even more. She abruptly remembered what Koralo had said about some of his customers enjoying the task of breaking a strong-willed woman, and she swallowed hard.

Below the dais, Koralo gestured with his hand. "You're welcome to take a closer look at the merchandise before the bidding starts, if you like."

Despite her show of defiance earlier, Tanna couldn't help but take a step back as two dark-haired men immediately approached her. She couldn't get far with the female pirate still holding her arm though; she had no choice but to stand there while the men pawed at her. From the smirk on Koralo's face, it was clear he was enjoying her discomfort. When she glared at him, he merely laughed.

But those two men were only the first to take a closer look at her. When they moved off, someone else took their place, and then another and another, until Tanna thought she would scream. She was almost relieved when Koralo announced the auction was about to start.

Stepping onto the dais to stand beside one of the prisoners, the tattooed slaver turned to the buyers. "Shall we start the bidding on this strong, strapping man here?"

\* \* \* \*

Garrick refused to think about what would happen if his plan to rescue Tanna didn't work. Instead, he spent the time berating himself for letting her get captured in the first place. If he had just gotten to the other airlock sooner, then she would be safe right now. Hell, he should never have let her go off with Malana and Leala in the first place. At the

very least, he should have gone with her. But self-recriminations were pointless. All that mattered was getting Tanna back. He'd had to wait seven-hundred years to find her; he damn sure wasn't going to lose her now.

After learning the pirates' ship was headed to Mercaron, Jalena had suggested getting in touch with the other salvage captains to see if anyone had any information on the planet, or his compound. Garrick had been all for that idea. As it turned out, though, while the other captains could provide plenty of information about the planet itself, few of them knew much about Koralo's compound, other than that there were an army of pirates guarding it. Most of them felt that any direct attack on the compound would be little more than a suicide mission. Even so, several of them still offered to join in the rescue operation, regardless of the risk. Garrick hadn't been surprised. Tanna was the type of person that others would risk their lives to save. Though he had appreciated their offers, he turned them down. He wasn't going to trust anyone else with Tanna's safety. The other captains understood his position, but still wanted to help, so they said they would remain in orbit above Mercaron, just in case things went to crap. Garrick hoped it wouldn't come to that, but it was nice to know there was someone he and the crew could call on for help if they had to.

Landing on Mercaron was easier than Garrick had expected. Then again, considering that Koralo and everyone else thought the *Andrusis* had exploded, it wasn't like anyone would be on the lookout for them, he supposed.

Though Garrick would have liked Ena to stay with the ship, especially since they would probably need to make a fast getaway, he couldn't afford the luxury. He needed every trigger-puller they had out there. So, after docking, she joined him and the rest of the crew in the shuttle bay.

"Once we get there, Ena will come with me." He glanced at the other girls. "I want the rest of you to attack from the front of the house. I'm going to need you to create a distraction and draw as many of Koralo's people in your direction as you can. Hopefully, that will leave less of them for Ena and me to deal with."

Sela looked up from buckling her holster. "How are you going to find the captain and Malana?"

"According to the small amount of information we got from the other captains, Koralo keeps his prisoners in holding cells located in the back of his compound until the auction. We'll start with them. If Tanna and Malana aren't there, we'll head for the auction blocks. They shouldn't be that hard to find." As the women exchanged nervous looks, he added, "I know it's not much of a plan, but it's all we've got." He looked at each woman in turn. "Ready?"

Though they all nodded matter-of-factly, he could tell that the girls were terrified. He was too, but not about breaking into Koralo's compound. He was scared out of his mind with worry for Tanna. For all he knew, they could have sold her already. Or she might be dead. His gut clenched at the possibility.

Shoving the horrible thought away, Garrick grabbed another handful of cylinders from the table and climbed into the hovercraft with the rest of the crew.

\* \* \* \*

As she stood watching one prisoner after another get sold into slavery, Tanna got more and more nervous. She wondered which of the people would buy her and what they

would do once they had her in their possession. Her only hope was that she could somehow escape after Koralo sold her. But even if she could escape, where would she go and what would she do? Her ship was gone. Her crew was gone. Garrick was gone. Tears stung her eyes and she hurriedly blinked them back before they could trickle down her cheeks. She didn't want to cry in front of these bastards.

Just then, a sound from somewhere in the compound caught her attention and she lifted her head. No one else in the room seemed to have noticed it, though, and when she didn't hear anything else, she wondered if she had imagined it. But then she heard it again, and this time there was no mistaking what it was. Laser fire.

At the sound of it, the bidding stumbled to an abrupt halt. Silence descended on the room for a moment, but then the buyers began to shift nervously and demand to know what was going on. Koralo ordered two of his people to check it out, then turned his attention to the buyers, trying to calm them down.

As more laser fire sounded, Tanna felt her pulse skip a beat. She didn't know what was going on, nor did she care. This could be the opportunity she had been waiting for, her only chance to escape. and she wasn't going to pass it up. She looked around at the other prisoners and could tell by the look in their eyes that they were thinking the same thing. No one seemed to want to make the first move, though.

