



Closed in Chains 1

Chains: 1

Chapter 1

Tain Halliday struggled back to consciousness, at first having no idea where she was. She lay on something that felt like bare metal, and when she forced her eyes open she found she was right. It was metal she lay on, just like the metal of the bars a few feet in front of her eyes.

Damn! Tain thought as she sat up and looked around, memory returning in a literal flood. That damn female did get us caught! If I live through this and somehow manage to get away I'm going to kill Coleson!

Rather than wishful thinking, the intention to kill was more of a sworn oath for Tain. Coleson was head of Tain's department back at headquarters, and he was the one who'd made no effort to refuse taking on one of the director's lame nieces. The girl had no aptitude for being an agent, but because she wanted to be one she and her uncle had seen no reason not to indulge her whim.

And they still won't see why this was such a bad idea, Tain thought as she settled into a cross-legged position and looked around at the other cages standing near hers. The little imbecile was supposed to take my orders, but instead she blundered around until she set off a trap that caught us both. That will become my fault, of course, because I was supposed to be in charge. But when that happens and I'm accused of not doing my job, at least I'll have the pleasure of punching out a director. Right after I punch out his niece...

But right now the girl, Ennie Farrow, was still unconscious in her cage.

This world of Oliven, degenerated from what it had been since it was settled, was more than a little backward. Properly protected upper class women were supposedly never bothered, but all the rest were considered fair game for enslaving. Tain and Ennie had been disguised as upper class women and should have been safe to do their job of locating the various places where the leaders of the area met, but then Ennie had taken off on her own. Tain had been forced to follow, and she'd caught up with the mindless girl just as Ennie walked right into a slaver trap.

And now Tain sat naked in her cage, seeing the other naked women in other cages. Many of those women were crying softly, the rest either silently angry or resigned to the point of depression. Tain's department had been given the job of finding a way to end the practice of enslaving women, but the job wasn't proving easy. Women

on this world were raised to think of the practice as normal, so if they happened to be enslaved most of them went along with it. Not that they were given much of a choice...

"No!" a shout suddenly sounded from one of the cages, unsurprisingly the cage holding Ennie. "No! Let me out this minute! I'm important and you can't do this to me!"

Tain just sat where she was, a faint smile curving her lips, unworried about what Ennie would say. Coleson, the fool, had been going to leave the girl just as she was, but Tain had insisted that Ennie be rendered incapable of telling anyone about who she was and where she came from just like every other agent. When Coleson tried to insist, Tain had put her foot down and refused to take the stupid girl along. Too bad she hadn't stuck with that refusal even after Coleson backed down.

The girl kept shouting for a good couple of minutes before anyone appeared in response. The women and girls in the other cages watched silently all the while, and when a man appeared who looked like a guard to Tain some of the other captives lay down and turned their faces away. A number of the other women wore expressions that said they were waiting for the loud-mouthed captive to be taught to be silent just the way they were being, an event that didn't take long in coming.

The man who appeared wasn't all that tall, but he was broad in the shoulders and wore an annoyed expression. It was very obvious that he didn't like being bothered, but Ennie wasn't bright enough to notice little things like that. Tain saw the girl all but sneer at the brief body wrap and thin vest on the man, all the covering that was really required in a hot climate like the one where they were, apparently missing the fact that she, herself, was naked. The girl sat up straight, the cages being too low to stand up in, a glare in her usually-flat blue eyes.

"It's about time you got here," Ennie spat out, her spoiled-brat attitude more than clear. "There's been a mistake made by somebody, and that somebody is going to pay hard for it! You people had no right putting me in this thing, and I demand to be released at once!"

Rather than answering, the man Ennie spoke to simply reached to the top of the cage and moved the latch that held the cage door closed. As the door swung open Ennie's expression changed to one of smug satisfaction, but the look didn't get to stay on her face long. As she began to leave the cage, the guard put a fist in her blond hair and dragged her out rather than letting her move on her own.

The girl screamed in outrage over the way she was being treated, but had no choice about going where the guard took her. That place was only a short distance away, near the wall between two of the cages where there was a low wooden shelf holding various items. The guard reached to the shelf with his free hand and got what looked like a thin branch to Tain, and then he was suddenly using the branch on Ennie's backside. This time the girl's screams had no outrage in them, just the sound of shocked pain.

The guard spoke softly to Ennie, who was trying to protect her backside with her hands, and then the girl's hands were out of the way. It was perfectly clear that Ennie didn't want to move her hands, which made Tain sigh and shake her head just a little. The girl had been told what usually happened to female slaves, but Ennie's shock and disbelief showed that the girl hadn't paid much attention to the intel she was given.

We've obviously been loaded up with the drug that makes it impossible to disobey the orders of anyone in charge, Tain thought as the guard went back to using that branch on Ennie's bottom. That fool girl can't believe anyone would treat her like that, and she doesn't even seem to know what's going on. But she's certainly in the process of finding out...

The guard gave Ennie ten or a dozen hard swats with the branch he held, then he put the branch back and took something else from a small box. Tain couldn't see what the something else was, but the guard spoke softly to Ennie again and then turned so that his body hid what he was doing. Tain saw the way Ennie's eyes widened as

she gasped and tried to cry out, but it was clear that the guard had given the girl orders about not making any more noise. Ennie was bouncing and crying even with her hair still held, but she'd stopped screaming or making noise of any kind.

Once the guard finished with whatever he was doing, he put Ennie back into her cage. It was possible to see painful-looking welts criss-crossed on the girl's backside, which meant that Ennie went to her stomach inside the cage. Her body squirmed around where she lay and she continued to cry hard, but there was no more noise coming from her. The guard looked around once the cage was locked closed again, specifically in Tain's direction as if he knew the two women had been captured together. When Tain's quiet showed that she had no intention of doing what Ennie had, the man turned and left the area again.

And then there was nothing to do but wait. The number of other women in cages told Tain that it wouldn't be long before they were all sold, not when there was a chance that one or more of the women's men would show up demanding to have his or their woman back. Not every man on Oliven believed in enslaving women, Tain's department had found out that much, but that group wasn't organized while the slavers and their supporters were.

A number of hours went by with nothing happening, and then the guard reappeared in the company of others like himself. The captives had been given nothing to eat or drink, but for Tain that was more a kindness than deprivation. The only sanitary facilities available was a short bucket in each cage, a bucket that stank even without being used. No field agent was actually fastidious, not with what usually had to be put up with in the field, but there was a big difference between using a bush or tree in the woods and using a stinking bucket.

The guards began to open cages, starting with the ones farthest from the door they'd entered by. One or two of the women tried to refuse to come out the way the guards wanted them to, but a brisk order got them out and on their feet. Deliberate orders couldn't be refused by them any more than Ennie had been able to refuse the guard who'd punished her, which meant it wasn't long before Tain's cage was also opened. She was gestured into line in front of the woman who'd been released just before her, and then Ennie was taken out to stand in front of Tain.

The look Ennie gave Tain just before she turned to stand quietly was filled with desperation, a silent plea Tain had no trouble ignoring. It was no one's fault but Ennie's that the two of them now had big trouble, but the girl clearly expected Tain to get them out of that trouble. Tain could have freed herself from the cage by getting a guard to take her out for punishment, but then what?

Even if Tain knocked out the guard or killed him and then released Ennie, where would the two of them have gone? There was no knowing what lay beyond the door the guards had used, and even if they'd found it possible to get outside the building where the cages were they would probably have found themselves in the middle of the slavers' compound. Tain knew just how good she was in a fight, but taking on two dozen roving guards was beyond even her expertise.

So Tain simply stood and waited until all the women were lined up to the guards' satisfaction, then she moved forward when they were told to do so.

Ennie still seemed to be squirming where she stood, and when the line began to move the girl made very soft noises under her breath with every step. Tain now had a guess about why Ennie was acting like that, but if the guess turned out to be true there was absolutely nothing either of them could do about it.

The women at the head of the line moved through the doorway with two of the guards leading the way, and when it became Tain's turn she could see that they moved through a rather large room with chairs and tables.

It wasn't hard to see that the room usually held the guards who were now all around them, which was hardly surprising. When you have valuable merchandise, you tend to guard it well.

Rather than being taken outside, the line was led deeper into the building. The floor they walked on was stone and

the walls were plain stucco, nothing in the way of decoration to be seen anywhere.

Lighting consisted of what looked like oil lamps on the walls, other rooms along the corridor hidden behind closed, plain wooden doors. Tain pretended to look at nothing but where the line was going even as she studied as much as she could of her surroundings, but the studying did no good. Without a decent opening trying to escape would be a waste of time, and nothing in the way of a legitimate opening came by.

The line was finally directed into another room, this one much larger than the ones they'd already seen. There were a couple of women already in the room, but they were taken out by a door opposite the one Tain and the others had used even before the entire line made it through the doorway.

The women were directed to line up along the lefthand wall, and once the entire line was in place the guards went into waiting mode.

And we weren't told we could sit if we liked, so we can probably be called at any time, Tain thought as she glanced around. It's fairly obvious that we're about to be sold, and I wish they would hurry up and get it done.

Once I'm out of here I ought to get some kind of break.

Or so Tain fervently hoped. She had a small edge the slavers weren't likely to know about, but it was a very small edge and couldn't be wasted.

One chance would be all she'd get, and then -

"Do something, Halliday!" a very faint whisper came from Tain's left, obviously from Ennie where she stood and squirmed. "I can't stand any more of this, so you have to do something now! And when are they going to give us our clothes back?"

Looking at or answering Ennie wouldn't have been very bright, so Tain continued to ignore the girl while she made sure the faint smile she felt on the inside didn't show on her face. Some of the guards were looking over the new crop of slaves, their stares very direct and not in the least shy. Ennie was squirming even harder under the inspection of one particular guard, finally having noticed that she stood stark naked and men were looking at her body. Tain wasn't particularly happy about the situation herself, but what did the fool girl expect her to do? Challenge all six of the guards and beat them to a pulp? Sure, right, maybe tomorrow.

With the guard staring straight at Ennie, the girl made no effort to repeat her demand. A number of minutes went by with nothing happening, and then that other door opened again. The first two women in line were directed toward the door and the guard in the doorway who was obviously waiting for them, and once the women had hurried through the door was closed again. Ennie and Tain were now third and fourth in the line, but when the door opened again and the next two women were taken they became first and second.

Just about the same amount of time passed before the door opened again, and now it was Ennie and Tain who were gestured through. The guard on the other side of the door took Ennie's arm when she got close enough, and a second guard, waiting in the short hallway beyond the door did the same with Tain. At the end of the hallway was what seemed to be a considerable amount of light, but Tain's curiosity wasn't immediately satisfied. Ennie was taken ahead to a short flight of stairs and up into all that light, but Tain was held back by the hand on her arm.

Ennie glanced back at Tain just before she was taken out of sight, the glance filled with a good deal of nervousness and downright fear. It seemed clear that it hadn't occurred to Ennie that she and Tain would be "sold" separately, and Tain wouldn't have mentioned the point even if they'd been able to speak privately. Ennie wanted what she wanted when she wanted it, and that kind of person isn't known for being reasonable. Not even when other people are suddenly in control of your life... It might have been Tain's imagination, but it seemed to take longer to sell Ennie than it had taken with the women who'd gone first. At one point the sound of laughter came

floating down the stairs, mostly male laughter but women's voices undoubtedly adding their own amusement. Some of the upper class women also bought female slaves, which made Tain's department's job even harder. Even if they managed to get one of the male leaders talked into the idea of getting rid of slavery, if his wife liked the situation just as it was all their efforts could end up being undone.

The guard who had taken Ennie up the stairs had come back down alone, and he finally gestured to the guard holding Tain's arm as he himself headed back toward the door they'd come through. Tain's guard moved her to the stairs and up them, and once Tain reached the top she almost had to squint against the increased light level.

At the top of the stairs there was a stage of sorts surrounded by lots of lamps as well as mirrors, the mirrors doing their job of increasing the light coming from the lamps. Tain could tell that the large area beyond the stage held a lot of people, but it wasn't possible to make out any faces.

"Our next offering is a nicely made little sweetie," a man's voice boomed out, coming from an area to Tain's right just beyond the stage. There was no sound equipment being used, of course, but the man obviously didn't need any. "You can see she hasn't given us any trouble like the last offering, so those of you who want a good, obedient little girl will want to bid on her. Turn around for the people, girl."

Under other circumstances Tain would have told the man what he could do with himself, but right now all she did was turn as directed. Someone who wanted an obedient slave would be easy to take out, once they were away from this place with all its guards. By the time Tain turned back to the audience there were bids being made, but nothing to give Tain a swelled head. All the bids were on the low side, and the one woman who bid twice dropped out after that.

The bidding finally came down to two men, but one of the two dropped out just as the amount was beginning to approach real money. The auctioneer declared the winner, his voice sounding very pleased, and the man with the winning bid went over to the auctioneer to pay what he now owed. Tain tried to get a look at the man, but he stood just beyond the auctioneer's narrow platform and was completely blocked by the platform side. Well, who her new owner was didn't really matter, Tain thought as a different guard came to take her arm and move her off the stage to the right and down a short flight of steps. After all that brightness it was hard for Tain to see anything in the relative dimness, and then she was pulled into a room that had a number of people in it. Two women, semi-dressed in very short, very low-cut tunics of a sort wore the narrow, red-cloth armbands that marked them as slaves, and they were the ones the guard pulled Tain over to.

"Obey these slaves as if they were free," the guard said to Tain, and then he released her arm and walked away. The man was probably on his way back to his post near the stage, but Tain didn't even get the chance to see him leave the room. One of the slaves moved behind her, and the next minute there was a blindfold being put over Tain's eyes. It was standard procedure to blindfold newly-sold slaves before they were handed over to their new owners, Tain knew, but that didn't mean she had to like the practice.

But there was another part of the standard practice that was a good deal worse than simply being blindfolded. Tain had been trying not to think about that other part, but not thinking about it didn't stop it from being done.

"Bend over and hold your ankles," a female voice said softly from right next to Tain. "Once you're bent over, relax your inner muscles." For once Tain was relieved that she had very little choice but to do as she'd been told. If she had had the choice she probably would have refused, or at least she'd have tried to refuse. There were three male guards in the room in addition to the two slaves, and although she might have been able to take all three there was always the chance that one of the guards might have gotten lucky. If she tried something and it didn't work, she'd be in a much worse position than she currently was.

A position that was more than bad enough. Tain's breath drew in when she felt the small, round thing being pushed into her bottom, the kind of thing that the guard had put into Ennie after her switching. The insertion was

designed to make the new slave really hot, so that when her owner decided he wanted a taste of her she would not just be ready but would be downright eager.

"You aren't permitted to take that out or do anything to make it come out on its own," the slave told Tain softly once the insertion was solidly in place. "If you're a very good slave your master will see that you're eased. You can stand straight again now."

Swallowing the rude sound she wanted to make wasn't easy for Tain, but she still managed to keep her comments to herself as she carefully straightened up. The insertion was worse than she'd thought it would be, and it was all Tain could do not to squirm in place the way Ennie had been doing. Heat began to flash through Tain's body from the feel of that insertion, but she gritted her teeth and tried to ignore the feeling.

Once her new "master" got her out of this place, she'd be rid of him and the insertion together.

Not to mention the blindfold. The cloth had been folded into a fairly narrow band, which meant the thing was tight over her eyes and almost nothing of light leaked in. The practice was meant to make the new slave nervous and unsure of herself, two reactions designed to help her learn her "place," but Tain already knew her place...

Even so, when a big hand wrapped itself around her right arm and began to lead her somewhere it was all Tain could do not to gasp. Walking with that insertion inside her was bad enough, but not being able to see where she was going made things a lot worse. She felt the edge of a doorway when she was taken through it, and then the sensation of moving air on her body told her she was outside the building.

The first part of the trip lasted only a few steps past the outer door. Sounds told Tain there were people all around her, and she also heard the snort of what seemed to be a horse. She expected to be handed over to her new owner and taken away, but the first thing that happened after the hand on her arm stopped her came as a surprise. Her arms were drawn behind her and her wrists quickly tied, making Tain want to curse out loud.

Now she would have to wait until the leather on her wrists were removed along with the blindfold before she'd be able to free herself.

As soon as she was tied to the satisfaction of the guard who had been guiding her, Tain was given another surprise. This time she did gasp as she was lifted into the man's arms, but he didn't hold her for long. Another set of arms took her and arranged her astride the horse she'd heard, most of her lower body in this other man's lap. His right arm came to circle her waist and hold her in place, and then the horse was moving off from where it had stood.

Tain hated surprises, and this newest turn of events made her more sure of that than ever. Her new owner should have had a small wagon or buggy to put her in, not be mounted on a horse. And he shouldn't have asked to have her tied, not when she'd been presented as a slave who didn't give any trouble. Nothing was working out right, especially not her position on the horse. The way her bottom rested on the man's thighs made that insertion work on her even more than it had been doing, which was to his benefit but not hers.

The horse was kept to a fairly slow pace for a short time, but then the man holding Tain made a clicking sound and the horse shifted into a trot.

That gait was much worse than the walk had been, and it became more than Tain could do not to squirm around. The man holding her chuckled, showing he knew what she was going through, but that was it as far as reaction went. He still kept the horse at a trot and his hand and arm kept her close to his body.

By the time they finally stopped Tain was silently frantic. She wanted to scream and curse the man who held her, but doing something like that would not have gotten the leather off her wrists and the blindfold taken from her eyes. When the man dismounted and then lifted her from the horse's saddle Tain moaned, so badly in need that if

she'd been free she'd probably have tried to rape the fool.

But she wasn't free, so all she could do was rant inside the privacy of her head as she was carried a short distance and then set back on her feet. A big hand on her arm kept her from bouncing and squirming away from where she'd been put, and then a length of leather was tied to her left arm. A moment later the man walked away, but when Tain tried to take a couple of steps of her own she found that the other end of the leather on her arm had been tied to something and pulling at the something didn't loosen the leather.

So Tain was left with no choice but to stand and squirm where she'd been put. She could hear the sound of something like leaves moving in a small breeze, which probably meant they'd stopped in a stand of woods of some kind. If she hadn't been tied she would have stumbled off into those woods even if she couldn't see where she was going, and once she put enough distance between herself and her new owner she would have had the time to do something about the blindfold and the leather on her wrists.

But tying her like this effectively killed that plan. Being so hot didn't encourage clear thinking, but even with the heat raging around in her body Tain was getting suspicious. Why would someone who had bought an "obedient slave" have her wrists tied behind her and then tie her to a tree or something? It just didn't make any sense -

"Oh!" Tain cried out as a big hand smacked her bottom once, hard.

