

SHAUNA'S
CHOICE
Collection

CHULA STONE

 Blushing Books PUBLISHING

SHAWNA'S CHOICE
COLLECTION

CHULA STONE



Published by Blushing Books
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Chula Stone
Shawna's Choice Collection

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Shawna's Choice

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Chapter 1

Shawna sat up in the comfortable seating pod and listened intently. Her friend Rilka had just come back from Trellian to collect her interplanetary visa and some odds and ends she needed in her new life as a settler there. Rilka had spent a very successful and happy three years in the Companion Program. "I married the fourth man I chose to work with. Some girls stay with their first," she had told Shawna, "but I'm glad I waited. It's a great way to find a mate, and a great way to live. I love the wildlife out here. Sure, you do have to follow the rules, and if you don't, you get spanked for it, but that won't kill you. If you're just careful to be safe, you can have a great time."

"But don't you get lonely and bored? You're alone out there on your minestead with just some strange man! And he calls all the shots? I don't get it." Shawna sounded skeptical.

"It's a bit strange at first, taking orders, but you have to remember, he has the radplant in his brain that tells him what's happening, and what to do about coming problems. The mining association can't always prevent the dangers, but they can warn him through the radplant that the problems are coming. The radplant is half radio, half database, and he can access it with his

thoughts. I don't mind my Dordek telling me what to do, since I know that it's not just his whim. He's got information I don't have. Once I get the explanation, I usually agree with his ideas, anyway. And it keeps peace in the house if everybody knows who's in charge."

"Wasn't it hard to get used to being alone like that though?" Shawna wanted to know.

"We're linked through the telecom system, and can see and hear the other ladies in several sectors. On good days, the reception is clear even farther, and we have really nice chats. We have daily meetings, share the mining results the men have gathered, plan strategy and compile result reports. It's challenging work and keeps us busy. We work together all the time and I actually see more of the other companions through the Linkset than I saw of my friends while I was working in the factory here. Come on, just try it."

It sounded so good to Shawna, and yet it was such a big step. For some strange reason, the thought of getting spanked for misdeeds didn't bother her at all. In fact, it intrigued her to think that a man would care enough about her to enforce the rules he set down. She would love for someone else to make the hard choices she usually had to agonize over by herself. She also knew the miners had to go through training courses to qualify for the Companion Program and had to be thoroughly checked out so that the women who went to work out in the minestead areas were not at risk of being asked to do anything of a personal nature that they did not want to do. There were lots of protective measures in place to ensure against abuse, and it seemed like a good system where lots of happy couples met, worked together for a time as colleagues, and then fell in love and stayed together. The boyfriends she'd had so far here were not at all interested in working together or building anything. Maybe it was time to take a chance. And the best part was it need not be a permanent choice. She could always change her mind and come back.

The ship that brought Shawna to Trellian hadn't taken off again before Shawna was whisked through the Orbitport and deposited by the harried company representative into the land transport that would take her to the Selection Meeting Center. She'd had no time to take more than a glimpse of her new home world, so instead of settling herself in the padded pod and strapping in as she was supposed to do, she dumped her carryall and looked out the window of the compartment. A dark-haired man in the next pod scowled and admonished her, "Hey, can't you read the sign? You need to buckle in or you'll be sorry."

She paid him no mind, but rather drank in the scene hungrily.

He tried again. "Miss, these things get going with a jolt as often as not and you'll get hurt if you're not in a pod." Then his voice turned stern as he added, "And if I have to come over there and help you, you'll be sorry in more ways than one."

Shawna turned to make a smart retort, but the chance was taken from her by the loud pop of the engines. A moment later, she found herself flung headlong through the aisle by the jerking start of the transport. The stranger caught her awkwardly over his lap and held her tight to keep her from crashing into the floor. As the transport got underway and stabilized, she tried to catch her breath enough to thank the man for helping her, but was shocked into silence by his hand landing with a sharp smack on her upturned bottom.

Vilnek spanked her harder and faster than he had ever spanked a girl before because he knew he really had no right and as soon as she protested, he would have to stop. Before that happened he wanted to give her something to remind her that her new home was not without its dangers. The settlers with more experience were duty-bound to teach the new recruits quickly that the rules were to be obeyed. He smacked her bottom through her thin leggings, knowing they offered little protection from the kind of force and swing he was using. As quick as piston strokes and as hot

as a drill engine boring through grade three Stalcon, he did his level best to make her bottom feel the error of her ways. His hand began to feel the heat as it landed with several sharp swats to her left cheek before her right cheek received the same attention. He then returned to the left side but lower down on the sensitive crease where her bottom would hit a chair. He succeeded in dispensing several sharp slaps to both sides before returning to the higher portions of her bottom and spreading his swats around to cover all the area so prettily displayed to him by her position over his knee.

Shawna gasped with the surprise and pain of the spanking, but didn't resist. She knew that miners had the right to spank their companions, and so assumed falsely that all miners had the right to spank any companion they encountered.

When she gave him no fight, he felt a strong surge of protective empathy toward this obviously green recruit and finished up the spanking with a sternly voiced warning. "Now remember this in the future, little one. We need and value our companions and don't want you hurt. You obey the rules and you'll be fine, but if you don't, you'll get more of this. Nobody wants to spank, but they will if they have to. Do you understand me?"

She sniffled her assent and he let her stand up. Then he surprised her even more by gathering her in his arms and holding her close, though not so close that she felt threatened. His hand stroked her hair as he pressed her head gently into his chest to let her snuffles subside. She asked in a small voice, "Should I strap myself in now?"

He replied, "Now if I were your boss and had the right to tell you what to do, I might tell you to take a nap as further punishment, but since I actually don't have any say-so over you..."

Her howl of anger and confusion cut him off. "What do you mean? You don't have the right to? Then you just.... Oh, how dare you!"

"Well, little lady, if I have my way, I will be the one taking you

home with me day after tomorrow, and I will have the right to protect you and correct you. As for this little incident, let's just call that a welcome party."

"I don't think much of Trellian's welcome traditions, then," she pouted, but broke into a smile a moment later. She had to admit the humor in the situation that her ignorance of the rules had caused. "I guess I have a lot to learn. Trellian educational methods take a bit of getting used to," she commented as she rubbed her sore seat.

"I know you were just wanting to get a look at the planet, and it takes a bit of seeing. Not hard on the eyes at all is our little world, especially for a mining planet. I've worked some rough ones, I can tell you. I much prefer this planet, no matter the weirdo dangers, and I like this mining company. Not many out there that like to keep their miners civilized, not to mention happy and sane. Without the Companion Program, this place would be like all the other dirty mine worlds around here. This place is decent, and they work to keep it that way. You'll soon learn you've made the right choice."

"How did you know I was having doubts?" she asked him in wonder. She felt as if he could read her mind.

"It's written all over your sweet face. I can see... hm...." He tipped her face toward him with a gentle finger and pretended to study it like a sparkling, but complex, specimen the drill had brought up. "There's excitement, fear, a lot of self-doubt, and a healthy dose of new respect for the situation here. It's okay to be cautious, little one. That caution will keep you safe. But don't be scared that you've come to a bad place."

They continued to chat, getting to know each other, but somehow feeling as if they'd already become close friends. Shawna put it down to the pioneer atmosphere, where folks knew each other and helped newcomers to settle in. When they arrived at the Meeting Center, Shawna let the man help her with her

carryall and followed him to the main entrance line, where they waited for a transport platform to carry them up.

"I have to go file some reports before I go up to the meeting," he explained, "so I'll leave you here. Just follow this line of folks and read the instructions when it's your turn. It's easy enough." He gave her a meaning glance before he left her, but she was already turning away and barely caught it. She was eager to meet other miners, especially if they were all as personable and helpful as this Vilnek.

Shawna took a deep breath, pushed her blonde hair back from her small featured face, and looked up at the office building where the meetings were to take place. The bright lights glowing from the rows and columns of doors in the outer face of the wall let visitors know exactly where to stop the small transport platform that lifted people one at a time from one level to the next. She was told to enter the blue door on the third level from the top, so she hung on to the handrail and tried not to look at the pavement below. The instructions printed on the platform railing said to face away from the building, but she did not want to enter the Intake Area looking green with motion sickness, so she faced the wall.

The transport platform whisked her up to the correct floor quickly, but she had to stop and wipe her eyes because the bright lights of the building wall had stung them, making them water. Then she waved her hand over the sensor at the side to open the door. As she stepped into the room, she heard a light buzz of conversation and smelled a bit too much perfume and a bit too little deodorant. Gee, these folks must be as nervous as I am. Everything is going to be just fine, she thought.

A hostess from the recruitment department greeted her and signed her in, taking her retinal reading confirming her identity and generally helping her with all those little routines that put one at ease in a new group. Then she went over the purpose of this first meeting once more. "You will have this meeting and an

all-day seminar tomorrow to get to know the miners and list them in order of your preference. You will then be matched with one miner who will be your companion assignment for the next two months. Nothing will be expected of you beyond housekeeping, technical assistance, and conversation during those first two months, so don't get all tense about an immediate attraction. It's quite normal for ladies to return after two months and pick a new companion. What you are doing today is just really picking a boss. If it develops into something more, well... that's just an added bonus, so there's no pressure, okay?" Her manner was friendly and reassuring, which helped Shawna relax. Five introductions later, Shawna felt like she needed to take notes to keep names with faces and first impressions. It was almost time for dinner and she still only had vague impressions of the miners she had met. Not one of them even came close to having the calming effect Vilnek seemed to have on her. None of the others made her feel so right about her decision. She had asked normal small talk questions, and received stock answers about interests and experiences, but no one stood out in her mind as being particularly more or less desirable as a potential "boss."

She chided herself that she should not pin her hopes on just one man and tried to look about her again. Then the door opened and admitted a dark-haired man of Vilnek's height and build. Shawna glanced away from the door for a moment, and when she glanced back, he had already faded into the background. She wasn't sure whether it was Vilnek or not, but when he didn't approach her, she told herself sternly to forget him. He obviously wasn't going to bother to show up at the Meeting Center after all, and she had best forget him.

The bell rang for the whole company to go into dinner and they gathered at the double doors in the far wall of the room. The doors opened to reveal a table of unique design and function. It was of brown plexilat, but that was the only common thing about it. It was circular in shape with a hollow center and

place settings were situated so that diners sat facing each other in concentric circles. The hostess instructed the ladies to take seats on the inside of the circular table, which they entered through a single empty slot. Upon closer examination, Shawna realized the table was really a double circle. She sat facing one of the miners she had met earlier and chatted quietly with him and the people around them.

Suddenly, the table and chairs on which the men were seated started to move. Some of the ladies gasped in surprise and the men chuckled, but most of them had been to these Selection Meetings before and were used to the equipment. When the table settled into its new position, the gray-haired man across from Shawna introduced himself as Radnok, and explained that every ten minutes or so, the table would move the men one place to the right so that every miner got to chat with every companion at least once during the evening.

Shawna chatted with the various miners easily, but the dark-haired man she had observed coming in late never seemed to make an appearance. It must have been her imagination, she told herself. Best concentrate on making notes of names and estimates of how each man would rate as a boss. The older miner Radnok, who had made her laugh, would be first, while the conceited younger man who could only brag about his success in getting his first choice of companions at other meetings would definitely be last. She lost herself in the conversation and the purpose of the meeting.

The next day's seminars opened without incident, and also without Vilnek. Surely now you'll give up hope, you silly thing, she scolded herself. The ladies had two hours of meetings to discuss rules and ask questions regarding safety issues and the life they were embarking on. Shawna had become friends with two of the other new prospective companions over breakfast, and they sat together reviewing their lists during a break.

"I just can't think of it as selecting a boss," Willa declared. "I

want someone dashing and romantic. I'm putting down Bilvon as first choice. He seems so manly and strong."

She had named the man Shawna considered a braggart last night, so Shawna felt compelled to say, "He seemed like a bit of a bully, to me." When Willa protested, Shawna made no other comment. Everyone had something different they were looking for, and she was just glad she was not competing for her first choice with a gorgeous girl like Willa.

"I can't really make up my mind," said the shy blonde Claire. "I'll just put down that I'll take anybody but that huge one with the scar on his face. He scares me, but anyone else would be ok, I guess."

Again, Shawna had to disagree though silently this time, with her new friend. Choldor, the huge miner with the scar, had actually impressed her with his stolid good sense and steady calm manner, but he had described his minestead as being perched on a high cliff overlooking a misty valley and her fear of heights made her queasy at the thought of going there. So she reluctantly decided to use her veto power and not list him at all in her preferences.

Leah, one of the returning companions, tried to help them make sensible decisions and put their fears at rest. "It's best not to be too romantic or too picky about these first choices. If you get a reputation as being hard to please, you won't be listed in anyone's top choices next time around. You should look for a man with whom you can talk and work peaceably. And you have to respect him enough so that if he has to invoke the Peace Initiative, you won't be too embarrassed. I mean, being over a man's knee certainly helps you decide pretty quickly whether he's right for you or not," she chuckled.

Shawna had more questions about the Peace Initiative, which was what The Company called their policy of encouraging the miners to enforce obedience with spankings. A "Peace Initiative Adjustment" was the standard euphemism for a spanking, and

Shawna wanted to make sure she understood the details, though none of her friends knew of her encounter with Vilnek or their misunderstanding. She could not admit to them that she had just laid there and taken a hard spanking from a total stranger, not knowing he had no right to be anywhere near her bottom. Neither could she admit that she could not keep from searching for that same stranger through all the meetings and social times. Nor could she admit that none of the other miners appealed to her half as much as the stern, rather overbearing Vilnek, partly because he was stern and overbearing enough to make her feel protected in this alien and dangerous place. The Peace Initiative was meant to keep peace between the working couples, but it also seemed to her that it might provide peace in her heart as well. At least it seemed that peace was what she had felt around Vilnek. Perhaps in time she might find that same peace with one of the others.

Shawna had almost given up hope of seeing Vilnek again by the time the companions were entering their final selections on communipads to be turned in at the end of the night. The ladies were together in a small comfortable courtyard and Shawna was just sitting back, relaxing, and trying not to look at the door when suddenly it opened and there was Vilnek, looking harried and a bit cross.

"Come on, Shawna. You've got to pack quickly so we can go," he instructed.

"What are you talking about?" she shot back, slightly embarrassed and suddenly angry at his unexpected reappearance.

"We don't need all this Selection nonsense. No point in it, and I need to get back to the mine. The drilling drones are getting some really strange product and I had to return there right after I left you. I just came back to get you. In fact, we need to get a move on. The transport leaves soon and the company won't wave the darn escort, so we'll have her slowing us down, too."

"But that's not possible," she countered. "I mean, I haven't been assigned to you. I haven't even put you on my preference list. I thought... well, never mind that. My point is, I haven't been assigned to work with you so...."

He cut her off with a note of impatience as he explained, "I got an Early Release for you so you don't have to wade through all these other men. They're not right for you anyway, and we both know it. It's all cleared. It's a done deal. Now go get ready and meet me at the transport dock in ten minutes."

She watched with her mouth gaping open as he turned on his heel and strode out. I can't believe this is happening, she thought. I assumed I had a choice. I guess I really do have a lot to learn.

With a hasty explanation to Willa and Claire, she left the courtyard. Her friends hesitated only a moment before following her out of the hall, but were turned back at the door by the company representative.

"You haven't turned in your lists so you can't leave. Please finish your preference rankings, then you can go help her." The representative wondered how much trouble she would be in if it was ever learned that she had accepted a bribe from that miner to railroad this particular companion into accepting an Early Release. Vilnek was her old friend, so she didn't mind helping him separate the woman from her friends who might tell her that in reality, an Early Release needed the retinal scans and signatures of both parties to be valid.

Vilnek hoped his gruff manner and insistence on haste would convince Shawna to come with him without questions. It was true that his minestead was heading toward a crisis, but he would let the minestead implode if it meant getting her assigned to him. His fear of losing her to another miner in the usual Selection process persuaded him to not only take the unusual step of filing for Early Release, but also to give her no choice in the matter. If only I can pull this off, he thought as he paced the dock.

His friends in the company had helped him hatch the scheme

when he had told them of how much he wanted this companion assigned to him, but they had also warned him sternly that the usual safety rules would still apply once he got her out to his minestead. Once he had her there, he would have to win her affection with no other rules being bent. She would still have the option of calling for an escort back to headquarters at any moment. He realized that he would need to convince her of the rightness of this pairing before she realized that it had not come about in a manner that would stand up to inspection.

A breathless Shawna hurried up to the dock and was relieved of her carryall by the strong hands that she had dreamed about in the night. It was a small off-rail transport ship that she stepped into and she wondered why they were in such a rush since the transport was obviously only carrying them and no other passengers. She began to form her question when Vilnek cut her off with a sharp swat to her behind and a stern tone.

"No time for questions, little one. We'll talk when we get there. There's the matter of the way you rode that transport platform backwards up the Central Meeting Hall wall yesterday and stung your eyes that we'll have to take care of as well." He kept up a steady stream of mild scolding as he handed her into the transport, helped her strap in, and checked that the escort had followed suit.

Much to Shawna's surprise, he climbed into the driver's pod and strapped himself in. In the middle of all the unexpected scolding, she could barely process the incongruity of his knowing about her eyes hurting yesterday. As the transport gave its loud "pop" and started to zip and hum through the large central company complex towards the mysterious minelands beyond, Shawna's mind seemed to swirl one way and her heart another. Isn't this what she had wanted from the beginning? Hadn't she compared the other miners with Vilnek and found them wanting? So why did it seem now like she couldn't get a deep breath?

Vilnek on the other hand had breathed deeply for the first

Shawna's Choice

time, it seemed, since he had met Shawna. He had her in the transport and on the way to his minestead. "This is going to happen," he thought. "I'm going to have her there with me. She's all I've ever wanted. This is going to work. I'll give her a beautiful home, a great life and she'll want to stay... won't she?"

Chapter 2

Shawna finally calmed down enough to look over at the escort seated next to her. "I'm Shawna, but I guess you already know that," she said, smiling.

"And I'm Pippa," said the pretty brunette beside her. Pippa appeared to be a few years older than Shawna, and self-assurance calmly flowed out of her. She didn't bother wading through trivialities to break the ice before getting down to business. She'd wanted to speak with Shawna alone for several hours now, but the opportunity never arose. Now was her chance. "Vilnek is a dear friend of mine, and I just want to ask you, dear, if you know what a wonderful man he is?"

"Well..." said Shawna, somewhat taken aback. "I am a bit overwhelmed by all this, but I must say he made a very lasting first impression and that it was... favorable, though for the life of me, I can't imagine why." Shawna giggled and in just a few words told about their first meeting. The ladies laughed about Shawna's mistake and Vilnek's strong will, then fell into earnest conversation about him. Shawna asked questions about his background and career as a miner.

"Oh, he's one of the most efficient and successful guys out

here," Pippa told her. "He'll go far with his intelligence and good sense. He can get along with other miners, too, which is so important on a pioneer world. He has the respect of The Company and the other miners. I'd say only Choldor keeps a cooler head in a crisis, and his blood flows ice water anyway, so he doesn't count. Vilnek is definitely a force to be reckoned with out here. I recommend you don't underestimate him, or how much he thinks of you, Shawna."

"Oh, I don't intend to," Shawna replied.

"I mean, look how he just got you out here like this. He really had to be determined to do that, and you may not know it, but an Early Release costs quite a few Salary Credits. He must have really wanted you assigned to him to get one."

Shawna mulled over all Pippa had told her while they finished the journey and finally stepped onto the grounds of the minestead. She could see in the twilight of the summer suns several smaller outbuildings, which she presumed held mining drones and supplies. Vilnek ushered them into the living quarters quickly then excused himself to check on the shafts that had caused him so much worry of late.

Pippa began her official escort duties by showing Shawna the common room, dining area, office suite, safe room, and private quarters. The companion's quarters where Shawna would sleep were fitted with cameras that were monitored by computers at all times. Pippa explained again that the door would lock at 11 o'clock each night and if she was not in the room alone by that time, escorts would automatically be dispatched to investigate. There were other rules and procedures for Pippa to explain but they soon got all the official orientation out of the way and settled down for a nice chat.

Suddenly, the intercom buzzed and Vilnek's voice commanded, "Safe room, ten minutes, urgent!"

Pippa moved faster and more calmly than Shawna had ever seen a person move in her life. Pippa took Shawna's arm and

somehow flew to the safe room, opened it with a wave of her hand over the sensor and pushed her friend in. She then stepped quickly inside and sealed the door behind them. The light was dim, but adequate for Shawna to see two chairs and a table with a computer Linkset. Pippa sat and began the conversation again as if nothing had happened, but Shawna interrupted her.

"But what was that all about? What's happening?" she demanded.

"No idea, dear. And don't really want one. I mean, if you go trying to understand every time you are given an instruction, you'll spend all your time reading about crazy weather, strange organisms, and who-knows-what-all on this very capricious planet. There's just no keeping it all straight. That's why the guys have the radplants and tell us what to do about what's coming up."

At that moment, the floor gave one violent jerk to the left, like it was trying to step out from under them. Pippa recovered very quickly, used to Trellian and its unusual ways.

Shawna took a bit more time to contemplate what life would be like in a world where she would be told what to do, but often not told the reason why. She was beginning to understand the underlying necessity of it all, but the actual day-to-day living of it might get challenging. She would really have to trust Vilnek, she realized. Her instinct told her that he was worthy of that trust.

As soon as Pippa's driver arrived to take her back to headquarters, Vilnek took Shawna's arm. "We have something to discuss, little one. I hate to start things out this way, but I can't overlook it or let it go. When you are given instructions, you will follow those instructions as quickly as possible. Do you understand?" He looked in her eyes as he demanded his answer.

"Yes, I understand," she said doubtfully. "I went to the safe room just now, if that's what you're talking about. Was that an earthquake? What happened?"

"Don't go changing the subject, little miss. I'm not talking

about the safe room. I'm talking about when you used the transport platform facing the building. Why would you do that? I know it hurt your eyes. Pippa told me they were red and streaming when you got to the Selection Meeting Intake Area," he responded.

"I'm scared of heights, so I just faced inward. No big deal." Shawna could not see why he was so upset.

"Well, let me tell you something, little miss," he chided. "It is important that you use equipment safely, follow instructions as given, and take care of yourself. If you were scared, you should have told me or someone else. They would have helped you. But no, you just did things your own way, and see what happened?"

"OK, I'll try to remember to ask for help next time. I think arriving at the Intake Area looking like a total wreck was consequence enough," she dismissed him and turned away. He caught her arm and turned her toward him again.

"What you think in this matter isn't what gets done, understand?" He was pulling her gently but firmly to a bench. He sat at the end of it and gave a quick jerk to position her over his lap where her torso and arms could be more or less supported by the rest of the bench. With no more explanation or argument, he began spanking the daylights out of her. "And this time, I do have the right," he said as he caught her waist with his left arm as she tried to roll away from him. "You are my assignment and you agreed to this. You need to see that I'm in charge here and I'll keep you safe. You also need to see what happens when you don't pay attention to rules." All the while, his hand was smacking hard and rhythmically all over her bottom. It burned and stung, but she settled down as she focused on his words.

He took a moment to reach his arm across her burning bottom to pull her leggings down. Her tunic was already out of the way because of her position. Then he continued his lecture and spanking until she was gasping with the pain and emotions the spanking was evoking. He heard her sharply indrawn breaths

and knew he was getting through to her. Time to let her regroup, so he stopped the swats, and rubbed her backside gently.

"You going to mind me now?" he asked her.

"Yes, yes, I'll mind you. Yes!" she answered as she tried to get up.

"I'll tell you when to get up, little one," he told her as he tightened his grip on her waist. When she lay still, he loosened his grip and rubbed her bottom again. Then he continued, "You are to get up and go wait in that corner. Keep your hands on the wall until I say you can come back for the rest of your spanking."

"The rest of my—"

But, he didn't let her finish. "When you are being punished, you will not question or give me any backtalk. I'm 'sir' to you while you've got your leggings around your knees, understand?"

"Yes, sir," she replied with a bit of puzzlement in her voice. Why did she feel no resentment? She thought she should at least feel angry, but she didn't. Shawna got up and awkwardly waddled over to the corner he indicated. She placed her hands on the wall and tried to collect her thoughts. Two words just kept pounding through her mind, no matter what else she tried to consider. He cares!