Tanna gave the pirate holding her a sidelong glance. The sounds of the fight going on outside the room were clearly distracting the woman and she wasn't paying any attention to Tanna. Taking a deep breath, Tanna balled her hands into fists and swung her manacled wrists straight into the side of her captor's head. The heavy weight of the cuffs connected with the woman's temple with a solid thud. The big woman crumpled to the floor, unconscious, maybe worse. Tanna didn't waste time wondering which, but swung her fists at the next closest pirate, connecting solidly with the woman's jaw before she even realized what was happening.

Thankfully, that was all the encouragement the other prisoners needed. Within seconds, every captive was following Tanna's lead, lashing out at anyone and everyone around them. One of the men grabbed a pistol from the pirate he had just rendered unconscious and began firing wildly into the crowd of prospective buyers. Below the dais, people began to immediately panic, shouting and running for the doors. Tanna heard Koralo shouting at his people to restore order, but it was too late for that. Between the laser fire outside the room and the melee inside, there was nothing they could do to contain the bedlam.

On the dais, Tanna dropped to her knees and dug through the female pirate's pockets until she located the keys to the manacles binding her wrists. Trying to find the right one and getting the shackles open took some doing, especially since she was in a hurry, but after a few tense moments, she finally managed to get them unlocked. Dropping the manacles on the floor, she jerked the woman's pistol out of its holster and looked around. Just then, the door on the far side of the room burst open violently. A moment later, a pirate came flying into the room, a ragged hole in the center of his chest. Tanna blinked, unable to believe what she saw next.

Garrick stood in the doorway, as big and tall and perfect as she'd ever seen him, a blast-pistol in his hand and a furious look on his face.

*It couldn't be.* Garrick was dead. Her ship had blown up, along with everyone on it. She had seen it herself. Her mind was playing tricks on her, showing her what she most

wanted to see.

But when Garrick's blue eyes met hers, she knew it wasn't her mind playing tricks. He was real!

Tightening her grip on the pistol, Tanna darted across the room toward him, shoving some people out of the way and stunning others as she went. Garrick was doing the same from his side of the room, shooting anyone who got in his way. Unlike hers, though, his weapon wasn't set to stun.

When she reached him, Tanna threw herself into his arms and squeezed him so tightly she thought she would crush him. She was just so afraid if she let go, even for a second, she would find out he really was some trick her mind was playing on her.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she said, her voice husky with unshed tears.

He wrapped one arm tightly around her. "I know, love. Me, too."

She pulled away to look up at him. "But I saw the *Andrusis* blow up. How did you and the crew survive?"

"I'll explain everything later." He glanced around the room. "Where's Malana?"

Tanna swallowed hard at the mention of her first officer. "She's dead. Koralo killed her."

Garrick's blue eyes clouded with anger. "That son of a bitch. Where the hell is he? I'm going to enjoy killing that bastard."

Tanna wasn't so sure Garrick would be as interested in revenge if he knew the part Malana had played in all this, but that would wait until later. Right now she wouldn't mind seeing Koralo dead herself. She turned to look towards the place she had last seen the pig, only to see him darting out a side door, doing his best not to get trampled in the stampede of people.

"There!" she said, pointing. "He's getting away through that door."

"The hell he is."

Garrick started to move in that direction and Tanna was more than ready to follow, but just then the com on his belt let out a loud beep.

"Garrick, they're bringing in reinforcements," Leala shouted. "And the city guard is starting to arrive. We can't hold them off much longer. You and Ena need to find the captain and Malana and get out of there."

Tanna hadn't even realized Ena was with Garrick. She looked around for the dark-haired girl and saw her standing by one of the other doors, covering the hallway with a pulse-rifle.

Garrick swore, his gaze going to the door through which Koralo had just disappeared. Tanna could tell from his expression that he really wanted to follow. But when he turned his head to look at her, his expression softened. He reached for his com button. "We're on our way, Leala."

"Make it quick," was her reply.

Putting a hand on Tanna's back, Garrick urged her toward the door and Ena.

Once outside the room, they moved as quickly as they could, with Ena covering the rear as Garrick led the way through the compound. Tanna had fully expected Koralo's people to be waiting for them once they left the room, but the other prisoners who had been on the auction block with her were giving the pirates all they could handle. As she, Garrick, and Ena ran through first one passageway, then another, Tanna saw that there were other men and women fighting with the pirates as well. Though she didn't recognize



any of them, from their drab garb, it was easy to figure out who they were. Apparently, Koralo's personal slaves decided the rescue was the perfect opportunity to revolt. Which meant the pirates weren't able to pay much attention to her, Garrick, or Ena.

"Where's Malana?" Sela asked, looking behind them for the other woman as they burst out the front door.

Tanna just shook her head as they ran for the hovercraft. She would have to figure out what to tell them, she thought as she climbed in. Later, though, after they were all safely back on *Andrusis*.

As Vi took off and maneuvered the hovercraft through the busy streets as fast as she could, Tanna had to grip the sides of the seat to keep from falling out. She held her breath, expecting their way to be blocked at any moment by the city guards, but to her relief, no one attempted to stop them. When the hovercraft came out onto a main thoroughfare a moment later, she realized why. Slaves from all over the city obviously decided to follow the example set by the ones belonging to Koralo, and were revolting against their owners. It looked like the fight was tearing apart the whole city, and from what Tanna could see the slaves were winning.

A loud noise overhead abruptly caught her attention and she looked up to see a huge salvage ship coming in low above the street. She watched in disbelief as two doors slid open and blast-cannons appeared, firing shots at a contingent of city guards.