The smack hurt, but more than that it had made her even hotter than she'd been. The man was back near her and doing something from the sounds Tain heard, but she didn't know what that something was until she was picked up and put down on her back on what felt like a blanket. The length of leather tying her to a branch or a bush was now slack, but the looseness did her no good at all.

And then two lips and a tongue came to her hardened left nipple, the tickle from the tongue making her moan and squirm even harder. A big body was now positioned between her knees, probably in a crouch, and when the tongue moved to lick her right nipple two hands also came to caress her body. Nothing but mewling came from Tain's throat as the sensations seared through her body, that body bouncing and kicking in a silent demand for easing. And then A scream forced its way from Tain's throat as the unseen man thrust himself inside her, a scream of victory at getting what she needed so badly. Then she choked some when the size of the man became very clear, a size she hadn't been expecting. But when he began to stroke in and out of her the mewling returned as she matched his motions, as she was forced to match his motions. The demands of her body let her do nothing else, and in no more than a moment she was lost to the incredible sensations. The sex lasted for quite a long time, allowing Tain to explode again and again in an easing of need. Not being able to see somehow made the time more intense for her, focusing all her attention on what she was being made to feel. When the man finally let himself join her latest explosion, Tain couldn't decide if she was relieved or disappointed. The experience had been incredible, and when the man withdrew to lie beside her his hand came to gently touch her middle.

"That was almost as good as I thought it would be," the man drawled, his hand on her middle downright possessive. "But don't worry, Kitten, I wasn't really disappointed. And as the days pass I know you'll get better and better. You won't be given a choice about that."

The man chuckled over what he'd said, but Tain was so shocked she almost forgot to breathe. She now knew why so many precautions had been taken with her, and also knew why the man hadn't spoken sooner. That deep, arrogant voice couldn't possibly be missed, not when she'd spent so long a time avoiding the man who owned it.

It was a small relief to know she'd been found and retrieved by someone from her department, but why did that someone have to be Jake Killen? And what the hell had he meant about her "getting better?" He couldn't possibly be thinking of keeping her as a slave? No, he was probably just trying to torment her.

Wasn't he...?

Chapter 2

"Do you think it's safe to untie me and take off this blindfold now?" Tain finally forced herself to say, letting a hint of disdain color the words. "If you're afraid I'll attack you, I can always promise not to."

"Before I untie you we need to get the ground rules straight," Killen answered, sounding a lot less disturbed than Tain had hoped he would. "I'm in charge this time, not you, so we'll be doing things my way. There are a number of reasons why I've been put in charge and told to stay there, not the least of which is the fact that you're not entirely your old self."

"I'm also not completely and totally under the influence of the drug, something you ought to know," Tain countered, getting more unhappy by the minute. "If not for that fool female I was saddled with - But that's beside the point. The fact still remains that I can do what I have to even with that drug in me."

"But not nearly as well as you normally can, and there's no getting rid of the drug until we're back where we belong," Killen stated, his voice taking on a hardness Tain didn't like at all. "You can't go back to being an upper class woman, not when there's a chance someone will say something to show you do have the drug in you, so you have to stay a slave."

That means doing as you're told, not whatever you care to."

"That's garbage," Tain said, making the mistake of moving in annoyance.

The movement started that insertion to working on her again, and having to lie absolutely still to calm the thing again multiplied her annoyance.

"If I'm dressed as an upper class woman and you're acting as my protector, everyone we met would talk to you rather than me. You're just trying to II

"And if I don't happen to be around every minute of the day and night?"

Killen interrupted, still with that hardness in his voice. "All it would take would be one bit of bad luck, and then the game would be over. Do I have to remind you what's done to slaves who pretend to be free?" Tain had parted her lips to snarl at the fool, but his last words left her with very little to say. She did know what happened to slaves who dared to pretend they were free, and to say the fate wasn't pretty was to understate by a mile. Death was a happy thing compared to what would be done to her.

"And where do you think I would get the clothes and other requirements of an upper class woman?" Killen went on after only a very brief pause. "My character is nothing but a mercenary, and even if there were stores to go into where the clothes and things could be bought, how could I explain why I was buying those things? And then there's my companion, who'll be joining us in a short while."

"What companion?" Tain asked automatically while her mind scrabbled around looking for a way out of the mess. A way she could live with... "Who are you talking about?"

"We've managed to recruit one of the natives of this world who's willing to work with us," Killen said. "Tandro is smart enough to know that enslaving women is bad for his world, so he's going to try to help us change the practice. But he grew up with the rules this planet operates under, and he knows I just bought you at the slave auction. He'll expect you and the girl to be treated like any other slave, at least until we get you both back to where you came from."

"The girl," Tain said, knowing the place Killen meant was the very well-concealed base they operated out of. And

that had to mean he'd been at the base when her tracer and Ennie's had shown they'd been taken. "Are you telling me your friend is the one who bought Ennie? And I thought I'd be rid of her for a while."

"I couldn't very well let her be sold into real slavery, now could I?" Killen asked, amusement having entered his voice. "Tandro bought the girl and I bought you, and we each left the compound with our slaves and headed in a different direction. Tandro will circle around and meet us here, where we'll camp for the night. First thing tomorrow we'll all head back, he and I taking care of our assignment on the way. The assignment shouldn't take long, so this will all be over almost before you know it."

The amusement had strengthened in Killen's voice, and Tain didn't have to wonder why. He sounded like a used-car salesman, trying to talk someone into buying one of his lemons.

"Come on, Kitten, be reasonable for once," Killen urged when Tain didn't say anything for a moment. "We have no real choice here, so why fight the inevitable? And this will be the first time we've ever worked together. I don't know about you, but I've always been curious about how we'd do if we teamed up."

Sure, teamed up. With him being the owner and her being the slave. But even beyond that there was a reason she'd never agreed to work with the man, and that reason hadn't changed.

"I won't let you take advantage of this foul-up to treat me like a slave," Tain finally stated, wanting him to know how firm the decision was.

"It isn't 'reasonable' to let people walk all over you, especially when the mess you're in was caused by someone else. But if you don't like what I'm saying, you don't have to go along with it. Just untie me and turn your back for a minute, and I'll take care of getting myself home."

"And run the risk of getting caught as an escaped slave?" Killen countered at once with a snort of scorn. "I don't think so. You seem to believe that your not being in charge will mean the end of the world, and it's time you learned that that isn't so. If you want to do it the hard way, then that's the way we'll do it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tain demanded, finding it impossible not to react to his belligerent tone, but the fool didn't answer in words.

A gasp escaped her when she felt his hands on her body, hands that caressed her breasts and then moved to the place between her legs.

"These are my orders to you, slave, and you'll obey them completely and absolutely," he said in that very hard voice as Tain lost the fight not to squirm. "To begin with, you won't obey anyone else's orders but mine unless I tell you to. If I'm not there and someone tries to command you, you'll humbly explain that you're not allowed to obey anyone without my permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Tain gasped out, agreement forced on her by the damned drug she'd been given. And with the louse's hands all over her, she couldn't even control her thoughts well enough to make mental loopholes she could take advantage of later.

"My second order is that you'll obey me completely and absolutely any time I address you as slave," Killen went on without taking his hands away. "If I call you by some other name, the decision about whether or not you'll obey is yours - with the firm awareness that if you don't obey me you'll be punished. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Tain repeated, writhing and pulling at the leather on her wrists.

The insane need she'd felt earlier was back, and his every touch made the fire burn hotter.

"The third thing you need to be told is that you're not to take off on your own unless something happens to me,"

Killen said, giving her no rest.

"No matter how unhappy you are, you'll stay with me until we get where we're going. Do you understand?"

This time Tain's answer was more of a grunt than a word. If he didn't ease her soon she would die, and she wanted to die!

"And lastly, for the moment at least, you're to tell me every time that insertion dissolves," he said, his voice sounding kind of far away.

"The thing takes a while to dissolve, but as soon as you feel that it isn't influencing you any longer you're to let me know. Do you understand?"

Tain wasn't capable of anything but mewling as she tried to nod in answer, but that response seemed to satisfy him. The next thing she knew he was between her knees again and entering her, and then there was nothing for her but sensation. Explosions wracked her body again and again, and when the very last release came, exhaustion took her down into blackness.

Jake lay still on the blanket for a few minutes, unwilling to lose the feeling of satisfaction too quickly. Making love to this woman was something he'd wanted to do since the first time he'd seen her, but her own reaction to meeting him hadn't been the same. She was the department's fair-haired girl despite having dark-brown hair, their top agent, and most of the people she worked with were intimidated by her in one way or another. Either they tried to be as good as she was or, failing that, they tried to be invisible.

But I never did the same, and wouldn't have even if we'd worked together, Jake thought, getting up on one elbow to look down at the woman who was lost to exhausted sleep and stroke her hair. I don't need to prove how good I am at everyone else's expense, and if she'd wanted to be in charge, as she usually was, I wouldn't have minded. But Coleson would never give us the same assignment, and even though he refused to say why I had the definite feeling the refusal was her doing.

Even though Jake didn't know why she'd refused to work with him.

The refusal might have something to do with her nickname, Tain, a less-than-usual shortening of "captain." Her unofficial rank was captain, but he'd earned the rank of major before he'd left the armed forces to work for the department. Could she resent him for something as petty as that? He didn't like to think so, but it was always possible.

Jake sighed as he reached for his body cloth, stood, and began to put it back on. Only the upper classes wore more than the scantiest of clothes on this world, and even they stripped down when they weren't in public. His role as a mercenary let him be as comfortable as possible in the heat, and Tain would be even more comfortable as a slave. At least as far as clothing went. As far as the rest of it was concerned, this woman would get exactly what she'd asked for.

Annoyance got a good grip on Jake as he crouched next to the sleeping girl, removed the short strip of leather from her arm and the bush, then began to untie the leather holding her wrists behind her. Anyone else in her place would have seen the need to be reasonable, but not the mighty Tain. She had to have everything done her way, even if her way put her life in more danger than usual. Any slave caught pretending to be free or proving to be a runaway was tortured to death slowly and horribly, but that was not going to happen to this woman. No matter how unhappy the restrictions he'd put on her made her.

And the time just might teach you a needed lesson, Jake thought as he stood straight again to look down at the sleeping woman. In your own way you're as much of a brat as that girl Ennie, and Ennie will definitely be taught better before this is over. And who knows? Maybe the time we spend together will make something grow between

us in spite of your unhappiness.

As soon as you learn to relax and let someone else be in charge. Tain made a sound of unhappiness as she moved just a little on the blanket, then she sank back into sleep. As soon as Jake was certain of that he left her and went to the pack horses he'd hidden in these trees before going into the slavers' compound. One of the horses had been carrying his possessions and the other had had Tandro's things, but both horses had been unburdened and put on a grazing line before he and Tandro had left.

The pack horses had pretty much grazed as far as they could by now, so Jake shifted their positions before carrying his tent and stuff into the clearing. He'd already taken care of his saddle horse, so he put up the small tent and then went to gather wood for a fire. It was somewhere around noon right now and his stomach told him it could do with a meal, and Tain would certainly be hungry when she woke up. Not that she was likely to enjoy what she was given, but that was just too bad about her.

If she'd been reasonable...

But she hadn't been reasonable, and Jake had decided to make her regret that choice. Maybe someday the lesson would help to save her life.

Tain woke up feeling confused, most especially since she couldn't see anything. For a minute she didn't understand, and then she realized that although her wrists weren't tied any longer she still wore that blindfold.

It took only a minute to push the cloth up before pulling it off, and then she was able to see again.

But the return of sight wasn't the comfort it should have been, not when she saw Killen sitting by a dying fire drinking from what looked like a water skin. It was fairly obvious that he'd also eaten, something that made Tain very aware of the hollow in her middle. But she'd rather starve than ask that man for anything, so if that was what he was waiting for a hiss forced its way out of Tain's throat when she thoughtlessly tried to sit up. That miserable insertion felt smaller than it had originally but it was still inside her, something she'd found out about when she'd tried to sit in the normal way. Perching on her hip was about all she could do, a humiliating position that the amusement in Killen's very light eyes said he knew all about.

"I'm glad you're awake, Kitten," Killen said as he put aside the water skin. "Come over here and have your lunch, and then you can do some cleaning up and wood-gathering. You'll want to be ready when it's time for you to make supper."

"Thanks anyway, but I'm not very hungry," Tain said, forcing herself to ignore his stare. "Since I'm the slave around here, I might as well get directly to work. Show me what needs cleaning, and then I'll get the wood."

"You'll do as you're told, slave," Killen said, his tone having turned as hard as the look in his gray eyes. "You're not in a position to decide what you will and won't do, something you ought to know but obviously don't. Let's see if I can make the point absolutely clear for you. Come over here."

Tain tried to resist doing as he said, but the drug in her system made his orders completely undeniable. The best she could do was move slowly as she got to her feet and walked over to where he sat, but the slowness of her pace seemed to make him even more annoyed.

"Stubbornness has its place, but the trick in using it successfully is knowing when not to use it," Killen said, reaching up and pulling her down across his folded legs. "The next few minutes might help in teaching you which time is which, and if it doesn't then we'll just keep doing the same over and over until you do learn. Keep your hands and arms right where they are."

Tain's hands had gone to the ground beyond Killen's leg, so she didn't understand his order until she felt a really

hard smack on her bottom. Her first reaction was to gasp and try to protect herself with her hands, but only the gasp actually worked.

"Did you like that?" Killen asked while Tain fought not to squirm because of the growing sting in her seat. Not squirming was absolutely essential because of what the last of the insertion was doing to her, that smack waking it up with a vengeance. "Answer me, slave. Did you enjoy what you were just given?"

"No," Tain was forced to say, the single word pulled past the growl in her throat as her hands turned to fists. She wasn't being allowed to defend herself in any way, and that was lousy, stinking, and -

"How about that one?" Killen asked after giving her a second hard smack that almost made her cry out. "Did you enjoy the second any more than the first?"

"No," Tain choked out again, too busy with trying to control her reactions to ask what the hell he thought he was doing. Besides starting to slowly drive her crazy.

"I have a theory about why you aren't enjoying this," Killen said while the ache built higher in Tain's bottom. "I think you aren't enjoying the spanking because you don't know how much good it will eventually do you, so you aren't able to really appreciate it. What I intend to do is keep spanking you until you appreciate the effort enough to thank me, and I expect those thanks to be sincere. Let's see how long it takes."

And then his hand smacked her bottom again, just as hard as the first two times. This third smack, though, landed on a seat that was already aching, which meant Tain wasn't able to keep from yelping just a little. As the fourth and fifth and sixth smacks landed in turn, the yelps grew in size and volume until Tain was almost shouting. In addition to the flaming heat growing inside her, the ache in her bottom was flaming almost as high.

At one time Tain would have sworn that she was able to take anything anyone could dish out, but she quickly learned that a hard spanking wasn't part of the anything. Every time Killen's hand landed on her bottom the situation got worse, finally forcing her to admit that stubbornness might not be the best of ideas right now. She would rather have died than give the louse any satisfaction at all, but since dying wasn't even a faint possibility.

"Thank you!" she found herself suddenly blurting as she fought to swallow her howls of pain and need. "I really want to thank you!"

"Oh?" Killen said, and happily that hand hadn't come down on her bottom again. "You're thanking me? What are you thanking me for?"

"I'm thanking you for - Ow!" Tain yelled when another smack reached her tender backside - probably because she was talking too slowly.

"I'm thanking you for giving me - ow! - this spanking! Thank you for oh! teaching me what I need to - ouch! know!"

"Not bad," Killen allowed, and even while Tain writhed she noticed that he'd stopped spanking her again. "You do sound somewhat sincere, but I'll need some proof of that sincerity. Ask me to finish the spanking in a proper way."

Tain almost asked what he meant by "a proper way," but she cut the words off just in time. Questioning the man in any way at all would cast doubt on her "sincerity," and that was something Tain very much wanted to avoid.

"I ... would like you to ... finish the spanking in a ... proper way," she got out through gritted teeth, hating herself for being such a coward but helpless to do anything else. "And I'd ... like to ... thank you ... in advance."

"You'll also thank me once it's finished," Killen said, and then an even harder smack to her bottom made Tain

howl louder than ever. There was a pause between each of the following smacks, so after the fifth it took Tain a short while to realize that the spanking was over.

"Now you can get to your knees and give me those thanks," Killen said once Tain's wildness had calmed just a little. "That's right, move backward off my lap."

Tain had no interest in moving at all, but it still wasn't possible for her to refuse. Small pain sounds were forced out of her throat as she backed off Killen's lap and to her knees, humiliation covering her like a blanket.

"Thank you for finishing the spanking properly," Tain said once she'd settled into a position that brought the least amount of added pain to her bottom. She wasn't able to look directly at Killen, and surprisingly he made no effort to get her to do it anyway.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" he asked instead as he used one finger to wipe at the tears streaming down her cheek. "I know the time wasn't pleasant for you, but you have to learn not to act any differently than other slaves. As long as you're a good girl and do as you're supposed to, you probably won't have to worry about being spanked again. Now take this food and eat it."

Killen put a wooden bowl into her hands, and despite the fact that Tain had no appetite whatsoever she used the crude wooden spoon to swallow down the plain cereal the bowl contained.

"Good girl," Killen said once she'd finished the "meal." "Next time you'll eat as soon as your food is ready so it won't be cold the way it was just now. And if you're a really good girl, we'll see if we can't find berries or something to give the cereal some sweetening. Now you can rinse the bowl in the second bucket of water that's a little farther away, and then you can go and collect firewood."

Tain was about to protest that she needed easing first, but one glance at Killen's expression said that she'd be wasting her breath. He really was determined to treat her like a slave and make her act in a way he considered proper. Even with no one around, he obviously wasn't prepared to budge an inch.

Tain had trouble getting to her feet, and once she was standing she had trouble walking. The ache in her bottom flared high with every step and motion, and the heat inside her made her want to moan. But none of that was allowed to keep her from doing the chores assigned by her owner, a man who seemed to be watching her every move. And washing the bowl proved to be the easy part. Once she put the bowl aside and headed into the trees for the firewood, she found out just how bad it could get.

A small armful of wood had already been collected when Tain moved behind a tree to gather what was on the ground. As soon as sight of Killen and the camp was cut off, her mind automatically went to the possibility of escape. It would be so easy to slip off into the deeper woods and head for the base, keeping to the wilderness the entire distance. She knew how to stay out of sight, how to feed herself, how to make sure no one had the least idea she was around.

But taking the first step proved to be impossible. She'd been given very strict orders about staying with Killen, and even though she fought with all her strength she couldn't break the hold those orders had on her.

It was maddening, infuriating - but there was nothing she could do about it.

She'd been tied hand and foot without a single length of leather touching her.