He gave her little time to consider much else. In a few moments, he was back with a length of sturdy black pipe insulation. It was very light but he knew it packed a powerful sting and left no visible mark the next day. It was perfect for his intentions. He wanted her to feel the spanking, which she surely would for at least a day, but not bear any bruises.

He felt confident she would follow his instructions so he called to her, "Come over here and keep your hands away from your bottom. I'll rub it a minute, but you're not allowed." He put his arms around her and stroked her back gently, then rubbed a bit of the sting away as he murmured, "I know I haven't known you long, but it feels like we've known each other forever. When I saw you up there, on that transport platform, it made me furious.

I couldn't help thinking what might happen to you if you disobeyed in a place where it really counted. Out here, you could get hurt or killed pulling a stunt like that. I have to show you I mean business. You will mind me and take care of yourself, or face the consequences!"

His words made her feel ashamed of herself and receptive to his next order. "Bend yourself over the back of this chair and put your hands in the seat. There, like that. That's right. Now hold still and remember why I have to do this."

He let her feel the insulation tube on her burning skin just before he raised it high and brought it down with a whack on her bottom. She flinched and yelped, but didn't move and he was reassured that he wasn't going overboard. A first spanking could be hard to gauge. He didn't want to give her one stroke more than she needed, but then again, he had to get the job done. He felt like he knew what it would take to make her understand, but it might be as well to take his time and really watch her reactions. So he let each stroke sink in and watched the color bloom in her fair behind. She was making strange noises in her throat before he stopped, but at least he knew he had moved her to a new level of reaction to the spanking. It would have to be enough for today.

Now to see her reaction to him. Would she pull away and pout? Or would she turn to him? He touched her hand, held his breath, and waited to learn his fate.

She took the hand he offered her and stood. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she whispered a faint, "I'm really sorry, Vilnek. I never saw it that way before. Maybe I made a bad choice in coming to Trellian. Maybe I'm not suited for this life, but if you give me another chance, I promise I'll be careful from now on. I hope you can believe that."

"Of course, I believe you, baby. Come here to me," he assured her and folded her in his arms. "It's all over and forgotten now. You'll mind me and be safe. You'll see. You've made the

right choice. You're here with me now and that's all that matters. We'll be fine. You'll see."

Five weeks passed in a whirl of work and learning. Shawna found her days full of boring reports one minute and crazy crises the next. She mastered the communiPad and the computer Linksets easily, and enjoyed daily interaction with the ladies she had met at the Selection Meeting as well as others who were already settled with their assignments. It seemed strange to her when occasionally the thought crossed her mind that in just three more weeks she would be returning to the Selection Meeting Center. That was why it was so disconcerting to receive a communiPad message stating that the Extension of Assignment she had filed for had been granted and the fees duly received. She had no idea what Extension they were talking about, but planned to find out as soon as Vilnek got home.

She brought up the message at dinner that evening. "So what is this Extension of Assignment? I mean, I didn't file for anything, but Headquarters sent word today that—"

Vilnek cut her off mid-sentence, pretending to have a radplant impulse he needed to attend to. He cupped his hand to his temple like he always did and hoped she couldn't guess from his expression that he was really just using it as an excuse to avoid a conversation he didn't want to have. "Got to go see to this. I'll be back late, so you go on to bed. In fact, go to bed early tonight. You're looking tired." He didn't want her talking to any of her friends about this and finding out what he'd done. He couldn't stand the thought of her leaving him, much less going to a Selection Meeting and going home with some other... no, he couldn't even contemplate that, so he just wouldn't.

Tomorrow he'd disable her communiPad and make sure she didn't chat with anyone until the danger had passed. He knew he

was only putting off the inevitable, but just a few more days and he was sure he'd have convinced her to stay with him. He'd just been so busy. The mineshafts were bringing up such strange product that he hadn't been able to take off any time to spend with her in fun activities. By the time she realized what policies he had pulverized in order to keep her, she'd want to stay anyway and it wouldn't matter. He tried to convince himself she would understand. If she didn't... well, he just wouldn't think about that now.

The next few minutes represented the first time that Shawna actually, knowingly disobeyed him. All the times he'd received radplant impulses and sent word for her to do this or that, she'd done it without complaint. He'd only given her one hard swat once when she'd been slow to return to their quarters when told. She knew he would find out and be angry but she didn't care at this point. She knew in her heart he was keeping something from her and hated being in the dark. Leah would know the rules and explain things to her. She sat at the Linkset and beeped her new friend.

"An Extension of Assignment? Wow, that's great. And such a big step. When did you file?" Leah asked, confusing Shawna more.

"I didn't file. He must have done it, just like he filed for the Early Release from the Selection Meeting. And why is it so great? Why is it such a big step?" She tried not to let her mounting frustration show.

"Wait a minute. He filed for Early Release? He can't do that. You at least gave your retinal scan and signature, didn't you? You had to sign," Leah told her.

"No, I didn't sign the Early Release," Shawna told her flatly.

"Well, it's all worked out anyway, so why fret about it? You're happy together, obviously, or you wouldn't be staying with him. The Extension is a big step for a first time assignment because it usually means that you are planning to stay together. If you don't

want to meet other miners, then that means you are really serious about this one. If you went to the Selection Meeting, you could still choose to go back to Vilnek, but by not even going to the meeting, you're pretty much saying that you're staying with him for good. And I don't blame you, Shawna. You two seem so right together. If you can get through the rough times, you two are having after only a few weeks knowing each other, you can get through anything. That's a great basis for a relationship."

Shawna could not believe what she was hearing. She hadn't agreed to any of this. She'd not even been given a choice. Why was Vilnek just making these decisions for her? It seemed he had been doing it all along, and it was time for some answers. She barely slept all night waiting for the door to her room to unseal itself so she could confront him.

The next morning, Vilnek took one look at her face and knew that she had caught him in his deception. No use trying to brazen it out any longer. He hung his head and turned his back on the hurt look in her eyes.

"Do you know what kind of fool you've made me look? Do you just get your jollies manipulating me? Don't you think I'm capable of making my own decisions? Or is it just too inconvenient to go through the normal processes. I guess I'm not worth the trouble, huh?" Shawna threw all these words at his back, her sarcasm like an acid burning through her words into his heart.

"It's not that at all! No way, no how! I didn't want to deceive you. I didn't mean to make you look foolish. It's killing me to admit this to you, but this once, I'll try. I was afraid you wouldn't choose me. I was afraid if you met someone else, you'd go to him. And I couldn't stand that thought. I needed you. I've known it from the first moment I saw you. And after we talked that day, I was sure. I couldn't risk losing you. Look, I'm not good with words and I'm gruff and all business right now, but you've got to know that I'll make it up to you. I'll take you places and do things with you. I'll give you a life that you'll really enjoy, if you only

give me the chance. I'll make you see, but you've got to give me more time. Please."

"So is that what you think of me? You think I'm just looking for someone to keep me entertained? That I can't see a man for what he's worth? That I'm a selfish spoiled child who can't recognize that a crisis sometimes demands all a man's attention?"

"No! Wait!" he turned to face her now. "You can forget that kind of talk, little gal. I think the world of you. You're the greatest girl I've ever known. You're smart and responsible, funny and sweet. You're everything a man can want, and the least selfish person I know. That's why I can't stand the thought of you leaving here. Because I love you. And I can't stand you talking about yourself that way, so stop it right now."

His angry tone made her fear that perhaps she had gone too far, but his words thrilled her heart as nothing before had ever done. In that moment, she realized that she had no desire to meet any other miners or try any new assignments. She had a man right here worthy of her trust and respect. She had his love and had given him her love in return. That was why they were both so angry now, over just a few simple misunderstandings. She knew of one way to let them both release their emotions and find some peace, but first she had to defuse his rising anger. "Truth be told, I love you too and can't stand the thought of having to leave. I was just upset at you not being honest with me. You can trust me next time, okay?"

He nodded his acceptance as his mind tried to navigate the swirling waters of this conversation. He could barely believe she wasn't angry anymore, but there she was, smiling up at him. One minute she was white water rapids, and the next minute she was a clear mountain lake, just waiting for him to wade in. He didn't make her wait long.

"Then you agree with my decision?" he asked, his voice calm, but taking charge again.

"Yes, Vilnek," she murmured. "We fit together and it doesn't

matter that you knew it before I did. I know you'll never hurt me or do anything that isn't best for me. I trust you. And I'm sorry I spoke sharply to you," she continued with a faint but unmistakable gleam in her eye.

Not trusting his eyes or heart yet, he waited, dumbfounded, for her to continue. She saw his doubt and suddenly felt very powerful in her wish to submit herself to his will. She went on in a bit of a pout, "And if you feel like I need a little Peace Initiative Adjustment, I understand. I mean, I wasn't exactly promoting peace, was I?"

By this time, her tone and words had completely restored his confidence and his heart lifted like a rocket breaking Trellian's gravitational pull. He strode to her and wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her hair. "I'll promote your peace in a minute here, young lady. Just let me catch my breath." He breathed in strong gulps of her scent, as if it was the only air on Trellian, and then stepped back into the role he realized they both needed him to play now.

"You know better than to put yourself down like that. You know I won't have it. Get yourself over in that corner and get your little bottom bare." His gesture made it clear where she was to go and that she was to hurry.

She obeyed quickly, pulling her tunic up and her leggings down. She needed him to take control of the situation again and though she knew the spanking would hurt, she needed the healing it would also bring.

He left the room to get the insulation strap he'd kept in his closet since that first day he'd brought her home. "You know you disobeyed me when you used the Linkset last night. I saw the activity log just before I came out. For that, you'll be getting twenty. Go bend over the chair and count them out," he ordered.

She got into position quickly and he started without any warning. The strap came down heavily across her exposed bottom and she flinched before she counted, "One!" She made it

through six before her tears started to flow. That made it harder for him to continue, but he thought of the danger she could have been in if she had disobeyed in different circumstances. That thought helped him hold steady even after she lost her ability to form the words to follow his instruction to the end. He let it slide this time because she'd done her best.

"Now to the matter of your talking yourself down," he told her quietly as he rubbed her back. He wanted to let her regain some of her composure before he went on. "I won't have it and you'll remember this next time you start. You're talking about the woman I love, and you better show some respect or you'll answer to me and this friend of mine here, and he isn't very forgiving. Get it?" He indicated the strap by rubbing it on her backside. Then he started in again, harder than before. The strap was not thin, but still it made a hissing sound of rushing air before it landed when he swung it fast as he did now. *Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap!*

"Oh, please, Vilnek, that's enough. I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she sobbed.

"I'll say when it's enough, little one." *Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap!*

"It hurts so badly, Vilnek. Please!"

"Your words hurt badly, too, little one." *Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap!*

Finally, she couldn't support herself on her hands anymore and her head came to rest on the chair back. This positioned her thighs for the strap.

"No, Vilnek, please don't spank me anymore."

"Yes, little one. There's nobody else here needs a spanking." *Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap! Hiss thwap!*

He made sure every inch of her buttocks and thighs was a deep crimson before he stopped. She was sobbing between strokes, but when she let out a short scream, he decided it was enough. He was breathing hard as he stood her up and held her

close to him. "You needed that, little one, and so did I, but it's over now. It's all forgotten, okay?"

She nodded through her tears and he let her finish crying out all her emotions. What filled her heart, as the tension flowed out, was a peace and love the like of which she had never imagined. When she was finally able to raise her face to his, he was relieved to see that love shining in her eyes. He kissed her with even more passion than he had shown in her spanking.

She wondered how she would ever find the strength to leave his arms and go to her own quarters that night.

He wondered how quickly he could convince her to agree to Permanent Personal Assignment, thus making her return to her own quarters unnecessary.

Chapter 3

Willa sat nervously, waiting as the communicapads were handed out to the companions one by one. This little handful of computer would contain her fate for the next two months in the form of a single miner's name. It also held more information for her to read and assimilate on the journey. She was excited to finally be receiving it so she could get familiar with its workings. Through it, she would maintain communication with her new friends, file reports, and keep up with company news. Since the Radplant was only compatible with the male brain chemistry, the companions had to rely on their communicapads for warnings and instructions as well.

Willa was just contemplating how important this little machine with its tiny screen and keypad would be in her life when she realized that all the other girls had received their devices and were anxiously reading the names of their assigned miners. She sat in stunned disbelief. This must mean that not one of the miners liked me. I'm not getting the assignment I wanted, she complained to herself.

With her wide blue eyes and striking black hair, Willa had never doubted that she would be the first pick of several miners.

Don't men always want the most beautiful women they can find? But here she was, not chosen, and apparently unwanted. She had never felt so rejected in her life, but tried to stop the tears that threatened to spill over onto her cheeks. She hardly registered the happy squeals Leah made at discovering she had been assigned her first choice for this selection. She didn't notice that Claire sighed with relief when she read the name of the older miner who had made Shawna laugh. She knew she ought to congratulate them with gracious interest but just couldn't drum up the energy. Why had none of the men picked her? Do they all think I'm stupid? Some people can't see past a pretty face and realize there's a brain in here, too, Willa pouted.

Her disappointment made her surly and she lashed out at Claire. "Too bad about your getting assigned to that old nobody. But what can you expect with a nothing face like yours?" Claire looked as if she had been slapped, but Willa just stood and slipped past her and headed out of the room. Her despairing thoughts churned so that she nearly missed the company hostess beckoning her to a small side alcove.

"Your communipad is not in the group because the miner who asked to be assigned to you is the company owner's son," the hostess explained. His father likes to meet the companions going out to be with him, so you'll receive your communipad there at the family residence, okay?"

Again, Willa felt like she had been sandbagged. She had been chosen, after all and by the owner's son! Well, of course. I should have known there was some explanation, she thought. Then she caught sight of Claire's still pale face. She was talking to Radnok, her new boss and he was trying to dry her tears. Willa barely remembered saying something to Claire. Had it been something nasty? Yes, now she remembered. Nasty was not the word for it. How could I, she chided herself. She excused herself though the crush of newly assigned pairs and made her way back to Claire to apologize.

"Claire, sweetie, I'm sorry for my silly joke," she tried to pass it off, but Radnok turned a furious face to her and cut her in half with his gray eyes.

"I think you've done about enough around here. Unless you want to get what you've got coming, you'd best get on away from us right now! You're not fit to be near a fine girl like this one," he declared, indicating Claire.

What I have coming? Not fit to be near? Willa wondered in shock. She was starting to panic a bit at the thought that this old miner might be able to keep her away from one of the nicest girls she had ever known. Willa sometimes had trouble keeping female friends around because of her good looks, but there didn't seem to be a jealous bone in Claire's body. Willa felt she simply had to make things right, and fast, before this unreasonable boor got in the way of a dear friendship. She also, to her surprise, felt a pang of jealousy towards Claire. Why should Claire have a man care so much about her that he would speak that way to me, she asked herself. Then she realized that he was leading Claire away and said, "Wait. All right. I am sorry and to prove it, I'll do whatever you say," she promised gamely.

"All right then," Radnok answered her gruffly, but actually, he was surprised that this spoiled little beauty would care enough about a friend to make amends. He half expected Claire to argue with him, but she only stood there silently staring at the two of them with a strange look in her eyes so he asked her, "Where's your room? We need some privacy."

Claire led them to her room and waited in silence as Radnok sat on the edge of the bed and motioned for Willa to bend over his lap. Willa gave a flirtatious grin and sashayed over to him. "Now hold on here. You're not really thinking that I'm going to allow you to spank me, are you? I never agreed to that. I just said I'd do what you want. I'll apologize or make amends some way, but not a spanking," she explained in her smoothest, most

winning voice. "I apologized to Claire and to you. I'd like to explain so you'll see why—"

"You don't need any practice making excuses, from what I can see. You've had plenty of chances to hurt sweet girls' feelings before now, and if you don't learn how to stop, you'll always be unhappy and pull other folks down with you. What you need is a hard spanking to make you remember your manners before you open your mouth. Now either you take this licking without another word, or you won't be welcome in our home, even by Linkset. You understand me?"

She thought about his words as she looked into his eyes. She had no doubt he was right in his assessments and that thought shamed her to the core. She knew she was selfish and heedless of other women's feelings, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. If she just thought a moment, she could be nice. A spanking certainly wouldn't help, but she did deserve it and if it would allow her to continue to have a real friend like Claire, it was worth it. So without another word, she bent herself over his lap and supported herself with her hands on the bed so that she would not have to rest her body on his legs.

That lasted for the first ten minutes of the spanking, but she couldn't hold it any longer than that. The pain was too great. She had never received a spanking before in her life and this man had obviously had plenty of practice in giving one. He started hard and fast and got harder and faster than Willa was able to take in. Soon she was gasping and bouncing on her toes, trying to stay in position, but she found it impossible. She stood back up, and attempted to get a breath. Was the man trying to kill her?

"Get back over my lap right now, or the deal's off," he ordered, and again Willa knew he meant business. She reluctantly complied, this time lying flat out over his bent legs.

"You hurt my little Claire," he chided as he continued, harder than before. Whack, whack, *whack!* "You said things a lady ought not to say to anybody." Whack, whack, *whack!* "You ever say

anything like that to her again and I'll give you double what you're getting now!" Whack, whack, *whack!* "Pretty is as pretty does, and right now you were downright, dog-in-the-mud *ugly!*" Whack, whack, whack!

And that last remark cut as deeply as anything Willa had heard in her sheltered life. She wanted to be seen as beautiful by every man she met. To realize that this one found her ugly was more than she could bear. She began to cry, but it was her words that surprised him into stopping his assault on her rear end.

"You're right and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," she sobbed. "I am ugly but I want to do better. I will do better, I promise. I can be nice. Really, I just need to..."

"Not 'I' anymore, young lady. Other people! Other people! Think of other people once in a while!" Radnok accented his words with hard, hand-hurting, bottom-burning spanks that sounded like pottery cracking and hurt like sandpaper on her tender skin.

He let her up and motioned to Claire to give her a hug, which she willingly did.

Willa finished up her cry quickly and said a quiet, "You are the beautiful one, Claire, and I really didn't mean what I said."

Radnok took heart in this strong beginning and hoped that Willa would try to keep her earlier promise. She was so lovely, but so unhappy, he could tell. She reminded him so much of his late wife and the thoughts he was having about Willa were disturbing to him. He didn't hesitate long in letting Claire know that he expected to see her tomorrow, on time at the transport dock, then said his good nights and left the residence hall.

Willa and Claire packed their things and talked about the coming day until a company escort came to get Willa for her meeting with Bilvon's family. His father, Falsan, appeared to be a no-nonsense leader with a strong bias toward his son, but his mother, Sarah, was a sweet creature with several wise words of advice about minesteading.

Each time Willa thought of a cutting remark or nasty comment, Radnok's words rang in her ears and her bottom throbbed, so she actually kept her tongue under control all evening. Very happy with herself and hopeful for a bright start, Willa returned to her quarters late that night satisfied that the next two months would be wonderful.

The next two weeks crawled by in a nightmare. Bilvon was a narcissistic wretch who wouldn't be pleased, no matter what she did. She had never known anyone so wrapped up in himself or unheeding of other people's feelings. After her first two reports had been sent back for mistakes, Bilvon had given her the first taste of how he handled his temper. He continually found fault and berated her, using his hands and belt, and sometimes his fists to help him make his point. He was always careful though, to make her use the ointment that prevented and healed bruises on contact so that there was no proof of his abuse. The surface bruising healed, but the pain remained.

"You can't even do a simple report right," he complained as he held her over the padded back of a seating pod that extended out into a bed or folded over to make a writing desk or table. She had been seated there struggling over her work when he came in again, like every day that week and yanked her out of the pod, pushed her over its back, yanked up her tunic and started blistering her backside with hard hot strokes of a belt he kept by the door for such purposes.

She jerked and yelped until he finished with a loud, "Why do I always get the stupid girls?" and let her up. He pushed her roughly back into the pod and bent down to shout in her face, "Do it right or you'll get double tonight!" With a final clout to the side of her head with his fist, he stalked out.

She cried out her pain and frustration at having been so

wrong about Bilvon and her future here. Bilvon's last warning reminded her strangely of Radnok and his final words to her. On the surface, the words were so similar, but in effect so different. Willa had vowed she would change or die trying to live up to Radnok's expectation of her. But if Bilvon was disappointed, she'd actually be glad. No, no, she told herself. Don't think of yourself first. Think of how Radnok will be disappointed if you are sent back after just two weeks. You've got to stick it out. You can't always get your own way.

If all the miners were so awful, how could any of the girls stand it? There must be something wrong with me, she thought. Or maybe it really was Bilvon. If only she had listened to Shawna and her warnings about him. Shawna's first impressions had been so correct. He was a bully and a braggart, not someone she could respect at all. Now Radnok had her full respect, but she had to stop thinking about him. It only made her more unhappy to compare the two men. So she Linked Shawna instead, and poured out her woes.

"And I want to think it's just him, but maybe it is me. I can be so mean sometimes, though I really am trying to do better. I just wonder if all the other miners are like Bilvon. I know at least Radnok isn't," she finished her initial recounting to Shawna who listened sympathetically. "I just hope Claire and Radnok will be happy together. He's such a good man, Shawna. Claire's so lucky to be with him. And you're lucky to have Vilnek, too. You're doing fine, aren't you?"

Shawna was glad to hear the genuine hope in Willa's voice and thought that she had indeed come a long way from the selfish girl she had been when they first met. Pioneer life had a way of forming fast friendships and making people face their faults even faster.

Willa continued to chatter on, giving Shawna little time to speak, until she realized what she was doing and then stopped

short with a quick, "I'm sorry. I'm talking too much. I really do want to hear what's going on with you."

But, Shawna felt like Willa's problem needed to be dealt with. "Willa, you need to call for an escort to take you out of there. There's no shame in it."

"But I'll feel like such a failure. I can take just six more weeks. I just can't stand the thought of quitting like that. I probably deserve all he dishes out, just for past nastiness alone," Willa confessed.

"Nobody, but *nobody* deserves that kind of treatment, Willa," her friend tried to convince her. "He has no right. Six more weeks and he'll have you believing his insults. You need to get out of there. What about if I contact headquarters for you? Pippa will know what to do. Or I'll tell Vilnek. He can come and straighten this jerk out."

"No, no, you can't do that, Shawna. Don't even think about it. Bilvon really hates Vilnek for being so popular here on Trellian. I'll be ok. I came to Trellian partly because I wanted to start over and be the kind of person I know I can be. A nice person, not spoiled like I've always been. Things aren't going my way just now, but I'm going to be patient this time. Look, I hear him coming back. He can't find me like this. If you don't mind, I'll just send you my reports to look over before I send them in, then they'll be right and there will be no problem, ok?"

They agreed on this much of the plan, and Willa felt better. She was able to go to sleep that night knowing that at least the reports wouldn't contain as much detailed analysis as they had in previous filings. This would make sure Bilvon had no excuse to punish her. What she hadn't told Shawna was that Bilvon really didn't need an excuse, but just hit her whenever, wherever, and however he felt like it.

Shawna spent the evening wondering what she would have done had Vilnek had turned out to be abusive or mean. Would she have had the strength to stay, or for that matter, the strength to walk away? What would her choice have been in Willa's situation? In Shawna's mind, no choice was easy, especially if it couldn't be undone. She was glad she didn't have to make the kind of choices Willa faced.

Willa was busy trying to load the dishes in the Insti-san unit that cleaned all clothes, eating utensils, and even some of the more sensitive mining equipment when the Linkset summoned her with its friendly beep. She expected to see Shawna checking up on her, but instead saw Radnok's worried face. Without preamble, he jumped right into the subject of his call, and after a moment, Willa understood why.

"Claire's sick, Willa. She's in a bad way and can't seem to get out of bed or keep any food down. I guess by now maybe you've had enough of that idiot, Bilvon, so when I call this problem in to headquarters in a few minutes, how about I tell them that you're willing to leave your assignment to come here and help her?"

"I'm on my way," Willa promised.

"You can't make the trip by yourself. Get Bilvon to bring you, or wait for the escort. You know it isn't safe for you to be outside without someone with a Radplant. Anything could happen and you wouldn't know it was coming," he reminded her.