Tanna instinctively ducked. "What the hell is the *Gypsy Star* doing here?" she asked when she lifted her head again.

"When they heard you and Malana had been captured, they offered to give us a hand with the rescue," Garrick explained.

She blinked. She hadn't even known the *Gypsy Star* had weapons mounted on him. She'd have to remember to thank Captain Teller for the assist once they got back to *Andrusis*.

"Crap!" Vi said.

"What is it?" Garrick asked.

Her eyes darted to the rearview vis-screen beside the controls. "We've got company behind us."

Tanna looked over her shoulder to see a large hovercraft right behind them. Crap was right, she thought, watching in dismay as four of the hover's five occupants lifted their weapons and began firing at them. Tanna immediately returned fire, as did Garrick and the crew, but it was difficult to be accurate with Vi having to zigzag to avoid taking a direct hit. Unlike the hovercraft behind them, theirs wasn't fitted with armor plating.

Tanna was so preoccupied with trying to stay alive she didn't see the second hovercraft coming in from the side until it slammed right into them. The impact knocked them sideways and sent them veering out of control toward a huge storefront window. Tanna stared at the window in wide-eyed horror, knowing she should take cover, but for some stupid reason, she couldn't make herself move. Luckily, Garrick grabbed her and pulled her into the shelter of his arms just before their hover crashed into it.

Tanna squeezed her eyes shut and held on tightly to Garrick. It sounded like the whole planet was crashing down around them. She kept waiting for the hovercraft to come to a stop, but to her dismay, it just kept going and going. People screamed and hollered as it smashed through one display after another, before finally coming to an abrupt and jarring halt against the back wall of the store.

For a moment, Tanna was too shaken up to move, but at Garrick's urging, she pushed herself upright with a groan.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, tilting her chin up so that he could see her face.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. What about you?"

"I'm fine."

"What about everyone else?" she asked, looking around.

"We're all okay," Sela answered from the front of the hover. She put her hand to her head. "What the hell hit us?"

Tanna opened her mouth to reply, but the words caught in her throat as laser fire bore a hole into the wall beside her head.

## Chapter Nine

“Shit,” Garrick muttered. “They’re coming after us. Everyone out. Now!”

Tanna and the other girls didn’t hesitate, but scrambled out of the hovercraft as fast as they could. He did the same, crouching down behind what was left of the vehicle alongside Tanna and the crew. Tanna, however, didn’t stay put for long, but got to her knees to peek over the side of the hover. Garrick caught her arm and pulled her back down.

“It’s Koralo,” she said before he could scold her. “He’s out there.”

Garrick swore under his breath. “That way,” he said softly, jerking his chin toward the back of the store. “Through those double doors.”

Tanna and the other women didn’t hesitate, but darted across the store and through the doors. Garrick had expected the doors to lead outside, but instead he found himself in a huge warehouse with boxes of merchandise. On one side of the room, there was another set of double doors and on the other, there was a set of stairs leading up to a broad mezzanine that ran all the way around the perimeter of the first floor. His eyes narrowed as he took in the boxes that were stored up there. With all of those crates for cover, he could easily hide up there and take out Koralo and his people when they came in. But first, he had to get Tanna and the other women to safety.

He turned his attention back to Tanna to see her regarding him expectantly. “I want you to take the crew and go out the back,” he said, gesturing to them. “Head for the main street. From there, it’s only a few minutes back to the spaceport on foot. I’ll be right behind you.”

Tanna’s brow furrowed. “Not a chance! We stay together.”

Garrick clenched his jaw. “Dammit, Tanna!” he growled. “Now is not the time for this. I’m not planning to play the selfless hero here. I’m just going to stay long enough to convince them that we’re all in here, then I’ll leave. I’ll catch up with before you get half a kilometer away. I promise.” When she still looked unconvinced, he added, “Tanna, please. Your crew needs you.”

While the other women would have been fine on their own, he knew it was the only thing that would convince her to leave him. He needed to know she was safe. She hesitated, but then to his relief, she finally nodded.

“You better be right behind us. You promised.” Going up on tiptoe, she gave him a quick kiss. “I love you.”

“I will. I love you, too. Now, go.”

“Here,” she said, shoving her pistol into his hand. “You’re going to need this if you want to convince them there are more than just you in here.”

Before he could say anything, she turned and ushered the other girls toward the back doors. Garrick would rather Tanna have kept her weapon, but he didn’t have time to chase after her. He had to get into position. He waited until just long enough for the women to disappear out the door before racing up the stairs. Finding a stack of crates that would give him a clear view of the floor below, he ducked behind them just as the doors of the warehouse burst open.

Garrick’s hands tightened on the blast-pistols as two men hesitantly stuck their heads

inside. He had to resist the urge to shoot them right then. He needed to take out as many of Koralo's people as he could, which meant he had to wait until more of them came into the room.

Koralo's thugs must have been expecting a trap because they entered the warehouse cautiously. Four more pirates followed the first two, then three more after that. Though their gazes flicked to the top floor more than once, none of them made any move to come upstairs. *Yet*. The longer he waited, though, the more likely they were to check out the upper level, or just take off running for the back door. He didn't want them to do either. Easing out from around the crate just enough to get a clean shot at the group, Garrick began to fire both blast-pistols at once.