By the time she had all the wood she could carry, Tain was completely miserable. Her bottom ached and throbbed, the need threatened to send her screaming to her knees, and she felt so hemmed in that the emotion nearly reached the level of phobia. She hobbled back to the campsite and put the wood she'd gathered on the ground near where the fire had been, deliberately not looking around at anything. She hated being so tied down,

and the hatred made her uninterested in everything but itself.

"That's a good start," Killen said from where he lounged on the ground, callously intruding on Tain's need to brood in silence. "We'll need more wood than what you have there, but before you go back out for it there's something I have to do. Come over here and kneel down."

Tain would have hesitated quite a while if she'd been able, but only a short hesitation was possible before she just had to obey. "Good," Killen said when she was on her knees, and he seemed to be pretending that she'd obeyed him enthusiastically. "You'll need some help, and the slavers were kind enough to make sure I could give it to you. No, don't worry, you're not about to be spanked again."

Tain had stiffened and almost struggled when Killen took her across his lap again, and she wasn't entirely sure that she could believe what he said. It wasn't all that long since the last time she was bottom up across his lap, and the experience was one that would be remembered for quite a while. Then she gasped as she felt his hands parting her thighs, and gasped a second time, louder, when two of his fingers put something inside her.

"This cream is designed to soothe your inner parts and make it easier for you to do your duty toward your master," Killen said as he moved his fingers in a way that made Tain moan. "I know the treatment is hard on you right now, but we can't do anything about rewarding you for acting properly until you're in a condition to appreciate that reward. Is the soreness being eased?"

With speaking completely beyond Tain, all she could do was nod spasmodically. She hadn't really been aware of the soreness inside her, not with everything else she'd been made to feel, but she was aware of the way the cream had first eased and then banished the soreness. "Okay, all done," Killen said, no longer using one hand on her thigh to hold her still. "You can get up now and go back to gathering wood. Your body needs time to absorb that cream completely, and there's no sense in your not doing something constructive while we're waiting." While we're waiting, Tain thought bitterly as she found that getting up was almost as hard this second time. Her body was now screaming for relief, and the thought of how long she still had to wait made Tain want to blubber or tear her hair. She was almost to the point of being willing to beg, and it wasn't just the knowledge that she'd be ignored that stopped her. If she ever begged Killen for anything she really would want to die.

Tain fought not to squirm as she walked back into the woods, and the fact that she probably failed miserably wasn't one she cared to consider. There were now two compact tents in the small clearing the campsite had been erected in, with a few feet distance between them. The second tent reminded Tain that Killen had said his friend Tandro would be arriving, and the thought that the native would get here in time to see her being humiliated was a devastating one. Not to mention that Tandro would have Ennie with him.

The picture in Tain's mind of her moaning under Killen while Ennie laughed in ridicule was so vivid that she didn't realize she had all the wood she could carry until she dropped the latest branch she tried to add to the rest. The realization that she'd completed her chore sent her directly back to the campsite, her body refusing to listen to the reluctance in her mind.

Tain nearly held her breath until she saw that Killen was still alone, but that sight didn't bring the relief it should have. There was no telling when the other man would arrive, but it suddenly came to her that using one of the tents ought to take care of the problem. For that reason Tain hurried to put the second load of wood with the first, but before she could say anything Killen had his own say.

"And now it's time to give you your reward," Killen told her with a grin, and his rising to his feet showed Tain that he'd moved the blanket and had been sitting on it. "No, don't say anything right now. I've been looking forward to your getting back and I don't want the mood spoiled."

The mood spoiled. Tain's mood was one of frustration that made her want to scream, most especially when Killen

came close to lift her into his arms.

The heat inside her flamed higher at the touch of his hands and body, but her mind's reluctance also grew as he carried her to the blanket, went to one knee, then put her down on the cloth.

"Just to make you feel less alone, I was given a cream for my own use,"

Killen murmured as he put himself beside her on the blanket. "Now we're ready to make beautiful music together instead of whimpering piteously.

Aren't you glad?"

Tain tried to shake her head vigorously, but Killen held her head still with a fistful of hair and began to kiss her. At the same time his free hand caressed her wherever it could reach, increasing her need so badly that Tain thought she would die. She writhed in his grip and made sounds of desperation, and after an eternity his lips left hers long enough for him to remove his loin covering.

One glance showed Tain that Killen was just as ready as she was in spite of the way she had to use her feet to keep her tender bottom off the blanket. She watched him move between her knees, taking her thighs in his hands, and then he was presenting his rampant demand to her own desire. If she could have she would have screamed for him to hurry - and then she was suddenly in a lot less of a hurry.

"Oh, yes, how deliciously tight you are now," Killen exulted while Tain choked over the impression that he was pushing a tree trunk inside her.

"We're going to have much more pleasure this time, we certainly are."

Tain would have wanted to show her disagreement with that opinion, but she was much too busy thinking about how long it would take for her to break.

Chapter 3

Tain's mind was filled with pure desperation by the time Killen was completely inside her. He felt so outrageously big that she was sure she couldn't hold all of him, her body lying totally motionless due to the conviction. But once he had entered her fully, the touch of his body to her tender bottom made her jump and squirm in a way that also widened her eyes.

"That's my good girl," Killen murmured as he began a slow withdrawal that Tain just knew was the start of gentle stroking. "We're going to enjoy this a lot, you just wait and see if we don't. Now doesn't that feel good?"

If Tain had been able to speak she wouldn't have been able to speak.

Killen's movement was the start of his stroking, and the sensations Tain felt were beyond description. She needed relief desperately, but the sudden size of him was so overwhelming that she began to mewl at every motion. And she'd thought he was big the first two times... If left to her own devices she would have lain without moving, but every time he stroked inward his body touched her backside and made her writhe and squirm.

"What a good kitten you are," Killen murmured as he held her close while he slowly increased the speed of his stroking. "A deliciously tight, squirming kitten who's giving me more pleasure than I've ever felt before.

Yes, that's right, keep moving like that."

Tain wanted to be furious over the way Killen kept speaking to her, but all too soon she became completely lost to

what his body did to hers. Her world became one of pure sensation interspersed with lengthy explosions, a world that didn't end for quite some time. When the time finally did end and Killen withdrew to lie beside her, Tain had strength enough to do nothing more than use her feet to ease her bottom while she lay otherwise motionless with her eyes closed.

"Now you know I wasn't lying," Killen said after a long time of silence while they both did nothing but breathe. "I said you'd be even better than you were the first time, and you can take my word for it that you were.

And now you can talk again any time you like."

There were a lot of things Tain would have enjoyed saying a short while ago, but now she'd passed the point of believing those things would be satisfying - or would do any good. Killen was taking advantage of the situation to really enjoy himself, and there was nothing she could do to change matters.

"You can't mean there's nothing you can think of to say?" Killen teased after the silence had gone on for a minute or so, then Tain felt him shift where he was before his hand came to her middle to stroke gently.

"If you're refraining from telling me how good I was to keep me from getting a swelled head, you have nothing to worry about. I've learned how to take overwhelming praise with all due modesty."

"You made it very clear that you don't want me saying things you prefer not to hear," Tain suddenly decided to tell him. But she kept her eyes closed as she spoke, not in the least interested in how he took her comment.

"No, what I tried to make clear was the way you're supposed to act, especially when other people are around," Killen corrected, the teasing quality gone from his voice and his hand now unmoving on her middle. "Are you trying to say you didn't enjoy that as much as I did?"

"What choice did I have?" Tain countered, making herself ignore the change in his voice. "I needed relief desperately because I was forced into needing it, not because I find you irresistible. And now I'm being forced to tell you that the insertion has finally stopped affecting me. I hope you'll excuse me if I don't celebrate the announcement."

"You're probably just tired as well as stressed," Killen said after a short hesitation, his tone obviously trying for lightness now. "I know this situation isn't easy for you, so it will probably take you a while to notice how really great I am. We'll give it that while and then we'll talk again."

Tain opened her eyes when she heard him getting to his feet and saw him retrieve his body wrap and put it on. It was disturbing to think that Killen was disappointed in her reaction to the sex they'd shared, just as if he'd actually expected her to be as enthusiastic as he'd been. He couldn't really be that naive so chances were good that he was pretending, but why would he pretend?

Turning to her side on the blanket made it easier for Tain to think, which gave her the answer to her question in no more than a minute. Killen was responsible for getting her back to base in one piece, and if something permanent happened to her he would be held responsible.

Someone else would have relied on the orders he'd given her, but she now remembered that he'd tied her to a tree when they'd first stopped rather than rely on the way she was blindfolded and had her wrists behind her.

He's afraid I'll find a way to get around his orders, so he's decided to use suspenders and a belt, Tain thought, the concept perfectly clear. He's trying to make me think I mean more to him than I really do, an effort to tie me emotionally rather than with leather. His mistake was not being more subtle, but maybe that was a deliberate mistake. He somehow sensed that I would be more responsive to openness than game-playing, but I'm not going to be responsive to anything. I can't afford to be.

Tain closed her eyes again, hating to admit the truth even in the privacy of her own mind. From the first minute she'd seen Killen, she'd known he was a man she could get seriously involved with. But she didn't want to get involved with a man, not when she'd worked so hard to get where she was in her chosen profession. If she and Killen developed a serious relationship, one of them would have to leave the department. The rules were clear on the point, and it was one rule no one ever ignored. Once emotion entered the picture, intelligent efficiency of effort went right out the window.

And considering that people didn't change much no matter how technologically advanced the worlds got, she would be the one who would be made to leave. If she left the department on her own she'd have no trouble finding a home with people who did similar discreet work for the Union government, but being made to leave because of "personal reasons" would make trying to find another job like her original one a waste of time. Which was why she'd told Coleson that if he ever paired her with Killen she would quit on the spot.

Hiding behind closed eyes wasn't the comfort it should have been for Tain, but that didn't make her want to look at the world again. Part of her felt the urge to scream out that having to live alone if she wanted to keep her job wasn't fair, but the rest of her knew better than to lie. It was a fair requirement for someone who risked her life all the time, especially when other lives often depended on her being clear-headed enough to do the job right. A single hesitation at the wrong time, brought about by thoughts of how her other half would cope if she were killed, and that could be the end right there.

So the choice came down to staying with a job she loved that would kill her to lose, and letting herself feel something for a man who would end up causing her to lose that very necessary-to-her job. Even being deeply and completely in love with the man would do nothing to make her loss of the job less devastating, which in turn would most likely change her feelings for the man. Her loss would end up being entirely his fault, and that would be the end of the relationship.

But someone like Jake Killen would find it impossible to understand her position even if it was explained to him. Tain had quietly found out that he considered what he did to earn money nothing but a job, and if the job was lost it would always be possible to get another. He would brush aside her objections and concentrate on nothing but making her fall in love with him, and he would almost certainly succeed. His draw was too strong for her to resist for long, and he would work even harder if he got the least hint that he had a chance of succeeding.

Which was why Tain had decided to believe that Killen was trying to trick and trap her by being open and gentle. It was the only way to defend herself, especially in a place where he had all the advantages. She had to make him believe she had no personal interest in him, she just had to...

A long stretch of time passed that Tain spent on her stomach, studying her hands and trying to think lucid thoughts. The desperate need for self-defense helped her to come up with an idea or two, but not very pleasant ideas. If she could possibly avoid using those ideas she would, but if push came to shove she would just grit her teeth and get on with it.

"It's time you started supper, Kitten" Killen said suddenly, actually startling her. He'd spent the time himself checking on the horses and then sitting around thinking, and now he was sharing one of the things he'd obviously been thinking about. "I don't have to tell you that cooking over a fire takes longer than a couple of minutes, do I?"

All sorts of clever or sarcastic come-backs fought to leave Tain's tongue, but abrupt suspicion kept her quiet as she got to her feet. She'd spent more time on this world and others almost as backward than Killen had, and both of them knew it. Why, then, would he be prodding her with the kind of arrogance designed to start an argument? Even a glance showed that the man was watching her closely, so all she did was look around at the sacks that had to be provisions.

"Have you decided yet what you'd like to eat?" she asked mildly without actually looking in Killen's direction. "If

not, you can think about it while I start the fire."

As Tain went toward the firewood, she decided that the plan she'd just come up with would be better than the others she'd thought of. Playing it cool and agreeable would at the very least give the man nothing to complain about, and at best it might convince him that he meant nothing to her. Disliking someone for no apparent reason was too often looked at in the age-old way: the supposed dislike was really intense interest that the person involved was trying to cover up. As an experienced agent she ought to be better at covering things up than the average man or woman in the street, not worse.

"I think I'd like some stew," Killen finally answered as Tain started the fire, his voice nearly a drawl. "You'll have to make do with more of that cereal, at least until I decide that you've earned a reward. Good kittens get to taste real food, but bad ones have to make do without."

"Stew it is," Tain agreed without reacting to the rest of what he'd said, at least on the outside. Mentally Tain felt the urge to grit her teeth over the way Killen was pushing, but knowing he was definitely up to something let her hold her temper without trouble. Once she figured out what he was up to it would be time enough to decide whether or not to read him the riot act.

Jake watched his temporary slave go to the packs to find a pot and the dried meat and vegetables that would go into the stew, his body relaxed only because he refused to let his muscles knot. She wasn't reacting at all the way he wanted her to, the way he'd decided he had to have her act.

The girl's disturbance over his lovemaking had bothered Jake at first, so he'd left her alone in order to do some thinking. If she really didn't feel for him what he felt for her, his forcing her to accommodate him couldn't be considered anything but low. It had taken a long string of minutes before a different idea came to him, one that was downright intriguing.

If Tain really had nothing in the way of feelings for him, she would have been more disgusted than disturbed over what he'd done. Or she would have put him down in an offhand way, the kind of way he'd seen her use with others in the department. Her very disturbance said she was feeling something, but not a something she wanted to feel. For some reason she felt it necessary to hide her real reactions, and he decided to find out what that reason was. If she had legitimate grounds for acting like that he would respect her need, but if she was just being stubborn...

So Jake had prodded at her in a way that should have made her lose her temper. When people lose their tempers they tell you more than they would choose to say in calmer moments, and in that way you find out what you need to know. Not to mention the fact that Tain was even more attractive to him when she was angry. Fire flashed in those pretty blue eyes of hers, threatening to burn him to the ground if he couldn't handle her and the anger both. And he wanted to handle her, with both hands.

But she hadn't gotten angry at his prodding. Instead she'd dismissed just about everything he'd said, accepting it as if nothing he said or did was very important to her. And she seemed to have lost the disturbance she'd felt, settling down into the role she really did have to play without any more fuss. Jake felt the urge to say something else to dig out a reaction, but at the last moment managed to keep his mouth closed. Being too obvious wasn't likely to get what he was after.

So Jake just sat and watched Tain prepare the food, and when she brought him his bowl of stew he half hoped she'd done something to ruin the meal.

That would bring her anger out into the open where he wanted it -but a single, cautious taste of the stew told him the story. The food was fine, just the way it was supposed to be, and the miserable female didn't even seem to mind that she had to make do with cereal instead of real food.

But as Jake swallowed down what he didn't really want any longer, he made himself a promise. He would find a

way to shake Tain's cool indifference, damned if he didn't...

Tain collected the bowls after they'd both finished eating and took them to the bucket where the pots were already soaking. It wasn't going to take long to get everything washed, and while she saw to the chore she was able to think about Killen's reaction to her plan. Or his try not to show a reaction, even though he hadn't been quite as successful as he probably thought.

The man is definitely not very happy, Tain thought, making sure not to show any outward satisfaction. For some reason he wanted me to jump at him, and when I didn't he almost added to what he'd already said. Then he realized that pushing it would be ... pushing it, so he just kept quiet and ate his food.

Ate his food. Tain smiled to herself, remembering how Killen had been cautious with his first taste of what she'd given him. She could have put something into the stew that he wouldn't have enjoyed at all, but that would have been reacting to his prodding and she'd decided not to react.

And her plan made things better in more ways than just one, at least for her. All she wanted was to get back to base and her normal life, and the less fuss she made the less excuse Killen would have to give her a hard time.

Once the dishes and pots were done, Tain went back to stretch out on the blanket in the last light of the day. Killen continued to glance at her from time to time, but she pretended she was all alone in the camp.

In reality she was keeping a fairly close watch on the man, so she noticed that he was about to speak when his intentions were interrupted by the sound of a horse coming through the woods. Killen got quickly to his feet, his hand on the long knife he'd kept close to him in its sheathe, but when he saw the rider - riders - he relaxed immediately.

"Tandro, glad to see you made it," Killen said as the newcomer stopped his horse only a few feet away from Killen. "I was starting to get worried, but then I remembered you had a new slave to enjoy."

"'Enjoy' might not be the best choice of words," the man Tandro replied dryly as he dismounted, then reached up to get Ennie down. "This slave is completely untrained, so she'll need a lot of instruction before anyone is able to really enjoy her."

The native was a big man, easily the same size as Killen, but Tain could see he had black hair and dark brown eyes instead of the dark blond hair and gray eyes Killen had. Ennie had looked extremely uncomfortable where she'd been perched in front of Tandro, and once her feet touched the ground she began to voice her complaints.

"You had no right to tell me to keep quiet until we were in this camp!" she snapped at Tandro, her small hands closed into fists. "Being forced to sit like that not only hurt, it also made me hot again. If you'd let me say so, we could have stopped to let you do something about it again."

"That's one of the reasons you weren't allowed to speak," Tandro responded mildly, looking down at the much smaller girl. "You seem to think that I'm the slave, bound to cater to you in all ways, but you're about to learn better. Go to the other slave now and ask her politely to show you where the provisions are. You'll make some food for both of us, we'll eat, and then we'll see about easing you again."

"Absolutely not!" Ennie stated, glaring up at the big man. "If you want something to eat you can get it for yourself the way you did earlier, and at the same time you can make something for me. It was really awful of you to refuse to share earlier, and I won't put up with that kind of behavior again. But before you get involved with making food, you'll come into one of those tents with me. And once I'm feeling better you'll find some clothes for me to wear. I refuse to stand this humiliation even a minute longer - What are you doing?"

Just about as soon as Ennie started her tirade, Tain saw Tandro turn away from the girl and go back to his horse.

There were saddlebags behind the saddle, and Tandro looked through one of the bags for a minute before he found what he was after. The thing wasn't very big or thick, but it was about six or seven inches long and it was made of wood. Tandro held it by its handle, and above the handle the wooden thing spread out to be about three inches wide.

And as soon as Tandro had the thing in his hand, he took Ennie by the arm and began to move her away from the horse. His actions had interrupted what Ennie had been saying, but he didn't answer her final question in words. Instead he sat down near where Killen had been sitting, pulled Ennie across his folded legs, then showed her what he was doing.