"I'll get there safely, don't worry," she replied and closed the link. A lot more safely if I don't ask Bilvon, or wait for an escort, she thought. She packed a few necessities in a carryall and crept quietly out the back door. It was not far to the road and she was able to find her way easily walking beside it, though just out of sight. She didn't want to take a chance on anyone seeing her

because an unescorted woman was taking a big risk and would draw attention.

After three hours of steady walking, she arrived at Radnok's minestead and passed her hand over the sensor to let herself in as she had done on a previous visit. She found Claire lying on her bed looking pale and fretful. "Hey, Claire, what's wrong?" Willa inquired with concern.

"I'm fine, really. I can't understand why he won't let me get up and do my work," Claire whispered. She tried weakly to get up, but Willa held her down easily with a hand on her shoulder.

"If you could see yourself, you'd know why. You look pale as shaft sludge. Now you just rest and tell me what you want done. If it's important, I'll take care of it right away, as long as you promise to eat some of the soup I'm going to go get. Deal?"

Claire smiled weakly, laid back down on the pillow, and said, "Deal."

Two hours later, she awoke from a fitful sleep to hear Radnok's angry voice almost shouting, "You did *what?*"

"I just walked here and if you don't like it, you can go drill in Serpiac hulls," she replied, then instantly regretted her words, but they were already hanging in the air like the smell of three-day-old fish. Bringing up the Serpiac threat was one of the worst insults used in the mining community.

"In my home, young lady," he ground out with barely contained anger, "you will mind your tongue or I'll make you wish you had. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," she replied contritely. "I'm sorry I was rude, but I'm worried about Claire. I'm glad I didn't wait for an escort and I couldn't have asked Bilvon. He wouldn't have let me come."

"Your boss is responsible for your safety," Radnok reminded her with unexpected kindness. Willa had readied herself for a harsh reprimand and had her excuses all planned out. His kindness took her by surprise.

Looking at his sympathetic eyes, she couldn't help blurting

out as her tears started to stream down. "He doesn't care about my safety. I can't talk about him, but really, I don't know how I'm going to stay with him one more day. Spank me if you feel you need to. I don't mind the harshest spanking you can dish out. I know you do it because you care. That man I have to exist with only..." Willa found it impossible to continue, so she gave up trying and cried her sorrows out on Radnok's shoulder.

"You don't have to explain Bilvon to me, Willa," he assured her. "I was afraid he was abusing his companions, but I couldn't prove it. He gets around the regulations when girls like you don't complain about him. It'll be all right, now. You're here and you're safe. We'll deal with Bilvon later."

Willa and Radnok worked quietly around the minestead while Claire tried unsuccessfully to eat the soup Willa prepared. Her color looked terrible and the Healthscan indicated that she had a fever along with unusual brain chemical activity. Radnok contacted headquarters and requested that Willa be allowed to stay until Claire improved. He had just received an affirmative reply when Bilvon pulled his small transport ship into the loading dock on Radnok's minestead.

"She's here. I know it. Hand her over," he shouted. There was no doubt in anyone's mind whom he wanted.

Willa stood, but Radnok motioned her away from the door. "I'll take care of this," he warned her to stay back. Opening the back door that led to the dock, he shouted back, "That's close enough. You're not welcome on my place. Headquarters approved Willa staying here till Claire's better, and since Willa wants it, there's nothing you can do."

Bilvon continued to approach the door, but Radnok blocked his way. Radnok was older than Bilvon by at least fifteen years, but stood his ground to bar Bilvon's entrance. Bilvon looked like a thwarted child whose mother had just taken away his toy. "She came here by herself. I have the right to make her pay for that."

"I'll handle any Peace Initiative Adjustment she needs in my

own house. I know she needs to be taught a safety lesson. But 'payment' isn't any part of it," Radnok countered. He had no doubts as to how Willa would "pay" if Bilvon got a hold of her.

"Call it what you want, old man. She isn't going to take it from you, because she knows you got no right to do it. I'm the only one she has to take it from. She's a stupid chit, and if I don't clean up her act, I might just have to get her kicked out of the Companion Program altogether. You want that?" Bilvon was reminding him that policy did still apply here. A companion taking too many risks was vulnerable to dismissal.

Radnok turned to Willa and spoke in a soft but tense voice. "As long as you take the punishment, he can't get you kicked out of the program. What's it going to be? Take an Adjustment from me, or go with him?" He put his query to her as if there were a decision to be made, but Willa showed absolutely no hesitation. Taking the terrible spanking she knew he would administer would not be exactly getting her own way, but her heart told her it was not only right, but what she really wanted.

"I'd rather face you with a paddle for an hour than even one minute with him. I'll take what you think I need, just please don't send me back."

"She'll take it from me, Bilvon," Radnok informed him. "You get off my place. I'll keep Headquarters informed of the situation here." With that, he closed the door in Bilvon's face, now purple with anger. As he turned back to Willa, he heard the sound of a fist slamming into the wall, which was built to absorb the vagaries of Trellian's ground shifts, and had no trouble accommodating another slight tremor.

"Let's get this over with then, missy. You know the rules and you know what danger you put yourself in. Vilnek's place is producing readings we've never seen before. We have no idea what's going on in this sector, but you go traipsing around like this was a kid's play park. What were you thinking?" All the while he scolded, he was picking up various long thin implements and

placing them on the table. He got a length of strap webbing, his plexilat ruler, and his Filamith, a thin round drill bit used to bore small holes in the more delicate geographic anomalies that dotted the landscape. None of those things had ever looked threatening to her before, but when she considered them in the hands of a put out miner looking at her derriere, they all gave her pause.

She swallowed hard and laid herself over his lap when he sat on the dining room bench. The bottom of her tunic flipped up over her back as a result of her position and he made short work of lowering her leggings. He tried to remember the reason for this paddling, but for a moment all he could think of was how beautiful she looked there, completely trusting him, yet strong in her own way.

He had to move fast to get his mind back in gear. He knew he shouldn't be thinking such thoughts about this girl. She was perhaps a bit older than Claire, but she was still too young for him. She had just taken a grave risk and could have been caught in any number of dangers. Her vulgar mention of the Serpiac threat was just a reminder of one example of the risks she had run. The thought of those disgusting creatures, or the vicious Fensel that roamed in packs out here in the wild, not to mention the rogue lightning storms that swept across the minelands boiled his anger enough to spur him to action.

He picked up the short length of stiff webbing and brought it down hard on her backside. As he whacked, he scolded her and described what could have happened. "Without anyone with Radplant information, how would you have known if there were Fensel in the area?" Whack! Smack! Whack! "Do you think all the Serpiac infested regions are known? Well, they're not. The grubs could emerge any place, any time, if they decide to migrate sideways through rock, which I've seen them do more than once." Smack! Whack! Smack! Her bottom was on fire by now, since he didn't stop the paddle as he questioned her. She was glad

he didn't expect answers to his questions because quite quickly her breath was coming in gasps and would not have allowed her to speak.

When he finished with the webbing, he gave her no break, but picked up the plexilat ruler immediately and started in afresh. He raised it high, smacked it down hard on her already red backside, and listened with grim satisfaction as she yelped. He figured this pain had to be different since the plexilat had much less give to it than the webbing. It wouldn't bend as much, which meant the impact would be deeper. He wanted her to feel this paddling not just now, but for several days.

She had meant to take her consequences without complaint, but this was too much. She could not stop herself crying out and trying to arouse his sympathies. She'd always been able to use words to get her way before and old habits came to the surface. "Please stop, Radnok. I've learned my lesson. I'll never—*ouch*—leave the minestead without—oh, that hurts, ouch, ow—please, Radnok, what can I—ouch, ouch, *ow!*"

She howled too hard to continue speaking because Radnok had increased his tempo and strength to stem the flow of words. She needed to feel the importance of obedience and respect for rules that would keep her safe. He would make her understand that ignoring caution would not be tolerated. Her words would not help towards that aim. Hopefully her blazing backside would.

When he saw purple blotches start to form on her rear end, he stilled his hand for a moment and helped her stand up. "That was for coming here by yourself. Are you going to do anything like that ever again?"

She sobbed as she shook her head, then looked up at him, knowing he wasn't done, but not able to imagine his continuing. She couldn't stand one more minute and had to fight all her instincts that were screaming at her to run away. It was the look in his eyes that held her. That look showed such protective

strength and something else she couldn't name. She tried to concentrate on his burning eyes rather her burning bottom.

"Then bend over and put your hands on the bench. You're getting five more for the foul mouth. We don't mention those creatures in this house in a callous way like that. They kill people and ruin minesteads. They're not funny. You understand?"

Willa knew that Serpiac were a terrible plague and she should not have mentioned them lightly. It just wasn't done in polite conversation. When she thought of the horrible death and maiming some poor souls had suffered, she was sorry for her use of the curse. Still, it was a struggle for her to bend over to place her hands on the bench as he directed. Her tender flesh stung fiercely and she didn't see how she could stand one more stroke on her bottom.

She need not have worried. He avoided her bottom altogether and concentrated those last five swats with the cord-like plexilat drill bit on the sensitive crease between her thighs and buttocks. The Filamith made a "sh" noise before it landed without a sound on her sit spot five times. Radnok ignored her cries and let her feel the full force of his determination that she take seriously the warnings he had given her. Willa felt total relief as she heard him say, "Go on to your quarters now, and take a nap. I'll wake you up when I need you to see to Claire." She knew he had been angry but hoped that anger was now appeased. Turning back to him, she put her arms around his waist and let her tears and contrite whispers soak into his tunic front.

He held her and patted her back until she gently pulled away from him and walked gingerly to her quarters. There she slept the first good sleep she'd had since leaving the Selection Meeting Center and awakened refreshed but subdued. She suspected she might have caused Radnok more trouble today than she really knew and determined in her heart to somehow make it up to him.

The next day, Claire was worse, but Radnok needed to tend to the four shafts that were suddenly bringing up product similar to Vilnek's troublesome results. The two men kept in close contact to discuss the new, more sensitive technology. "Claire started to get sick just as the readings started to go south, so I was distracted yesterday," Radnok explained through the metallic rasp of the Radplant's Voice Enabler. The small device fit comfortably on his temple, clinging magnetically to the Radplant inside and allowing him to speak with Vilnek immediately. "Could be that this new ground sensor is set too high and we need to lower the indicator thresholds. I've never seen readings like this before, but I've never had this sensitive of a machine before. This could have been going on all along and we didn't know it."

Vilnek adjusted his Enabler to clear up the static and then responded, "We'll keep an eye on it a few more days and see. But how about Claire? Is she any better?"

Radnok's face clouded as he informed his friend, "No. In fact, she's worse. She may have been upset yesterday, with the paddling I had to give Willa, but it had to be done. I wasn't letting Bilvon at her."

"You did what had to be done, both for Willa's good, and Claire's. They'll both be all right. Just give them a few days. As for Bilvon, he's been without a companion plenty of times before, like we all have. He'll just have to deal with it. And if he gives you any more trouble, let me know. I'll be there before the static dies on your Enabler," Vilnek vowed.

"I'll handle my own minestead," Radnok expression betrayed his defensiveness over his age. He didn't want anyone to think he was too old for life out here.

"Sure, Radnok. No offense meant. I know you can handle an idiot like Bilvon, especially if he fights fair, but like as not, he

won't. If I know him, he'll be planning some dirty trick to bring Willa back and get at you, too. Watch your back," Vilnek warned.

Radnok took the warning to heart as he cut the connection and removed his Enabler. He saw the truth in Vilnek's words. He'd have to keep a close eye on the girls. With Bilvon out there feeling hard done by, there was no telling what might happen.

Chapter 4

Headquarters sent Pippa out to bring medicinal supplements for Claire and take a statement from Willa. Willa tried to be fair but honest in her description of the situation with Bilvon, knowing that because he was the son of the owner of the mining firm, she could expect little or no action on their part. Pippa spent several hours helping Willa come to terms with what had happened to her and why she had been vulnerable to his insults. They even invited Shawna to come to Radnok's minestead for several days to share experiences of their new lives.

Shawna and Willa were glad to see Claire improve as the supplements took effect. When Vilnek called Shawna to find out when Radnok was bringing her home in his personal transport, he found out that Radnok planned to bring all the ladies with him to take Shawna home and get a little change of scene. They would not stay long, but Radnok also needed to take some product samples to headquarters for analysis, so Claire and Willa could stay with Shawna until he returned that evening.

Radnok duly dropped Shawna, Willa, and Claire off at Vilnek's minestead and they enjoyed a long day of visiting

together. When Radnok returned that night, Shawna expected him to stay to supper, but he wanted to take the ladies and return to his own minestead before dark. It only got truly dark once every fourth day during this summer season because of the way the planet was positioned in relation to its twin suns, but when it came, the dark was total and dangerously cold.

"But why can't we just all stay? They've been kind enough to invite us," Willa begged.

"You need to get back before the True Dark hits. Too cold out there to travel in it," Vilnek backed up Radnok's decision.

"You keep out of it," Willa snapped at him. "He can make up his own mind. You just want to get us out of here so you can have Shawna to yourself. You need to think of how Shawna feels."

"We'll get together again soon, Willa," Shawna reassured her. "And there's always the Linkset. I'll call you later tonight."

"Oh, don't be such a pushover. Why do you just obey every little whim of theirs? Just because they're men? They're not perfect, you know. And don't you start either, Miss Goody Two Shoes!" This last, Willa directed at Claire who hadn't even opened her mouth to speak.

"I've had enough, Willa," Radnok ordered in a tone that let Willa know she was in trouble again, but Willa was in no mood to be reprimanded in public like that. She shot him a furious look and opened her mouth to go on, but Radnok, usually so polite, gave her no chance.

Claire was glad it was not her he addressed as he said, "Go wait in the transport. Now! I'll deal with you when we get home."

Willa stomped out, and after Claire and Radnok said their good-byes, Shawna and Vilnek saw them off.

"Wonder what got into her. But she is right, you know," admitted Vilnek with an unrepentant grin. "I do want you to myself."

Shawna grinned back and teased, "You'll have to catch me

first!" She started to run from him, but he brought her up short with a louder than usual command to stop right there.

"Not tonight. There's more danger of Serpiac activity just before the True Dark. You don't put a foot outside this house until it's passed, unless you want that foot burned off by Serpiac. You hear me?" Shawna went back in the house with a shudder at the thought of the terrible miniature monsters outbreaking right there in their own courtyard.

"Tell me again what the Serpiac are and what they do. I don't really understand it," Shawna questioned as they settled into a large double pod in the common room.

"The Serpiac are named for being half serpent and half acid. They hatch underground, mate, spread out to lay their eggs, and then come to the surface. That whole time they move through solid rock by burning it away with the acid that coats the edges of their frontal orifice, which constitutes their entire head. They usually surface within an hour or so of each other, so when you see one outbreak through the topsoil, you know there could be a dozen others in a matter of seconds. By the end of an hour, you'll have several hundred shards on the ground where their bodies turn brittle and break apart on contact with the open air.

"The death process doesn't take more than a few seconds, but as they're dying, they can still cause major burns. And if you happen to be standing right where one bores through to the surface, it will just keep boring right up through your foot. They move fast through human flesh and though it's not common, some people have died. If it hits your heel, it just continues straight up through you as if you were rock. You don't survive. More common are folks stepping on dying Serpiac that are still toxic and getting major burns on their feet. Remember, it goes straight up. Anything but a direct heel hit and you'll probably survive. I just don't want you to even ever see the things. They're disgusting as well as dangerous."

"But isn't there some way to protect yourself from them?" Shawna wanted to know.

"If they can eat through solid rock, they can get through any shoe you can think of unless it's made of the same grade of material as is in the foundation of this house. All the minestead buildings are built on a foundation that will stop them. They just hit the foundation and turn to tunnel under it until they can turn back upwards again. That's why the areas right around houses are even more likely to be outbreak sites. And that's bad, because enough boreholes can destabilize the foundation of a building. They don't do much good for drilling drones either. And I've seen them destroy entire Stalcon strata that I had all mapped out and ready to bring up. One day it was there. The next day it was gone and all I had left was one heck of a mess with their carcasses lying an inch deep on the ground."

"Can't they be killed before they outbreak?" Shawna inquired.

"We can kill them if we can find them. They don't show up on any scan. We mark infested areas, but we don't know where they've migrated to lay their eggs, or how deep they've laid them. All we can do is keep track of probable areas of infestation and timelines as to when outbreak might happen. I'd get a Radplant impulse about them if they did outbreak here, but we're not known as an infested sector." I don't think we have anything to worry about. But Serpiac just go to show you how important it is for you to mind me quick if I give you an order. You hear me, little bit?" He gave her that look that thrilled her straight to her toes and melted her heart a little more each time she saw it.

"Yes, sir," she answered. Shawna was sobered at the thought of the threat the Serpiac represented and was thankful again that Vilnek took seriously his duty to protect her. She knew she had made a good choice, at least this time.

Willa knew she was in trouble as soon as Radnok ordered her into the transport like that but somehow, she couldn't back down. The ride home was silent and even the usually cheerful Claire seemed tense. She was still using the supplements to control her illness, and excused herself to lie down as soon as they got home.

Radnok made sure she was settled in her quarters for the night, and then called Willa out of hers. "What got into you out there? Why would you speak to anyone like that?" he demanded of her.

"Like what?" Willa shot back. "I don't see a problem with expressing my views every once in a while. Just because you're the boss doesn't mean I can't have my say. If you want me to be sweet and quiet like Claire, maybe you had just better send me back to headquarters. Claire's better now, and you all don't need me anymore."

"If that's what you want, we'll see about it in the morning. But right now, I've taken about all I'm going to take from you, Missy. Come here and get ready. I'm going to put a stop to that mouth of yours right now."

"Forget it, Radnok. Claire's your assignment, not me. I don't have to take anything from you. I can call for an escort right now and just leave," she shouted.

He was across the room and staring down at her in two seconds flat. "Like heck you will! Just try it and see what happens. You're still my responsibility and I say you need a spanking worse than any girl I ever saw." He hauled her over his shoulder and made his way to the bench, her kicking at him, and shouting insults all the way. "You're only making this harder on yourself," he told her as he smacked her behind several stinging times. He set her down and caught her wrists. She struggled against him, but he managed to bend her down onto his lap. He wished for his Filamith but it was out of reach so he'd have to make do with his hand at first. He spanked her hard and fast until his hand ached.

"I'll not have you going back to the way you were before," he scolded as he spanked. "You've been happy and sweet since you came here. I don't know what's gotten into you, but it's going to stop right now." His hand found its way all around her backside. He alternated left and right as she struggled. When he realized she was still fighting, he changed his tactics and went lower down on her bottom cheeks where they met her thighs. A few minutes' attention to her sit spot had her singing a different tune.

"Stop, Radnok. Please stop. I'll keep my mouth shut from now on. I promise. Stop! Stop!" she cried out. To her surprise, he stopped.

"I don't want you to shut your mouth at the moment," Radnok explained with forced patience. "I want you to talk, as a matter of fact. You have to tell me what is going on."

"I can't talk to you like this," she griped. "My butt burns like I sat on an overworked drill drone."

"You'll have to learn to talk to me like I want you to talk to me. You speak with respect, like I speak to you, and if I want you to talk with your bottom up and on fire, that's how you'll talk!" His anger was rising again and he thought better of continuing this adjustment while he was in such a state. She had mentioned calling an escort and his panic at that thought was something he didn't care to examine at the moment. His worry made him impatient and his frustration might make him careless. Better send her to her quarters and continue this in the morning with a cool head. "Promise me you won't call an escort until morning and I'll let you up," he bargained.

"Call an escort? You're kicking me out?" she asked him, with panic in her voice.

"I didn't mention the escort. You mentioned the escort," he countered.

"I didn't mention any escort," she denied.

"Well then, give me your promise, and you can go to bed," he repeated.

"All right, I promise. No escorts. Just let me go," she begged.

So he let her up and stood as she hesitated in the middle of the room. She looked back at him and saw the concern in his eyes. Her panic at thinking he was going to ask her to leave overwhelmed her and she rushed back crying into his comforting embrace. "I just don't want to leave. Please, I won't be a bother. I'll be nice. I'll... I'll...."

"Sh, sh, Willa, it's all right. You can stay as long as you want. I'll never ask you to leave. This is your home now. You're fine, just hush now, and stop the tears. You're too pretty a girl to get your face all puffy crying," he admonished her with a slight smile.

She heard the "pretty" part and leaned back to look up at him. She knew one way to interest a man and make him want her to stay. This was familiar territory to her and she went into autopilot flirting without a second thought. "I want to be pretty for you, Radnok. You're such a fine man that I know you won't set me out all alone out there." She tightened her hold on his neck just a little and brought her face up to his, close but not touching.

He simply wasn't strong enough to resist. As wrong as he thought it was, he kissed her. Just for a moment, he thought. I'll enjoy this for a few heartbeats, and then I'll go back to being only half-alive again. But just for this one instant, let me dream she's mine.

And he hated himself a moment later. Here she was, vulnerable and oh, so young. She had her life ahead of her. What was he doing touching those breeze-soft lips with his hard rough ones? And what was she doing pressing herself up against him like that?

"No, Willa, I can't. You shouldn't. Just stop and go on to bed," he commanded as she stared at him in hurt shock. Just stop before I won't be able to let you stop, he thought silently.

She'd never been rejected like that before, and it was a nasty taste of reality for her. She felt hurt, and her pain made her feel

like lashing out again, in a total reversal of what she had just declared. Her usual reaction would have been to start belittling him, but then she looked back at those penetrating gray eyes, now fixed on her with an emotion she could not name. For the first time she could remember, Willa shut her mouth and bit back the hateful words trying to scramble out of it. She ran to her quarters and the doors slid shut behind her.

Radnok was still sitting in a pod, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands when Claire came out to sit in the pod opposite.

He looked up when he realized she was there and asked her, "What are you doing up? You need your sleep, Claire."

"I need even more to bash you over the head with something. There's nothing handy that your hard head wouldn't do serious damage to, so I'll have to do it with words. Don't you see what's going on here? Willa is upset because she doesn't want to leave. She thinks you'll make her leave and she can't stand that thought, so she's decided to just pretend like she wants to go."

"She said she'd call an escort, and then five minutes later, she denied it. Did you hear all that?" Radnok asked.

"Oh, yes, I heard all right, but I heard a lot more than you did, it seems. I heard a woman scared to death of leaving the man she loves."

"Love? That's a romantic girl for you. You're sweet, Claire, and maybe you don't understand that a beautiful girl like Willa would never settle for a tired out, stubborn, old mine rat like me."

"And maybe you don't understand that Willa, beautiful or not has fallen hard for you, stubborn, old, and tired out though you may be. If you let her leave here, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. If I keep her, she'll regret it for the rest of her life," he answered somberly. "And I can't stand that. I can't be the cause of any more unhappiness in her life."

"Good then," Claire quipped brightly, much to Radnok's

shock. "If you won't cause her any more unhappiness, then you'll have to keep her. The both of you will only ever be happy if you stay together. So that's decided, just like for Shawna and Vilnek." She smiled sweetly and poked a finger at his chest to let him know that she was only teasing.

"We all know there's a long hard mineshaft to drill before Shawna and Vilnek hit the kind of product that's really worth drilling. These things take time, Claire. They've got all the time in the world, though Vilnek would sure rather not hear that."

"Vilnek will wait as long as it takes to get Shawna to stay with him. And if you're smart, you start out tomorrow morning by telling Willa that she's staying with you. You know that I can't stay here, Radnok, much as I'd love to. I'm afraid it's this minestead that affects me. I was fine at Vilnek's place, but now, getting back here, I've had to double the supplements just to keep on my feet," Claire said regretfully.

"I know you have to go, too. I've never had a girl get sick on me like that and I just want you to feel better. I'll call you an escort in the morning, if you really think you'll get over this sickness by leaving here," he agreed.

So, it was decided that Claire would return to headquarters the next day.

Willa slept in that morning, so it was nearer to lunch when she finally came out of her room. When she entered the common room to find Pippa, Willa's face went white, and she whispered, "He made me promise. But here he's gone and called for an escort. I knew I should have left. Oh, how could he do this to me?" Then she balled her hands into fists and ran out the front door.

"What's going on here?" Pippa asked Claire, but she was already running to the Linkset to contact Radnok in the transport dock.