His shots caught the pirates completely by surprise. They hadn't been expecting anyone to pop up from behind a box on the mezzanine level and start attacking them so boldly. Their momentary confusion allowed him to pick off five of them before the others even started returning fire. Garrick was glad he had the heavy boxes for cover because when they did start to shoot back, they were damn serious about it.

Garrick had expected Koralo's thugs to take cover after he began shooting at them, but he was surprised when the remaining pirates actually charged the stairs to get to him. They must be more scared of failing Koralo than of Garrick shooting them.

He continued to fire at them as they rushed forward, praying his weapons wouldn't run out of power before he was able to finish them off. Thankfully, the red recharge lights didn't start blinking until the last pirate fell lifeless halfway up the stairs.

Thinking there might be more of Koralo's thugs still waiting outside in the store, Garrick stayed where he was for a moment. When the doors didn't open, he took off down the stairs and headed for the back door of the warehouse, tossing the spent weapons on the floor as he did so. He was out of cylinders, so he couldn't recharge the pistols, which made them useless to him anyway. If he were lucky, Koralo and the rest of his people were still outside the store waiting to see what had happened to the first group of pirates that had come in. By the time the slaver figured out what had happened, he, Tanna, and the crew would be long gone. Garrick had really wanted to kill the bastard for what he had done, but he wasn't going to have the satisfaction. Getting Tanna and the crew safely away from Koralo and off Mercaron was his number one priority right now.

Garrick raced down the alley, thinking that if he hurried, he could probably catch Tanna and the other women before they got too far. But what he saw when he got back out to the main street made his gut clench.

Koralo was smarter than Garrick had given him credit for. While some of his pirates had tried a direct frontal attack through the store, Koralo and the rest had moved to cover the other exits. The bastard had ambushed Tanna and her crew.

Ena and Jalena were lying on the sidewalk, unmoving. Leala, Naya, and Sela had been relieved of their weapons and four pirates were holding them at gunpoint by four pirates. Tanna was kneeling on the ground beside an unconscious Vi, her hand pressed to the other woman's shoulder as she tried to stop the bleeding there. Koralo was standing over them with a sneer on his ugly, tattooed face, his weapon pointed at Tanna.

Garrick didn't even stop to think about what he was doing, but took off at a run and launched himself at Koralo.

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Tanna gasped as Garrick slammed into Koralo. She hadn't even seen him coming.

The impact sent both men to the ground, knocking the gun from the slaver's hand and sending it skidding across the pavement.

When Koralo had waylaid her and the other girls, she had been sure they were all dead. Even though she knew it was crazy, now that Garrick was there, she couldn't help but think they might actually get out if this. She was confident Garrick could best Koralo in a hand-to-hand fight, and if he did, the slaver's four goons would most likely bolt. But when two of the men guarding the other girls left their post to go to Koralo's aid, her heart caught in her throat. She chewed on her lip, torn as to what she should do. She desperately wanted to help Garrick, to throw herself at the two men, but she was afraid that if she left Vi, the other woman might very well bleed to death. The girl's wound was really bad. Not having any choice, Tanna forced herself to stay where she was.

Koralo was fast, but Garrick was so much bigger the slaver's lightening quick strikes didn't even faze him. Garrick punched Koralo, rocking his head back. Then Garrick kicked out with his foot, catching Koralo in the stomach and sending the man flying backward to land in a heap on the ground. Garrick immediately got to his feet and started toward the man. With the slaver out of the way, his thugs had a clear shot at Garrick. Tanna opened her mouth to warn him, but before she could get the words out, Koralo spoke.

"Get back!" he ordered the two men as he got to his feet. "He's mine."

He advanced on Garrick, blood trickling from his split lip. Pulling the dreadful stun-stick from the holster at his waist, he glared at Garrick with a look of murderous hate in his eyes. Tanna's blood froze in her veins. She could tell from the lack of fear on Garrick's face that he had no idea how dangerous the simple looking rod was.

"Garrick, look out!" she cried out.

But it was too late. Koralo had already shoved the weapon against Garrick's chest and thumbed the trigger. From Garrick's howl of pain, Tanna knew the weapon had been set to maximum power, and she screamed as his body began to shudder in response to the electrical current running through it.

Tears welled in Tanna's eyes. She wanted to look away, but even though she couldn't bear to watch, she couldn't make herself move. In a moment, Garrick would drop lifelessly to the ground, just like Malana. But then something unbelievable happened. Garrick's howls of pain turned to cries of rage and he reached out to grasp the stun-stick with both hands.

Her eyes went wide. There was absolutely no way he should be able to control his body at all with the amount of current coursing through him, but he did. She watched in disbelief as he first yanked the tip of the rod away from his chest, and then ripped the stun-stick from the slaver's hand altogether.

Koralo must have been just as surprised as Tanna because he stared at Garrick in open-mouthed astonishment.

With a shout of fury half the city must have heard, Garrick reversed his grip on the weapon and smashed it savagely against the side of Koralo's head. There was a snap of electricity and a crack of bone, and then just that quickly, Koralo slumped to the ground, dead.

Stun-stick still gripped in his hand, Garrick turned to face Koralo's men, as if daring them to come at him. They must have seen enough, though, because all four of them turned and ran down the street like the demons of hell were after them.