Which, of course, turned out to be giving the girl the punishment she'd been begging for. Tain flinched just a little when that narrow paddle came down on Ennie's bottom, making the girl shriek with outrage, humiliation, and the pain being added to her earlier switching, not to mention probably also adding to her arousal from the insertion. It took about three or four swats on that bare, squirming seat before the ache began to build really high, something it was easy to tell when Ennie's cries suddenly changed.

Couldn't happen to a more deserving girl, Tain thought as Ennie's kicking and yelling developed definite overtones of desperation. The girl's backside was starting to get red from the smack of that paddle, a device that seemed to be made of hard but flexible wood. And Tandro was very methodical in the way he spanked her. Each swat was delivered with what looked like a good deal of strength to Tain, but there was a small hesitation before he gave her the next swat. He appeared to be letting the ache build before he added to it, making the time even worse for the mindless little fool.

The paddling lasted a good number of minutes before Tandro decided he'd punished his slave enough. Ennie, who hadn't been allowed to protect herself with her hands, of course, had long since been reduced to tears and howling. When Tandro pulled her from his lap and put her to her knees beside him, he had to order her to silence before the howling stopped.

"That's better," Tandro said in the same mild way while Ennie cried hard but silently. "I told you that whether or not you obeyed me would often be your choice, and now you know what a wrong choice brings. Unless you want more of the same, go to the other slave without any further nonsense and do as you were told."

It was perfectly clear to Tain that Ennie would have preferred to refuse, but she wasn't that much of a fool. The girl swiped at her eyes with one hand before climbing slowly to her feet, then she limped and squirmed her way over to where Tain sat.

"I - I need to be shown where the provisions are," Ennie gulped out, obviously having trouble controlling herself and the crying. "And I also don't know what to do with the provisions, so if you would - " "What you want is over here," Tain said at once as she rose to her feet, not about to let the girl reach the point of asking her to do the cooking.

"I'll also tell you what has to be done, but you're the one who'll be doing it."

"Please, don't make me do something I have no idea how to do right!" Ennie whispered as she followed Tain to the sacks of provisions. "If that beast isn't happy with what he's given he might beat me again, and if he does I'll die!"

"No, you'll just want to die," Tain corrected, turning to look at the girl. "Being paddled is rarely fatal, but I have no interest in finding that out first hand. You were the one who was told to do the cooking, so if I do it for you I'll be helping you to disobey. If you'd rather not have your seat made even more tender than it is right now, you'd better learn fast."

Ennie's expression said she really disliked the answer she'd gotten, but there wasn't time for the girl to pester more

than another time or two.

Tandro had gone to take care of his horse, but he wasn't likely to be all that long in coming back. Once Ennie was forced to understand that Tain would not be changing her mind, the girl had no choice but to do what she'd been ordered to.

Tain explained slowly and clearly what Ennie had to do in order to make the stew for Tandro and the cereal for herself, then she went back to the blanket and lay down again. She'd built up the fire before making her getaway, knowing damned well that if she stayed to supervise, the girl would try again and again to get her to take over. If the one on the spot was someone other than Ennie, Tain's answer probably would have been different. But Ennie hadn't even tried to apologize for getting them taken captive, so the girl was definitely on her own.

Neither the stew nor the cereal ended up as badly burned as Tain expected them to be, which proved that Ennie was capable of learning when her ass was on the line, so to speak. The girl hobbled over to give Tandro his bowl of stew where he sat with Killen, then she returned to the fire to kneel and eat her own meal. The last of the firelight let Tain see the girl's grimace at the first taste of the tasteless cereal, but apparently Ennie was hungry enough that she couldn't afford to refuse what she had.

Instead of refusing she emptied the bowl fast, then was given orders to wash the bowl along with the pots that had been used.

"And you'd be wise to do a better job with the washing than you did with the cooking," Tandro added mildly around a mouthful of stew. "I'm going to check on how clean everything is, and if the pots and bowls aren't clean enough you'll find out almost at once."

Ennie swallowed hard before turning to the bucket she'd been told to wash the dishes in, but she hadn't soaked the pots the way Tain had. Both the burned-on remnants of the stew and the cereal had to be scrubbed off, and all she had to do the scrubbing with were her fingernails. It took quite some time before Ennie was done, and that was when she learned she wasn't quite as done as she'd thought. Tandro called her over to take his bowl, and when the girl discovered that the last traces of the food had dried on the bowl she looked like she was about to cry.

But with or without tears, the last of the washing was finally done. Tandro ordered her to kneel by the pots and bowls until he was ready to look at them, and then the native went back to his soft conversation with Killen. The two men pretended to see nothing of the way Ennie squirmed where she knelt, so Tain did the same. If it had been anyone but Ennie who was being made to suffer even longer.

The girl had taken to whimpering under her breath before Tandro finally got to his feet and stretched, then sauntered over to where Ennie still knelt. The man made a production of inspecting each pot and bowl, but finally he couldn't stretch out the time any longer. He ordered the squirming girl to follow him, and then he headed for one of the tents.

Ennie winced as she scrambled to her feet, but that didn't stop her from moving in as fast a hobble as she could. Tandro had caressed one of Ennie's rock-hard nipples before walking away, and for a moment the girl had seemed close to passing out.

"I don't know about you, but I found that very interesting," Killen's voice came suddenly but softly as he joined Tain on the blanket. "I expected Tandro to be really hard on the girl, but instead he's doing worse."

"What do you mean by worse?" Tain couldn't help asking in the same soft way as she quickly got a good grip on herself. Having Killen ten feet or more away was nothing like having him right behind her... "That paddling wasn't easy for her, but he could have been a lot harder."

"Making her choose to obey him is a good deal worse than even a hard beating would have been," Killen

answered without moving any closer. "The girl will end up conditioned to do exactly as she's told, you wait and see if she isn't."

"Ennie may very well end up conditioned, but I don't think the job will be as easy to accomplish as you and your friend seem to think," Tain responded after a brief hesitation. "Her entire life until now has conditioned her to expect to get her way in everything, and I seriously doubt if she'll give up that stance without a fight. And what happens if she figures out that you work for the same people I do? That will explode this whole game sky high."

"I don't want that happening, but it could," Killen acknowledged. "Right now the girl is too distracted with everything happening to realize how unlikely it is that she was brought straight to where you are, but once she calms down some the thought will probably occur to her. You're not to tell her that the two of you have been rescued no matter what she says or does."

"I never intended to tell her," Tain said, speaking the truth even though she felt an odd reluctance to stay with the decision. "Ennie can't be counted on to remember what she should and shouldn't say or do, but what if she can't handle accepting what she'll think will be her new place for the rest of her life? If she freaks out we may have to tell her."

"I'll take care of what she's told, assuming I decide she needs to be told anything," Killen said at once, his tone sober. "You're just another slave, so it isn't your place to make decisions and act on them. Do you understand me?"

"Certainly," Tain said with a nod, glad the man sat behind her rather than in a place where he might have been able to see her face. She'd had to clamp down hard on the urge to use words of one syllable to remind him that she had more field experience than he did, but her suspicious mind saved her just in time. The way he kept rubbing her nose in the fact of his being in charge meant he was definitely up to something, and losing her temper would be a lame way of finding out what that something was.

"I'm glad you do understand, because what I said is an order,"

Killen responded, obviously still pushing. "If this thing blows up in my face it will be because of something I did, not because of someone else's mistake.

And now I think it's time we got ready for bed. We want to get an early start tomorrow."

"I'm already ready," Tain answered, but before she could get to her feet she was stopped in an unexpected way. Killen's arms came to circle her, and then she was pulled back and across his folded legs.

"No, I'm afraid you aren't quite ready," Killen disagreed as she gasped in surprise. "Just lie still and don't try to stop in any way what's going to be done. It won't take long, and then we can go to our tent."

Tain parted her lips to demand to know what he was talking about, but the answer came to her before she made the mistake of responding in anger.

Knowing, really knowing what was going to happen made her want to scream and fight to avoid Killen's intention, but she wouldn't have followed through even without being under orders not to resist. If he wanted her angry, that was the last thing she could afford to -

"Good girl," Killen said, ignoring the gasp that had been forced out of her when he put a new insertion into her bottom. "Now we're ready, so let's go to bed."

Tain moved as slowly as possible when she stood up, but that didn't help much. The insertion began to work on her at once, a reaction that came as no surprise. Killen put the fire out before coming to lead the way to the second tent, his hand on her wrist making her walk faster than was in the least comfortable. But all Tain could do was

snarl on the inside and promise herself that one day she would find the perfect way to get even with Mr. Jake Killen!

Chapter 5

Jake Killen wasn't happy. He'd finally gotten a reaction from Tain, but not the one he'd been looking for. She'd flatly refused to put on the outfit she'd been given, and the defiance he'd seen in her pretty blue eyes had been something he couldn't overlook or excuse. It had almost been as if she were challenging him, and Jake Killen wasn't at all used to turning down a challenge.

So he'd answered the challenge instead, announcing that he meant to punish her at some later time. Once the words were spoken he couldn't very well take them back, but the look of disgust she'd given him had made him wish he could. If it were possible to erase spoken words as easily as those written in pencil or in the dust.

But erasing a rash decision just wasn't possible, not unless you wanted to look like a fool. Jake never worried much about what he looked like to others, but Tandro had heard his promise and there might be trouble with the native if Jake backed down. Jake needed Tandro's backing when they reached the town they were headed toward, so Tain would not be getting away with defying him.

As they rode along, Jake eyed the gathering clouds less with suspicion than with the hope of being distracted. Tain had been doing better than he'd expected with obeying him, acting as if she didn't much care what he told her to do. Why, then, had she gone so far as to ignore him when he told her to put on that outfit?

She hadn't enjoyed having that insertion put in her bottom last night, but the explosion he'd expected and had been hoping for never came. Instead she'd saved her reaction for this morning, out where Tandro could see her rather than taking advantage of the privacy the tent provided. It was almost as if the woman knew how arousing she looked in those skimpy so-called clothes, but that was ridiculous. Of course she didn't know what sight of her like that did to him...

"I think it's time we had our lunch," Tandro said from where he rode to Jake's right, the words as lazy as most of the things he said. "Our slaves ought to be hungry enough themselves to react properly to the sight, teaching them the easy way that whether or not they starve is entirely our decision. If they don't behave themselves they won't be fed."

"Your little brat may learn that lesson, but I don't think mine will," Jake answered, speaking softly. "She isn't the same as yours, and the idea of starving doesn't intimidate her. You do understand, I hope, that my kitten isn't like most other women."

"I still have trouble understanding how your people can trust a female with a really important job," Tandro said, his dark eyes showing that he wasn't joking about being troubled. "It's perfectly obvious that if we keep on enslaving women at the rate it's now being done all the best women will soon be unavailable for breeding, but that's a different matter entirely."

"Actually, you're talking about another side of the same problem," Jake said, glad to be discussing a topic he hadn't wanted to bring up himself.

"If you raise women to believe that cooking and cleaning is all they're capable of, you won't find many who can be used for something else. But if you raise women to believe they can do anything that takes their interest, you're actually doubling the number of hands available to raise your world up to the next level. Holding down half your population does the same with the world you live in."

"In other words, even if the women are used for nothing more than to free the time of men with ideas, we'll still benefit," Tandro said, suddenly looking surprised. "I hadn't considered the matter in that light, and I doubt if anyone else on this world has either."

"When you're too busy enjoying the women around you, thinking of other things for those women to do isn't easy," Jake said with something of a smile. "Making it legal to enslave women triples or quadruples the problem, which is why we really need to change that law. And then make sure the slavers really do find a different way to earn a living. They're not likely to give up their ... trade without a struggle."

"That's something no one will have to be told," Tandro said with a snort of amusement. "Slavers do love their trade, even more than most men enjoy having slaves around them. You weren't able to completely understand the lure of having a slave before, I think, but my guess would be that your understanding has been going through a change."

"Yes and no," Jake admitted, deciding he might as well share his own viewpoint. "There's no question that it's very pleasant to have a woman available who has to obey everything you say, but unless there's something seriously wrong with you - or you have no experience with any other arrangement - the novelty wears off fairly quickly. There can be so much more to a relationship with a woman than having her serve you in bed and out that you have to have experience with that something more before you can know what losing it means."

"You almost sound as if you pity me for not having experienced that something more," Tandro mused, happily showing nothing of insult as he studied Jake. "Can you describe the kind of thing you're talking about?"

"I don't know if I can," Jake answered, trying to figure out a way to explain color to a blind man. "When a woman is free and self-confident and whole, you can share things with her that you'd never share with another man. Say you're feeling depressed for some reason. If the woman is your friend as well as your lover, she'll do or say something to pull you out of the dark mood. A slave wouldn't know how to do something like that even if she weren't afraid of being punished if she intruded on your mood."

"What if I didn't want to be pulled out of the dark mood?" Tandro said, possibly playing devil's advocate as he frowned with the attempt to understand. "Sometimes a man needs to think dark thoughts so he can figure out a way to deal with the things bothering him."

"A woman who was your friend would understand the point and leave you alone to brood," Jake said, smiling faintly. "Sometimes women have the same needs, and the really wise ones will recognize the need when you have it. And you have no idea how much fun arguing with a free woman can be."

After the argument comes the time of making up, and no man who hasn't dealt with a free woman can know what that's like."

"You'd better not mention arguing with a woman when you speak to Gordi,"

Tandro advised after shaking his head at the grin Jake's smile had become.

"Gordi can be made to see reason up to a certain point, but beyond that point he'll dig in his heels and refuse to listen. He has a very large following among the men of this world, so getting him on our side is the first step in abolishing female slavery. I'm glad you're not insisting that we take the females back to your base before your interview with him, but you will have to watch what you - and the females - say."

"Since the women will be under orders to say nothing, we don't have to worry about them," Jake assured the other man. "And I'm not about to throw away the opportunity I was given when Gordi agreed to hear what I had to say. If he has to wait too long for me to get there, he could well change his mind about listening. And I intend to be very careful of what I say."

New ideas have to be handed out slowly, one at a time, so the people involved have a chance to get used to one before they're exposed to the next."

"Then until Gordi agrees to go along with the first idea, you'd better act as if you're not considering any others," Tandro said, handing Jake a piece of the dried meat he'd already taken out of one of his saddlebags.

"Our new slaves need to be properly trained, and this is part of the right way to do it. When we reach Gordi's town you'll have to be even more careful to do everything right."

Jake took the dried meat with an inner sigh, knowing that if he refused to take Tandro's advice he'd be wasting his time speaking to Gordi. And he couldn't afford to waste his time, not when the success of this assignment would mean a change for the better for everyone on the planet.

The dried meat didn't make all that pleasant a meal, but a few swallows of water afterward helped some. When the meal was over Jake joined Tandro's silence for a while, going over in his head what he would say to Gordi during the interview. And especially what he would not say. One new idea at a time, saving the next concept for -

"Am I imagining things, or are those men riding right for us?" Jake suddenly found himself asking, the approach of the strangers odd enough to bring him out of his thoughts. When he glanced at Tandro with the question, his surprise changed to suspicion. There were another two men approaching from the right, and they were coming as directly toward Jake's little procession as the first two.

"My guess would be that someone's found out why you want to talk to Gordi," Tandro said without taking his gaze from the two men on his side.

"I hope you're as good with that knife at your belt as you claim to be.

I'm willing to bet that we'll both find out the truth of the claim in just another couple of minutes."

"No bet," Jake said at once, knowing Tandro was right. The native had had to give some kind of reason for why Jake wanted to talk to Gordi, and lying about the proposed subject would have alienated Gordi completely. So Tandro had had to tell the truth, both he and Jake hoping there would be no leak, but obviously there had been.

"The two on your side are yours, the other two mine," Tandro commented as he pulled his horse to a stop, still as calm and unruffled as he usually was. "We'll be fighting on foot, so let's get off our horses right now.

If you give two assassins on foot a chance to come at you while you're still mounted, you won't live to make the same mistake a second time."

Jake didn't entirely agree with that opinion, not when he'd had a lot more training than Tandro had, but he still didn't argue. He dismounted quickly, then took care of a necessary chore just as quickly.

"You slaves stay back out of the way," he called to Tain and the girl, who had also noticed the newcomers, and then he gave all his attention to the men Tandro had called assassins.

Each of the two men on Jake's side were dressed in the same way he was, wearing nothing but a body cloth with a leather knife belt around the waist. The fairly large knives were the weapon of choice among the planet's mercenaries, their technology unable to handle making any more advanced weapons, their personal skills not up to using anything as large as a sword. Jake did know how to use a sword, but that wasn't the technique he meant to use against the attackers. Knife fighting was an art in itself, and Jake had even more practice with that art than he had with swords.

So the first thing Jake did was take off the belt his knife was hung from, then he freed the sheathe from the belt and put the belt around his saddle horn. The two soon-to-be attackers were already on foot and approaching with

their knives in their fists, and they seemed to be sneering at what Jake was doing. Obviously they didn't understand that Jake hadn't wanted to simply drop the belt, not when leaving it on the ground could end up making a foot hazard for him during the fight.

The two also didn't seem to understand why Jake had taken the knife sheathe off the belt. When he unsheathed the knife as he moved forward away from his horse, the attackers didn't even glance at the heavy leather sheathe being held in Jake's left hand. He held to the wider end, of course, and his grip was just as firm as the grip he had around the hilt of his eight inch knife.

If it hadn't been cloudy, all three blades would have gleamed as Jake and the two assassins reached each other. The two men jumped forward at the same time in an effort to reach their target before he set himself, but Jake had been set the minute he had his weapons in hand. And the empty sheathe was a weapon of sorts, which the attacker on the left found out when Jake blocked his thrust. At the same time Jake used his knife to block the attack from his right, and then it was his turn. Slapping the sheathe hard onto the nose of the man on his left put that man down, and then Jake could give the man on his right all his attention.

The sheathe blocked another thrust before Jake kicked the assassin in his privates, and before the man could bend all the way with the pain he'd been given Jake ended the pain for good with a thrust of his own knife.

The second assassin was just struggling back to his feet when Jake used his knife on this other attacker. It wasn't anger that moved Jake, but a hatred and loathing for the very concept of assassins. Assassins struck out of the dark from behind, or else tried to overwhelm their chosen victim with greater numbers. That kind of cowardice had always infuriated and enraged Jake, and he hadn't hesitated a moment in showing how he felt.

But he didn't have the time to stand around admiring his handiwork.

He turned fast to see that Tandro was still alive and moving, but the native was being hard pressed by his two attackers. Jake sprinted over to where the three were trying to gut one another, and one of the two assassins turned away from Tandro and in his direction. It took no more than seconds before the third assassin was on the ground with his lifeblood leaking out, but Jake didn't get a chance at the fourth. Tandro had already taken care of the man, and as the native turned away from the body he'd made he gave Jake a lazy grin.