"Radnok, Willa's just run off. She saw Pippa and thought you

had called headquarters to come take Willa away. What should I do?" Claire wailed.

"First stay calm, and stay put. I'll go get Willa. Don't set foot outside that door, either of you. I just got a Radplant impulse that Serpiac are about to outbreak somewhere in our area. So whatever you do, stay inside," Radnok harshly ordered, then closed the link.

"I heard Radnok just now, so I know about the Serpiac. But what did Willa mean by what she said?" Pippa demanded as Claire came back into the room.

"Willa wants to stay, but she thought since there were two of us here, and I was here first, she'd have to leave. She's been acting strange all week and yesterday it came to a head. It's all been because she's worried about leaving. And I'm the only one who needs to go anywhere. When she saw you, she must have thought Radnok had changed his mind from last night and had called you in to come and take her away. If only she had let me explain. She must be really upset to just run out like that! She knows how dangerous it can be, and she's never done it before," Claire defended her friend as best she could.

"Oh, I'm not here to report on Willa. I'm not trying to get her dismissed from the program. In fact, I helped in her defense when Bilvon tried to get her dismissed. Nobody much took that seriously, anyway. We all, except maybe his daddy, know what he is. That was just spite and the Program Manager has the final say in such matters. So don't get upset that I'm here to see this. I only wish I could help," said Pippa, trying to comfort Claire.

Radnok raced back to the dock and jumped in his transport. Transports were not really vulnerable to outbreak because of the speed they could travel, even in small spaces. As long as the

wheels kept turning, they could not sustain much damage. And he could jump to flight mode just as soon as he located Willa.

It was the grinding, hissing sound that made his breath back up in his throat. He knew that sound. He had been outside during an outbreak once before. That sickening sound of acid burning through the last few particles of solid rock and hitting the good clean air to die, made Radnok's heart pound and his mind race. Where is she, got to find her, can't let them get her, just don't outbreak yet, please, just take a second more to outbreak!

Then he saw the first one and his mind grasped for any idea as to how to warn her, how to save her, how to protect her from what was about to happen. He strained his eyes to see any sign of her, shouted her name out of the open hatch as he guided the transport through the collection of outbuildings and out into the open mine country. Then he saw her and relief flooded through him. He watched as she ran and willed the transport to go faster to get to her in time. Serpiac carcasses were littering the ground out here. She must have run right into the heart of the infested area just at the moment when outbreak was occurring. Just a few more seconds, and he'd have her.

He saw her stumble, and then go down. More and more Serpiac were outbreaking beneath the wheels of the transport, but he no longer tried to avoid them. He just gunned the engine and opened the throttle up to get to her. Her screams got louder as he approached. As he screeched to a halt alongside her, he could see the bloody remains of half her foot and understood that though not hit with a heel strike, she had been hit and the toes and front part of her right foot had been eaten away. He had to get her up as fast as possible, so he grabbed her left arm and jerked her off the ground. Just as he lifted her face from the surface of the rock, a Serpiac outbreaked right under her right temple. It barely grazed her skin and she screamed again.

Chapter 5

Shawna leapt out of the transport as it pulled up outside the front door, not waiting for Vilnek to help her down. "Wait and I'll carry you over these shards," Vilnek ordered, hating to see his precious Shawna treading on the evidence of the recent destructive Serpiac outbreak. She paid him no mind. She had to get inside to Willa and see for herself.

With an impatient hand she waved herself into the minestead, not waiting to be admitted, and ran to the guest quarters where Willa was staying. She saw Willa lying on the bed, sleeping now that Pippa had administered the pain relieving sprays and injections she'd retrieved from the first aid kit. Willa's face looked fine to Shawna, despite what Radnok had said on the way from their minestead. He had called them as soon as he had carried Willa into his home and laid her gently on her bed. Pippa had taken over while Radnok summoned Vilnek and Shawna to come as quickly as they could.

"Not this side," Radnok explained as he entered behind Shawna. "The other side."

Shawna went to the other side of the room and observed the wide red welt that ran down the length of Willa's face. It was

swollen and puffy red, but did not touch the eye, so at least her vision should be unaffected, Shawna surmised hastily.

"Tell me what happened," she ordered Radnok, her voice frigid, each word articulated clearly in her effort to control her emotions. Now that she could see that Willa was alive, her fear had turned to anger.

"It was a misunderstanding," Claire began.

Vilnek interrupted her. "That's no way to talk to a man in his own place, little miss," he chided Shawna.

"It's all right, Vilnek. I wouldn't mind if she put that anger in her voice right into a good hard swing at my head. I deserve that and more. If I hadn't been so stupid..." his voice trailed off and Claire came to stand beside him.

"She should have let us explain, Radnok. It was her own fault that she ran out like that. But, it wasn't anybody's fault that the Radplant impulse almost came too late to save her. Remember, you did save her, and that's all that matters. She's alive and she'll be fine," Claire encouraged him.

She explained in just a few minutes the misunderstanding that had led to Willa's flight. Shawna turned to face Vilnek and started giving commands. "I can't really blame Willa for what she did. I would have left, too. Be that as it may, in the long run, Claire will have to come to your minestead, Vilnek, and help you while I stay with Willa until she's better. Claire's got to leave here anyway, so she can get better, and if she comes to you, then you won't be shorthanded."

"Hang on just a minute, Shawna. I hope you don't mean what you said about taking off like Willa did. If you ever try it..." Vilnek warned. Everyone could tell he was not fond of her comments or the arrangements. "We need to talk about this."

"As for today, it'll be a few more hours until Willa can be moved," Shawna continued. "Then Radnok will take her back with Pippa and me to headquarters. Claire should not stay here

alone that whole time, so, Vilnek, you wait here while Radnok takes us in."

Vilnek started to object, but Shawna rolled right over him with her instructions. "Vilnek can begin the clean-up, and should be done by the time Radnok brings us back. He can take Vilnek and Claire back to Vilnek's place and be back before the next true dark cycle hits, I hope." In acknowledgment of the dark look on Vilnek's face and the steam now rolling out of his ears, she tried a bit of mollification. "If you really need to get back to your minestead, Vilnek, I guess we could send out a public-use transport from headquarters to pick you two up and take you over there."

Vilnek was in no mood at this point for further directions from Shawna. If he had ever been this angry with her in their acquaintanceship, he didn't remember it. In a tightly controlled voice, he requested, "I need to see you outside a minute, Shawna." When she started to protest, his forceful, "Now, Shawna!" cut her off. When she still hesitated to follow him out of the sick-room, he leaned down, caught her around the middle, and slung her over his shoulder to carry her out.

If someone had told her seven weeks prior, that she would be shouting the words, "Put me down, you big oaf!" she never would have believed them. Now, here she was, shouting her head off and kicking like mad.

He applied two terrific swats to her behind and commanded, "Settle down, or I'll take you over my knee right here and now, and not wait till we're at the transport dock."

He was headed that direction, but Shawna had no idea why he wanted to spank her when they got there. She hadn't disobeyed him or endangered anyone. "What do you think you're going to spank me for, sir?" she asked in an icy tone.

His long strides had taken them the last few yards to the dock, so he set her down hard on her feet and gave her a steely look. "Who died and left you in charge around here, little miss? I

couldn't believe the way you were just giving orders right and left with not as much as an 'if it's okay with you.' I know you've got some good ideas, and I'm more than happy to listen, but you are not the one to give orders around here, do you understand? As a matter of fact, I can't remember a time when I gave out orders like you just did, unless it was an urgent and dangerous Radplant impulse. You just plain crossed the line back there. And as for that little crack about how you would have left the house like Willa did—"

He seemed to be processing the actual problem he was having with her behavior as he spoke. It solidified in his mind as he outlined to her why he was so angry with her. She could not admit, however, that he was making sense. She didn't like seeing her actions through his eyes, so she tried to blow a bit of smoke into the wind of where his thoughts were heading. "You may be in charge when it comes to issues of safety. You may even run your minestead. It is yours, after all, not mine. But this is my personal life, and I have every bit as much right as you to be in charge when it comes to my own friends and my own actions. You have no right to tell me what to do."

Even to her own ears, she sounded like a petulant child. She realized that she had been trying to direct the entire group and not just her own actions, but his words had stung her and she wanted to sting back.

She had stung him back, all right. Her words about it being his minestead thrust a knife into his heart to the hilt and then twisted it around the phrase, "you have no right," until he wanted to cry out with the pain of it. Was that the way she felt about him? Just a boss, with no influence or importance in her personal life. That was the only place he really cared to be important. The minestead could go hang! If she thought she could just walk out like Willa, she had another thought coming, and that thought was headed her way on a one-way high-speed course.

He took so long to reply that she wondered if she had once

more gone too far. She realized she had been rude and now compounded the hurt with her dismissal of him from her life. As she said the words, she realized they were a lie. Her love for him had given him every right to be involved in her affairs, and she realized that she had been reveling for the past seven weeks in his loving care. She had come to rely on his good sense and take charge attitude, which made her feel loved and secure. Now here she was throwing all that to the Serpiac, to burn it away under foot and crumble the whole foundation of her new world?

Finally, he found his voice and asked her pointblank, "Do you mean that?" He was afraid of the answer, but even more afraid to leave the question unasked. He had to know if his world was shattering to shards like one of the disgusting creatures whose carcasses littered the ground beneath the raised transport dock where they now stood.

"No, I don't," she breathed out on a sigh of relief that came right up from her toes and swept the broken pieces of her heart back together. "I don't know what came over me back there, or out here just now. What nonsense I was spouting. You have every right, and I can't believe it was me talking. Was I really being that bossy back there in Willa's room? I just can't stand to see her like that." Shawna finally wound down and hid her face on Vilnek's chest.

He held her close and felt the breath that had frozen in his lungs start to thaw. He drew in great gulps of her scent before he set her away from him and gave her another stern gaze. "Whatever we decide to do, it will be both of us deciding, not just you, understand? But, here and now, you get no choice in the matter of how hard and long I'm going to spank you for doing that to us. All I want you to do is admit you deserve it for being rude, and for even thinking about leaving the minestead like Willa did."

It wasn't a question, but she readily gave her assent. Inwardly, she didn't see the need for the spanking he most certainly would

give her, but she knew that if he felt she deserved it, it would be best to accept it. Perhaps it would help with the guilt and self-disgust she was feeling.

He gave her no orders, but simply took her arm firmly and guided her over his bent knee as he rested his foot on the short barrier that marked the edge of the transport dock. With one arm around her waist, he held her while with the other hand he reached under her tunic edge and pulled her leggings out of the way. They bunched on her thighs and her legs swung slightly in the air. He knew this couldn't be a very comfortable position for her, but he didn't intend to keep her there long. He would deal with her more fully when they got home, but for the moment, he had to clear the air between them enough to last them over the period of separation he felt sure would follow. She would be several days taking care of Willa, but he needed her to know it was also his decision and not just her impulse that would give direction to their lives.

He smacked his hand down hard on her bottom several times on her right cheek. Then without pause, he switched to her left. As he swatted, he looked around and spotted Radnok's Filamith affixed to the dock wall. He reached over and took it up with a certain satisfaction that at least he wouldn't have to work long to make the right impression.

Vilnek gave no indication of his intention, but rather simply raised the long whippy instrument high and brought it down full force on her bottom. Totally unprepared for this new and terrible sensation, Shawna screamed out in pain. He brought it down again full force, making sure not to strike the same place or it might open the welt that had immediately formed on her backside. "Hush that!" he told her. "Do you want everyone to hear what they already know is going on? You're getting twenty of these and if you don't keep it down, you'll be getting ten more after that."

She clamped her lips shut and tried with all her heart to keep

them tightly closed but the force of the next stroke forced her reaction again. The little *thwick* the Filamith made was followed by a strong rush of air escaping between her teeth but without her voice this time. She used that as her scream and each of the twenty long strokes were followed by that same woosh and then a gulp of more air. He could see each individual stroke's imprint on her tender rear and thighs, but he didn't waver even when she began to struggle. He knew she would feel the guilt of her disrespect for their relationship much longer than she would feel a few welts on her situpon. Better get the guilt over with now than have it between them for months, so he just held her more tightly over his knee and told her to be still. She kicked her legs in the air, which was easy for him to handle, but when she twisted her body so that her bottom was facing in towards him, he had to take his hand and reposition her, then tighten his grip and resume his task.

He finished his twenty, and then laid the Filamith down. It had marked but not broken the skin only because of the composition of the instrument itself. He was giving her as severe a lesson as he ever intended to give her, but just condensed in time. He wished he could take longer, but there was too much to do, and Willa would soon need to be taken into headquarters. On top of the stripes blazing red on her fair skin, he knew she would be most sensitive, so now was the time to apply a quick lesson with his hand once more. He flicked his wrist as he swatted her rear end again, then down across her upper thighs, making sure that every inflamed inch was covered again.

She felt like her bottom was blistered and raw. She'd never sat on an oven, but this must be what it felt like, she thought as she struggled to keep from screaming out as he brought his hand down again and again. She'd thought when he finished the twenty that she was through, but he just kept on spanking. She heard herself starting to plead that she would never be disre-

spectful again, that she would never be bossy again, that she would never open her mouth again if he would just stop.

Vilnek had to smile at that last promise, but he realized that she would certainly try to keep the first two, at any rate, and that accomplished his goal, so he finally stopped. He set her down on her feet and she began to hop up and down, rubbing her stinging backside furiously. She realized she was making the burning sensation worse, so she gingerly pulled up her leggings and rubbed over them, which felt better.

He merely watched her performance, trying to remember that months from now, if he recalled this scene, he might be able to smile at her antics. At the moment, however, he knew she was hurting, and though he realized it was for a good cause, he still hated being the one to have to give her that pain. When she calmed down a bit, she looked up at him half expecting to see anger still blazing from his eyes. What she actually saw was concern and, she realized with some surprise, just a hint of regret.

He didn't enjoy doing that, she thought. As a matter of fact, he hated having to do that. I put him through a terrible time just now. By way of apology, she walked into his outstretched arms and held him for a moment. Soon, she couldn't help continuing her rubbing, but at least for a moment she had held him to let him know that she was really okay.

Before going back into Willa's sick room, Vilnek and a very subdued Shawna discussed plans for the next few days. "Will it be okay for you to stay here with Claire and begin the clean up? Then I could take Willa back to headquarters and learn what other care she will need."

"I think that would be a good idea, but I want you to be careful and not wear yourself out, okay? You need to make sure you understand the rules they lay out for Willa so you can encourage her to follow the doctor's instructions. It'll be good practice for you anyway, huh?" he gently teased.

She had to smile at that reminder that when she first came to Trellian, she was not very careful about following instructions herself. "So, we'll go in there now, and I'll let you propose the plan to everyone, how about?" Shawna suggested.

They re-entered the sickroom and all eyes turned to them, including Willa's. She was awake now and in some pain, despite the medications from the first aid kit. Shawna went to her and held her hand while the men had a quick planning discussion with Pippa and Claire.

"Sorry about that little delay, there," Vilnek began with some embarrassment.

"No problem, pal. I just want to thank you for all your help," Radnok replied.

"Shawna really wouldn't run away like that, you know," Claire offered, but Vilnek just smiled.

"After our little discussion just now," he added meaningfully, "I'm sure she won't."

Claire blushed and looked sympathetically at her friend. Claire herself had only had one serious spanking from Radnok, for forgetting to restock the safe room supplies one night. A spanking such as she had no doubt Vilnek had just delivered would be a totally new and horrible experience, she thought. Then why did she secretly envy Shawna at this moment?

Radnok duly transported Willa, Pippa, and Shawna to the headquarters' main healthcare building. He was not ready for the reception that greeted him.

"What have you done to her? And you say I abused her? I never made her runaway, did I? And right into a Serpican outbreak? You get the heck back to your minestead, pack your stinkin' bags, and get off Trellian. Your contract's been revoked," Bilvon shouted as Radnok got out of the transport.

Willa, through all her pain and fear, heard and understood enough to know that something terrible was going on. She could not take in the particulars, but she heard Bilvon's voice and grew

agitated, tossing and fighting Radnok as he tried to lift her out of the pod.

"Can't you see you're upsetting her?" Pippa stormed at Bilvon to try to keep him away from Willa. Pippa was a respected administration official, and a long-time confidant of Bilvon's father Falsan, so Bilvon knew he would be ill advised to just push her out of the way. He stood there fuming, as she gave the lie to his words in full voice so that he would be as embarrassed as Radnok would have been just now had he spared a thought for his own position. "No contract can be revoked without a mediation hearing. You just try to get his contract revoked and we'll see who gets kicked off this planet. You may be the boss's son, but there's only so much Falsan will stand for. You watch it, or Falsan will be getting some reports I've been holding on to. Got it?" Without waiting for his reply to her threat, she turned her back on him and left him standing there on the loading dock.

"I'll take her from here, sir," said an attendant as he approached, rolling a medi-pod. Once Willa was situated in it, she would not have to be moved until she could walk away from it under her own power, because it was designed to fit into all testing and treatment equipment, including bathing and scanning modules. Radnok had just been waiting for the moment when he could get her safely into one of these pods, so he breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the attendant transferred her expertly into the life-saving apparatus.

Willa was soon asleep as the electrical impulses from the pod eased the pain in her face, abdomen, and foot. She had also gotten a slight burn across one side of her waist that would have to be repaired. That particular Serpiac had come up at an angle so barely grazed her middle before dying in the open air, but it had left a deep, painful burn.

Other attendants joined the first as they commented on how quickly Radnok had made the journey. He had shaved almost an hour off the usual time for the trip, but no one felt inclined to

blame him considering the conditions. The attendants wheeled Willa away in the pod, and Pippa led Radnok and Shawna off to the waiting room to begin their vigil.

"It's been quite an unusual time in our sector," Shawna commented as they waited. Quiet conversation helped pass the time, but even more, she hoped to hear Pippa's comments on some topics that had been puzzling her. "Is all this disaster par for the course around here?"

"No, actually, if I were a superstitious person, I might be inclined to think your Companion Class was full of jinxes, or something. It all started when you got out here. First Vilnek's strange readings, then Claire getting ill, then the Serpiac, not to mention Willa's trouble with Bilvon," Pippa ruminated.

"But actually, the trouble with the strange readings at Vilnek's minestead had been going on for a few days before we got here," Shawna mused. "Still, I have to wonder if there isn't some connection with it all."

"How could there be?" Radnok wanted to know. He wasn't dismissing her out of hand, but rather really trying to see a connection.

"It just seems to me that the strange readings could have had something to do with the Serpiac. I mean, doesn't that make sense?" Shawna conjectured.

"But the strange readings started in Vilnek's place. Radnok's readings didn't start to go haywire until later," Pippa put in.

"And that's where the outbreak occurred, isn't it? It makes me wonder," Shawna would not let it drop.

"The only way to find out for sure," Radnok replied, "would be to bring in an expert on the new equipment. That would be Talvok, and I can't see Falsan bringing him in without a fight."

"Falsan barely speaks to his younger son, Talvok," Pippa explained to Shawna. "Since the boy went off to study instead of staying here to work the mines, Falsan won't forgive him. Thinks the boy thinks he's better than his father, just because he wanted

to get an education. He studied engineering and specialized in mining equipment, for goodness sakes. He's a big success in the mining world and we have no choice but to use his company's drills, scanners, and sensors, but Falsan just gets angrier with every technical triumph. Radnok, you're right. We need to call Talvok in, but I'll have the devil of a time getting the old man to agree."

"The old man can be made to see reason," came a reply from a deep voice above them. Falsan himself stood over them, looking down and glowering. "I just saw that poor girl, not two months ago at my house, eating at my table. And now this? She's scarred for life. That beautiful face! If you think that boy may be able to tell us something..."

"It wouldn't hurt to try it, boss," Pippa sounded relieved. She knew she would have to broach the subject, and finding the boss in a tender mood after the shock of seeing Willa's face was a rare chance. The man did have a heart, but he was just pig-headed. She hated to take advantage of Willa's suffering like this, but if it meant getting Falsan to see reason, she'd gladly live with that guilt for a while.

"But the company never claimed that the new sensors could pick up Serpiac activity deep in the ground. Nothing has ever been able to do that," Falsan argued. He carefully avoided saying Talvok's name and refused to give in without some kind of fight.

"They may not know what they've got here," Radnok put in. "You're smart to think of pressing your discovery in order to get better rates on your next purchase order from them. They'll have to give you preferential treatment if you can prove that you found a new use for their machines. Always the businessman." Radnok pretended to be a bit disgusted at Falsan's supposed profiteering off someone else's misery, all the while hoping that this little manipulation would work. He knew if he could appeal to Falsan's vanity and ambition, he would be more likely to overcome his pride.

"They'll have to do the analysis, and run numbers on more samples than we've got, in order to make the calibrations make sense. Still, I don't see how it could hurt to be the first ones to point out the strange readings and their correlation to Serpiac activity. Pippa, you go through all the numbers we do have, from the old sensors too, before you go calling in any so-called experts. I want you to have a good case before you go throwing out wild theories," Falsan ordered. He had successfully taken credit for their conjecture and distanced himself from any chance of error, but neither Pippa nor Radnok minded. They knew the only important thing was to get the process started.

Shawna sat there mystified by it all until Falsan had given some final orders then returned to his office. "Does that mean we get our expert?" she asked.

"Yes, dear. I'll have some long nights ahead of me at the Linkset, but as soon as I've got a good report together, I'll send it off to Talvok and see what he thinks. I've known him his whole life, and he'll come if I ask, no matter what the old man says." This last sentiment was spoken with voice lowered and wary looks around the room. It was best if it wasn't known just how much influence Pippa actually had.

The next few days were busy ones for Shawna. She sat most of the time with Willa as she recovered. The Serpiac acid had entered her blood stream and she was having trouble regaining her strength. Shawna learned from the medical workers at the center how to help Willa eat right, exercise within her limits, manage the necessary medicines, and operate the therapeutic devices that aided her recovery. She also helped Willa make decisions about her future.

"The surgery could be risky, but I'll have to do it if I want to walk normally again. I don't want to just get by with a detachable

foot in a shoe. The doctors here are great and I'm sure they'll do fine giving me the new permanent mechanical foot. It may still look a bit fake, and there will be a faint scar where the artificial skin attaches to my real skin, but I'll live with that. Who sees your feet, anyway?" Willa asked.

"And what about the scars, Willa? The complete skin graft procedure is too risky. The doctor said the burn is too deep and the nerves could be damaged if he operates. And there will still be a faint scar. Is it really worth it to get your old face back?" Shawna queried.

"There's no choice for me, Shawna. I just have to try it. I can't stand being like this. Radnok won't ever want to look at me again if I stay like this," Willa explained.

"That's a lie!" came Radnok's voice through the open door of the hospital room. "How can you even think such a thing?" The fury showed in his face, choked his words.

"Oh, Radnok! I didn't know you were coming today," Willa exclaimed, flustered.

"Where else should I be when the woman I love is about to risk her life on some foolish surgery to restore some crazy dream of herself that doesn't matter one whit? As soon as I got Shawna's message that you were thinking about that skin graft correction on your face, I had to come. You're not going to do that, you understand! We'll wait, see what happens, and if you need more treatment in time, we'll get it for you. But right now, we'll just let nature do her healing thing. Then we'll see what we want to do once you are completely healed."

Radnok had been referring to "us" and "our minestead" and "our future" since the outbreak, but Willa had not heard him take command so thoroughly before. She'd never actually heard the word "love," either. It took her breath away, so he was able to go on without interruption.

"No, don't go, Shawna," he said as she turned to leave them their privacy. "I want you to hear this so you'll know what I will

and will not allow. I'll trust you to let me know if she goes crazy and tries to do anything foolish. She tends to do that, you know. That's what got her into this predicament in the first place."

Shawna sat back down in the pod, and Willa shut her mouth on the angry retort she was formulating in her mind. She had to admit the truth of Radnok's words, so she just let him finish.

"The foot I can understand. You need to be able to walk and the procedure is not dangerous. Nothing's ever completely safe, but the foot replacement should be no problem. The skin graft on your tummy I can go for as well. That's not that deep. But your face? You don't know how much it will heal first. There may be no need for such a big deal surgery anyway. We'll give it time and reassess later. Okay?"

At least he's giving her some choice, Shawna thought. Then she realized that Willa was only agreeing without a fight because she wasn't really listening to the rest of his words.