Garrick threw the shaft to the ground and Tanna sagged with relief as he strode over to her. She wanted nothing more than to jump up and fling her arms around him, but she was afraid to release the pressure on Vi's wound.

"We need to get out of here. I'll take Vi. Go help the others," Garrick said, crouching down to scoop up the unconscious Vi from the ground and replacing Tanna's hand with his own.

Tanna got to her feet and hurried over to the two other unconscious girls. Unlike Vi, who Koralo shot, they had just been stunned. Tanna and Sela each draped an arm around Jalena while Leala and Naya did the same with Ena. They took off at a slow, stumbling pace down the street toward the spaceport.

Tanna was terrified that a hovercraft full of city guards would show up at any moment. But apparently, they still had bigger things to concern them. From the looks of it, every slave on the planet was revolting. They were demolishing stores and dragging their former owners into the streets. Tanna tried not to look as the slaves exacted their revenge. It was a good thing she and her crew were still carrying weapons or the rioting slaves might just as easily have turned on them, too. To her relief, they made it back to the spaceport and the *Andrusis* without encountering any more trouble.

Since Ena was still completely out of it, Garrick went to the bridge to handle the take-off after dropping Vi off in the med-bay. Tanna watched nervously as Sela worked on the unconscious girl, first pumping Vi full of sedatives, and then dumping her in a med-tank bath. Though Vi looked as pale as a ghost floating in the sustaining liquid, Sela told Tanna she was confident the other girl would be fine once the nano-meds got to work on her. The important thing was that they had gotten her into the bath before it was too late.

While Tanna was in the med-bay, the other girls got Ena and Jalena back to their cabins. Being stunned wasn't life threatening, but before letting the crew take the girls to their quarters, Sela had them hooked up to portable monitors all the same. Though Ena and Jalena would have one hell of a headache later, they would both be fine.

Garrick came back to the med-bay after getting the ship into deep space. Tanna was glad he was there, and she leaned back against him gratefully when he wrapped his arms around her. As much as she wanted to be alone with him, her crew needed her right now. Being in the safety of his arms was just as good, as far as she was concerned. When Sela came out with the latest update two hours later, however, it was to assure everyone that Vi was responding well to the nano-meds and would make a complete recovery. It was going to take a while, though.

"Go back to your cabins and get some rest," Sela added. "Vi will be in the bath for at least a day. I'll call you if anything changes. Trust me."

Tanna started to protest, saying she would rather wait, but at Garrick's and the rest of the crew's urging, she reluctantly agreed to go back to her cabin. As soon as she and Garrick were inside, he took her in his arms and held her tight.

"My God, Tanna, I think that today has been the longest of my life," he said hoarsely, his face buried in her hair. "When I saw those pirates drag you off, I thought I'd never see you again."

She clung to him tightly. "I know. Me, too."

"Knowing it was my fault you were captured only made it that much worse," he said.

She pulled away to frown up at him. "Please don't start that again. It wasn't your

fault.”

He reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Koralo never would have attacked the ship if it weren’t for me.”

“Koralo never would have even thought to attack us if it weren’t for Malana.”

His brow furrowed. “Malana? I don’t understand.”

Tanna let out a sigh as she ran a hand through her hair. “I didn’t say anything in front of the crew because I don’t want to tarnish their memory of her, but Malana made a deal with Koralo. She betrayed us.” Tanna told Garrick everything. About the other woman’s deal with the slaver, about Malana’s feelings for her, about how Koralo had killed her first officer when she had tried to defend her. “I had no idea she was in love with me,” she finished softly. “I hate what Malana did, but I’m still sorry she’s dead. She was my friend and the crew loved her. I’m not sure what I’m going to tell them.”

Garrick said nothing, but reached out and wrapped his arms around her. “You’ll tell them that Malana died trying to protect you,” he said quietly. “But what Malana did doesn’t change the fact that Koralo would have come after me sooner or later. Just because he’s dead, it doesn’t mean you and your crew aren’t still in danger by being around me. I’m sure Koralo isn’t the only scumbag who would want to get his hands on me.”

She lifted her head from his chest to look up at him. “I don’t care, Garrick. I’m willing to risk anything to be with you. I love you that much.”

“And what about the crew?” he asked. “Are you willing to risk their lives, too?”

She hadn’t thought about that. “I’ll let them decide that. If they don’t want to take the risk of being with you, they’ll be free to leave the ship with any profits they’ve made. But I already know what they’re going to say. You’re part of the crew, Garrick. You have been for a long time. That means you’re family to them and they’ll want to stay on board just to help keep you safe. You’re like a brother to them.” She lifted her chin. “So, don’t you even think about getting off this ship. That’s the order.”

The corner of his mouth curved. “Yes, Ma’am. Whatever you say.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “I want you to promise you won’t leave. I’d die without you.”

He reached up to tenderly brush her hair back from her face. “I feel the same way about you. I was a fool to think I could ever leave you. I promise I won’t step foot off this ship without you.”

Tanna felt herself finally relax. “Now that we have that settled, how about we get cleaned up and go to bed? I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Taking a step back, she kicked off her boots, then unbuttoned her breeches and shoved them down. Stepping out of them, she stripped off her shirt, then turned and walked into the bathroom. Behind her, she could hear Garrick pulling off his clothes. Slipping out of her bra and panties, she dropped them in the hamper and stepped into the glass-enclosed shower.