"If this ever happens again, remind me to doubt your ability even more than I did this time," Tandro commented with amusement. "If I handle things that way, I probably won't even have to bother with one of the garbage. Nice work, my friend."

"Your efforts weren't particularly shabby either, my friend," Jake responded with his own grin. "Let's clean our blades and then we can be on our way again."

Tandro agreed without hesitation, so the two men turned to their former enemies and used clean sections of the dead men's loin coverings to wipe their knives on. The knives would have to be cleaned again and oiled later, but for the moment the job was good enough. When Jake was done he walked back to his horse to retrieve his belt, then threaded the belt through the knife sheathe again. Jake had just about finished putting everything back together when he noticed that he couldn't see Tain and the girl.

Suddenly afraid that he'd been lured away from the two women with the attack, Jake rushed back to where he'd last seen them. But the women weren't gone, just having some trouble. The girl Ennie knelt in the grass while she threw up, Tain standing with a hand to the girl's back in a way that was probably supposed to be comforting.

"She's not used to seeing things like that," Tain said to Jake as he came to a halt not far from the two, only glancing in his direction. "And she hasn't eaten enough lately to have more than liquid coming up.

Once she's back in control of herself she'll need some water."

Hearing Tain's suggestion, Jake felt like cursing himself out. He'd had water to keep him going in this heat, and he'd been on a horse. The two women had been walking, and it hadn't occurred to him at any point that they needed water of their own. Thinking of the women as slaves was turning him stupid, and he also cursed the fact that he had no choice but to continue like that.

"I've got the water right here," Tandro said as he came around the far side of the pack horses. The native's expression was as calm as ever, but Jake thought he could see a bit of concern in the man's dark eyes.

The emotion was probably due to the fact that Ennie wasn't really a slave who could be completely ignored, but Jake decided instantly to take advantage of the emotion no matter what it came from.

"After this little ... interruption, we're going to have to make up some time," Jake said to Tandro after nodding to acknowledge what the native had brought. "I think we'll be best off taking the slaves on our horses with us at least for a while, otherwise we won't make the town before dark."

"I agree," Tandro said almost at once, his gaze on the small blond girl who was only now regaining control of herself. "It also isn't smart to put too much stress on a slave you've paid good money for. You can lose the slave by doing that, and it would be easier just throwing away the money without bothering with the rest."

Tandro glanced over at Jake when he finished his say, the look letting Jake know that Tandro was supplying a good excuse for the reason they would be treating their slaves more gently. The line of argument did hold up, and it also reminded Jake that Tandro was very much for ending slavery. The man only rarely showed what he was feeling, so it was perfectly possible that Jake had overestimated Tandro's devotion to the outer trappings of that way of life.

Jake joined Tandro in waiting patiently until Ennie had stopped heaving completely, and then Tandro gave Tain the waterskin and allowed the woman to help Ennie drink from it. When Ennie had rinsed her mouth and then swallowed as much as she could hold, Jake had Tain take her own drink from the skin. While Tain was drinking, Tandro moved closer to Ennie and told her to close her eyes, then the man picked the girl up and carried her back toward his horse.

"Okay, let's go," Jake said to Tain once the woman had lowered the waterskin and recapped it, taking the skin from her before gesturing toward his horse. "The sooner we get to the town, the sooner we can get something hot into Ennie."

If Jake had expected Tain to say something, he ended up disappointed. The glance she sent to him was impossible to interpret, and then she was moving around the pack horse and toward his saddle mount. She still looked incredibly appealing in that vest and skirt, but the way she stood and walked gave him the impression that she was ignoring him rather than obeying. A flash of impatience burned its way through Jake, right along with more than a touch of annoyance as he followed. Tain seemed to be silently accusing him of something, and it wasn't possible to defend against that kind of accusation.

As he boosted Tain up to the saddle then mounted behind her, Jake found himself just short of growling. He'd been doing his best to find out what was bothering the woman, but she'd been doing her best to avoid talking to him. Well, if that was the way she wanted it, Jake didn't mind going along. And if he was going to be accused, it would only be fair if he did something to be guilty of.

And maybe if Tain was taught what true misery could consist of, she just might become more willing to talk to him.

Tain sat as stiffly as possible in front of Killen, hating the way it wasn't possible to avoid coming in contact with the man's body at so many points. She would have much preferred continuing to walk, but saying so would have been more than a waste of breath. Killen had announced that they had to make up lost time, which meant he

wouldn't have accepted her refusal to ride even if for some reason he wanted to. And the way the hand attached to the arm he had around her middle caressed her from time to time said he had no reason to want to.

Anger tried to rise in Tain again, but useless gestures were too pathetic for her to want to repeat them over and over. They'd been riding for hours now at a faster pace than they'd kept to earlier, and every time Killen's hand touched her in some way her temper had wanted to flame out of control. But slaves weren't allowed to lose their tempers with their owners, so all she'd been able to do was snarl in the privacy of her own mind and fight not to squirm. That insertion was completely gone by now, but its effects tended to linger.

The day had become completely overcast, but rather than lessening the heat the coming rain had added humidity to the air. The only one who didn't seem to mind was Ennie, who sat sideways in front of Tandro, her eyes closed as she leaned against the man. If the poor girl hadn't looked so played out, Tain would have been tempted to wish for another attack. Just about anything would have been acceptable if it had gotten her away from Killen, and if another attack came she might have been given the chance to tend a wound on the miserable man.

Not that that would be very likely, Tain thought as she looked around at the open fields surrounding the road they now moved along. Killen is too good a fighter for any of these locals to have a chance against him, which is a real pity. Tending his wounds is something that would give me a whole lot of pleasure.

But thought of the attack brought Tain back to more practical considerations. Killen hadn't given her any details about his assignment, but it looked like someone knew what he intended and disliked the idea enough to want to stop him. She would have enjoyed helping out during the attack, if for no other reason than to work off some of the aggression growling around inside her, but Killen had made sure to order her to stay back even though he and Tandro were outnumbered. Another stupidity to chalk up against the man's account...

Tain's attention came back to the road and its surrounding area to find that she had a surprise waiting. Up ahead, beyond an even more open area, was the beginning of what looked like a town. Since it was getting on toward sundown, the town was probably the one the men had been talking about. Whether or not they would be able to reach the town and whatever shelter was available before the rain started remained to be seen, but at least the chance was better now than it had been.

It took almost another hour before they reached the town's wall and the men guarding its currently open gate. It was a lot closer to full dark and to the time when the skies would open up, but instead of continuing on to whatever hostel the men intended to stay at they turned aside as soon as they were through the gate. Their destination turned out to be a small building to the left of the gate and only a short distance away from it, and they drew rein before a man coming out of the building.

"Good evening, Captain," Tandro said to the man, who wore some kind of medallion around his neck. "We don't want to take up too much of your time right now when you're probably about to order the gate closed, but it's our duty to report that we were attacked on our way here. We left the bodies where they fell, so if any of the attackers' horses turn up you'll know what's happening."

"Glad to hear you know the right way of doing this kind of thing," the man answered with a nod, his glance going from Ennie to Tain and staying with Tain for longer than she liked. "Obviously the slaves were upset by what happened, so you might as well get them and yourselves to shelter before the coming storm lets go. Just don't leave town until I can get back to you for the details."

"We'll be at the travelers' house for a few days, so you can find us there," Tandro answered with his own nod. "Until tomorrow, Captain."

Tandro turned his horse back to the street the road had become, Killen following his example silently. Tain pretended she didn't see the way the captain stood and stared at her until he couldn't see her any longer, but that

didn't mean she couldn't feel the man's gaze for much too long a time. Men didn't stare at free women like that, at least not right out where the stare would be noticed, and the experience was more disturbing than Tain had expected it to be.

The travelers' house was a large hostel that stood by itself about three streets away from the gate, an equally large stable attached on the left.

Tandro led the way into the stable before he stopped to dismount, and it still hadn't started to rain yet. Killen also dismounted and then lifted Tain down, Tain surreptitiously watching as Ennie was awakened and put on her own feet. The girl seemed steadier than she had earlier, but Tain didn't like the way Ennie just stood staring at nothing. It was fairly clear that Ennie wasn't distracted, only completely uninterested in her surroundings.

The hurried arrival of two teenage boys drew Tain's attention away from Ennie, but the boys weren't attacking the way Tain had first thought. The two were stable hands whose job it was to see to the horses of newcomers, and they'd had to hurry because they'd probably been sitting around relaxing somewhere thinking no new guests would be arriving.

"Take good care of our horses, boys, and make sure you store our possessions close to their stalls," Tandro ordered after tossing each of the boys a coin. "We'll be staying for a few days, but when we're ready to leave we don't want to have to go searching for our equipment."

"All the possessions of guests are kept in the same storeroom," one of the boys answered, his hand happily closed on the coin he'd been given.

"There's always a guard on the storeroom, and we're the only ones who are allowed inside. We'll put all your possessions together, so when you're ready to leave we won't have to wonder which stuff is yours and which belongs to someone else."

"And we also have cages if you want to leave your slaves out here with the horses instead of taking them inside with you," the other boy put in just as happily. "The house has lots of slaves for the use of guests, to give you some variety even if you did arrive with slaves of your own."

"We haven't had these slaves very long, so we'll be taking them in with us," Killen responded before Tandro could say anything. "We're in the middle of training the slaves, you understand, so it isn't a good idea to break into the training right now and possibly undo what's already been taught them."

"But that doesn't mean my brother and I won't take a break of our own,"

Tandro said with a smile of amusement. "Thanks for the information, boys, and we'll see you again before we leave."

The boys were delighted to be reminded that they'd be tipped again, and they got out of the way to let the new guests move toward the door that probably led into the hostel. Both Killen and Tandro had taken the saddlebags from their horses, and Tandro moved Ennie before him by the hand he had on the back of her neck. Killen, though, opted for a different method of bringing Tain along.

"Follow me, slave," Killen said before heading for the door, giving Tain no choice but to trail along behind him. Both boys watched her as she walked past them, and she had the distinct impression that they would have touched her if they'd only dared. But she was owned by a guest, and stable boys weren't entitled to make free with the possessions of guests.

Moving through the door behind Killen showed Tain a large, round lobby area in front of a short counter to the right. Tandro had already reached the counter, and in only a couple of minutes he had the key to accommodations

in his hand. The stairs leading upward were to the left of the counter, but for anyone coming in the front door the stairs would be straight ahead. And oddly enough, the only doors to be seen in the lobby area were the ones leading to the stable and the one that opened directly on the street.

It didn't take long to reach the second floor of the hostel, and a minute later they were at the door with the number to match the one on the key Tandro held. Inside that door was a round communal living area, with two doorways that probably led to bedrooms.

"I ordered food for us and the slaves, but I want my slave to lie down until the food gets here," Tandro stopped to say to Killen once everyone was inside and the door to the hall closed. "Do you have a preference about which bedchamber you want to use?"

"No, no preference, but I do have a different request," Killen answered without looking at anyone but Tandro. "Would you mind lending me that paddle for a while? Until I can buy one of my own, of course."

Tandro's amusement was clear as he agreed at once, but Tain's reaction was entirely different.

He wouldn't dare use that thing on me, she thought with swirling emotions, watching Tandro open one side of his saddlebags and begin to dig around.

He wouldn't dare! Or he'd better not dare...

Chapter 6

"This isn't bad," Killen said as Tain followed him into the bedroom on the right and he closed the door behind her. "That bed would be a bit cramped for two if the two wanted to sleep, but slaves are probably expected to do their sleeping on that pallet."

He gestured to the pallet he meant with the paddle he held, but Tain didn't follow the gesture with her gaze. She'd already seen the small, thin pallet that looked like it had been partially stuffed with rags or straw, so a second look wasn't necessary. The bed Killen had referred to stood against the right hand wall, with two wide windows in the wall to the left of the bed and opposite the door. The windows weren't curtained or closed, but a wide overhang outside kept the pouring rain from coming in and making the whole place damp.

There were also a couple of chairs in the room, lamps already lit on two of the walls, and three tables. One of the tables looked large enough to eat at, but one of the smaller ones was square and sturdy enough to take Killen's saddlebags without a problem.

"Looks like we got inside just in time," Killen said as he put his saddlebags on the square table while studying the pouring rain through the open windows. "And it's definitely cooling down some, so I'm glad I wasn't given a reason to curse the storm. And now I want to know what's bothering you."

Tain looked up from distraction to see that Killen had turned from the windows to study her instead of the rain, his expression open and sober.

But he still held that paddle, a circumstance that gave Tain very little interest in wanting to exchange conversation with him.

"What's bothering me is how long it's taking to get home," she answered after a short hesitation, not quite looking at Killen. "Do you have any idea how long this ... chore of yours will take to complete?"

"That all depends on the man I'm here to see," Killen responded at once without moving his stare to something

else. "The sooner he agrees to talk to me, the sooner we'll be free to leave. But how quickly we can leave isn't the bother I was talking about. Something else is disturbing you, and I'd like to know what it is."

"You don't consider having to play slave enough of a problem?" Tain countered, making sure her expression didn't give her away. The man was probably just guessing; it wasn't possible for him to suspect what the real problem was. "There are so many different angles and sides to the situation that it's a miracle I'm not rolling around on the floor foaming at the mouth. Being disturbed isn't even important enough to think about."

"That sounds very logical and reasonable, but for some reason I don't buy it," Killen said, taking a step closer to where she stood, appalling Tain with his continuing doubt. "There's something beyond being a slave that's twisting you around, but I won't force you to tell me what it is. I want you to volunteer the information, if for no other reason than to show you know you can trust me."

"How can I tell you about something that isn't there?" Tain returned, working hard to sound faintly exasperated as well as confused.

"What you're talking about isn't a matter of trust, it's a matter of letting your imagination run away with you."

"I don't believe the impression I have is nothing but my imagination,"

Killen said, now sounding annoyed. "I think you're holding back on something I'll find important and relevant, so here's a choice for you: either you talk to me, or we'll get on with that punishment I promised you this morning."

"So that's it," Tain said with the suggestion of a sneer, grabbing onto the ploy as soon as she thought of it. "You decided you need an excuse to hurt me again, and this . problem thing is what you came up with."

You'll need to justify what you've done once we do get home, and trying to solve a 'problem' before it becomes real trouble will be your justification."

"You seem to be missing a very important point here," Killen said, actually sighing. "I don't have to justify anything I do to you because I own you. You're a slave, and men on this world treat slaves any way they care to. If you stop to think about it, treating you as anything but a slave is what will get me into hot water. Not paddling you for disobedience could end up as a black mark against me, and I really dislike the thought of black marks."

He looked much too pleased with that line of argument, and Tain couldn't disagree no matter how much she wanted to. When you traveled as a native of a world, you were required to act like a native under all conditions and circumstances. The main problem was, Tain would never have accepted an assignment that required her to act like a slave. Her personality was too aggressive for her to be really believable in the role, a point no one had ever tried to argue.

But now she was supposed to be a slave, and might have managed the role if her owner had been anyone but Killen. He was trying to make her be a slave instead of just acting like one, a truth he didn't seem prepared to admit.

He really expected her to tell him exactly what he wanted to know, but that wasn't going to happen. She was vulnerable enough as she was; there was no way she would add to the state by giving Killen what he needed to reach her deep down.

"I'm not hearing any more argument," Killen pointed out when Tain had stood silent for a long moment. "Does that mean you're starting to see things my way?"

"Actually, I've been wondering why I'm wasting my breath," Tain said, deliberately looking away from him after no more than a short glance.

"You're going to do exactly as you please no matter what I say, so you might as well get on with it."

This time it was Killen who hesitated, and then he moved closer to her to stroke her hair.

"Listen to me, girl," he said, the words soft and as gentle as his touch on her hair. "If you acted like this with any other man of this world, you'd be whipped instead of just paddled. I've given you all the freedom I can get away with, but you insist on seeing the effort as not good enough."

Do you want me to make you into a real slave? I can do it, you know, and it won't be very hard at all. Tell me what's bothering you, and then I'll be able to help you to settle down into this role as comfortably as possible."

Tain stayed silent, but fighting the urge to speak to the man was more a battle than a struggle. His soft coaxing reached her the way shouting never would have, but she couldn't tell him why the current situation was so intolerable. Exchanging unhappiness for misery wasn't a trade anyone would see as useful, and that would be the only result of her speaking out. And as far as being made into a real slave went, there wasn't a chance in hell she would ever let that happen.

"So you still refuse to cooperate," Killen said, his hand leaving her hair as annoyance entered his tone. "And the way you just straightened says you don't believe I can make you into a real slave. I think it's time you learned I don't bluff. The experience should do you a world of good."

Tain watched him walk over to the large table to put the paddle down, wondering what he was up to. If he was going to try forcing her to do something, shouldn't he -

"Now then," he said as he came back to take her face in both of his hands.

"Listen well and obey me, slave. You aren't a woman of experience and ability, you're a girl who's only just been made a slave. In your innocence you're eager to become a good slave and serve your owner in every way you can, but that very innocence causes you to commit small disobediences every now and then. The punishment you're given will intimidate you and make you even more eager to behave properly, but you won't actually feel fear. You'll continue to be like this until I tell you that it's all right for you to come back to yourself, and once you do return to yourself you'll remember everything you did. Obey me now."

Tain was suddenly very confused, feeling as if she'd been fighting against something she couldn't see or remember, but that was silly. Girls like her didn't fight things, they did as they were told. And her new owner was holding her face, certainly wanting his slave to do something for him.

Tain very much wanted to please the man in every way she could, but that confusion wasn't letting her remember what he'd told her to do. "I'm sorry, my master, but your slave is a fool for not hearing what you told her," Tain said hesitantly, hoping he didn't get very angry. "If you'll just say it again I'll take care of the matter right away."

"How nice to see a slave eager to please," he said with the loveliest smile, making Tain's heart beat just a little faster. "Come with me now and we'll finish up all the necessary arrangements."

Tain had no idea what he was talking about, but when he turned and walked away she lost no time in following him. First he went to the saddlebags that stood on a small table, got something from one of them, then went to the uncomfortable-looking chair rather than the soft one. When he turned and sat down he found her right behind him, and that seemed to make him smile again.

"I really do enjoy seeing an obedient slave," he said, gesturing her even closer. "Put yourself face down across my lap and then relax your muscles."

"Certainly, my master," Tain said at once as she did as she'd been told.

"Is this right, my master?"

"Exactly right," he approved, and Tain could now hear his smile.

"Keep your hands right where they are and don't try to resist what's being done."

For a moment Tain didn't understand what he meant, but then the back panel of her skirt was lifted out of the way and his hands were at her bottom.