"You said, 'the woman I love.' Did you mean that? Really?" she asked in a dazed voice.

"With all my heart. That's why when you are completely healed, and back where you belong, I'm going to blister your bottom every day for a month for leaving the house that day. I know you've suffered enough, but the fact that you left because you thought I wanted to kick you out just sticks in my craw. I never wanted you to leave, and I don't want you to ever leave. I know it's too early yet for a permanent assignment, but I want to file for an Extension before we leave headquarters."

Willa nodded in amazed agreement as tears came to Shawna's eyes. She didn't really think it was very romantic to promise a month-long spanking in one breath and an Extension of Assignment in the next, but whatever made Willa happy was fine with her.

"I'm depending on you to help keep her straightened out, okay, Shawna? She'll be released a week after the surgery and I'll

need you to come with us at least for a few days to help. Is that going to fly with Vilnek and you?" Radnok asked.

"We've already discussed it, and Vilnek thinks it is a good idea. Claire has been healthy since she left your minestead, so she'll just stay with Vilnek until I can go back. Or maybe she'll go to the next Selection meeting and get a new assignment. Vilnek can get along fine by himself," Shawna explained.

The day of the surgery found Radnok waiting with Shawna, chatting amiably and with little doubt in his mind that this next season would be his best ever. That explains why the shock, when it came, was so complete.

"There's been a problem," the doctor announced as he entered the waiting area and approached Radnok. "The Serpiac toxins were still present in her bloodstream when we started, but they didn't show up on the sensor. The anesthetic reacts badly with those toxins and if we had known they were still present, we would never have begun the operation. But we had no way of knowing. She's in a coma and brain activity is pretty much shut down. We're trying to bring her around right now, but Radnok, I have to tell you, I've seen this before. It's not good. She's still not responding to the treatment. About half the patients who react like this never regain consciousness."

Chapter 6

Try again. Hear pleading voices. Hear angry voices. Hear familiar voices. Hear crying. Hear angry voices, again. Hear shouting. Stop shouting. Stop it please. I can't stand it. No. No. No shouting.

"Shout louder, Radnok! How would you shout if she was in danger, and you needed to make her mind you? Yell like that," Doctor Danek instructed him.

"I can't yell at her. Look at her. She can't hear me. I can't yell at her. It's just too..." he broke off and buried his face in his hands.

Good. No more shouting. No more voices.

"Shout at her, you idiot! If she can't hear you, it won't hurt her, but if she can hear you, it may bring her around," the doctor hissed at him.

"All right, all right. I'll try again, but..." Radnok looked doubtfully down at his heart's own joy, lying there on the bed, pale and so very still. "Willa! Willa! Come on now, honey, listen to me. Okay, honey, can you hear me?"

"No, shout at her, man! Make her mind you."

"I can't. No, I just can't. I won't. I can't do it. She's so frail..." Radnok's voice trailed off again as he looked at her.

"I'll try it doctor. Here, let me near her. Let me try, if you won't," Shawna roughly pushed the grieving Radnok out of the way, building up an anger she didn't want to feel. She used that anger now as she shouted at the lifeless form on the bed, "Willa, you selfish spoiled brat! You listen to me right now."

"That's good, that's right. Good, Shawna. Now, call her to you. Make her come to you," the doctor ordered.

"Come here right now! Come on. I'm waiting for you and I'm getting tired of it. Come on and quit being so rude. And you said you wanted to change. You wanted to think of others. Come on, now, and hurry. Get over here to me, now!"

Shawna sounded furious and determined. Radnok looked at her, first in anger, then in despair. Where was she finding the strength to shout like that? What was the point?

As if reading his mind, the doctor explained, "Sometimes patients in this kind of state can put forth some effort. They've told us after such experiences that they can hear and respond in some mental way. It's like trying to get somewhere, and not being able to move. But if they try, they can reach out. And when they do that, sometimes they wake up. I don't know why it works, but sometimes it does. It's the only hope I've got for you right now. But it doesn't seem to be working. Maybe in a few hours, we can try again." He took Shawna's arm and turned to guide her out of the room.

To the doctor's surprise, Radnok's stern voice sounded in the silence, "Willa, you listen to me right now. You quit this nonsense and get over here to me. I mean it."

"That's it, Radnok. Try again. Make her mind you. Be as stern as you ever are with her. Make her come to you," the doctor coached him.

"I mean it, Willa. You get over here, now!" Radnok shouted.

Then his voice gentled, and he pleaded again, "Don't you want to come to me? Don't you need me like I need you?"

Shouting again. Pleading again. Go away. I'm too tired.

"You've got to mind me now. Get over here or you'll be sorry. You know I can make you sorry if I have to. Now, come on. I'm waiting. Don't make me come over there and get you," he repeated words he'd said to her just a few days before, when he'd had to punish her for staying out after dark. She'd ignored an instruction, and nearly been caught in a True Dark that came ahead of the normal schedule, as happened every so often, depending on atmospheric conditions. He'd called her to him for a spanking and she hadn't wanted to come, so he'd threatened her with an extra spanking after the one she'd already earned, and she'd come to him in order to avoid it. The familiar words didn't seem to be jarring her memory as he'd hoped.

"Wait, look! Her brain activity monitor responded just then. Try that again, Radnok," the doctor ordered.

"If you don't come now, I'll come over there and get you myself, and then you'll be sorry! You should be ashamed of yourself. I want you to get over here, now!"

Radnok. It's Radnok's voice. He's upset with me again. I'd best quit fooling around and—ah! Hurts, pain, *ah!* Hurts, *hurts*. No, can't.

Radnok nearly fainted with relief as he saw her eyelids flutter, saw her hand twitch, and even saw her foot move as if she were taking a step toward him. Then she stilled again and he drew breath to shout to try to bring her back.

"No, that's good enough for now, Radnok. That did the trick. We know she was able to respond to you." The doctor adjusted settings on the medipod so that the pain inhibiting electric pulses increased enough to make her comfortable. "I can't give her chemical pain relief, but the manual pain inhibitors should let her sleep for a while. Look, see the brain activity monitor? She's

dreaming, even now. That's sleep, Radnok. Just plain old healing rest. She'll be fine now. We'll let her sleep as much as possible while we wait for the toxins to clear out of her system." The doctor left to make notes on a wall monitor outside the door to the room where Willa lay, and Shawna embraced Radnok in celebration.

That's how Vilnek saw them when he entered the recovery area. "Hey, what the blazes is going on here?" he demanded. He trusted Shawna, but finding her in the arms of another man rattled him.

Shawna's excited squeak and quick turn to embrace Vilnek allayed his misgivings. "Oh, Vilnek, we nearly lost Willa, but she's going to pull through! It was horrible, but then we had to shout at her, and she... and Radnok... oh, I can't explain it right!" Instead, she burst into tears. He held her while she cried herself calm, then turned her towards the door.

"Somebody around here needs a good meal and a long sleep. And that's exactly what you're going to get," he declared.

"Oh, but no, I can't leave," she contradicted. "I have to stay to see if she wakes up, and—"

"And what good are you going to be to her," he interrupted, "if you let yourself get run down and sick? Huh? Now come on like a good girl or I'll treat you like a naughty girl and we both know which one you'd rather be." The look he gave her made her stomach flip flop in the most delicious way in spite of her worry and she couldn't help smiling as she went with him.

After a good meal at their favorite restaurant, Vilnek returned her to her guest room at the hospital where she had been staying while waiting for Willa. He opened her door for her then followed her inside. Not waiting for her to turn to him, he reached for her and pulled her close with his front to her back and nuzzled her neck.

"It's funny," she confessed, "but I almost wish I had been a

naughty girl today and that you did have to punish me. Isn't that insane? It's just that I've been so tired and I can't seem to sleep, or even relax. At least after a long spanking, I can get some rest. I know that sounds crazy, though." She was glad he couldn't see her blushing face to know how embarrassed she was at that moment.

"I don't think it's crazy at all. Whatever helps you is fine by me." He stooped and picked her up in his arms, then strode over to the bed. Sitting down, he positioned her over his lap and began to slowly and steadily smack her behind. His swats were firm but not harsh as he gave her a slow, tender warm-up. "This is just to help you remember that I care about you and love you. I'm going to take care of you, whether we're together all the time or not. You've got to take care of yourself for me, and if you don't, well, I'll know what to do about it."

All through his lecture, his hand came smacking across her bottom in a harder, faster rhythm. He let his worry build so that he could begin to give her the kind of spanking that would stay with her. He needed her to feel his concern for a few days after he returned to his minestead.

He intensified the strength of his swats until she was squirming and bucking across his lap.

"I think that's *ow*, enough now, Vilnek. Really, I—*ow*! Think that'll—*ow*—wait, please, no more. I oh, ouch, that stings too much, it's burning, *ow*! *Ow*!" she wailed as she tried to cover her bottom with her hands.

He struggled for a moment to get her hands out of the way and pinned to her sides. He held her helpless and continued to spank her, letting her feel each smack on her tender flesh fully before he placed the next one. His slower pace helped her not cry out so much, but she still pitched and wriggled, trying to get away from the pain.

"I know you asked for this spanking to start, little miss, but

I'm the one who'll say when it ends." His voice showed his irritation at her lack of concern for her own well-being. "I can see you need a little reminder of who it is you have to answer to no matter where you are or what you're doing. It's me, do you understand? You have to explain to me why you're run down and weak. It's me who'll take you to task for not taking care of yourself. No matter how far away you are or how long it takes, I'll always be there sooner or later, making sure you do what needs to be done, and making you face the music if you don't." He let the intensity of his strokes build again so that the red skin he was gazing at began to develop white patches. He knew that she must be in real pain now and that once the active stinging subsided, the soreness would last much longer.

Since he'd reached his goal, and not because she was now sobbing, he gave her one last swat on her sit spot and then lifted her to stand between his legs. He held her close and rubbed her back as she rubbed her bottom with one hand and shifted her weight from foot to foot in an effort to find a comfortable way to stand. All the while, she clung to him with her other arm as her sobs subsided. "I don't know why I needed that, but I did," she admitted with a little pout. "And if you tease me about it, I'll just die." Her tears broke out afresh.

"No, no, I'm not going to tease you. Not just now, little one. I know you're worried and hurting. This isn't the time for jokes. But, I need to hear you promise me you'll take better care of yourself. If I come back and find you run down and stressed out like this again, you won't need to ask for a spanking, because I'll take you over my knee without a second thought, understood?"

"I understand, and I promise, Vilnek. I need to be strong for Willa and I will take better care of myself. I've been so worried, but I'm not helping her with that worry, am I?"

"It's only natural to be concerned for your friend, but you can't let the worry get the best of you. You think of setting a good example for Willa once she starts getting better. You'll be

telling her all the things I'm telling you now, won't you?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, you're probably right," she agreed with a grin.

And indeed such turned out to be the case. In the weeks that followed, Willa improved enough to return to the minestead with Radnok. After the initial scare in surgery, Radnok would not hear of any more medical treatments until he was sure Willa was back to full strength. The doctor concurred, so Willa felt she had little choice but to return to Radnok's place, and try to prove that she was strong enough to undergo the treatments that would restore her appearance and mobility.

She was not able to walk long distances or even stand for long periods, because of the foot, and she felt useless, despite all the reporting and analysis she was able to perform. That feeling of uselessness irked her almost as much as the knowledge that her face was still disfigured with the scar that itched and pulled much of the time. She pushed herself and tried to work too long without rests, but Radnok's patience was wearing rather thin by the time Shawna was scheduled to return home to Vilnek's minestead.

"We'll be taking Shawna home today and we need to leave by noon at the latest or we won't be back before the True Dark," Radnok explained over breakfast.

"I should probably just stay here and keep working on the final reports on that last shaft production from sector two," Willa replied.

"You can finish it in the transport or when we get home. There's plenty of time. Now I don't want any arguments, Willa. You're not staying here by yourself. You're not strong enough yet, and I want to keep an eye on you. It'll be good for you to get away from here for a little while." Radnok knew she didn't really want to see even her close friends, Vilnek or Claire, with her face still scarred as it was. He wanted her to get over that, and really didn't think she was ready to stay by herself. He tried not to

hover and smother her with his concern, but he couldn't stand the thought of her getting tired out and having a relapse.

"Oh, all right," Willa conceded with ill-grace. "You always get your own way in the end, so I guess you will again today."

"I really do want you to see me home to say good-bye, Willa," Shawna reasoned with her. "And Claire will want to say good-bye, too. She'll be off to the Selection Meeting in a few days. With you back on your feet, you know she's decided to get a new assignment."

Willa let it all go with a shrug, secretly scheming as to how she could get some time alone today and avoid going to Vilnek's minestead. Her clever brain got everything worked out down to the last detail, and she schooled her features to look exhausted as she announced to Radnok while he was fueling the transport, "I feel so tired all of a sudden. I need to lie down and rest, okay?"

He looked at her with concern and then agreed, "Of course. I'm glad you're being sensible about it. Go lie down for a while. I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

But, when time came to board the transport, Willa was still asleep in her room with the door sealed. Radnok knocked, but to no avail. If he suspected the trick she was pulling, he didn't let on to Shawna. He just apologized for the delay and loaded Shawna's things in the transport quickly. "She'll be fine," he assured Shawna as they lurched to cruising speed. "She'll probably sleep the whole time I'm gone and not know we've left."

Willa was out of her room as soon as the transport's humming buzz had faded into the light mist. She stumped around the minestead with her tools, fixing a variety of little items that Radnok had let slip over the past few weeks since her accident. They didn't seem to bother him and he refused to let her deal with them, but he wasn't here now and she could hardly wait to get to them.

Several hours passed and she was getting down to the last few repairs when she heard the transport buzzing in. He passed by

the loading dock where she was working, and she felt a moment's guilt as he waved expressionlessly. She had been caught and she knew it. Suddenly the thought struck her that though Radnok had not been here to stop her from doing what she wanted to do, he would have something to say after the fact. Nervously, she finished up and stumped back to the living quarters building. She expected to see the transport circle round and dock at the ramp. She expected to hear his angry voice demanding explanations and threatening dire punishments any moment. She expected him to hesitate in doling out those punishments because of her delicate health, but she expected to endure a severe scolding at the very least. None of her expectations came true.

He worked out in the shaft sectors until well after the True Dark descended. It was dangerous to travel in the Dark, but on his own minestead, he was safe enough for a while. He intended to let her think about what she had done and come to her own conclusions like an adult. Then he intended to accept her abject apology. After that, he intended to scald her bottom raw with a piece of pipe insulation he'd just gotten from Vilnek. He swore by its effectiveness with Shawna, so Radnok had decided to try it out. Since Willa felt like she was healthy enough to trick and defy him, and work outdoors with difficult repairs, she must be healthy enough for him to cloud up and rain all over her. But first, he'd let the guilt set in. He gave her plenty of time for that.

By the time he entered the living quarters, Willa was almost frantic with worry. First she'd felt relieved that he didn't seem to be offended or worried about her. Then she felt aggrieved that he didn't seem to be offended or worried about her. Then she began to worry that he really might not care anymore what she did. He might be too tired of her inconsiderate games to even bother being angry. In her mind, she had him kicking her out into the True Dark and telling her that he never wanted to see her again.

What he actually said was, "I see you're up and about." He kept his tone neutral as he continued, "Shawna missed saying

good-bye, and Claire was very disappointed that she couldn't see you in person one last time. She's nervous about the Selection Meeting and wanted to talk to you face to face before she left. But I guess you just couldn't be bothered."

He then walked right past her and ignored the comment she started to make. He went to his own quarters and took his time about cleaning up and getting ready for his evening meal. She had prepared a simple dinner for them while she waited, but he left it on the table and scrounged a sandwich while she watched in dismay. He took it back to his quarters and sealed his door.

First tentatively, then firmly, then angrily she knocked on his door. She apologized for interrupting his supper, not dreaming that he was really ignoring his food completely waiting for her to approach him exactly as she was doing. She asked, politely, for him to come out and join her. She pleaded, cajoled, and finally started demanding that he come out and face her.

"Seems to me you liked sealed doors earlier today. Don't see what you've got against them now," he stated as he heard her start to cry.

"I'm really sorry, Radnok. Please don't be angry with me. I behaved badly and I know it. I just had things I wanted to get done, and I knew you wouldn't let me do them. I don't want to see anyone anyway. I just couldn't bring myself to get into that transport."

He unsealed the door and looked at her tear-stained face. "I would have been there with you. I would have helped you. But no, you had to have things your own way. You had to ignore the needs of others again and get what you wanted first. What am I going to do with you, Willa?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I thought I would feel so proud of myself and so good for getting all that work done, but instead I just feel selfish and," here she hesitated to tell the truth but wanted to make a clean breast of it, "a little sick, actually. I guess you were right. I'm not up to the physical work just yet."

He looked at her with concern and changed his strategy completely. The very satisfying Peace Initiative Adjustment he wanted to deliver would have to wait until she was stronger. "I accept your apology, Willa. But now I ask you again, what am I going to do with you?" He took her elbow and led her into the common room so they could discuss this briefly before he began to implement his new plan.

"I said I was sorry. Can't that just be the end of it? I don't think I can take a Peace Initiative Adjustment tonight," she told him as she shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"So you agree you deserve an Adjustment?" he queried.

"Yes, I guess so. I disobeyed you, defied you, and tricked you. That wasn't fair and wasn't what I agreed to do when I came here. I should pay a price for it, but..." Her voice trailed off and she looked helplessly at the floor. With a sigh, she went over to the nearest pod and knelt in front of it with her upper body resting on the seat. She waited for him to begin the spanking, but instead he took her by the arm and guided her out of the room and back to her own quarters.

"Not tonight, my dear. If you are truly sorry, then you'll have more consequences than just a paddling. For tonight, you'll begin by going to bed, right now." He talked right over her feeble protests. "I don't care about the reports. They'll be late and you'll tell Pippa exactly why tomorrow, understand? You'll also apologize tomorrow to Shawna and Claire, then turn off the Linkset and not use it again until I tell you. Understand? You're totally grounded until I think I can trust you to behave yourself without my constant supervision."

"Yes, sir," she forced herself to nod and not pout as she agreed to his rules.

"You'll be allowed up out of bed two hours tomorrow, one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon to sit at the table and write about why what you did today was wrong and hurtful. If I think you're up to it, you'll get an Adjustment in the morning

before getting to writing, so you can have a well-warmed bottom to sit on. Then you'll go to bed early in the evening. We'll repeat all this every day for a week and then see where we are. I'm not promising it will be over in only a week, but at least one week for sure. And before you can get yourself in any more hot water, let me tell you this. If you complain or ask for leniency any given day, that day doesn't count and you make up for it at the end of the week. I don't want any discussion at all on these rules. I know in the past I've at least listened to you about consequences, but not this time. My mind's made up. Are you willing to agree about this? Absolutely no backtalk?"

He'd never called it "backtalk" before when Willa tried to plead for leniency. She had often gotten a few hours or days shaved off a grounding or extra work assignment by asking nicely and pleading her case well. And maybe that had been a mistake. She considered the prospect of not only taking the punishment, but also taking the Adjustments all without a word of protest. It would be so hard, but if she really meant to change her behavior, she ought to start right now.

"I intend to do my best," she answered, "to take whatever consequence and Adjustments you give without one word of complaint."

"There's no reason for talking anyway, Willa. I know you want off your grounding, or if you don't right now, you soon will. And I don't mean to let you off. You've got to learn some responsibility for your own actions. So starting right now, unless you've got a physical reason that we can't go ahead with this, you'll take your grounding and your Adjustments, understand?"

"Yes, sir," she replied in a subdued voice. She turned to go into her room without another word. He hated that she was pouting and resentful, but felt justified in his decision. Then she surprised him by turning back to him at her door and giving him a small smile. "I'm going to bed now, like you said. I'll see you in the morning for my one hour of getting up. I mean, if it's all

right, I'd like to do it early so I can see you before you leave for the shaft sectors."

"That'll be fine," he answered with relief. His first instinct was to lessen her punishment because she was showing a good attitude, but he put that thought away from him like putting old shoes into a closet. That way of thinking had gotten them where they were today. He needed to be strong for her and he intended to be.

That same moment saw Shawna and Vilnek sharing a very intimate dinner together. Claire had retired early to give them privacy and Shawna reflected that she would miss her friend when she left for the Selection Meeting the next day. She hoped for the best for Claire and told Vilnek about her concerns for her.

"She'll be fine, Shawna," Vilnek reassured her. "She's a lovely girl and very competent worker. She's sure to get lots of good offers. Pippa will see she gets a good assignment."

"Did I hear you mention Pippa?" Claire asked before she rounded the corner of the dining room. "I hate to interrupt, but Pippa's just now come on the Linkset, and wants to talk to you both."

"Sheesh! Try to get a nice quiet evening alone and look what happens," Vilnek complained in mock exasperation as he made faces at Claire. "I'll give you twenty credits to tell her we're not home."

"Get on in there," Shawna pushed at his back while Claire giggled.

"Thirty credits," Vilnek offered again.

"Go on, you oaf. Pippa's waiting," Shawna admonished with some mock exasperation of her own.

"This had better be important, Pippa," Vilnek growled, carrying on the teasing as they entered the common room where

the main Linkset stood. "This is Shawna's first night back and we were having an important conference."

"Sorry to interrupt, Vilnek, and if it weren't urgent, believe me I would wait until tomorrow. We need you to bring Claire in tomorrow personally, Vilnek, and you too, Shawna. The Company has something to say to you."

Chapter 7

"**W**hat's this all about, Pippa," Vilnek queried.

"I can't tell you right now, Vilnek. I'm at Falsan's residence and we've just finished up a confidential meeting. All I can say is that either I or some other escort will be leaving at first light tomorrow to come out there and get you all. We'll need to have our meeting here as early as possible, so be ready to go. And make sure your house is clean before you leave," Pippa warned them then wished them a good night and signed off.

"Confidential meeting? Make sure your house is clean? What's that supposed to mean?" Shawna wanted to know.

Before anyone could propose a reason, the Linkset beeped again. This time there was a text message, unsigned, but sent from someone with the top security clearance needed to send messages anonymously. It read:

Tomorrow is your last day on that minestead. Why not leave now before you get terminated?

"I guess it means Pippa likes to have a minestead shipshape when she repossesses it," Vilnek muttered as he rose. He started to move around the room, straightening up and putting things in

order. "There's not much here that's actually mine. The company provides the quarters and all that's in them, though they are nominally in the miner's possession. The company has the right to terminate a mineholder's contract and repay the fair market value of his minestead."

"But you're not going to take that message seriously, are you? That's just someone's idea of a joke. Pippa didn't say pack up. You do have some personal things she knows you'd want to take with you. She didn't say anything about repossession," Claire argued.

"Sometimes the company packs for you if they want you out on the double. It avoids trouble to just get a miner in to headquarters and then not let him return to his sector," Vilnek explained in a defeated voice.

"I simply can't believe Pippa would allow that. Why would The Company possibly want you out, Vilnek? It's just too crazy," Shawna put in. They pondered and packed, but no one could come up with any answers.

The next morning dawned hazy and chilly across the sector. In his minestead's common room, Radnok watched Willa for signs of illness or fatigue, but saw none. "Good day for Vilnek to take Claire into Headquarters. They should get there and back easily before True Dark."

"Yes, they should have no trouble," Willa answered as she finished her breakfast and cleared the serving containers away.

"And you're feeling okay this morning?" Radnok inquired.

"Yes, fine, thanks," Willa responded. She wondered for only a moment whether he would act on the plans he had outlined the night before. He'd promised her a Peace Initiative Adjustment and she'd never known him to delay one once he'd determined it was due.

"Then you can just get yourself over into that corner with your leggings down and your tunic out of the way. I want to study my target a minute," Radnok ordered her.

"Yes, sir," came her subdued reply. She positioned herself as instructed and tried not to cry at the thought of the punishment she was about to endure. She felt embarrassed, standing there with her bottom on display, but she knew that if she complained, he would make her stay there longer.

He didn't want her standing long so he called her over to him after only a few minutes in the corner. He wouldn't tax her strength with one long spanking, he decided, but would still get his point across by giving her a short spanking every day for the coming week. The first one might not affect her that much because she was used to much worse, but he figured that the cumulative results would convince her of his determination to tolerate no more of her antics.