Tanna had just turned on the water when Garrick joined her. Closing the door, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against him. She let out a sigh. It felt so good to be in his arms.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Garrick reach around her and grab the bottle of shampoo from the shelf. She inhaled deeply as the fragrant scent filled the glass

enclosure. A moment later, he began to gently massage her scalp as he washed her hair. Tanna closed her eyes and tilted her head back, another little sigh of contentment escaping her lips. *Mmm*, his fingers felt so relaxing.

“I could have you do this all night,” she said softly.

“That good, huh?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Garrick chuckled as he continued with the massage. Except for those occasions when she had treated herself by going to a spa on some pleasure planet, Tanna had never had anyone else wash her hair, but it was extremely relaxing. She would have to ask Garrick to do it more often, she decided as he rinsed out the shampoo a little while later.

As Tanna smoothed her hands over her wet hair and pulled it around to the front, she wondered if she should return the favor, but Garrick was already squeezing some body wash into his hand. The thought of him treating her body to the same kind of exquisite massage he’d just given her scalp had her rethinking her offer. She’d have to return the favor later. Much later, she decided as he began to rub her shoulders. His touch was firm and yet gentle at the same time, his fingers working every bit of tightness from her muscles. He moved slowly down her back, making circular motions with his thumbs as he went that made her moan. God, he was good at giving a massage.

When he got to the small of her back, he slid his soap-covered hands around to her front and cupped her breasts. Her nipples immediately stiffened in response to his touch and she caught her breath as he gave them a squeeze. She reached up and covered his hands with hers, urging him to keep playing with her breasts. He did as she wanted, kneading them gently with his fingers before tweaking her nipples again. Tanna gasped, only to moan even more loudly when she felt Garrick press a hot kiss to the curve of her neck.

Sliding his hands out from underneath hers, Garrick ran them over her stomach and down to the juncture of her thighs. Apparently, the clean-up portion of their shower was over. That was fine with her.

“Keep touching you breasts,” he ordered softly, his mouth brushing her ear.

Tanna did as he instructed, massaging them like he had done, and then giving each nipple a firm little pinch. While the task was simple, concentrating on touching herself became more difficult when Garrick slid his hand between her legs and began to play with her pussy a moment later. She groaned and leaned back against him, spreading her legs a little wider.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

She nodded. “Very good.”

He delved into her curls, finding her clit and beginning to make slow, lazy circles on the plump, little nub. She murmured her approval and rotated her hips, grinding against his hand. He moved lower, running his fingers along her folds before gently sliding one of them inside her. She clenched tightly around his finger as he slowly moved it back and forth inside her wetness. When he slid out, Tanna opened her mouth to protest, only to close it again when she felt the head of his cock at the opening of her pussy.

Tanna automatically spread her legs and bent over, placing her hands against the wall. Garrick didn’t slide in right away, but ran the tip of his shaft up and down her slick folds. While the move was extremely pleasurable, it was also frustrating, and she couldn’t stifle the growl that escaped her lips.



She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. "Stop teasing me. I need you inside me. Now."

Garrick's mouth twitched. "Yes, Ma'am."

Grasping her hips in both hands, he thrust his cock all the way into her in one smooth motion.

Tanna gasped. Every time he was inside her felt like the first time.

Tightening his hold on her hips, Garrick pulled her back more firmly against him, thrusting into her even deeper. It felt so incredible that Tanna wanted to scream, but all she could manage was a husky cry as he began to slowly pump in and out of her.

Reaching down with one hand, Tanna began to rub her clit with her fingers. Little tingles of pleasure coursed through her body and she felt her pussy tighten around Garrick's shaft.

"Oh yeah," he said huskily. "Keep touching yourself. I like that."

Knowing that he found the act hot turned her on even more, and Tanna found herself moving her fingers faster and faster on her clit.

"That's it," Garrick said. "Make yourself come."

The combination of her fingers on her pleasure point and his cock inside her sent her toppling quickly over the edge, and she cried out as her orgasm engulfed her. She could tell from Garrick's groans that he was coming with her, though she could barely hear them over the sounds of her own screams.

Afterward, Garrick wrapped his arms around her and held her as they caught their breath. When her breathing had finally returned to something close to normal, Tanna turned in his arms and kissed him tenderly on the mouth.

"It's always amazing with you, but that was off the nav-screen," she said softly. "Maybe we should take this into the bedroom before my legs give out."

He brushed back her wet hair with a chuckle. "Good idea. Safety first."

It was much later when they lay together in bed that Garrick spoke again. "Are you really sure about me staying?"

She lifted her head from his shoulder to gaze down at him. "Of course I'm sure."

"Well, then you should know that from now on, I'm not letting you out of my sight," he told her.

She kissed him on the mouth. "I like the sound of that."

## Chapter Ten

Ten days later Tanna went looking for Garrick and found him on one of the lower decks signing some purchase orders for Naya. At the sound of her footsteps, he glanced up from the handheld computer to give her a grin.

"Have a minute?" she asked.

"Yeah. Let me just sign the rest of these."