The next moment her eyes went really wide and she couldn't keep from squirming in protest.

"Oh, that feels terrible!" she exclaimed, wishing she could reach back and remove what had been put inside her. "Please take it out again, my master, please!"

"But putting that in you will increase my pleasure later when I use you," he said, his hand now stroking her bottom and making her feel worse. "Your asking me to take it out again means you're trying to deny me pleasure, not to mention that you're also trying to be disobedient. I'm afraid either of those things would call for punishment, and both together certainly do. Stand up and fetch me the paddle from that table."

Tain didn't hesitate to obey him about standing up, but she couldn't keep from squeaking as she moved slowly to obey his orders. What he'd put inside her made her feel terrible, but even worse was the punishment she was about to get. She certainly didn't want to be paddled, but there was no way to stop it from happening. Oh, why hadn't she been a good slave and kept silent?

"I'm sorry, my master, I really am," Tain said when she finally got back to him clutching the paddle. "I want to be the best slave there is, so I promise that I'll never do those things again."

"I'm sure you won't do those things again," he said as he took the paddle out of her hands. "But in order to be absolutely certain I'm going to give you a very good reason to remember your resolve. Put yourself back across my knees, keep your hands out of the way, and don't let yourself make a lot of noise."

Tain couldn't move as quickly as she might have wanted to, but it was still much too soon before she was face down again. She felt the skirt panel being moved aside a second time, felt the hand that stroked her bottom gently, and then she nearly choked trying not to cry out. Not only was that paddle hard when it struck her bottom, but the stroke was even worse with whatever had been put inside her. She mewled when the second stroke added more of an ache and more agitation, wishing she could protect herself with her hands, wishing she could keep from squirming.

The third smack was followed by the fourth and fifth, each stroke slow enough to let the previous one turn into a flaming ache before the next one landed. Tain bounced and kicked as the throb in her bottom grew higher and higher, finding it impossible to stop the soft whining coming from her throat. The paddling hurt even more than she'd thought it would, and on top of that she was being turned frantic by whatever had been put in her.

She also cringed on the inside waiting for the next smack, but a knock at the door came first.

"Come in," her master said at once, something Tain hadn't expected him to do. Heavy embarrassment made her want to jump to her feet, but of course doing something like that was impossible.

"This is a drink and a snack from the meal that was ordered, master," an amused female voice said once the door had been opened. "I'll bring the rest as soon as it's ready, which shouldn't be much longer."

"Put it down on the table over there," her master directed, probably pointing to the table he meant. "I'll help myself as soon as I'm done with this chore."

"Certainly, master," the female said as Tain heard her moving, and then she was able to see the other slave out of the corner of her eye. Even that tiny glance showed the other slave fighting not to laugh out loud, but before Tain could feel more than a little outraged the paddling was continued.

The need to howl turned into mewling as Tain jumped and bounced and kicked and squirmed, but even the smack of the paddle didn't completely erase her awareness of how slowly the other slave was leaving the room. Tain had never been paddled in front of anyone before even as a child, and having her seat heated to sizzling was made even worse by the presence of an audience. Her master couldn't help but know that the slave was taking her time leaving, so his not saying anything to hurry the slave out had to be an addition to the already-painful punishment.

The paddling didn't go on much beyond the eventual departure of the slave, but Tain was already intimidated by the time the last smack landed. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she was made to stand up, and she didn't have to be told that she couldn't rub at her hot and aching seat. All she could do was stand and try not to bounce, or at least not bounce too hard. Moving that way made her feel so much worse, but not moving was completely beyond her.

"Don't worry, you won't have to suffer for long," her master said as he also stood up, then raised her tear-stained face to touch her lips with his own. "You'll serve my meal when it comes, and after we eat you'll serve me in a different way. You do know what I mean by that, don't you?"

Tain shook her head to show she didn't know, but her master didn't get angry as she half expected him to. He smiled and touched her lips with his a second time, then used one finger to wipe at the tears on her cheek.

"Don't worry, you'll find out what I'm talking about later," he said in a gently amused way. "But that won't change your innocence, even though you will have more pleasure than you've ever had before. And you'll have the same pleasure every time it happens."

Tain didn't know what he meant, but she wasn't foolish enough to ask questions as he left her to walk to the table where the tray had been put.

A glass of wine and some raw vegetables had been brought to him along with a slice of bread, and he took a piece of carrot as well as the glass of wine to the comfortable chair. Once he was seated with the food, he gestured with the carrot slice that Tain was to come and kneel by his feet.

Trying to hurry to obey him brought the squeaking back to Tain, a squeaking that didn't quite stop even when she was kneeling the way she was supposed to. Her bottom really hurt from the paddling, but more than that she felt ... desperate for something because of what had been put in her. Her master had said she would feel better later and she believed him without the slightest question, but later was still a long way off.

And later continued to be a long way off. When her master finished the slice of carrot, he had her go and fetch him a piece of celery. When she looked at the bread still on the tray she became aware of how empty her insides felt, but she couldn't quite make herself ask to taste the bread.

Or even any of the vegetables. If her master had wanted her to have some of the food, he would have said so or given it to her himself.

Her master was just finishing the piece of celery when another knock came at the door. When he allowed the person knocking to enter, the visitor turned out to be the same slave who had been there earlier. This time she carried a tray with three plates and a bowl, and she took the tray directly over to the large table.

"Your meal, master," the slave said after putting the tray down, her smile warm and her voice very soft. "If there's anything else I can do for you, you have only to command me."

It suddenly came to Tain that the other slave was a very beautiful female and was entirely naked. A glance at her master showed that he seemed to be enjoying the way the female was turning herself just a little as though offering him something, and he smiled as he got to his feet. "I just may decide to do that commanding later, slave," Tain's master murmured as he got nearer to the other female. "Right now, though, the only thing I'm interested in is that food. You may go."

"Thank you, master," the female breathed, and then she was slowly moving toward the door in a kind of... flowing motion. The slave had also laughed quietly at the way Tain couldn't keep from squirming where she knelt, and all those things together made Tain really hate that female.

"Come and serve me, Kitten," her master said as soon as the other slave was gone, immediately capturing Tain's full attention. He'd taken a chair near the big table, and sipped at the wine while he waited for her. Tain winced even before she began to hurry, but that didn't stop her from hurrying. She wanted to serve her master, wanted to do for him more than anything else in the world, and now she was finally going to get the chance.

Taking the plates from the tray and putting them in front of him gave Tain a good deal of pleasure, but when she also put the bowl in front of him he laughed and shook his head.

"No, Kitten, that one is yours," he said, having spent his time watching her carefully. "Take a spoon and kneel next to me while you eat, and then I can get on with my own eating."

Tain did as she was told, but the smell of the food her master had been given made the cereal she ate even more tasteless than usual. She swallowed down the horrible stuff as fast as possible, hoping that her master might leave a small taste for her, but he didn't. He ate every bit of the baked loaf of meat and the potatoes and cooked vegetables, and only then did he sit back and finish his wine.

"That was really good," he said after putting down his wine glass and standing. "You can put all the empty plates back on the tray now, and the glass and your bowl as well. When that's done you can take a drink of water from the small bowl near the washstand."

Standing up still wasn't easy, but once Tain was up she lost no time in obeying the orders she'd been given. The washstand was in the corner of the room beyond the foot of the bed, and Tain hadn't noticed it before.

She also hadn't noticed the small bowl standing next to the washstand, but if she had she probably wouldn't have known what it was for. The bowl didn't take much of the water in the pitcher that was meant for washing, and when Tain swallowed the water she almost wished she hadn't. But water that was warm and somehow almost dusty went really well with the kind of meal she'd had.

"Good girl," her master said when she replaced the emptied drinking bowl.

"If you continue obeying me so well you probably won't be paddled more than once in a great while. Come over here and tell me how your bottom feels now."

"My bottom hurts, my master," Tain said as she went to where he sat in the soft chair again. "That paddling was terrible and I hope it's a very long time before I'm given another one."

"Everyone says that a girl with a tender bottom works really hard to please," her master said with a smile as he took her hand to draw her closer. "Since you now have personal experience with a tender bottom, do you agree?"

"Of course, my master, but I didn't need a tender bottom to want to please you," Tain assured him, her insides fluttering at the way he touched her hand. "I want to do everything for you, and I'll try to learn your preferences as fast as I can."

"I'm sure you'll learn really fast, but if you don't then the paddle will help to teach you," her master said, still

smiling and stroking her arm.

"Right now I'm going to teach you a different way to kneel."

The different way he meant was for her to straddle his lap in the chair on her knees, and then he took her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. Tain didn't know what the pressing of lips was supposed to mean, but for some reason her insides really twisted around when it was done. The experience was actually pleasant until she unthinkingly sat on the lap she straddled, and then it was all she could do not to yelp and pull away from the lip-touching.

"That was very nice," her master said when he ended the touching, the amusement in his eyes telling her that he knew what she'd inadvertently done. "Now I'm going to do what I'll enjoy just as much."

His hands came to push open her vest and move it part way down her arms, and then he was slowly touching his lips to her breasts one after the other. Tain gasped as her flesh hardened, then gasped again only louder when one of his hands moved under the front panel of her skirt to touch her there. She felt as if she were about to burst, and couldn't have kept herself from writhing and squirming if her life had depended on it.

"I think it's time you served me in that other way," her master said, gently pushing her off his lap and standing up himself. "Come over here and I'll show you what I mean."

The place he took her to then was the bed, where he made her kneel on forearms and knees. She had no idea what was going to happen, especially when the back panel of her skirt was raised again. The vest still clung to its place on her arms, making it difficult for Tain to lean on her forearms, but somehow she managed it.

And then something very large and hard touched her before it moved slowly into her body. Tain was miserable not understanding what was happening, but the deeper the big, hard thing went the more her thoughts whirled around crazily. Mewling noises started to come out of her throat again as she fought not to move, but then the big, hard thing began to move in and out of her. She didn't want that to be done and yet she did, needing the movement in spite of the way it forced her to writhe and squirm. And each time the thing went deep her aching bottom was touched, which made her squirm even harder.

The time went on and on, but it didn't take long before Tain was completely lost to what she was being made to feel. She knew she'd never enjoyed anything as much as what was being done to her, and the moaning she did should have made that absolutely clear. Her body seemed to explode over and over again, and finally there was another explosion to match hers before the big, hard thing was withdrawn from her body. She no longer felt terrible, but as she collapsed flat to the bed she almost wished that the time hadn't ended.

"Now that wasn't bad at all," her master murmured from behind her, oddly enough sounding short of breath. "Every time this is done to you, I want you to be infatuated with the man who does it. You'll feel faintly flustered by the infatuation, but you'll still feel it and act accordingly. If you aren't a very very good girl, I won't be the only one doing this to you."

Tain didn't know what to say to that, and also didn't understand why part of her liked the idea of having that done by others but a very small part hated the idea. Her master moved around doing things in the room while she lay still with her eyes closed, but after a while he came back and began to take her clothing off completely. Opening her eyes showed that the lamps had been blown out, and then his hands were on her again, bringing back the terrible feeling she'd suffered with earlier.

But when the hard thing was put in her again, this time while she was on her back, she eagerly waited to give her master pleasure as many more times as he liked - and take some for her own...

Chapter 7

It was still pouring rain outside when Tain woke up to the new day.

Her master had kept her in his bed all night, probably so that he could have her serve him again just the way she was doing. He was behind her the way he'd been the first time, and while she moaned helplessly she suddenly became aware of that slave coming in with another tray. Her master knew the slave was there, but he didn't stop making Tain serve him in that odd way. That was his right, of course, but for some reason Tain lost a good part of the pleasure she'd been feeling.

Once the odd service was done, Tain was allowed to lie unmoving only a short time before her master made her get up to serve him breakfast. She scrambled out of bed and over to the table where he already sat, put his food in front of him, then reluctantly knelt with her own food. This time it was the smell of eggs and bacon and fried potatoes that made her cereal even more tasteless than it usually was, and if she'd had the choice she would have gone hungry instead.

"The cook in this hostel is really good," her master said when he'd emptied his plates again and had sat back with a cup of coffee. "Aren't you finished with your own meal yet?"

Tain had had a lot of trouble stuffing down the tasteless cereal, but with her master's attention on her she gulped the last two spoonfuls and was finally done.

"Good girl," her master said as he pushed his chair back and stood.

"After you clear the table, come over to where I'll be sitting. There's something I want to tell you."

Tain stood up fast and hurried to finish her chore, wondering what her master might have to tell her. She was hoping hard that he had other chores for her to see to, other things to do that would make her feel this good doing them. She loved doing things for her master, wanted to do those things very badly, and couldn't wait to get on to the next chore. "I'm glad to see you're being a good, obedient girl this morning," her master said once she'd knelt in front of him where he sat in the comfortable chair. "It looks like that paddling did what it was meant to.

Has your bottom stopped being tender?"

"Almost, my master," Tain answered, needing to speak the truth even though it was somehow embarrassing. "I can still feel a shadow of what the paddling produced, a shadow I'd probably feel more if I were sitting instead of kneeling."

"As long as you still have a memory of that paddling, I may not have to give you another one right away," her master said, amusement in his light eyes. "I want you to keep in mind everything that's gone on since we got to this room, and then I want you to come back to yourself."

For an instant Tain didn't understand what he was talking about, then memory of her real self came crashing back to freeze her with shock. Her mouth opened without any words coming out, and Killen leaned forward in his chair.

"I think it's safe to say you now understand thoroughly what being a slave can mean," Killen said while Tain's thoughts whirled in a blur of confusion and horror. "I can't afford to have the reason for my being in this town messed up, so if you defy me even one more time for any reason at all I'll put you back into that other persona and leave you like that.

As I said once before, I don't bluff."

Tain stared at the chair rather than at Killen, still completely unable to say anything at all, and the man seemed to understand the point.

"It will probably take you a few minutes to come back to yourself all the way, so I'm going to leave you alone to do it," he said as he stood.

"But when I come back I'm going to ask you that question again, and if I don't get an answer that satisfies me I'll consider your refusal an act of defiance. If becoming that slave permanently is what you want, you now know how to make it happen."

And with that he walked away, the sound of the door opening and closing a moment later to show that he really was gone. Tain continued to kneel where she'd been for a time, and only when she finally noticed that her knees were hurting did she shift over into sitting cross-legged. Sitting down didn't actually hurt, not even on the floor, but she couldn't help remembering what her other self had said...

Her other self. Tain bent forward with her arms wrapped around her head, nothing but iron self control keeping her from screaming in torment.

She hadn't believed something like that could be done to her, something that could turn her into a simple-minded, happily-eager slave. But it had been done, and a lot more besides, and remembering the time was so painful that the aftermath of a whipping would have hurt less.

"And he said he's going to do it again if I don't choose to obey him," she whispered, her insides twisting at the thought. "I'd rather be dead than go back to being that other person, and if I have to live like that until we're back where we belong I know I'll come out of it insane. I know it, I know it, I know it."

Tain's body had started to rock without her being aware of it, and once she noticed she did nothing to stop the motion. She was so devastated that the idea of dying sounded better the more she thought about it, and the soft wailing that started to come from her throat was a kind of prayer.

Please let me die now, the sound begged inside her head. Please let me die so it will all be over. Please!

Jake walked into the common room and closed the door to his bedroom behind him, more than a little disturbed. He'd expected Tain to fly into a rage when he finally released her, but instead the woman had looked as if she'd been hit between the eyes with a sledgehammer. He'd also meant to press the question of what was bothering her immediately, but seeing how shaken she was made him change his mind. He'd give her some time to pull herself together, and then he'd talk to her again.

"Good morning," Jake heard in Tandro's calm and even tones. Looking up showed that he hadn't noticed the native sitting in a chair, which meant that he really had to pull out of his thoughts. "Did you sleep well?"

"Actually, I slept very well," Jake answered, moving forward to stand and look down at Tandro. "How about you?"

"Sleeping in a bed is better than sleeping on the ground any day or night," Tandro answered with a faint smile. "The rest we got probably would have been useful - if our appointment with Gordi hadn't been changed. He sent word to reschedule our talk until the rain stops because he likes to relax and enjoy rainy days."

"I'm glad somebody will be enjoying the day," Jake muttered as he rubbed at his neck with one hand, not in the least pleased to find that they wouldn't be leaving as soon as he'd hoped they would. "So what are we supposed to do while we wait? Sit and watch the rain come down like Gordi?"

"I don't know about you, but I could use some exercise," Tandro responded as he got to his feet. "I don't usually mind having nothing to do, but something tells me we'd be fools to sit around with our feet up."

"Because until we speak to Gordi we'll still be targets," Jake agreed with a nod. "That's a good point, so I'll

definitely be joining you in getting that exercise. And before I forget, how's the girl doing? Has her stomach settled down, or is she still feeling shaky?"

"I'm not really sure how she's feeling," Tandro answered, disturbance flickering briefly in his eyes. "I made her eat something before she slept last night, and she didn't seem to have any trouble holding it down. When she woke up this morning I asked her how she was doing, and she assured me she was fine. She also ate all the cereal in the bowl while I had breakfast, but there's something different about her now. She didn't say a word until I spoke to her, then she answered briefly and to the point.

All without looking at me even once."

"She's probably still frightened about what she saw yesterday," Jake told the other man with a clap to his shoulder, for some reason getting the impression that Tandro needed reassuring. "Once the memory fades a little more she'll most likely be back to the way she was, so my advice would be to enjoy the peace and quiet while it lasts."

"Most likely you're right," Tandro said after taking a deep breath to help him shake off the dark mood he'd almost fallen into. "By the time lunch is served she'll be all ready to tell me how I ought to share my food with her, so let's go and find that exercise. Even if we aren't attacked again, the effort won't be a waste."

Jake agreed with a chuckle, and the two of them left the common room, Tandro locking the door behind them. If they'd been on another world they probably would have had to go downstairs to find what they were looking for, but on Oliven the men didn't want to be constantly trudging up and down stairways. For that reason the only things to be found on the ground floor were the entrance lobby with its registration desk, and the stable.

The rooms on the second floor, most of them suites rather than single rooms, were arranged around the outside of the wide half circle the hostel had been formed into. That left the center of the floor and the front part of the hostel for other things, latticed walls separating the different sections. Jake knew that the third floor had mostly single rooms, with a couple of doubled suites in case a really large party came in that didn't want to have separate accommodations. There were guest-convenient arrangements up there as well, so the only people on the second floor were those who had rooms here.

"As you can see, the kitchens are over there," Tandro said as they walked, nodding toward what would be the front of the hostel. "The lattice lets guests see the food being prepared, so they don't have to guess about what they're being given."