"You can come on over here now, Willa," he instructed her. "Lay yourself over the table and tell me why you're getting this Adjustment."

She did as he asked, then stated in a contrite voice, "I'm to be spanked because I showed disrespect when I tricked you and disobeyed you. I wasn't careful or honest, and I'm sorry that I hurt you and other people, too."

"So, I'm going to have you count out fifty today, Willa. I want you to count nice and loud, and say 'sir' after each number. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," she whispered, then, "One, sir," as he began to bring his hand down hard on her backside. He covered her bottom thoroughly with the first twenty-five strokes, then picked up the piece of pipe insulation he had secreted under a pod the night before in order to have it handy that morning. He brought it down on her backside and watched with satisfaction as she jumped. Her pinkening skin went slightly white for a moment before turning a deeper purple color as she howled.

"Ow! Oh, what was that? It, ow, it hurts so much. *Ow!*"

"You lost count, Missy. Start over at twenty-five." He hated to see her in pain, but felt pleased that he would be sure that his message had gotten through to her. The fire in her bottom would smolder all day and then tomorrow he could rekindle it without much effort or strain on her.

She started the count over at twenty-five as instructed, and could barely get out the remaining words. Her breath hissed and gasped as she fought for the control she needed. When he was finally done, he pulled her into his embrace and they stood there for long moments, taking comfort from each other without restraint.

"I'll never trick you again, Radnok, I promise," she cried into his tunic. "I'll be careful and safe and never run from you again, either."

"You bringing up that old news?" Radnok asked. He knew instinctively that she was remembering the unfinished business they still had between them that started on the day of the Outbreak when she ran out the door. "That's all in the past now. We'll take things slow, but if there's one thing I learned from that day, it's that I can't live without you."

"But I'm so much trouble to you. I'm so selfish and bad that you have to spank me and ground me. Why would you want a girl like that with you permanently?"

"You're not selfish or bad, Willa. You need a bit of tending, and I'm just the man for the job. An old mine-rat like me should count himself the luckiest man alive to get to think about having a beautiful girl like you be his forever. I know you're not ready to marry me just yet, but when the time's right, you will marry me, won't you?" He hadn't planned to ask her today or in this way, but she had brought it up and seemed to need some reassurance about the future.

"I want that more than anything in this world, Radnok. I

want to stay here with you forever. I'm ready to marry you any time you say."

He gaped down at her in shock. Didn't she realize she still had her leggings around her ankles from a hard painful spanking he had administered not ten minutes ago? Apparently she didn't mind his discipline methods. He kissed her until they were both breathless, then set her away from him firmly.

"You need to get busy writing now. You've got apologies to make and an essay to write. One hour this morning, then one hour this afternoon, but that's all. You'll have all week to work on this essay, so it better be long."

After all that had happened, she found it difficult to keep her mind on her work. She tried to get her thoughts together for her essay, but she just kept thinking about her future as Radnok's wife. Finally, she gave up and used the Linkset to start her apologies. She beeped Vilnek's minestead, but no one answered. So she beeped Pippa's office and got no reply again. Wondering what was going on, she realized her hour was up and went to lie down as instructed. One thing she didn't want to do was to give Radnok another reason to give her another Adjustment. She felt quite well adjusted right now as it was.

No one had answered the Linkset hail at either Vilnek's minestead or Pippa's office because at the time of the call, they were all in transit. The morning had found Vilnek, Shawna, and Claire tense and strained. The transport that came to get Claire arrived early and Pippa herself stepped out leaving the pilot to refuel at Vilnek's pump. When she walked in the minestead and saw the carryalls packed and lined up along one wall, she looked at Vilnek in annoyance. "I thought I asked you to clean up? What are your guests going to think?"

"You mean you're not going to take possession of the minestead?" Shawna asked.

"You mean you don't want to terminate me?" Vilnek demanded.

"What guests?" Claire wondered. In her relief, she forgot that she would not be here to greet them, no matter who they were.

"I've got to explain it all to you at headquarters, not here. But no, we're not terminating or repossessing or any ridiculous thing like that. Where did you ever get such an absurd idea?" Pippa wanted to know.

The ladies just looked at Vilnek who sheepishly grinned at the floor. He didn't want to upset Pippa by mentioning the anonymous message, which Shawna had rightly interpreted as a cruel joke. His relief was so great that he didn't mind the thought of any extra chore The Company wanted him to perform. This was a good thing because once they arrived at headquarters and Pippa explained all they wanted him to do, he almost changed his mind about cooperating at all.

"You want me to play nursemaid to a couple of egg headed experts on mining equipment and Serpiac? You're crazy! No way!"

"But your minestead was the first to give us the strange readings," Pippa persuaded.

"But then Radnok's minestead took over in the 'strange readings' department, and went way past mine," Vilnek countered. "Pick on him!"

"But the Serpiac have already outbroken there. It's all over and done with. Besides, Willa is in no shape to deal with guests or any extra work right now," Pippa reasoned with Vilnek firmly.

Shawna thought about exactly how little Willa could deal with guests right now. In the short apology message Shawna had received on arriving at headquarters, Willa had explained about her grounding and the Adjustments she was expecting throughout the next week. It seemed to her that she and Radnok

really did need their privacy. Vilnek's minestead was the logical choice.

"Why not just go along with it, Vilnek? You know it'll be kind of fun. And we'll get to see all their findings as they determine them. It'll be fine, Pippa," Shawna assured her and the two of them calmly went over the details as Vilnek fumed in his chair.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. "So what exactly am I supposed to do with some engineer geek with two heads and not enough sense to fill even one? I'm not going to go out and spit-polish my mineshafts so Mister Priss won't get his glasses dirty. If he screams like a girl at the grubs in the samples, don't blame me if I laugh at him."

"I promise if I scream like a girl, I'll laugh at myself harder than you will, you son of a Fensel!" A voice spoke from the hall and they all turned to see a tall rugged-looking man glaring in at Vilnek.

The two women flushed red with embarrassment when they realized that this man had just heard himself described as a two-headed Mister Priss. The two men faced each other for a long moment, and then strode quickly toward one another. Shawna tried to dive between them to prevent the fight she knew must follow and got entangled between two large male bodies, either of which weighed twice as much as she did. At first, the grunts and jerks she felt alarmed her as she struggled to extract herself from the pile of bodies on the floor. Then suddenly she realized the two men were not even trying to get up. Were they seriously hurt? Vilnek seemed to be gasping for breath.

Shawna turned on the newcomer and raised her fist. "If you've hurt him," she shrieked, "I'll squash you flat!"

"You and what army?" he asked in interested tones. He wasn't taking her seriously and, all the more infuriated, Shawna tried to take a swing at his head. At the last moment, her arm was caught, and she twisted around to face the new attacker. Vilnek, now purple faced, had a hold on her arm and she assumed he

was begging for her aid. She knelt at his side, her thirst for vengeance momentarily forgotten in her rush to aid her fallen hero. He was making the strangest noises in his efforts to get his breath and she realized he was going to need medical attention.

"Call a medic, Pippa," Shawna yelled. "Can't you see Vilnek's dying?"

"Dying of laughter," Vilnek managed to croak out between hoots of mirth. He had struggled to his feet and was restraining Shawna as she tried to get to the Linkset to call for security.

Shawna stopped her struggles against Vilnek and looked at him again. He was wiping tears from his eyes and slapping his knee with his hand. So was the newly arrived gentleman whom she had so nearly clouted. What was going on here? "Have you lost your mind? Why are you laughing?" Shawna demanded.

"I think," Pippa explained, "that you just risked your life to keep two old friends from giving each other a welcoming embrace. They seem to find it singularly amusing and I think the only first aid they may need will be in the form of a sedative to keep them from going into mirth-induced hysterics."

"Oh, I don't know," Shawna stated as she gave the two hooting men a withering look. "They may need a medic sure enough if I brain them both for laughing at me. What was I supposed to think, with the two of you going at each other like that? And stop that cackling this instant!" This last was shouted as the two men renewed their guffaws during her tirade.

When he finally could speak again, Vilnek managed to croak out a gasping, "Talvok here, is an old friend from training school days. He was just starting out as I was finishing up, but we got to know each other pretty well." Then to Talvok he said, "So you're the Mister Priss Serpiac expert?"

"No, I'm the Mister Priss equipment expert. That over there," he jerked his thumb backwards at a woman standing out in the hall frowning, "must be the Miss Priss Serpiac expert." This sent

the two men into renewed gales of laughter, but the woman seemed unamused.

"I'm Faith Galbraith, the Serpiac expert. Have I stumbled into the psychiatric ward by accident?"

"No, no," Pippa hastened to welcome the visitor and shot squelching glances at the two men who were still hard put to breathe normally and keep their snorts in check. "These are the two gentlemen you'll be working with, and this is Shawna, your escort while you're here with us."

Faith cast another disapproving look over all of them and then seated herself in a chair near Pippa's desk. Shawna looked mortified while Vilnek and Talvok proceeded to talk over old times as if the rest of the room wasn't even there.

Faith fumed a moment then stood to rudely interrupt the men's conversation. "If you need someone to observe baboon behavior," and here she gave the men another pointed glare, "then you've got the wrong person. I'm here to research Serpiac, and find a clue to their eradication. When the topic gets back to the situation at hand, I'll be in my room."

"Her Highness's haughty stalk out of the room would have been much more effective," Talvok drawled, "if she hadn't turned down the hall that leads nowhere but the garbage incinerator."

"Still, I guess we'd better go after her before she gets lost down there. As hot as she is right now, she'll make the incinerator overheat and we'll all be blown to kingdom come," Vilnek mused, still seated.

"I'll go get her and show her to the transport dock. We're leaving right away, aren't we?" Shawna directed her exasperated question at Vilnek.

"That's right, little one," he returned, "but after you deposit her at the dock, come back here, please. I need to talk to you a minute." The look he gave her had her wondering what she'd

done wrong. She knew that look which could only spell trouble for her backside, so she hastened to do what he asked.

Shawna found Faith hesitating in front of a large fire door. Faith turned quickly when she heard Shawna's approach and sighed, "Oh, thank goodness it's you and not one of those overgrown oafs. Getting lost is embarrassing enough as it is without those sub-humans actually finding me."

"One of those overgrown oafs is my chosen assignment," Shawna informed her in as neutral a tone as she could manage, "but I'm sorry things started out on such a wrong foot. We just learned of our role as hosts to the experts and directly after that curveball came the added surprise of Talvok's being one of the experts. I hope you can forgive their behavior in light of all the sudden changes in plans we've just had."

"You mean you weren't told to expect us?" Faith queried.

As she led Faith back up the hallway, Shawna continued, "No, we had no idea until we got here. In fact, we thought we might have been called in to Headquarters to be terminated."

"I'm really sorry to cause so much trouble, then," Faith apologized. "I don't need an escort actually. Those transports look very basic and I'm sure I can get around with just the guidance systems. I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"Oh, dear," replied Shawna. "Has no one explained how things are here? From your last statement, I can see they haven't. You definitely do need an escort here and in fact no woman can use a transport alone."

Interrupting Shawna before she could finish, Faith exploded, "Of all the prejudiced, backwards, unfair, sexist—"

It was Shawna's turn to interrupt. "I'm explaining this badly. Please, let me start at the beginning. Trellian is a very unpredictable planet filled with bizarre dangers and strange occurrences. There is a device called a Radplant that can transmit instant warnings of these dangers, but they are not compatible with female brain chemistry. So the men have the implants and

warn the women in the area of the coming threat. There are so many of these messages that it is impractical and unsafe for a woman to be in a transport without a man who has the Radplant. You could pilot the transport, but you'd still have to have a male escort and thus a female escort as well."

Faith looked at Shawna with dawning understanding, but still a good bit of confusion. "Why a female escort, too, then? I mean, I guess I can see why a man would be necessary. Even if the transport itself had the capability of receiving warnings from Headquarters, the chance that the transport could become disabled, or that a woman might need to leave the transport would make using it alone unsafe. But why a female escort as well?"

When Shawna first arrived, she had not understood this very well either, so she was able to explain the female escort requirement easily, as Pippa had explained it to her. "Miners have a very bad, and unfortunately well-deserved, reputation in this sector of the galaxy. They are as a group not known for observing the rules of polite society, to put it mildly. The situation was even worse when this world was first colonized. The head of The Company who runs this planet wanted to create a more civilized environment for his miners to attract a more reliable and better quality of worker. In order to do this, he needed to bring in women who would work alongside the men to give the planet a more natural, home-like feel. To get women to work here, the company had to set up safeguards and stick to them. So, there have always been escorts and rules in place to protect the women who come here. Whatever goes on between a man and a woman on this world is likely happening by mutual consent. The system may be a bit constraining sometimes, but it's as safe as The Company can make it."

"So I guess I'll have two escorts wherever I go. I hope you like to travel. We're going to need to see a good bit of the planet over

the next few months." Faith's demeanor showed a pensive but accepting attitude.

They arrived at the transport dock while they talked and Shawna showed Faith where to stow her gear. There were several boxes and bags of technical equipment, the functions of which Shawna could only guess. "I need to meet with Vilnek for a few moments before we leave. I'll be back shortly," Shawna explained. In her own mind, she added, "and probably tenderly. But what could he be upset about? Why did he give me that look?"

She pondered the question as she walked back along the passage to Pippa's office. All too quickly, she arrived and opened the door to find Vilnek discussing the anonymous threatening message with Talvok.

"But who would have sent something like that? And why?" Talvok wanted to know.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say it was Bilvon trying to get me out of the way. If he didn't like me getting this assignment, he'd try some trick like that. He'd know I could ask Radnok to let me borrow his transport." As he spoke, it occurred to him that Bilvon might have had more than one motivation. "And if Radnok left Willa alone in order to bring me the transport, he could get at her easier. That would be Bilvon's style. But, no, it's impossible. How would he know what the plans were? Pippa said the meeting was confidential."

Shawna had seated herself quietly while the two men talked and Talvok gave her a significant glance before he spoke. He hoped Vilnek would understand that at the moment, he couldn't say everything he knew, but that he would discuss it further when they were alone again. He had to remember to tell Vilnek about the suspicious device he had seen in Bilvon's home lab the night before. All he said was, "Bilvon could have known about the meeting and what was decided. Remember, he is still the owner's son, even though he's supposed to be just another miner right

now. If he wanted to get Radnok out of the way, he might have tried to use you to put him off guard. When he found out you were not being told all the plans until today, he would have seen his chance to fool you into asking for Radnok's help."

"I hate to accuse your brother or your dad, old buddy, but..." Vilnek conceded.

"Don't worry, Vilnek. I know them even better than you do. I wouldn't put much of anything past Bilvon, at any rate," rejoined Talvok.

"When we get back to the minestead, we'll be in range for me to use the enabler to talk to Radnok without using a Linkset. Linkset messages can be monitored or intercepted but Radplant enablers are private and as far as I know, can't be monitored. I'll warn him to be on the lookout for Bilvon, just in case it was him last night. We'd better all watch our backs," Vilnek warned.

And now I'd better watch my backside, Shawna thought. Talvok left to prepare for their departure, which left her alone with Vilnek. He didn't give her much chance to wonder why he wanted to see her.

"We're not going to have much chance to be alone for the coming months, little miss," Vilnek stated as he went over to lock the office door. "You need to understand that I will discipline you if I have to whether we have privacy for it or not. I'll try not to let everyone know our business, but I won't tolerate you disobeying me or taking chances no matter who's around. I'll give you this one last spanking here where we can't be heard, and hopefully this will help you keep yourself on track until they're gone. But you need to know that I won't care if they can see and hear us. If you need a lesson, it's a lesson you'll get." As he spoke, he pulled Shawna over his lap and pushed her tunic up out of the way. Next came her leggings, which he pulled down to expose her lovely pale skin.

She twitched and wriggled, trying to put herself in a position where he would not have such easy access to her upper thighs as

she demanded, "But what did I do? I didn't disobey or take chances. Why are you going to correct me?"

"See, there's where you're wrong, little miss," he scolded as he brought his hand down hard on her right cheek. She jumped and tried not to yelp and he continued his lecture without pausing in his swats. "When you jump between two grown men twice your size, I'd say that's taking a pretty big chance, wouldn't you?" He didn't sound very angry with her and in fact, he couldn't keep a hint of amusement out of his voice as he remembered her coming to his rescue like a Chihuahua trying to protect a German Shepherd.

The sounds of his palm contacting her tender flesh cracked through the office. Shawna was squirming and twisting all over his lap to get away from the burning sting of his spansks. He held her more firmly as he worked her body more forward and down across his lap so that he could apply his lesson to the backs of her thighs because he knew she hated that particularly. She would feel this lesson all the way home and that seemed fine to him. Another few resounding strokes, harder and faster than the first, and he was done. He noticed with satisfaction that she waited to get up until he signaled her that he was finished.

She stood and adjusted her clothes, then accepted his comforting embrace. He rubbed her back as he warned her, "I went easy on you this time, because I know you really don't think you did anything wrong. Don't you realize how I would feel if you got hurt protecting me? Protecting is my job, not yours and next time you try to take what you think is a punch meant for me, I'll wear you out and you won't sit for a week. Got that?"

"I guess I understand what you mean, Vilnek. You didn't have to spank me, but I guess I'm still glad to get it all out and over with. I know how you feel now, and actually, I do realize that it could have been dangerous, at that," she answered.

"I did have to spank you, to show you that I mean business.

Do you really believe I mean what I say, or should we have a little more discussion time about it so I can convince you I'm serious?"

"Oh, no, I don't need any more discussion time. I'm going to have a hard time sitting all the way home as it is," she replied ruefully.

As they left the office, Pippa was waiting out in the hall. "You didn't spank her too hard, now did you, Vilnek?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone. "She didn't even realize she was putting herself in danger. And nothing happened after all."

"How did you know?" demanded a shocked and embarrassed Shawna.

"I'll decide how hard to spank my own companion, thanks, Pippa," Vilnek growled in minor irritation. They could hear Pippa's chuckle as they made their way down the hall toward the transport.

"But how did she know, Vilnek? You said you were spanking me here to give me some privacy."

As they arrived at the transport, Talvok didn't help matters by teasing, "Not too bad, now, was it, Shawna? This softhearted pushover doesn't even know how to give a real PIA, I'll bet. Look at you! You're not even walking tenderly. Maybe I ought to finish things up so you really learn not to be so foolish." He continued the joke by making a half-hearted feint at catching her, which Vilnek easily headed off with a mock punch to his shoulder.

"You so much as look like you're thinking about giving an Adjustment to my woman, and I'll make you think Adjustment!" he informed Talvok. "I'll adjust your face with my fist," he declared, and the two men started to tussle like schoolboys.

"Do they always act like children?" Faith asked as she approached from the other side of the transport.

"I suggest we just get in the transport and wait for them to grow up," Shawna replied.

"But that may be a while," Faith returned.

"Oh, it'll probably be a long while. I'll fix us some drinks and

we'll get better acquainted while they murder each other," Shawna offered.

"I heard that!" Vilnek interjected in a warning tone while Faith and Shawna smirked.

"And what's this Adjustment thing they keep talking about?" Faith queried.

"I'll be more than happy to show you," Talvok replied, sticking his head around the open transport hatch.

"No one's told you about the Peace Initiative?" Shawna marveled.

"This may be an interesting ride home," Vilnek predicted.

Chapter 8

The journey home was indeed eventful as the group got to know each other better and more of the intricacies of life on Trellian were explained to a disbelieving Faith.

"I would never be able to submit myself to that kind of treatment, Shawna. I mean, to agree to accept a spanking? You really are brave to take a chance like that," she declared.

"I agreed to accept as many spankings as he thinks I need when I break the rules. But it's not like they're allowed to beat us or anything. A spanking isn't going to kill you," Shawna felt like she had to defend the practice, but Vilnek reacted in a more matter of fact manner.

"Shawna knows how things are. She knows I'll never hurt her, but I do have to protect her. It works for us and the community as a whole. The Peace Initiative was developed not too long after the Companion Program got started and has worked well for several years now."

"But I could never agree to live under such an arrangement," Faith admitted. "I wouldn't trust any man that much."

"I hate to argue with you, Your Highness," Talvok inter-

jected, "but you already have agreed to such an arrangement. By setting foot on Trellian, you agreed to submit to discipline from your assignment. And I guess, under the circumstances, that assignment would be me."

Her hearty laughter surprised everyone as she replied, "There is no way in this world or any other world for that matter that I would accept a spanking from you. I'd even take one from Vilnek here before I'd take it from you."

Her words left no doubt as to her opinions, but Talvok saw no reason to argue the point. He knew when the time came, he would protect her from doing anything foolish. If in order to do that he needed to show her how serious he was about her minding him, he would make sure she understood. A good hard spanking was the best way he knew about to convince a woman that a man is serious about what he says. And from what he'd seen of her gorgeous rump, not to mention her snooty attitude, he would surely enjoy the task.

He could just imagine scolding her for taking some silly risk while he pulled her over to a bench where he would yank her over his lap. He'd trap her legs between his because he figured she'd be the type to try to kick and fight. He'd pull down those strange, thick, loose leggings she was wearing and push them down to the tops of those tough brown hiking boots. Then he'd get a better grip on her waist to show her that her struggles were useless before he whacked that splendid rump hard and fast. She'd probably struggle even more, he mused, and he'd get to see that magnificent behind go from pale to pink to bright red.

If she calmed down quickly, he might slow his pace and just slap those wiggling cheeks until they were dark red, making sure to use plenty of wrist action to save his arm. But if she kept up her struggles, or cursed him too much before she got quiet, he would keep up a quick pace until her bottom was showing some purple before he let her up. She'd be all apologetic and contrite as he held her in his arms and comforted her. He imagined how

she'd look up at him with new respect and meekness in her eyes. His reverie was interrupted, however, by her whispered, "Do we have to wake that big jerk up or can we just leave him here while we get out and start work? I'm sure we'll get more done without his interference."

Shawna assured her that they did indeed have to wake him up and take him with them into the minestead's main building. The two men only stayed inside briefly though, before heading out to the main equipment sheds to examine the sensors that had been giving such troublesome readings.

The rest of the day, throughout all the preliminary investigations, Talvok's mind kept turning back to the imaginary spanking he'd given Faith. He wondered how long it would be before she violated some rule and made his fantasy a reality. In a normal situation, he might spank a woman for calling him a jerk, depending on the circumstance, but he felt the timing was wrong as yet. He could be patient.

Willa contacted Shawna late in the afternoon and expressed her desire to help, along with her repeated apology. She explained that she could not do much in the way of aiding the investigation until the end of the week. The second day of Willa's grounding proved to be more difficult than the first. She was feeling better rested, and wanted to get up and do more. Her apologies behind her, all she was allowed to do was work on her essay while sitting on a very sore bottom.

That morning's adjustment had been a repeat of yesterday's, with fifty swats in all across her bare backside. The difference had been that her backside was already tender from the previous encounter with Radnok's hand and the piping insulation. The first few smacks of that calloused palm across her already sore bottom cheeks had felt like the last few swats of the

day before. He spanked harder the second day, which also added to the sensation that her rear end was on fire after the first ten swats.

Twenty swats into the spanking, she was bouncing on her toes, trying to stay in position. After thirty swats, she couldn't stop her hands from reaching back to try to protect herself. Radnok simply grabbed both her wrists and held them up tight against the small of her back. He started his count over at twenty-five and she realized she should try harder next time to keep her hands on the table where they belonged. After forty swats, she was no longer thinking of her hands, but merely feeling as if she could not stand one more moment of this stinging burn. Radnok made the last ten swats harder than all the others, and she kicked first her right foot then her left as she rested her weight on the table. She made no attempt to actually escape and Radnok was proud of her for that, so he made no comment about the hands or the kicking. He wanted to allow her some way to cope with the pain that he knew needed to be intense if it were to have its desired effect.

After a moment to let the spanking sink in, he helped her to stand and stroked her hair as she cried into his tunic front. She hadn't cried during the spanking, but when it was over, her tears flowed like rain. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was and that she would never do anything so mean and selfish again, but she was afraid he would see it as a plea for leniency. Instead, she just told him, "I'll get to work on my essay, now," as she turned to go to her workstation.