Tanna smiled, pleased at how quickly Garrick had taken to his role as first officer. When she suggested it to him a week ago, he had been both surprised and flattered. Even though he'd clearly been intrigued by the idea, he had been reluctant to accept, saying she should instead promote someone who had been on the crew longer. The crew, however, disagreed. They were all still upset about losing Malana, but after the way Garrick had taken command of the ship when the pirates had captured Tanna, everyone agreed he had the necessary leadership qualities to fill the position, and then some. Tanna had taken Garrick's advice about keeping Malana's involvement with Koralo a secret. There was no reason to sully their memories of their former first officer. The crew missed her, but they knew Garrick was the best person to take her place.

"Though you do realize that means you'll have to take orders from me," Tanna had teased him when they were alone in her cabin later.

Garrick had just chuckled. "I can handle that. As long as you can handle me disagreeing with you sometimes. I'll try not to do it in front of the crew, but when we're alone, don't be surprised if I put you over my knee and spank you if you even think of doing something foolish like boarding a freighter that's about to fall out of orbit, for example."

Tanna had automatically started to protest, but he silenced them by covering her mouth with his in an intoxicating, and by the time he did let her up for air, she'd forgotten what she had been going to say.

Though she and Garrick might seem like they were on the same page in front of the crew, in private, they were still ironing out a lot of the details. For one thing, Garrick was completely against the policy about the first officer staying on the *Andrusis* when the captain was a member of the away team on a salvage mission. She was resistant to the idea, but she was beginning to think she might have to give in on that one. He had promised never to let her out of his sight, after all. Something he constantly reminded her about.

Another thing they had disagreed about was what to do with the pirates they had captured. Garrick wanted to turn them over to some legal authority, and when he discovered there really wasn't anyone who dealt with interplanetary pirates like that, his next idea had been to throw them out the airlock. Tanna hadn't been sure if he were kidding or not, especially after Sela told her what had happened to the pirate who had refused to cooperate. Regardless, Tanna hadn't let it get that far. She had set their prisoners free on the nearest way station.

Garrick's threats had the desired effect, though. The pirates were absolutely terrified of him and within a week, the IPD was abuzz with stories of not only what Garrick had done in the shuttle bay, but also with the things he had done on Mercaron. The stories

were starting to become more and more exaggerated with every retelling. According to the latest version, Garrick had laughed the whole time Koralo had been shocking him with the stun-stick and had only taken it away from the slaver when the battery charge ran out.

As ridiculous as they were, the rumors might actually help keep Garrick safe, Tanna thought. Garrick was already developing a reputation as a man not to be fucked with. She didn't think there would be anyone willing to go up against him for quite a while. *Thank God.*

Finishing up the purchase orders Garrick handed the computer back to Naya, then turned to Tanna as the other girl walked away. "What did you need?"

"You," she said softly.

He grinned. "I like the sound of that. Lead the way."

Garrick must have expected her to go to their cabin because when she walked past it to stop outside the holo-chamber instead he lifted a brow.

"It's a surprise," she said, giving him a secretive smile as she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Good evening, Captain. Garrick," Hollie greeted them.

"Hollie." Garrick glanced around the empty room before turning his attention back to Tanna. "So, what's this surprise of yours?"

"Impatient, aren't you?" she teased.

He chuckled. "You've got me curious."

"I'm actually a little impatient, too. I can't wait to see your reaction," she admitted with a laugh. "Hollie, run the program, please."

At her words, the holo-chamber slowly transformed into Seattle's Pike's Place Market just as it had been when Garrick had last seen it seven-hundred years ago. Her lips curved into a smile as his eyes lit up upon seeing the familiar sights and the wandering tourists. She and Hollie had put a ton of work into the program, and Tanna hoped everything looked right. In addition to the market, she had included the entire Puget Sound area, the Cascade Mountains, and even the Space Needle. Their clothes were from the time period, too—jeans and a T-shirt for Garrick, and a mini skirt and cami-top for her.

Garrick gazed around, wonderment in his blue eyes. "This is amazing. How did you do all this?" He sniffed. "Is that the ocean I smell?"

She laughed. "It is. I loaded the photos from your album into Hollie and then went onto the IPD to find some more. Hollie pieced everything together, using program algorithms to fill in anything that was missing." She caught her lower lip between her teeth and chewed on it anxiously. "Do you like it? Does it look right?"

"Like it? I love it. It's absolutely perfect." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "And it's the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me."

"I'm glad you like it." She smiled up at him. "Want to show me around?"

He flashed her a grin. "I'd love to."

When Tanna uploaded the information into Hollie's computer, she ran the program just to make sure it looked the way she wanted, and she'd had to resist the urge to explore the city. As they walked through Pike's Place Market together, she was glad she hadn't looked around on her own. It was much more fun doing it with Garrick at her side.

Though Garrick told her stories about the market, Tanna hadn't realized how

fascinating it truly was. But after seeing the variety of foods and handmade crafts, she could see why it had been so popular with tourists. She could have stood and watched the fishmongers throw fish to each other all day. But since she was eager to see the rest of the city, she eagerly nodded when Garrick asked if she was ready to continue the tour.

"Where to next?" he asked as they left the market and stepped out onto the busy street.

"How about the Space Needle?" she suggested. "I've wanted to see it ever since you showed me the pictures."

He chuckled and slipped an arm around her. "The Space Needle it is. But first we need to make a quick stop on the way."