Jake nodded to acknowledge the information, at the same time seeing something besides food being prepared. One of the female slaves was bent over holding to a low wooden frame of some kind while a woman who, by the clothing she wore showing she was free, used a switch on the slave's backside. The slave danced and writhed and squirmed every time the switch struck her, but she made no noise Jake could hear and also made no effort to let go of the wooden frame.

"Now, that's a sight you don't often see," Tandro said, obviously looking at the same thing Jake was. "The slaves who work in this hostel tend to go out of their way not to do something that will get them switched, so that slave must be either very clumsy, very stupid, or very unlucky."

"I can understand their not wanting to be switched," Jake said, having no trouble seeing the red lines left by the switch strokes on the girl's bottom. "After that she won't want to do a lot of moving around, but I can't picture the ones in charge of her letting her lie around until the pain eases up."

"The situation is a bit worse for the girl than that," Tandro responded, his voice as calm and even as ever. "All the slaves in this place are kept under strict discipline, which means they get three strokes of the switch in the morning before breakfast, in the afternoon before lunch, and in the evening before supper. They're also made to

sit down to those meals, which gives them even more of a reason to avoid doing anything that will get them punished. A full switching on top of the discipline is more painful than it would otherwise be, and getting switched for something during the day doesn't excuse the slave from being given any of the strokes of discipline that come afterward."

"Ouch," Jake couldn't help saying softly, flinching inwardly as the switch kept landing on the poor girl's behind. "It takes a real sadist to make an arrangement like that, and I can't help wondering if the sadism was there before slavery became so widespread."

"You think having slaves encourages sadism?" Tandro asked, clearly seeing Jake's point. "What makes you believe that?"

"The fact that the paddling I gave my own slave last night was harder and lasted longer than I'd intended it to when I started," Jake answered, needing to mention aloud what had been eating at the back of his mind.

"When you can do anything you like to the girl you bought, the unusual freedom seems to encourage ... excess."

"Right now that's probably a good thing rather than a bad one," Tandro said, his voice lower than it had been. "If our enemies find out about what you did they'll be confused, and confusing him is the best thing you can do to an enemy aside from killing him. If we don't have any more attackers sent after us, you won't find me complaining."

Jake lost no time agreeing with that sentiment, and as he and Tandro turned away from the lattice wall they saw the guard captain they'd spoken to the day before, coming up the stairs. The captain saw them at the same time and headed for them without hesitation.

Captain Sovri joined Jake and Tandro in walking to a couch, then he took off the hooded rain cape he wore before sitting down. Under the cape he had a map tucked into his knife belt, and once the map was spread out on the low table near the couch he had Tandro point out the area where the four bodies had been left. Once that was done to his satisfaction, Sovri refolded the map and tucked it away again.

"Thank you for your help, men," he said as he stood up and started to get back into the rain cape. "Now once the rain stops I'll be able to send out some men to retrieve what's left of those attackers. If we can identify any of them, we might be able to figure out who sent them. In the meantime three of the horses showed up this morning when the gate was opened. Since there was nothing on any of the horses to identify their owners, the horses were sold to one of the town's merchants. Half the proceeds of the sale goes to the town, and the other half will be sent here this afternoon for you two. In case you didn't know, there's a bounty on assassins around here."

Jake joined Tandro in thanking the captain, then the two stood and watched the guard leader leave. Once the man was gone, Jake chuckled.

"Now I'm even more glad we killed those assassins," Jake said softly to a pleased-looking Tandro. "Putting a bounty on assassins is a good idea to discourage men from taking up the trade, but how do they know that the body they're being offered really is an assassin?"

"When it's a matter of four against two and the two report the incident as soon as they get to town, there are probably very few doubts," Tandro answered. "In other cases they might have had to execute a claimant or two for murder before the false reports stopped coming in, or maybe they just question the claimants very thoroughly before allowing the claim. Whatever they do, they seem satisfied with the results."

"And since this is their town, it's also their business and none of ours,"

Jake agreed. "Now it's time we found that exercise we were talking about earlier before I fall asleep standing up."

"Rainy days tend to do that to you," Tandro said with a faint grin. "Most of the men I know don't fight the urge,

but I've always enjoyed being different. The exercise area ought to be that way."

Jake followed Tandro in the suggested direction, and a minute later they found the uncarpeted circle meant for exercise. Arranged around the circle were small tables holding wooden knives that were obviously supposed to be used as practice weapons, so Jake and Tandro took off their knife belts and left them on the small tables in place of the wooden weapons. Then they moved to the center of the circle and faced each other. With no other men around intent on their own exercise, Jake and his companion didn't have to worry about how far they spread out.

Tandro was a trained fighter and had good instincts, but Jake still had to take it easy with the man to keep from ending the exercise in no more than a couple of minutes. He also had to be careful not to show that he was taking it easy so he didn't insult the other man, and somehow he managed it. Tandro didn't seem to have a clue that Jake wasn't using every bit of skill he had, and the sparring became really enjoyable.

Until two other "guests" joined them, men who drew their real knives rather than taking up wooden weapons. The two came at Jake together, obviously meaning to put him down first before they then went after Tandro, and Jake wondered distantly if that meant the two considered him the weaker fighter or the better one. Some people believe in taking out the weaker fighter first so that they can concentrate on the better one without distraction, and some prefer to leave the weaker fighter for easy polishing off once the better fighter is down and done.

But whichever idea they had it still didn't work out, since Jake combined unarmed combat with knife-fighting techniques as he faced the two.

While he used his wooden knife to block the real weapons, it took no more than a kick to one face and a second kick to a groin to put both attackers down.

The shouts and screams forced out of the two assassins drew the attention of other guests as well as men who worked for the hostel, and Tandro silenced the noise of their demands to know what happened by holding up both of his arms.

"We need to have the guard sent for," Tandro said once the noise died down a little. "These men attacked us for no reason."

"It's perfectly obvious that you were attacked," one of the men from the hostel said, gesturing toward the real knives the assassins had dropped.

"The guard has already been sent for, and I'm sure they'll have the same question that I do. Since it is obvious that you were attacked, why didn't you kill those two the way you're entitled to do?"

"I didn't kill them because it isn't possible to question dead men," Jake answered when Tandro didn't. "This isn't the first time we were attacked, and we'd like to know who has it in for us."

"But you won't get any answers out of assassins," the same man responded with a short laugh. "Most of them even refuse to talk under torture, so trying to question them is a waste of time. Don't you know anything?"

"Maybe I know something you don't," Jake returned, not about to mention the idea he'd just gotten. "In any event, it can't hurt to try. A prisoner can always be killed later, but once he's dead you can't change your mind and make him live again."

A mutter of confusion went up from the crowd, but Jake ignored the noise while he kept his attention on the two assassins. Tandro was watching the crowd, Jake had noticed, so he did his own watching to make sure neither of the assassins woke up and tried again. The unconscious men were just beginning to stir when the crowd parted to allow the arrival of Captain Sovri and some of his guardsmen.

"If the matter weren't so serious, I'd say the situation was starting to become tiresome," Sovri said, standing next

to Jake and watching while his men went to chain the two assassins. "There really wasn't a reason for you to leave these men alive, but since you did we'll take care of the chore for you."

"Before you execute them, I have a suggestion," Jake said very softly, drawing Sovri's startled attention. "I know it isn't usually done, but you might try giving them the drug usually given only to female slaves."

That drug won't let them refuse your orders, and then you can get them to tell you who hired them. You'll have to use more of the drug because they're bigger than most females, but the idea ought to work."

Jake could see that Sovri started out being completely outraged, but by the time Jake finished speaking Sovri had shifted to looking thoughtful.

"You know, it never occurred to me that the drug could be used in just that way," Sovri mused, his thoughts mostly inward. "Afterward the two can be sold as slaves instead of executed, maybe with the one who hired them to keep them company. That bounty on assassins isn't collected unless the victim survives, and even so hasn't been that much of a deterrent."

The possibility of being enslaved like a woman should do a much better job."

By that time the two assassins had been chained up and forced to their feet, the second man still partially bent over because of the pain in his groin. Sovri gestured his men into leaving and then followed them, promising first to let Jake and Tandro know if and when anything was found out about who hired the assassins. Most of the crowd followed the guardsmen and their prisoners, so Jake used the opportunity to walk to the table where his knife belt was and reclaim the weapon.

"So much for our time of exercise," Tandro said as he joined Jake, exchanging his wooden knife for his own belted weapon. "I have a request that I hope you won't consider as me stepping over a line. Do you think there's a chance you could teach me that other fighting method you use? I could see how effective it is, and would love to be able to use the same myself."

"I'd be glad to teach you, but we can't do it here," Jake answered with a smile as he replaced his knife belt. "As soon as we talk to Gordi we'll leave for home, and once we get there I can start the lessons."

Tandro nodded with his own smile, obviously pleased with Jake's promise.

He knew as well as Jake did that the lessons couldn't be started in the hostel, not when there were already too many people who would be watching their every move. The assassins had ruined any chance for privacy Jake and his companion had, and there was nothing they could do to change that state of affairs.

Tandro led the way out of the exercise area, and it came as no surprise to Jake when it was their suite the native headed for. Getting out of sight, at least for a while, was a good idea, but for some reason the closer they got to the suite, the more Tandro lost his air of satisfaction. Once they went inside and closed the door behind themselves, the native turned resolutely to Jake.

"I wonder if you would do me a different kind of favor," Tandro said, looking as if the words were being torn out of him. "I'd - hate to be held responsible if something - bad happened to that girl, so if you'd talk to her."

"That's a good idea," Jake said at once, trying to sound heartily approving rather than suddenly worried. "If she's still bothered by what happened yesterday I might be able to ease her mind. Let's go and talk to her right now."

Tandro nodded eagerly and began to lead the way to his bedroom. Jake followed silently, but his mind whirled with the question of what could be going on. The conversation they'd had about excess and sadism came back to mind, and Jake could only hope that Tandro hadn't lost himself in some way with Ennie. The native had been very firm on the fact that both women had to be treated like real slaves, and if Tandro had gone just a little too far.

Walking into the bedroom behind Tandro showed Jake a girl who lay curled up on the slave pallet with no expression on her face. If her eyes hadn't been open Jake might have thought that Ennie was asleep, but then she seemed to pull out of her thoughts and sat up to look toward both of the men. But still with that same lack of expression...

"How are you doing, girl?" Jake asked, trying to sound friendly and somewhat concerned. "What happened yesterday was hard on you, we know, so both my brother and I want to make sure you're all right."

"If you're talking about the way I threw up, I'm completely over the sickness," the girl answered without actually looking at Jake. "I've never seen anyone killed before, especially not like that, so it made me sick."

If something like that happens again, I just won't look."

"That's ... very wise of you," Jake said after exchanging a glance with Tandro. The other man didn't like the girl's answer any more than Jake did, and what she'd said had nothing to do with the problem. It was the way she spoke, as if all the life had gone out of her... "Yes, very wise of you, but you still seem bothered about something. Why don't you tell us what the something is, and we'll see if we can help take care of the problem."

The girl hesitated long enough to remind Jake about the way Tain had refused to answer a similar question, but apparently Ennie was the kind to make a different decision.

"There's nothing bothering me that can ever be taken care of," the girl replied after the pause, still not looking at either Jake or Tandro.

"I've had to make myself understand that there's no one anywhere who will ever really care about me, and it doesn't even matter why that is. I've been fighting all my life trying to change that, but nothing I do has worked."

Now I'm too tired to fight any more, so what happens to me from now on doesn't matter. From now on even I won't care about me."

Once she finished speaking the girl lay down again, her eyes still open but apparently seeing nothing but inner visions. Tandro's face looked pale and drawn, and when Jake only hesitated a moment before leaving the room again, Tandro followed.

"Now what?" Tandro said to Jake once they were in the common area, a plea for help rather than a demand. "I've never heard a slave say anything like that, and I don't know what to do to pull her out of it."

"You and me both," Jake muttered, rubbing his face with one hand. "I wish I could say it was your problem and just walk away, but I can't do that, can I? The only thing I can think of to do is talk to Tain and ask her opinion. They're both females, after all, so maybe Tain can think of something that we can't. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Tandro nodded with what looked like faint hope, so Jake left the man and went to his own bedroom. When he opened the door he was startled to find Tain lying in the middle of the floor on her back staring up at the ceiling, and all at once Jake remembered the state he'd left her in.

"Is it lunchtime already?" she asked suddenly before Jake could blurt out some kind of demand about how she was feeling. "Time does fly when you're having fun, and now I imagine you want an answer to the question you asked before you left."

"Are you going to give me that answer?" Jake put cautiously as he moved closer to look down at the woman. "I noticed how disturbed you were before I left, so if you need a little more time - "

"I wasn't disturbed, I was in shock," Tain interrupted to correct him, her blue eyes holding his gaze with what looked like no trouble at all.

"Being forced to act like that almost killed me when I finally knew what was going on again, so I've decided to give you the information you want.

After all, it doesn't make much of a difference now."

"What is it that doesn't make a difference?" Jake asked, for some reason now almost dreading what she would say. "If keeping quiet was all that important to you, maybe I shouldn't have insisted - "

"But you did insist, so now you get to hear what I didn't want to talk about before this," Tain interrupted again, and Jake had the impression she was controlling some kind of anger. "What was bothering me was being this close to you and having to act like your slave, because I've always found you more attractive than I could handle. Does that tell you what you want to know?"

"I - don't understand," Jake responded as he crouched down beside the woman, part of him silently admitting that he didn't want to understand.

"If you find me as attractive as I find you, we can both relax and enjoy our time together instead of fighting about every little thing. If, that is, you still feel the same about."

The humorless smile curving her lips answered his question even before he finished it, making Jake feel as if someone had punched him hard in the middle. He'd been an idiot with the woman he felt so attracted to, and instead of making things better between them he'd managed to kill the interest she hadn't wanted to admit.

So what other brilliant ideas would he find it possible to come up with to make things even worse.?

Chapter 8

"I think we're going to have to talk about that later," Jake finally got out, now very much relieved that there was an actual problem to discuss with Tain. "At the moment I have to ask your advice about something, and I sincerely hope you can help. There's ... something wrong with Ennie, and I don't have a clue about how to handle it."

"What do you mean, there's something wrong with the girl?" Tain asked, a small frown denting her forehead. "Is she still bothered about the attack yesterday?"

"No, she says that isn't the problem," Jake responded at once, encouraged by Tain's immediate concern. "When I asked about what was bothering her, she said something about no one ever caring about her and now even she doesn't care. It's almost as if she's given up on life, and that isn't good."

The frown creasing Tain's forehead deepened as she sat up, but then she looked directly at Jake.

"There's a good chance the girl has given up on life, and oddly enough I'd guess that being a slave has little or nothing to do with it," Tain told him. "If you get to the point in life where you suddenly realize that no one has ever cared about you and no one probably ever will, the understanding leaves you very little to live for. Just existing for the sake of existing isn't enough to keep you going."

"I'm glad to see you understand the problem," Jake said, forcibly keeping himself from smoothing back Tain's hair. "Now all you have to do is tell me how to solve the problem, or else volunteer to do the solving yourself.

The girl may not believe that Tandro and I care, not after the way she's been treated, but you ought to be a

different story."

"I'm no different from you two, and chances are I'm worse," Tain said with a shake of her head. "Ennie was supposed to be my partner, but all I did was treat her like an unwanted burden. If you want me to talk to her I'm willing to try, but I don't really expect it to do any good."

"The only thing we can do is try," Jake said, rising from his crouch to hold a hand out to Tain. "Let's go and talk to her and see what happens."

Tain gave a small shrug before getting to her feet, making absolutely no effort to take Jake's hand. She'd pretended not to see the offered help, but Jake knew it was an unwillingness to touch him that had made her stand up alone and that thought turned his hand into a fist of frustration. Well, he and Tain would still have the rest of the day to talk about their own problem. Right now there was someone else to think about.

Jake opened the door into the common area, almost pausing to let Tain go first before he realized that the woman was waiting for him to go first.

Her actions were perfectly in keeping with the required behavior of a slave, and if Tandro hadn't been hovering just outside the door Jake might have groaned. Tain was behaving exactly the way she was supposed to, but suddenly that didn't suit Jake at all.

"My slave is going to try talking to your slave," Jake made himself tell Tandro, hopefully without showing anything of how he really felt.

"The talk may not do any good, but at least we can try."

Tandro didn't look as pleased as Jake had expected him to, but instead of commenting the native led the way back to his own bedroom. Inside they found the girl still lying on the pallet with her eyes open, and the way Tain moved close to crouch down next to Ennie showed Jake how reluctant Tain was. But the way Tain smoothed the younger woman's hair showed she also felt compassion, so Jake made no effort to walk closer himself.

The two were speaking softly enough so that they had a small measure of privacy, and intruding on that privacy would probably be a bad idea.

A number of minutes went by, mostly filled with Tain saying something and Ennie listening, but to Jake's eye Ennie wasn't also believing. The girl hadn't even sat up again, so when she closed her eyes and didn't respond again Jake wasn't surprised. Tain kept at it another minute or so, but finally she straightened and came back to where Jake and Tandro stood waiting.

"It's no use," Tain said in a soft voice, defeat clear in her tone and expression. "Ennie's spent all her life trying to find someone who would really care about her, and now she doesn't want to try any longer.

She's given up on everything, including worrying about what will happen to her.

She's completely empty inside."

"And if she continues like that she'll die," Tandro said angrily as Jake gave in to the urge to put a hand to Tain's arm in shared compassion.

"Well, I won't let her die, not now and not ever. If she's all that empty inside then what she needs is something to fill her up."

Jake didn't know what Tandro was talking about, but it wasn't long before he and Tain both found out. Tandro went to his saddlebags and got something that Jake couldn't make out, then the native went over to Ennie's pallet.

It took only a moment for the man to pull Ennie to her feet by one arm, and then they went to the room's plain chair. Tandro sat in the chair and pulled Ennie across his knees almost in a single motion, then he used both hands to part the girl's nether cheeks. It wasn't hard to see that Tandro was putting an insertion in Ennie, but even that didn't elicit any reaction from the girl.

"Lack of enthusiasm isn't acceptable in a slave," Tandro said, and then his hand came down hard on Ennie's behind. "You're going to show me some life, girl, or else you're going to be very unhappy. Tell me you're sorry for the way you've been acting, and that you want to apologize to me in the most pleasant way."

Tandro had been spanking the girl while he spoke, and her backside had started to go pink before he was through talking. The way Ennie moved looked completely involuntary, and when she spoke Jake wanted to close his eyes in pain.

"Sure, anything you like," she said in the same dead voice even while she partially squirmed. "I'm sorry for the way I've been acting, and I want to apologize in the most pleasant way."