"No, go take a good nap first. Then you can come back and write for an hour." He wondered if she would give him any argument, but she merely nodded and headed for her own quarters. He hoped that she would grow used to obeying him in this week where she was allowed absolutely no input, so that when he did again allow for discussion, she would still be in the habit of minding him, even if she had given her opinion. He wanted to

hear her views, but for this week only, they would both have to make do with unquestioning trust and obedience.

By the third day of her restriction, Willa's boredom grew to irritation. She woke with her backside tender and her conscience toughened up. Not feeling so contrite, she resented having to plan her time just so that she would spend a few moments in the company of the man who bore the responsibility for her dilemma. The stiff way she walked into the room revealed to Radnok her attitude change. Here his resolve met its next test. Should he lessen her punishment to lessen her resentment?

"Vilnek and the experts are going to be doing lots of traveling around in the next few months," Radnok commented as they ate breakfast. He looked at her indifferent expression and went on, hoping to spark a bit of remorse. "He and Shawna will need help running their minestead while all this is going on, but I'm not sure I can volunteer us to help. I can't run the risk of you getting sick again. Look what happened when my back was turned just for a minute."

"Of course, we've got to help, Radnok," Willa took the offensive. "My restriction is only four more days and then I'll be free to pitch in, but until then, you've just got to go over there and do whatever they ask."

"I'm not talking about your restriction or my going over there to help. I'm not even talking about whether or not we should help. Stands to reason we should help. That's what friends are for. But you're more important to me than anything else in this world. If I add extra work to our load, I have to be able to trust that you'll mind me when I say take it easy. If I think you'll go behind my back again, I won't risk it."

His words knocked the righteous indignation right out of her. She put her spoon down with a clank and sat back in her chair, looking down at her hands. "You're right. I know it. I lost your trust, and you have every right to be suspicious. I can say I'll behave, but I've said that before and look what happened. I'll do

whatever you think best, Radnok. Just let me know." She cleared her place and then walked over to the table and bent herself over it. As he watched, she pulled up her tunic and pushed her leggings down past her hips to bare her bottom for him without his even asking, a thing she'd never done before. He knew then that he was finally getting through to her.

He took his time finishing his breakfast and clearing away his things. Then he said, "Stay in that position until you hear the transport pull away from the dock. When you hear that, I want you to go get the Filamith and bring it back here. Then lay yourself out again just like you are right now and wait for me with the Filamith in your right hand."

He left the room without another word and she listened intently for the sound of the transport with its chug-chug-clunking start. As soon as she heard it, she straightened up, arranged her clothes, and walked out to the shed attached to the transport dock where the various small drilling instruments were kept. She saw the shorter Filamith that she didn't mind so much, but she knew it was the longer one he had intended her to bring, so she chose that one and returned with it to the common room. Again, she laid herself carefully over the table and bared her bottom for punishment. She assumed that he would be away for a while and had just settled her mind into a working daydream of how she would rearrange some sample data files when she heard the sound of the transport returning.

Radnok came into the common room and without a word of warning, took the Filamith gently from her hand, and swished its slender length in the air in front of her so that she could see it. Then he took up his position behind her and looked at her beautiful backside, already bruised from the first two days' consequences. The Filamith gave a harsh punishment, but he could use it to direct his swats more carefully. The pain would be intense, but different from that of the first two days. The first ten came down hard and fast on her thighs, an area as yet untouched

by the Filamith. She bounced on her toes and squealed out her pain, but stayed in position.

The next ten swats he gave more slowly and a bit higher up. He tried to be careful not to lay the stripe in the same place too often, but there was only so much flesh to cover. She knew her skin must be a fiery red by now and tried to focus on her breathing. The next ten strokes blended into one another and followed closely on each other. Now she was gasping and yelping with every breath as the Filamith seemed to touch off a new flame each time it descended.

The last twenty strokes, he gave with little regard to where they landed. Each unexpected placement on her skin brought pain and a bit of panic. Would he never stop? Was he going to continue all day? She couldn't take one more stroke, and yet she endured them all without reaching back or straightening up.

As the last stripe lit white on the curved line of her bottom cheek, he reached to help her up and she sobbed her heart out with her cheek on his chest. He knew by her obedience to him that she truly intended to try to rebuild the trust she had damaged. His heart sensed her peace within and let that same peace wash over him.

Peace was the farthest thing from Faith's mind each time she looked over her workstation at the big galumphing hooligan who shadowed her every step. Talvok seemed to be everywhere, always working and examining equipment, always making progress in their investigation, but always under foot. He said little and touched her even less, but she could feel his eyes on her and knew he was watching her every move. She told herself that his behavior annoyed her. She knew, however, that she was a terrible liar.

Day after day, they worked side by side with Vilnek and

Shawna. Week after week, Faith watched as Shawna interacted with a man she trusted more than Faith thought possible to trust any man. Month after month, the data mounted with the mystery, as strange readings and Outbreaks occurred without apparent pattern.

Radplant impulses seemed to come a dozen a day and each time, both men touched their temples and seemed to listen to a message like an announcement on a public address system that only they could hear. Vilnek would then tell Shawna what she should do, and she obeyed without hesitation.

In contrast, Faith would usually try to finish her last job before she complied with his instruction. Vilnek tried to let Talvok handle Faith, but his patience was wearing thinner than a Filamith, which is what he was beginning to think someone was going to have to use on Faith's backside to make her see sense. Her stubborn hesitation could wind up getting them all killed if she delayed operations at the wrong moment. Before it came to that, Faith needed to be made to see reason.

The situation came to a head while the four of them were working outdoors at a site far from any shelter. Vilnek had just been explaining to Talvok how the miners fitted the thin Filamith onto the drilling drone as an extra fitting to bore through the more delicate structures that yielded such pure Stalcon if they could be induced to give up their treasures without collapsing and crushing the drone. Talvok's eyes went wide as he saw how the drone was being abused, as he saw it, and he drew breath to berate his old friend for risky tampering with equipment, when his hand went to his temple. Vilnek's gesture mirrored his as they both listened to the radplant impulse.

"To the transport now! Run!" Vilnek shouted. Shawna turned toward the transport, which she could barely see in the distance and started to run without bothering to stop and drop the Filamith she had been refitting while the men talked.

"Drop it and run faster! Go! Go!" Vilnek shouted and again,

she complied by letting the Filamith go and increasing her speed. "I'll get the drone cover on if you cover the communipads on the table," Vilnek yelled to Talvok who whirled around to do as his friend asked.

As he turned, he saw Faith at the table, still busily typing data into her communipad. Talvok covered the distance to the folding table before he was able to form the words, "What the heck are you still doing here? Run!"

"What's the matter? Why is Shawna running to the transport? You two are still hanging around. What's going on?" Faith stared at Talvok as he ripped the communipad out of her hands and gave her a none too gentle shove in the direction of the transport.

"Would you just go? There's no time to explain. Just run and keep running or you'll regret it, I'm warning you."

"Whatever's coming, I'll just—" and then Faith's words were drowned out by a squishing, squelching sound coming from the southeast.

The grayish slime rained down on the remaining trio of investigators for more than five minutes as they finished covering the equipment. Thick and viscous clumps of goo formed out of the lighter mass of the slimy ooze that splattered sideways on the rocks and equipment covers. The slime accumulated on the ground before Faith realized that she could no longer walk without slipping in the disgusting mess.

"Keep it out of your eyes!" Vilnek warned the others and they could see that he had pulled his tunic up over his head to keep the slime from falling on his face. They quickly followed his lead, but Faith was hampered by her desire to retain her modesty. What extra skin she did expose crawled with disgust as it felt the awful sensation of the sticky, slimy Gooze that itched unpleasantly wherever it stuck. She couldn't raise her tunic that high and so continued to get some of the slime in her face.

"Cover you face, Faith. You want to go blind? No, don't try to

fit into that overhang down there under that rock. It'll put your face too close to the Gooze on the ground. It gets in your eyes, you'll never forget it. Too much of it and you will go blind. Now, get up there on that rock face and turn your face toward it. It won't hurt your skin, but if it gets in your eyes, you've had it. Go on." He tried to help her climb and though she achieved a safe height, her strength was insufficient to allow her to hold on there and she dropped back to the ground.

As she fell the short distance, Talvok dropped to the ground beside her and their squelching landings were almost simultaneous. "Put your arms around my neck and hold on to my back," he ordered her in a voice barely audible above the falling Gooze.

"No, I'll just wait it out here. It won't last long, will it?" Faith countered.

"No telling how long it will last, woman. Just do as I say," he shouted back.

Vilnek agreed with Talvok's idea. From his perch on the cliff face, he tried to yell loud enough to be heard without opening his mouth enough to let any of the Gooze fall in. "It's not safe to stand there in the accumulated muck on the ground. Let him help you and come on. You're putting him in danger, too."

Talvok tried to draw her in to him, but she pulled away. "Look, I can't toss you over my shoulder and carry you up the cliff. If you let me, I'll help you, but you have to come to me now!"

Faith just stood there, irresolute. She simply could not bring herself to put her life in this man's hands. She knew his strength and courage would hold her up, but to admit she needed help from him was beyond her ability. She shook her head and tried again to cover her face with her tunic, raising it up higher and pulling it over her forehead as far as it would go without baring too much of her midriff. "You go on and climb up," she yelled into the din of falling Gooze and high winds. "I'll be fine."

"The heck you will! If this mess doesn't get you, then by gum

when it's over I sure will. Get over here!" He grabbed her again and she fought to pull away so he dragged her to the folding table he had covered and pushed her under it. He thought at least it would afford her some protection as the last of the sticky substance plopped to the ground.

As the worst of the event ended, Vilnek began to hear a strange spinning sound. He risked turning from the rock face in order to determine the source of the noise. What sight met his eyes, but the transport fishtailing wildly from side to side in the grayish Gooze that seemed to be running together and forming large puddles of gunk. "Take your foot off the power pedal. The brakes won't catch in this mess. Just don't give it power and it will stop!" His futile shouts went unheard and within seconds, his heart leapt to his throat as the transport spun wildly out of control and crashed into one of the delicate geological formations that the miners called "pencils." A relatively short specimen, it came crashing down on the transport and brought it to a halt.

As the Gooze gathered in low-lying areas, dry paths formed and Vilnek followed one of these to where the transport had finally come to rest. As he reached for the door, it slid open and Shawna stumbled dazedly into his arms.

"Did it get you? Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Vilnek rushed his questions over her as his hands sought their own answers, gently investigating her face, arms, legs, and torso for signs of injury.

"No, no, I'm not hurt. You gave the warning in time. But are you okay? And Faith didn't come with me. Is she okay? What happened? Where's Talvok?"

"I imagine he's doing exactly what I'm going to do right now, little miss. He's probably taking his assigned companion to a dry spot and blistering her behind!" As Vilnek spoke, he took Shawna by her arm and pushed her back into the transport thinking that they would at least find Gooze-free surfaces and some privacy for what he needed to accomplish.

"But Vilnek, I obeyed you. What did I do wrong? I followed your instructions and I'm fine," she protested.

"And piloting that transport is in the regulations, huh? You often take this thing out for a jaunt, do you? How did you even know how to start it up? You were in more danger doing that than you were from a little gray glop." He indicated the outside mess with his free hand as with his other hand he positioned her over his lap.

She realized he was just upset when he used this very intimate position. He could not spank nearly as hard with her so close to him though he could still make his point. She decided to let him go ahead with what he felt he had to do partly because she knew fighting him was a waste of energy and partly because she craved the closeness a spanking always brought. They had weathered a potentially dangerous crisis, and though usually Gooze was just an annoying practical joke the planet sometimes played on them, being caught out in it had its risks. Now that those risks were past and everyone was safe, she wanted emotional release as much as he did.

He spanked her first with his hand, going full force as fast as he could manage. Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak! The blows rained down all on one spot. She tried to count to keep her mind focused on the moment and after ten swats she noticed he switched his attentions to the other side and began again. Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak! She expected him to slow down, but he never broke his rhythm as he began to lecture, giving several spanks per word.

"You know better than to pilot a transport you know nothing about. I know it looks easy, but it can be tricky. You could have been hurt or hurt someone else. You did damage a valuable pencil. All that Stalcon, gone! And for what? So you could avoid walking over the Gooze? And get to us a little faster? Was it worth all this?"

"No, it wasn't the Gooze. You know I can take that. I just

wanted to get to you faster. I thought someone might have been injured. I didn't realize the transport would fishtail like that. Please, that's enough! I'll never do it again. Please! Ow!"

"You'll never do what again?" he demanded, never pausing in his assault on her rear.

"I'll never try to pilot a transport again," she responded hoping against all previous experience that he would listen to her pleas.

"You've got more of a lesson coming to you when you get home, but for now this will have to do. I haven't got a Filamith handy, or I wouldn't wait. You had me scared to death!" he chided her as he finished his task then brought her upright to hold her close. When she had calmed down enough to spare a thought to them, she wondered what Talvok's reaction to Faith would be. If Shawna had been in trouble, how much more so would poor Faith be in for it now.

Chapter 9

Faith had never been treated this way in her life. She could barely believe it was happening at all when Talvok reached under the table and pulled her sternly to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. "Are you hurt? Did any of that mess get on your eyes? Your mouth? How about your ears? They're all vulnerable." He ran his hands over her, trying to scrape the Gooze off her skin and out of her hair.

"No, no," she assured him. "I'm unhurt. Really, I'm fine. Stop fussing!"

"Stop fussing? You want me to stop fussing? Fine! I'm finished fussing, and ready to start spanking!"

"Now wait just a doggone minute," she returned, alarmed now at his expression as well as his actions. What was he doing with that bucket? Why was he using that trowel to scoop up heaping blobs of that gray disgusting whatever it was and pour them into that bucket? Why was he setting that bucket down near that box?

The next thing she knew, he was seated on that box and she was turned over his knee, bottom up and face down right above

the bucket of seething gray slime. The slime that lay on the ground was rapidly disappearing down cracks in the soil, but he seemed to have kept a sample just for this purpose. The mystery was soon solved as he divested her bottom and legs of clothing and applied the flat of his hand to her up-till-now-unspanked rear end.

"Look at what your disobedience got us! We all three had to stay out in that revolting mess. And why? Just because you refused to follow a simple instruction. How hard would it have been for you to run when we told you run? Huh? How hard could that have been! But no. You had to know the reason. You had to question our judgment. Not just mine, but Vilnek's, too. So I want you to look at that junk you made us stay out in and think about what you could have caused."

The whole time he lectured, his hand came down, swat after stinging swat, regardless of the sting building in his own hand. He held her tightly by her waist and covered her wiggling struggling backside several times over before he paused again to question her. "What was so all fired important that you couldn't run when you were told?"

"You let me up from here right now. I have no intention of arguing with you in this ridiculous position."

"I see you're not ready to see reason yet, so here comes round two," he replied with determination. The series of swats that followed concentrated low on her nether cheeks and on the tender crease between her buttocks and thighs. When he moved down lower, to her upper thighs, he sensed an increased urgency in her struggles. The fact that he had snatched up a length of webbed strapping to deliver those swats may have had something to do with her change of tone when she answered his next, "Are you ready to talk now?"

"Yes! Yes! I'm ready to talk. I'm ready to do what you say. Just please stop this... this... this... absurdity. I'm a grown woman! And you're a grown man. If you had wanted to get to shelter, you

could have done it with or without me. It was just your macho pride that kept you out in the open, not concern for me."

"Wrong answer, number two," he growled. "Here comes round three." He doubled the strapping, catching the ends in his fist and brought it down full force on her backside twenty times without pause. By the end of the count, she was sobbing as she lay over his lap exhausted.

"Don't you understand, it's my duty to protect you? I could no more have left you out there alone than I could have stopped the Gooze itself from falling out of the sky. Now, I don't like doing this to you in anger any more than you like me doing it. But it's got to be done. How much longer are we both going to have to go on like this? All I really want you to do is look down at that bucket of Gooze right there and admit you were wrong to be the cause of us all risking blindness and disfigurement from it. Can you stop your selfish self-pity long enough to do that?"

His words brought her up short and finally something in her sagged. Not just exhaustion, but dejection had her answering him with a whispered, "Was I really responsible? If I had run when you told me to, would you all really have been able to make it to safety in time? Was it just my need to know the reason that could have cost you both so much?"

"You know the answer to that," he stated flatly.

"But you should have left me when I disobeyed you. I deserved it. Why not just let that be my punishment?" she queried, finally still enough to be receptive to his words.

"To leave you would have been too harsh a punishment. A man who cares about a woman will punish her without risk of permanent harm. That Gooze can leave lasting damage. I couldn't let you take that risk."

"But you'll spank me, causing plenty of hurt, let me tell you, in order to punish me for running the risk?"

"I'm not punishing you as much as I am trying to teach you to own up to your actions and to get you to understand why you

should never do that kind of thing again. If this incident is the last time you delay in obeying an instruction, then all the pain will be worth it. And the pain I'm causing you is just temporary. You'll get over it soon enough. There's all the difference in the world between leaving you alone to face who knows what fate, and enduring fate together. I know which way I'd rather have it. How about you?"

The question hung in the air that bristled between them. She didn't answer him, but tried to roll off his lap again. When his left arm held her in place, she lie back down and let her head hang down.

"I'm not done," he told her. "You still haven't done what I asked." She gasped as she realized he was going to continue the spanking and then yelped when the webbing struck her already burning skin. All she could do was sob as he delivered ten more stinging swats. When he stopped again, she was more than ready for him.

"I'm sorry. So sorry. I was wrong to delay obeying you. I was wrong to try to refuse the discipline. I was wrong and selfish to think that I wasn't to blame for our danger. I'm really sorry and I won't be so foolish again."

"That's better," he answered her. "And you weren't totally to blame. I mean, you didn't exactly order up that Gooze storm. I just want you to understand that out here, all our actions are tied up together. We're all dependent on each other. I need you to obey me and you need me to guide you. You don't have the Radplant, and while I do have it, I also have the responsibility to keep you safe. We can't do our jobs well if either of us falls down on our part of the bargain. Do you agree to that?"

After a moment's consideration, she breathed a quiet, "Yes, I agree."

"Well, thank goodness for that!" He sighed with relief. He stood her up and took her into his arms to pat her back and stroke her hair. After a moment of soft closeness, she pulled away,

blushing. After her first spanking, she suddenly didn't know what to say or do. Her first angry mental vows of retribution seemed silly and pointless to her now. She felt that simply going on in as normal a fashion as possible might be best. Shawna had handled her spanking in Pippa's office that way and it seemed to work for her.

Talvok looked around to survey the damage to their work site. It seemed there was nothing beyond repair. Instead of looking around, however, Faith stared intently at the bucket of Gooze. He followed her gaze and picked up the bucket, thinking to empty it into one of the cracks in the ground that seemed to be swallowing up the remaining gray sticky mess. "No, don't pour it out. Wait! It looks familiar. I just can't place it."

"Yeah, it looks familiar to me too, when I recall the last time I sneezed, but it's not polite to talk about bodily fluids like that in mixed company or too near mealtime," he complained.

"Wait. It's not in a tissue that I saw this stuff. It was in my lab. But what? What? Oh, that's right. But it's impossible! Could it be?" She took the bucket from him and turned to walk toward the ruined transport. "Ow! Why does walking hurt so bad? Did the Gooze penetrate my trousers? Oh, yeah, that's right," she remembered with a jolt. "I'll be sore for days."

"You mean you don't remember that lesson after just half a minute? Do I need to teach it to you again right now?" He made some menacing steps toward her, but she quickly backed away covering and rubbing her behind with her free hand.

"No, no, I remember the lesson all right. I was just concentrating too hard on this stuff. It can't be what I think it is, and yet, if I can just get back to the chemicals in that transport, I'll have an answer in a jiffy."

"What are you talking about," he asked her. "What do you think it is?"

"You'll laugh if I tell you. I'm too embarrassed to say anything until I have proof. It's just too absurd," she explained.

"After I just spent the last half hour looking at your bare rump, you'd think there'd be very little left to embarrass you with," he grumbled as he walked by her side back to the transport. He tried to keep his tone teasing, but could not hide his disappointment in her lack of trust.

They both coughed in further embarrassment when they realized that Vilnek and Shawna were not quite ready for interruptions just yet. Shawna hastily pulled her tunic back down while Vilnek turned an irritated scowl on Talvok. "You finished with that Adjustment already? Can't be. Go back and do it again. She needs it and I'll give you the honors. We're busy here." He turned his back to them and began to murmur to Shawna, "Don't worry about them, little one. We were just getting to the good part. Now, as I recall I was about to—" but she cut him off.

"You were about to ask Talvok what he needs, and then we were both going to go help with the cleanup," she declared with a glare full of meaning.

"No, I know for a fact I had no kind of asking or cleaning on my mind before this son of a Fensel barged in and messed everything up."

Shawna blushed, and punched him on the shoulder, while Talvok grinned at them and said, "Sorry to break up the party, but Faith needs some chemicals out of here. Anything survive Shawna's driving spectacle?"

Shawna gave him a gentle shove in mock outrage and exited the transport before Vilnek could embarrass her further.

Six chemicals, eight sample tubes, one microscope, and seventeen various other implements later, Faith showed each member of the team in turn what she now concluded was totally though impossibly true. "The Gooze is in fact the larval state of the Serpiac. Of that, I have no more doubt. Look at that cell structure. There's no mistaking it. Look at that chemical analysis. It's irrefutable."

"But it's preposterous," Talvok countered. "How could the

larval, or any other state of the Serpiac, reach the surface? No known examples of Serpiac have ever survived even when maintained in lab conditions without air. They need the rock's pressure, heat, and resistance to live."

"I know all that," Faith replied. "That doesn't change the test results that I have just confirmed now three times. This gray mass of overgrown pond slime is indeed Serpiac."

Shawna's face paled and she backed away. After what she had witnessed poor Willa suffering, her dread of the creatures turned her stomach. Vilnek noticed and suggested they return to his minestead for further study and a conference with Pippa.

"There is a closer minestead. As I recall, the miner is some guy named Choldor. We should just head there," Talvok put in.

"All right then. Choldor's clifftop it is," agreed Vilnek as he packed up the last of the equipment and loaded it onto the newly repaired transport.

On the trip to Choldor's minestead, the conversation started out benignly enough. "That was a fast repair job, Vilnek. How did that pencil thing stop the transport anyway? I thought pencils were delicate?" queried Faith.

"They're delicate in comparison to the cliff faces and rock surfaces. They're not really that delicate and they're generally heavy, though some you can knock over with your hand if you hit them right. And the transport is designed to halt on any impact. It's a safety feature," Vilnek explained.

"All our equipment is designed with complete safety in mind. That's why I can't believe the Gooze is any form of Serpiac. Our systems are closed for optimal safety," Talvok reasoned. "The Gooze is fairly acidic itself, but it won't even go through much cloth, so forget about rock. How would they Outbreak with no acid to bore through the rock for them?"

"There are always the mineshafts themselves," Faith countered.

"Oh, wouldn't you love it if my equipment were to blame for Gooze? But it's not possible. The mineshafts our drones dig were designed to also expose the shaft to air so that any Serpiac they happened to encounter would be exposed and exterminated. The Gooze isn't killed by air, but when we planned for Serpiac, we planned also for the possibility of other contaminants. There are no hollow parts to the drilling drones that could bring unwanted substances up to the surface. I say again, it's just not possible. And as I recall it, the Gooze rained down on us. It wasn't swirling up from the ground. How'd it get up in the sky? Did it somehow slide itself up the mineshaft, jump into the atmosphere, then suddenly decide to obey the law of gravity for a minute and come down again?"

"I didn't say I had all the answers," Faith admitted. "I only know that the Gooze is Serpiac."

"I can explain the falling aspect," Shawna offered. "It's purely theoretical, but I have read your reports and papers, Faith. You describe the larval stage as beginning in the total absence of air or water. The adult breeding Serpiac provide water as the larvae develop. Isn't that right?"

"That's how we think it happens, though as I said, no one knows for sure. We can't keep the adult Serpiac alive long enough to observe the process firsthand. And I've only seen most of this through a microfilament camera inserted through a tiny borehole. Can't see much that way."

"Well, what if the larvae start out as more of a powdery substance that could get drawn upwards with a draft of air from the surface, then blow into the atmosphere where it comes into contact with water vapor in small quantities. The more humid the climate, the faster this would happen. With enough water, the larvae would develop along the lines we've seen today. It would go from powdery to slimy, form globs too heavy to stay airborne, and fall to the surface again."