Tanna slanted him a curious look, but when she asked where they were going, he just grinned and told her it was a surprise. That only made her more inquisitive, but she found out where they were going soon enough when Garrick stopped in front of a coffee shop.

"You can't visit Seattle and not get a cup of their world-famous coffee," he said as he opened the door for her.

Though she preferred tea, Tanna had to admit the coffee was pretty good. That probably had more to do with the cream and sugar she added, than the coffee itself, though. But she didn't mention that to Garrick as they walked to the Space Needle.

This close, the landmark was much bigger than she had thought, and Tanna gazed up at it in amazement. Once inside, they took the elevator to the observation deck. The view from there was spectacular, and she gasped as she took in the surrounding mountains. It was absolutely breathtaking.

Garrick leaned on the railing. "So, what do you think?"

"It's beautiful."

He reached out to gently brush her hair back from her face. "Not as beautiful as you."

She blushed at the compliment. "Are you sure you're not biased?"

"Maybe a little, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. You are beautiful." He bent his head to kiss her. "But you're right, it is beautiful up here. In fact, I can't think of a better place to do this."

Tanna watched curiously as he took a step back and got down on one knee in front of her. What was he doing?

"God, I hope it's still here," Garrick muttered half to himself as he reached into the pocket of his jeans.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. What was still there? What was he looking for in his pocket? She found out a moment later when he held up a small jewel box.

"Tanna, will you marry me?"

As he spoke, Garrick opened the box to reveal the most beautiful diamond ring she had ever seen. Tanna stared at it, too stunned to speak. In her wildest imaginings, she had never dreamed of finding a man to share her life with, but then she had found Garrick on that derelict ship and all that had changed. He not only loved her, but wanted to marry her. Tears of happiness welled in her eyes.

Garrick, however, must have mistaken them to mean he had upset her because he quickly got to his feet. "I didn't meant to make you cry, sweetheart. Seven-hundred years ago this was considered the most romantic place in Seattle to get engaged, so I thought..."

Tanna gently pressed her fingers to his lips, silencing him. "It is romantic," she said, letting out a tearful little laugh. "And you didn't upset me. These are happy tears."

Though relief crossed his handsome face, the look he gave her was still unsure. "So, does that mean you want to marry me? People still get married now, don't they?"

She laughed again. "Yes, of course, they still get married. And yes, I want to marry you. I love you."

She reached out and pulled him down for a kiss. No sooner had their lips met than a round of applause went up around them. Startled, Tanna pulled away, only to flush in embarrassment when she realized the computer-generated tourists Hollie inserted into the program had been watching the entire exchange. Even now, they were coming over to congratulate her and Garrick.

He chuckled. "Maybe we should continue the rest of this back in our cabin."

Tanna smiled. "Actually, I have a better idea," she told him. "Hollie, run the second part of the program, please."

At her words, the holo-chamber transformed into a masculine bedroom, and she couldn't help but smile at the look of surprise on Garrick's face.

"Recognize it?" she asked.

"Yeah. This is my old apartment." He looked around, and then back at her, his blue eyes filled with amazement. "How did you do this?"

She reached up to wrap her arms around his neck. "Same way I did the other program. I used the photos in your album and Hollie filled in the rest using the details I gave her from the things you told me about your apartment. Do you want to look around the rest of it?"

"Maybe later." He put his arms around her and pulled her close to kiss her on the lips. "Right now, there's just one thing I want to check out more closely."

"What's that?"

"The bed," he said, swinging her up in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

"So," Tanna said, pushing herself up on an elbow to admire the diamond ring on her finger. "When did you have time to get this?"

Garrick reached out to gently twirl the ends of her long hair around his finger. "When we were on Tertious Prime. Ena and the other girls told me about a reputable jeweler there."

She blinked in surprise. "The crew knew you were going to propose?"

He chuckled. "Probably before I did. But I made them promise to keep it a secret. I have no idea what I would have said to them if you turned me down."

She laughed and bent to give him a kiss. "I would never have turned you down."

"That's a relief," he said. "Though the jeweler did look at me a little odd when I asked about engagement rings."

"That's because men don't give engagement rings to women anymore. Just the wedding band," she explained, then grinned. "They don't get down on one knee to propose, either."

He lifted a brow, clearly surprised by that. "They don't? God, I really am old-fashioned. Emphasis on the old part."

Tanna laughed again. "I thought it was very romantic. Even if I didn't know what

you were doing at the time.” She reached out to cup his jaw. “I can’t believe how lucky I am to have found you.”

Garrick slid his hand in her hair. “I’m the lucky one, Tanna. If you hadn’t come across my ship, I’d still be floating in space somewhere.”

She smiled. “There was never a doubt that I would be the one to find you. I’m really good at discovering valuable cargo. And you’re definitely the most valuable cargo I’ve ever found.” She leaned close. “Now, stop talking and kiss your fiancée. That’s an order.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Paige Tyler is a full-time writer of erotic romance. She and her research assistant (otherwise known as her husband) live on the beautiful Florida coast with their easy-going dog and their lazy, I-refuse-to-get-off-the-couch-for-anything-but-food cat. When not working on her latest book, Paige enjoys reading, jogging, doing Pilates, going to the beach, and vacationing with her husband at Disney.

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