Tandro had paused to hear what she would say, but instead of looking as appalled as Jake felt, the native looked angry.

"That's not good enough, and isn't at all what I want!" Tandro snapped, starting to spank the girl again. "You will do things my way, otherwise you won't sit down for a very long time! Tell me what I want to hear, and do it in the right way!"

When Ennie began to drone out the same words all over again, not even really reacting to the spanking, Jake realized he'd had all he could stand. He touched Tain's arm and gestured for her to follow him, then he led the way out into the common area.

"Tandro is trying to get through to her in the only way he knows how, and all I can do is hope he succeeds," Jake said to Tain once he'd closed the door behind them. "What did she say when you spoke to her?"

"Nothing, really," Tain said with a shake of her head, not quite looking at him. "She thought you'd ordered me to talk to her, refusing to believe I was there on my own even when I corrected her. She said she knew how I really felt about her and didn't blame me for feeling like that, so I didn't have to bother pretending. Then she closed down again into that that - "

"State of existing," Jake finished when Tain didn't, glancing to the door he'd closed. "How do you get through to someone who doesn't care if she lives or dies? All I can do is hope that Tandro's method works. If it doesn't."

Jake let his words trail off, expecting Tain to finish his sentence this time, but she didn't. She just stood staring at something he couldn't see, which meant it was time for their conversation. He touched her arm again to get her attention, and when he had it he led her back into their bedroom. Once the door was closed they had complete privacy, but Tain didn't seem in the least interested.

"I ... can't help seeing a parallel between you and the girl right now,"

Jake said after a moment of nothing but silence coming from Tain.

"I hadn't realized that what I did would hurt you so deeply, and I want to apologize. Never at any time did I mean to actually hurt you."

"If you're afraid that I'll go into moving catatonia like Ennie, don't waste the time," Tain said, but she still made no effort to look directly at him. "What you really did was make me understand thoroughly how I ought to be acting, and that's the way I will be acting from now on."

And with that she went to the pallet and sat down cross-legged, then stared at the floor in front of her folded legs. But she sat with rounded shoulders and head bent, the picture of complete and total lack of challenge. Just the way a good slave was expected to sit...

"Tain, please," Jake said, almost in desperation as he followed her to the pallet and crouched down. "We're completely alone now, so you don't have to act like that. And I want to talk about what you told me. If you felt that great an attraction for me that you couldn't bring yourself to talk about it, one stupid move on my part couldn't have killed the attraction entirely. Please tell me there's still something left and that we can start over again but this time in the right way."

"I have no interest in starting anything at all with you," she said, and there wasn't even a hesitation that Jake could think of as encouraging. "I didn't want to talk about the attraction because it embarrassed me, not because it was the beginning of eternal love. You can't feel more than physical attraction when you don't know someone, not unless you're a fool who likes to lie to herself. You have to get to know what that person is really like before you can feel more - or maybe not even feel what you did at first."

Jake straightened out of his crouch and walked to the windows, looking at the still-pouring rain but not really seeing it. When he first saw Tain Halliday he'd been nothing but surface-attracted, all right, but that shallow kind of attraction hadn't lasted very long. The more he learned about the woman, the more he saw her, the more he felt that he'd found the mate he'd been searching for so long.

And then I got the chance to actually be with her, so what did I do?

I let myself be lured into treating her like the slave she was supposed to be.

It was intoxicating having that much power over a woman, more fun than just working with her. Fun. I hope you enjoyed yourself, Jerk, because that's the only enjoyment you'll ever have with her.

If Jake's thoughts hadn't been so bleak he would have considered them bitter, but bitter was too mild a word to describe his feelings. He'd fallen all the way to self-hatred, and there was nothing he could do to salvage the situation. Tain wasn't challenging him in any way any longer, which had to mean her original interest really was dead. Whatever he did to her didn't matter because he didn't matter.

There was no way for Jake to know how long he stood in front of the window, but it was certainly long enough for depression to get a good hold on him. His mood was as dark and dreary as the day beyond the windows, but he was partially distracted when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," he invited, hoping it was Tandro with some good news, but instead it was that same slave bringing in his lunch. Her grin was still as saucy as it had been the other times, but the girl lost some of her amusement when she glanced at Tain. Seeing Tain being paddled or used had actually increased the slave's amusement, but a single glance seemed to show the girl what Tain was now feeling.

"Your lunch, master," the girl said as she hurried to the table.

"Would you like to have me serve you?"

"I have my own slave to do any serving I might want," Jake said, fighting not to let the depression color his words. "You can go back where you belong now."

"Yes, master, thank you," the girl said, and then she was hurrying out of the room and closing the door behind herself. She seemed to know almost at once that Jake was no longer in a lighthearted mood, and obviously didn't want to be around if he turned mean. But Jake had gotten an idea, and as soon as the slave was gone he put the idea to use.

"Come and serve me, Kitten," he said as he moved to the table and then sat. He was pretending not to look at anything but the food on the tray, in reality watching Tain closely while he hoped for some sign of anger in her. Anger would have meant there was something left of her feelings for him after all, but all she did was get to her feet at once showing no expression at all. The next moment she was beside him and obeying the order she'd been given, again making Jake want to close his eyes in pain.

"No, wait a minute," Jake said instead of closing his eyes, talking about the way Tain had taken the bowl of cereal and a wooden spoon after putting his own food in front of him. "Since I made my point about the way you're supposed to act, there's no need to carry the act too far. I'm not all that hungry, so take as much of the food as you like."

"Thank you, but I have the only food I want," Tain answered as she knelt beside his chair with the cereal and spoon. Jake expected some kind of dig to show she was playing the martyr by not accepting real food, but all Tain did was start to eat the cereal. Jake knew then that he was in real trouble, the kind of trouble he had no idea how to get out of. He sat and watched Tain eating her cereal for a moment, then got up and went back to the window. If he'd had only a faint appetite before, now he had none at all.

Another stretch of silence went by, during which time Tain finished her cereal, put the bowl and spoon back, then returned to the pallet.

Jake could hear her moving around, then the silence returned. He wondered how much of the cereal she'd actually eaten, but didn't leave the window to go and look. Depression had him by the throat again, and only another knock at the door was able to free him part way. He expected it to be the slave coming back for the tray, but this time it was Tandro knocking.

"Captain Sovri has some news for us, my friend," Tandro said at once. "He says the idea you gave him worked, but he didn't go into details about the idea."

Jake raised his brows as he moved quickly toward Tandro, and sure enough the captain was in the common area looking really pleased.

"I suggested to the captain that he use the slave drug on those assassins and then order them to talk," Jake told Tandro as the two of them walked toward Sovri. "If it worked, he should have found out who sent all those assassins after us."

"That's exactly what I did find out," Sovri confirmed with a grin, then the man's amusement dimmed. "The one who hired the assassins is a well-known slaver named Himlin, but when I took some of my men and went to arrest the man we found him gone from his house. Do you have any idea why Himlin would want you dead?"

"Since we've never heard of him, I suppose you'll just have to ask him when you find him," Jake said after exchanging a carefully puzzled glance with Tandro. "Were you given any clue as to where the man went?"

"We were told that Himlin is away on business the way he often is, but I'm not too sure that's the truth," Sovri answered, apparently satisfied with Jake's reply. "The slaver could be hiding from us to avoid arrest, but he'll have to come back at some time."

"Maybe he's waiting until my friend and I are gone from the area," Jake suggested, not in the least happy with the fact that their enemy was still at large. "If we're not here to accuse him, he ought to be able to get away with what he did."

"No, you'd have to withdraw your complaint entirely for that to happen,"

Sovri denied with a brief shake of his head. "Withdrawing your complaint would even negate what we learned

from the assassins, so don't let anyone try to tell you that the complaint isn't necessary. When your business here is finished and you leave, we'll still be able to take care of your enemy."

"That's good to know," Jake said as Tandro agreed. "Thank you for telling us who our enemy is, Captain. We appreciate it more than we can say."

The captain shrugged off their thanks as Jake and Tandro took turns shaking hands with him, and then the captain left their suite. Jake waited a moment to be sure Sovri was gone, and then he turned to Tandro.

"So our enemy is a big-time slaver," Jake said sourly. "What a shocking surprise."

"Yeah, for me as well," Tandro agreed. "So what do we do now?"

"We have our meeting with Gordi and then go home," Jake said, adding a shrug. "In the meantime we keep our eyes open and try to stay alive. How did things work out with your slave?"

"I wish you hadn't asked that," Tandro said with a sigh, his expression turning instantly bleak. "I was sure I could get through to the girl in the same way that worked with her before, but she didn't even come alive after she began to cry. When lunch was brought I tried to get her to eat some of it without making it an order, but that didn't work either. I ended up having to order her to eat after all, but I don't know how much good the food will do her. It wasn't long before I had to tell her to stop eating to keep her from throwing up again."

"Well, tomorrow we go to see Gordi even if it hasn't stopped raining,"

Jake stated, making the decision without hesitation. "We need to get those girls back home as soon as possible, and leaving right after our meeting is over will give us enough daylight to travel in for a good distance before we have to camp."

"There's a problem with your slave too, isn't there?" Tandro said, obviously not really guessing. "She looked almost as bad as mine when I went to your door, but with Sovri here I didn't want to say anything. What are we going to do?"

"We're going to have that meeting with Gordi and then we're going to get the girls home," Jake said, feeling even more tired than he had. "Once we're home we'll have a lot more options than we have here."

"I hope you're right," Tandro said, then he turned away and went back to his bedroom. Jake stood where he was until Tandro's door was closed, then he chose a chair and sat down. He had no desire to go back into his own bedroom and face that silence again, not when he could face the easier silence of the common area. Later he'd go back into the bedroom, definitely later.

The slave came for the lunch trays a short while after Jake made that decision, and his wasn't the only food that had gone almost untouched. The slave made no comment about that, of course, but she did hurry out of the suite when Tandro came out of his bedroom right behind her. The native sat down not far from Jake, but didn't seem to have anything else to say. The two of them shared the silence, but that didn't make the time any easier for Jake.

Supper was a replay of lunch, a replay Jake didn't enjoy any more than the first time. Tain politely refused to touch anything but that cereal, an action that turned the tasty food tasteless for Jake. But he ate it anyway, knowing that he had to keep his strength up. Tomorrow they would be leaving that town, and not long after that they would be back where they belonged. Maybe then...

After the meal Jake put the tray of empty dishes out in the hall, then went back to his bedroom for some sleep. But first he called Tain to him and ran his hands over her beautifully naked body, looking for the least sign of a positive reaction from her. It had come to him that she might be lying about having no more interest in him, and if so then her body would tell him the truth.

And her body did tell him the truth but one he hadn't wanted to know. His caresses brought not the least amount of arousal to her, not even what would probably have come from a brush with a stranger in a crowd. Seeing that killed his own interest, and after sending Tain to her pallet he turned the lamps down and tried to sleep. It took quite some time but eventually he managed the feat.

Tain opened her eyes to the beginnings of a new day, one that no longer had pouring rain. The pallet hadn't been the easiest thing to fall asleep on, but she'd learned to sleep when necessary even if it was bare ground she had to sleep on. And she'd also learned how to control her own body when she had to, a trick that had quite a bit to do with self-hypnosis...

Odd how Killen doesn't seem to know about that trick, she thought, studying the man where he still lay asleep in the bed. I thought all agents were taught the same, but maybe not. It's possible my not using the trick sooner confused him, and that's perfectly all right. The longer he stays confused, the less trouble he's likely to give me.

Closing her eyes again let Tain see a replay of what had gone on between her and Killen the day before, memories that weren't on her list of favorites. When the man had come back after she'd gotten over the shock he'd handed her in relation to that slave persona, she'd told him what had then been the absolute truth. At that moment, the idea of never seeing the man again had been her brightest hope.

But then she'd seen his distress and disappointment, two reactions that were ludicrous considering what he'd done to her. He'd been a fool and a louse, but he didn't have to be told that by anyone else. He knew it for a fact all by himself, and although he obviously regretted what he'd done he only made one attempt to apologize. After that he simply accepted the guilt and tried to live with the consequences of his actions.

Which had forced her to change her mind about him again almost immediately. Anyone can do something stupid, a truism that didn't exclude her, but regretting that stupidity and clearly deciding not to repeat it was more than a step in the right direction. In Tain's opinion it made the person doing the deciding extremely attractive, a living lure to make her want to find out what else the man was all about.

But that was something Tain still couldn't allow herself to indulge in. She didn't want a relationship with Killen no matter how attractive she found him, so she knew at once that something had to be done. Putting herself into unresponsive slave mode turned out to be the answer, and no matter how much she hated acting like that she wasn't about to let herself stray from the role again. She'd had one taste of what stupidity on her part could bring her, and she wasn't about to court insanity by risking being put into that other persona again.

Tain didn't quite brood as the time passed, but her thoughts had turned more than a little dark by the time Killen began to stir. She kept her eyes closed and her breathing even while Killen moved around the room, and he didn't seem to know that she wasn't still asleep. He shaved in the basin at the foot of his bed before washing briefly, which led Tain to wish she could wash in a bath. It had been much too long since her last bath, but backward societies tended to get used to the smell rather than try to do something about it.

A knock at the door finally let Tain pretend to wake up, but all she did was sit and gaze at the floor while the slave female brought in their breakfast on a tray. The food smelled incredibly good, but the lure of real food had no chance of reaching Tain. Being on this planet seemed to have destroyed her appetite permanently, which was actually a blessing. If you don't want something, not having it doesn't cause you to suffer.

"You'd better come over and eat now," Killen said quietly once the slave was gone. "We'll be leaving the hostel when we finish the meal, and then we'll be going to the meeting we came to this town for. As soon as the meeting is over we'll be heading home, so it won't be much longer."

Much longer that you'll have to be a slave, Tain thought Killen meant as she silently got to her feet and walked to the table where he already sat.

It might be true that she'd soon be free, but counting chickens just didn't pay. She could let relief flood all through her once she really was home and free.

Killen had already taken his breakfast dishes from the tray himself, so all Tain had to do was accept the bowl of cereal and its spoon and kneel to eat. Thinking about how most slaves were made to beg for a taste of real food turned her stomach so badly that the cereal was really the only thing she could hold down. She would have been happier not eating anything at all, but if they were heading home soon she would need all the strength she could muster.

Tain took the last swallow of the cereal before Killen finished his own meal, but not that much sooner. It looked like Killen was in a hurry to get going, and after he gave her a drink of water he didn't dawdle.

In just a few minutes his possessions were all packed, and Tain had been given her "clothing" again. This time she put on the vest and so-called skirt without comment, ignoring the way Killen watched her closely. At no time had she made eye contact with him, and that practice would continue unless she was told to do otherwise.

When Killen was ready to go he led the way out of the bedroom into the common area of the suite. Tain was aware that Tandro and Ennie already stood in the area waiting for them, but the only one she glanced at was Ennie. The girl was dressed in the same outfit Tain wore, of course, but there was something ... horribly distant about her. As if she wasn't really there at all, as if she were a cutout figure instead of a living being. For a brief moment Tain wished she could do something for Ennie, but this wasn't the place. Maybe once they got home the girl would come alive again.

By the time the men had all their gear and their horses the sun was well up, which meant that most of the mud created by the rain was not only almost dry but was on the way to being dry and cracked. But the last of the moisture made the mud cooler and easier to walk on, something Tain discovered once they'd left the hostel behind. She and Ennie had been told to walk behind the pack horses again, a position Tain found a lot more pleasant than riding with Killen. The farther away she was from that man, the better she liked it.

Their small procession moved through the town and its people for a short while, and then the number of people went down to just about zero. They'd reached an area that was mostly closed warehouses, but whether the places were closed temporarily or permanently was impossible for Tain to tell. A glance around the pack horse showed what looked like private houses beyond the last of the warehouses, and that was most likely where they were headed. A meeting, Killen had said, but not who the meeting was with.

And then all hell broke loose. Men came riding out from between two of the warehouses on horses of their own, four on each side of the men Tain and Ennie followed, and it was perfectly clear that the attackers had been waiting for Killen and Tandro. But not to kill the two men as those assassins had tried on the plains. These men carried heavy lengths of wood in their hands instead of knives, and as soon as they got close enough they began to swing at Killen and Tandro. Even as Tain watched, one of the lengths of wood struck against Killen's head, and that was all she had to see.

"Ennie, no noise and follow me fast," Tain ordered in a soft voice, then she ran toward the nearest space between two warehouses. None of the combatants were watching two unimportant slaves, which made this the best time possible for her and Ennie to disappear.

Tain didn't stop until she reached the shadow of the wall she'd aimed for, and a moment later Ennie slid into the shadow behind her. The results of the attack were what had let Tain do the necessary, since Killen's orders to her had been clear. She hadn't been allowed to take off on her own unless something happened to Killen, and now something had happened to him.

"What's going on?" Ennie asked softly as Tain saw Tandro hit just the way Killen had been. The attackers had

kept Killen in his saddle even though the man was obviously unconscious, and they did the same with Tandro. "Why are those men using clubs instead of knives?"

"Probably because they want prisoners instead of dead bodies," Tain answered just as softly, watching as the attackers took the two unconscious men and their horses into the warehouse opposite the one she and Ennie hid beside. "I don't know why those people want prisoners instead, but they obviously do. And not one of them noticed we were around."

"Does that mean we're free to go where we please?" Ennie asked, her tone sounding faintly disturbed. "But even if we are, how do we get out of this city? The gate guards aren't likely to just let us walk out, not when it's clear we're slaves."

"There's a way to get through the gate," Tain murmured back, not lying or wishful thinking. All she and Ennie had to do was follow along behind the pack horses of any two men who were leaving. Chances were the men would not even notice them, and once they reached the forest she and Ennie could slip away into the trees.

Even if the men did notice them and tried to keep two free slaves, Killen had protected her well enough. She'd been commanded not to take orders from anyone but Killen, and once she rendered the men unconscious she could apologize and explain politely about not being allowed to take orders from them. After that she could have Ennie take off her red armbands and she would do the same for Ennie. Without the glaring red of the armbands it would be much easier to hide in the woods, and getting back to base would take a short while but would be far from impossible.

The only question, though, was whether she should leave at once or stay and try to free Killen. Without any weapons she wasn't likely to do Killen much good, and after the few words she'd exchanged with Ennie a glance showed that the girl had now retreated back to being barely alive. Ennie was her partner, and you owed something to your partner. Back at base Ennie would be able to get professional help, so it was Tain's responsibility to get Ennie back.

Tain touched Ennie's arm to get her to follow, and then led the way toward the back of the warehouse. As she moved, Tain couldn't help but wonder if the relief she felt was because she really was on the way back home, or because she was leaving Killen behind. Whichever, she knew she was making the right choice. There was certainly no confusion about that.