"But Serpiac die when exposed to air!" Talvok shouted as he

pounded his fist on the arm of his pod. "If the Gooze were Serpiac, they'd die as soon as they hit the air!"

"We don't know for sure that the larval Serpiac would die in air. I've never exposed them. I was concentrating on keeping the adult breeding Serpiac alive. It's possible the larvae could withstand exposure to air!" Faith argued right back.

Talvok took a deep breath and tried to calm down. His voice held a forced calm while his words revealed his passion. "That may make sense as a theory, but we come up on the practical problem again of the equipment. All substances brought up from the substrata are exposed to air in the process of being pumped out. Then they go directly into the processing containers. It's a closed system, with the air added at that point through a one-way valve so that nothing just spills or, in this case, escapes from underground into the open. Nothing! So what if they survive air. They're still trapped."

"You're just defending your equipment, Talvok," Faith accused. "You've got to keep an open mind about this. It's not as if anyone is accusing you of unleashing Serpiac themselves into the open. This Gooze, as you call it, is not nearly as dangerous as Serpiac. You had no way of knowing you needed to design against its escape. No system is perfect."

"If this junk can get out, something else, even worse maybe, could get out. Our equipment is designed to block all contamination of the surface." Talvok's coiled tension and Faith's haughty disdain sizzled in the air.

Vilnek thought it was about time to intervene before this pair of hotheads got too rowdy for safe transport travel. There was nothing worse than a fight between two civilized academic over-achievers. "We'll just have to inspect Choldor's drones when we get there and see if we find any trace of the Gooze or any place it could possibly hide to come to the surface. Of course, Choldor's place isn't the best location to find anything related to Serpiac. In fact, when we get there, we'll know that if there are

Serpiac present they will be in this bucket. If your theory is true, then maybe all the larvae exit the rock and blow somewhere else. All I know is, they seem to avoid higher elevations and stick to the low country."

"I don't blame them," murmured Shawna. "I hate heights. At the selection meeting, I was quite impressed with Choldor," Shawna remarked to Faith as they sped in the transport toward their goal. "But I put him on my refusal list just because of his location. It's sad, you know. The girls that don't mind his location seem to hate his scar or his huge size. The girls that don't mind his outward appearance can't seem to get over the isolation of his minestead or the heights. There's always something, poor man. As far as I know, he's never had a companion."

She totally forgot her fear of heights, however, in her shock when she arrived at the door of Choldor's minestead to be greeted by a shyly smiling Claire.

While Vilnek helped the two experts unload their equipment, Shawna caught Claire in the kitchen and questioned her about her change of heart. "I thought you said from the time we first met that you'd go with anybody, accept any assignment except Choldor. You were afraid of him. What happened?"

Claire giggled and looked happier than Shawna had ever seen her. At Radnok's minestead, she had been cheerfully determined. When she lived with Shawna and Vilnek, she had been content and serene. But never in their acquaintanceship had she seemed so blissfully happy.

"It's a long story and I want to tell it to you. Maybe tonight after dinner we'll find some time."

"That'll be fine, then," she agreed. "But I want all the juicy details."

Vilnek contacted Choldor using the voice Enabler on his Radplant and he agreed to cut his workday short in order to assist the investigation. He told Vilnek to tell Claire to open up the equipment sheds for them and start up the drones for inspec-

tion, but Vilnek doubted that she would feel confident enough to comply with this request. His doubts were confirmed when he passed along Choldor's instruction.

"Oh, Vilnek, I couldn't. What if I messed something up? I don't like to go near those sheds when Choldor's away," she fussed.

"I'll be with you the whole time," he reassured her. "I won't let anything go wrong. But I don't know the access codes and it just wouldn't be right, going into another miner's equipment like that. Come with me and I'll make sure everything is fine."

As she followed him out the door wringing her hands, Faith turned to Shawna. "What's with her?" she asked. "Is she always such a mouse? If I lived on a minestead like this, I'd be sure I knew the workings of it from A to Z. She seems to be afraid of her own shadow."

"Claire's the sweetest girl in the world, Faith, but her self-confidence is so low it gives a mineshaft a run for its money seeing which can go lower. The mineshaft usually loses. She's got lots to offer, but nobody knows it because she's too shy to let anyone see. Radnok was really good at bringing her out and not letting her get away with hiding herself from other people, but he and Willa are together now, and Claire's on her own again. Vilnek tried to be gentle with her, but he was too impatient to put up with her long, and too tenderhearted to be firm with her. I wonder how it's working out with Choldor. She seems very happy, but I can't see how. She's so tiny and he's so huge, not to mention gruff and a bit awkward."

"What is he, some kind of giant?" Faith inquired.

"Somebody call me?" a low rumbling voice boomed from the front door. "One giant at your service."

The man who appeared in the entrance of the minestead looked down on the two women with a gentle sadness in his eyes. He grinned to show that he was joking, just in case they hadn't caught on, and the scar that ran jaggedly down his cheek puck-

ered white against his florid face. Faith worked hard not to wince and wondered how difficult life must be for someone who looked more friendly when he scowled than when he smiled.

"Well, Choldor, how good to see you," Shawna exclaimed, approaching him with arms outstretched. "It's been a while since the last picnic. How have you been?"

"Better than ever, truth be told," he admitted with another of those awkward grins. He glanced into the kitchen and asked, "Is she still here?"

"Of course, she's still here, you big lug," Shawna admonished him. "She's not the type to run out on an assignment. She seemed happier than I've ever seen her, in fact. Why would she want to leave? She's not sick again, is she? She looked fine."

"No, she's not sick. Healthy as a horse. No Serpiac up here," he looked relieved as he answered. "So where is she?" he asked, bringing the topic back round to what interested him most. "Where's my companion?" This last he shouted loudly enough to be heard on the next minestead and Faith winced. He seemed to enjoy the sound of that last word and repeated it, more loudly than before if that were possible. "*Companion!*"

"She's out at the sheds with Vilnek, Choldor," Shawna hastened to assure him and keep him from giving another of his earsplitting shouts. "What do you mean when you say there's no Serpiac here? Why do you relate Serpiac to Claire being healthy?" Shawna had grown alert to the slightest mention of the dreaded threat, so his casual comment raised red flags in her mind.

Choldor ignored her question, however, and pursued his own query. "But Vilnek's there, right? So she should be back by now. I'd better go see if she's all right," he announced anxiously as he headed back out the door.

"She's fine, Choldor," Shawna informed him. "She wouldn't go out there at first, but Vilnek said he'd go with her to help her and they're probably just getting the drones ready for inspection.

Now, please, tell me what you meant about there being no Serpiac up here."

"She wouldn't do as I told her?" Choldor seemed not to hear her question at all. He gave the impression of making a mental note as much as asking a question, and Shawna thought she recognized that tone of voice as similar to the one Vilnek used when he had an Adjustment in mind.

"Oh, she went, all right. She's there now. Really, she did as you asked. Why don't we sit down and wait for them? You can catch me up on what's been happening here. Did you know that I wasn't even aware that Claire was here with you? I'm afraid with all the travel for the investigation, I've lost touch with all my friends. And speaking of investigation, tell me what you mean by that Serpiac comment, Choldor. I really need to know."

"We'll catch up at dinner, Shawna. I'd better go see about Claire," he responded. He left the room before she had a chance to detain him further.

"He looks a bit miffed," Faith observed.

"And that is not a man I'd like to have miffed at me," Shawna agreed. "Man, I hope I haven't gotten Claire into trouble."

Chapter 10

It took Choldor no time at all to arrive at the sheds where Vilnek, Talvok, and Claire were working. It took him even less time to walk up behind Claire and lift her off her feet. Hugging her to him, he took just a moment to enjoy the feel of her against him before he started questioning her. "Did you obey me? Are those men supposed to be out here bringing these drones out for inspection? That was your job. You're allowed to come to the sheds and operate the drones for as long as it would take to do the job I asked of you. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, sir, and I'm sorry I disobeyed," she admitted, still embracing him.

"Then you know what you need to do. Get back to the house and get ready. *Now!*" Choldor told her. As she scurried out into the sunlight, Choldor turned to the other two men and shook their hands. "I'll be back in a minute," was the only explanation he offered before he followed Claire more slowly into the main building.

Talvok and Vilnek gaped first at Choldor's back and then at

each other. Talvok expressed his surprise first. "What do you think he's going to do?"

"You know what he's going to do. He figures she owes him obedience and he's going to take it out of her hide," Vilnek replied with acceptance.

"But she didn't do anything. He can't spank her for being scared to operate these big old drones by herself," Talvok argued.

"He can do anything he darn well wants. How a man runs his minestead is pretty much his business. You know that. And you saw how hard she hugged him. That's not a woman afraid of her assignment, or I'll eat my Filamith."

"It just doesn't seem right." Talvok shook his head as he pitched in to resume the work Choldor's arrival had interrupted. "Talk about Beauty and the Beast."

Vilnek took a moment to reflect before he answered. "Don't let his looks fool you. Choldor is one of the best men out here. I have to say, I would even trust him to take care of Shawna. He'll do what's best for Claire. Let's just leave him to it."

Claire passed Faith and Shawna silently on her way to the back workroom. When Choldor passed them a few moments later looking grim, Shawna tried to question him. "Hey, Choldor! What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"It will be in about ten minutes. Why don't you ladies go out to the sheds and help with the drones, all right? I'd consider it a personal favor," Choldor replied.

The women looked at each other and then rose to find their way to the sheds. It was exactly seventeen minutes later by Shawna's watch when Choldor appeared again in the sheds. Shawna and Faith took that as their cue to return to the main building where they found a smiling Claire absentmindedly rubbing her behind in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"All right, pal," Shawna declared. "Spill it. What is going on here? Explain that smirk on your face instantly or I'll call Choldor back and tell him he missed a spot. What gives?"

"No, don't call Choldor. What he gave me was just perfect. I don't require any more, thanks. You know, Shawna, I never thought this could happen to me, especially not with someone as big and frightening as Choldor. I must admit, I can be a bit of a mouse at times and I'm not happy about it, but there it is. But something about that big oaf just gets me going. He's just the cutest thing."

"I can think of quite a few adjectives to describe him, but 'cute' doesn't make the list. That mammoth just wailed on your behind for seventeen minutes and you think he's cute?" Faith asked, amazed.

"Oh, that's when he's cutest. He makes this big deal about it all, you know. We have this whole ritual, where I have to go to the corner, then face the middle of the room, then pull my tunic up, then turn to face the corner before I pull my leggings down. If I do any step out of order, he makes me do it again and gives me swats for it. Then he stands and watches me while I'm waiting. If I fidget or twitch, he swats me again. Then he calls me over and tells me what position to get in. If I hesitate at all, I have to start again and he swats me for that too. I have to be very precise and careful to get it right. I never know what position he'll want me to take, but once I'm there I have to answer all his questions and then, after all that build up and hoopla... he gives me the absolute sweetest little swats you can ever imagine. He usually gives me about fifty or so, but I could take ten times that, actually."

"You mean, he doesn't make sure he gets his point across? That doesn't sound like Choldor," Shawna observed.

"Well, really he does make me pay attention. I mean, I work hard to make sure I don't have to get his brand of discipline. It's a point of pride with me. And I want to please him. He knows

I'm trying. I guess that's why he's going so easy on me. Radnok spanked ten times as hard, the one time he did it. Choldor doesn't spank hard at all, but he does it almost every day. I kind of like it this way better. I know what he's thinking. And I get a lot of his attention. He's always asking me things and talking to me. He tells me when I'm doing a good job, too. Sometimes I didn't know for sure with the other assignments I had. I guess this assignment is just about my favorite one yet. I love being here."

"You certainly sound happy," Shawna smiled. "And look happy, too. Maybe this soft spanking thing will catch on. I'll have to tell Vilnek about it."

"Don't you dare!" exclaimed Claire in alarm. "You can't let on to Choldor that I think he spanks softly. He might get tough with me, and that's just what I don't want. I know he's capable of it, because I've had hard spankings from him, too. I like things the way they are now. You'll just have to live with the adjustments Vilnek gives you and leave us out of it." Her tone turned teasing as she finished her comments and then carried on with a grin to threaten Shawna. "You let on to Choldor that he's going easy on me, and I'll tell Willa that you got an adjustment right there in Pippa's office."

"How did you hear about that?" Shawna demanded in mock outrage. "Vilnek did that in her office supposedly to give me some privacy. Does the whole planet know about it?"

"Just anyone who happens to know anyone with any connection to Pippa. You can't blame her for explaining that those sounds coming from her office that day weren't caused by her. Then folks just put two and two together and realized it must have been you and Vilnek." Claire shrugged and giggled at her friend's blush.

"Speaking of Pippa, I'm going to go out and hurry the men along. We still need to have that conference with Pippa and fill her in. And I want to get at those trace samples to see what we find out about the Gooze."

Pippa encouraged the team once they all finally gathered around the Linkset to confer with her. She took their preliminary findings and promised to report them directly to Falsan. She seemed surprised that the team had visited Choldor's minestead but understood that they had wanted the closest location for a conference. Her doubts about how Choldor would react to having guests now that he had a companion were justified, however.

Talvok's solicitous attitude toward Claire that evening did not sit well with Choldor in the least. All through dinner and the conversation that followed, Choldor shot suspicious glances at the equipment expert as he tried to engage the shy Claire in teasing banter. Claire politely encouraged comments from all her guests but gave Talvok no special attention. Finally, the time came for Claire to appear for her security check in her quarters and be sealed in for the night. The other ladies planned to share her roomy quarters with her, so they all settled in for a chat.

"Now's the perfect time for you to tell us all about the selection meeting where Choldor got you. I can't wait to hear it," Shawna started right in pumping her friend for information as soon as they all settled down.

"I don't imagine Faith wants to hear my boring little story," Claire demurred.

"But I do want to hear all about it," Faith contradicted. "I find this whole selection and assignment thing fascinating. You companions are so brave to risk participating in this program. I would never have the guts."

"Guts? That's not what got me into the program. I had nowhere else to go. I was broke, with no skills and no future. My apartment on my home world got broken into for the third time before I finally had to admit that I needed a bit more security. I just wanted a nice safe place to live. The companion program offered that and more. When I heard that the crime rate here is practically nil, I had to take a chance on it."

"With all the security technology, and so few people on the planet, it would be hard to have very much crime here. Bad things can happen and they do, but not nearly as often as on my home world, either. I have to admit, that was one of the things that attracted me here, too," Shawna put in.

"It was a major factor for me. My dead end job barely paid enough to live on. I couldn't afford even a safe neighborhood, much less as nice a place as this, or the other minesteads I've lived on. And I've really enjoyed this one best. I've been here five weeks now and not a bit of trouble with that sickness."

"Choldor mentioned something about you being healthy and not a sign of Serpiac here. What was he talking about?" Shawna queried.

"The Serpiac? That leads right into the topic of the selection meeting, if you really want to hear about it. It's a long, boring story. You sure you want me to tell it?" Assured that both of the others wanted to hear, she continued.

"It started with my second selection meeting. It was hard for me to find a miner willing to take me on since I'd been so ill. There were a few to choose from, including Choldor, but I was still too afraid to look at him. His size, you know, and that scar, you must admit are a bit intimidating. I was chosen by a miner in another low-lying area, and sure enough, by about the second week, I was back on the medicinal supplements just to stay upright. That man wasn't nearly as understanding as Radnok was. When the Serpiac Outbroke near his minestead, he sent me back to headquarters saying he couldn't deal with Serpiac and a sickly companion, too.

"It happened twice more in the same way, and there were other companions, and miners as well, become ill. Some of them got so sick they had to leave Trellian. As for me, I'd get sick and two or three weeks later, Outbreak. By my sixth selection meeting, no one would even talk to me. Though some of the girls were nice, most of the miners treated me like a jinx. But not

Choldor. Meeting after meeting, he always talked to me and spent time with me when the other miners made it clear they had no interest in me.

"It was Pippa who suggested I should give Choldor a try. She seemed to know that he wouldn't really try to convince me. She told me that he was about the best man out here and well respected by all. She guaranteed me that if I would just try it for one week, she'd make up some excuse to get me back to headquarters if I wanted after that. So I put him as my preference. What choice did I have? Even with Pippa's promises, I was still terrified.

"As soon as Choldor realized that I had listed him on my preference sheet, he tried to let me out of it, as if he figured that I had just accepted him in a moment of weakness and must surely regret it by then. 'Claire,' he says, 'I know you're scared of me. I would never hurt you, but you have no way of knowing that. Please don't feel like you have to accept me. Some of these guys owe me some favors. I'll talk to them for you if you want.' Then this really hopeful look came into his face for a moment and he went on, 'Unless you would consider taking a chance on me. I promise you won't regret it. I'll treat you like a queen, now, won't I? I'll keep you safe and be the best assignment any companion ever had.' Then he kind of went all sad again and said, 'But I guess that's too much to hope for. Which miner would you really like to be assigned to? I'll see what I can do.'

"I told him, 'If you have any pull with these fellows, there is one I'm very interested in. He's really sweet but just too shy. He's too down on himself and I'd like to go with him partly to let him know that he really is well-respected around here, and partly just because I think he'd be fun to work with.' Choldor looked all sad and resigned and asked me again what his name was. So I said, 'His name is Choldor and if he goes trying to get rid of companions much more, Pippa's likely to bop him one on the head. Of course, she'll have to get a ladder to do it.'

"And then he laughed. He actually laughed. I'd never seen him laugh before. Have you ever seen him laugh, Shawna?"

Through her happy tears, Shawna shook her head.

Claire handed her a tissue and took one for herself before continuing. "It's a sight to behold, let me tell you. First he laughed, then he just stared at me for the longest time, and finally nodded his head once and stood up. 'I'll see you in the morning at the transport dock then,' says he, just like it was the most normal thing in the world for me to tease him and him to laugh. But I slept a happy sleep that night on the strength of that laugh alone. I knew when I heard him laugh that everything would be fine. And it has been."

"So I guess Pippa was over the moon that you took a chance on him, huh?" Shawna sniffled.

"She told me later that she didn't even cross check the other miners' lists to see if any of them had changed their minds and listed me as a preference. When she saw that we had each listed the other, she says she immediately did a victory dance and made the assignment. Choldor would shoot her if he knew she tried to influence my decision, but I'm so glad she did. This has been the best thing to happen to me ever."

"Well, you sure look happy. So let me get this straight. When he got you home, he just started spanking you at the drop of a hat like that and you just went along with it?" Faith was a bit incredulous still.

"Oh, no," explained Claire. "He didn't start out this way at all. It was a little, well, you know, awkward at first. He tried to treat me like a guest or some kind of china doll. I tried to help around the minestead and do the work I've learned to do now on all the various minesteads. He wouldn't let me. Just kept saying how I should relax, and get settled in, and stuff. Since he was always working, doing things that I should have been helping with, I got terribly bored." Here she covered her mouth and giggled again, looking embarrassed. "I can't believe now all the

terrible things I did, just out of boredom. I mean, I've never done anything like that before."

"What?" Shawna demanded. She could not believe that sweet, darling Claire would do anything even remotely mischievous, much less truly terrible. "What in this world did you do?"

"Well, for starters, I put salt instead of sugar in the sugar bowl. When Choldor sipped his coffee that morning, he spat it all over the table. Instead of getting mad at me, he apologized to me for making a mess. I couldn't believe it. So that afternoon, I unscrewed all the light bulbs from their sockets just enough so that they wouldn't work. Choldor worked on the circuitry for three hours apologizing all the while before he finally figured out what I had done. I kept doing little things like that to annoy him, and let me tell you, it got hard to think things up. By the end of the first week, I was repeating some of my tricks just to have something else to pull. He always just apologized like my obnoxious behavior was somehow his fault.

"I don't really know what I was expecting, or what got into me. I guess I wanted to get him mad enough that he would stop being so nice to me. I just kept thinking that I would like to be a bigger help to him if only he would let me. I was also tired of being told to take it easy and relax."

"I take it he finally had enough. What straw actually broke the camel's back?" Faith asked.

"It wasn't any of my silly practical jokes. Once he realized what I was doing, he tried to pretend like he thought they were funny. And that's what brought it to a head. That afternoon I crossed all the wires in the control panel so that when he went to turn on the lights, for example, the computer turned on the music, and when he tried to turn on the fan, the smoke detector went off. After he tried to warm up his coffee and the seating pod started its massaging function instead, he just hung his head and I thought for a minute he was going to cry. He just said, 'So now I know why you wanted to come here. You wanted to make fun

of me. I should have known I'd never be able to get a companion to live up here with me. You probably have a bet on with the other girls as to how long it'll take me to catch on.'

"Well, of course then I exploded. I told him that if that's what he thought of me, he could go kiss a tree, which would be pretty hard since there aren't any trees up here anyway. Then I stomped out of the minestead and wouldn't stop when he called me back. In fact, I was so mad that I did something I never thought I'd do. I hid from him and wouldn't come out. He's so big he just walked on by several hiding places I could have fit into. I finally started crying and he found me that way.

"He didn't seem to mind me crying, though. He just picked me up and carried me back to the minestead where he proceeded to spank the living daylights out of me. He about wore me out with his hand over my leggings and then reached over and got a ruler off the desk to give me at least another hundred on the bare. That spanking hurt like nothing I'd ever felt from Radnok, that's for sure. Choldor just kept on and on, smacking that ruler down all over my bottom and thighs, harder and harder. He lectured the whole time, too, and made me feel like a classic, all time champion heel. He told me how worried he was when he couldn't find me and how I should never leave the minestead without permission again. He said if I did, I'd get a real spanking, and this was just a warmup. When he finally let me up, well, I flung myself into his arms and cried my heart out. I apologized for all the dumb stuff I had done and told him I just did it for attention.

"He asked me then if I wanted to stay and I told him of course I did, if he would just let me do the job I came up here with him to do. From then on, things got better. He started letting me do more and more things with him and then made me do some things by myself that I was a little afraid to do. He's still very particular about where I go and when, but if he decides I can do something, I'd better do it. Just like you saw today. I know

I can get those drones out and working myself. It's not that hard. I was just embarrassed to do it with Vilnek and Talvok around, in case I messed up and they saw me. But I should have done it and after I let Vilnek do it, I realized I would need to confess it to Choldor later and he'd take care of it. Well, he did." She rubbed her backside as if to confirm that Choldor had indeed done a thorough job.

"But if Choldor doesn't spank hard enough, why are you sore, then?" Faith asked.

"Oh, I didn't say he doesn't spank hard enough," Claire replied. "I just said he doesn't spank hard. Compared to Radnok, or some of the other miners I've dealt with, Choldor usually doesn't spank me hard anymore. But see, he spansks often. What other miners would just shrug off, Choldor takes me to task for. So I get more spankings and they kind of buildup. The effect is the same. I'm still a bit sore sometimes and it's very motivational." Claire and Shawna grinned conspiratorially, but Faith looked pensive.

Out in the common room, conversation turned to the anonymous message Vilnek received the day before he and Shawna went to meet Talvok and Faith. "I wanted to tell you about that, Vilnek," Talvok stated. "That meeting actually happened out at my Dad and Mom's house. My dear brother was invited to dinner there, along with Pippa and me. He was supposed to leave while we worked out the details together, but I wouldn't put it past him to have eavesdropped on us somehow. He could have sent that message that night."

"We've got to be on the alert, then. I haven't thought about Bilvon much, with all that's been going on," Vilnek answered.

"You don't have to worry about Bilvon here," Choldor

sounded slightly offended. "I can protect my companion and my guests. There's no more secure minestead on the planet."

"No offense meant, pal. We know we're safe here. But we'll have to move on back to my minestead tomorrow. Best turn in now and be well-rested for the trip," Vilnek suggested.

In the passage, Choldor stopped Talvok and looked down at him with a searching gaze. "You like my little Claire, don't you?" he asked simply.

"Yes, I do," Talvok replied. "If you don't treat her well, I'll hear about it. She doesn't have to stay here, you know."

"I know that," Choldor growled. "I can't believe I've been lucky enough to keep her as long as I have. She's free to go any time she wants. Vilnek can take her with your group when you leave, if she wants to go. But while she's on my place, she's still my assignment and you stay away from her."

The next morning, Faith explained to Talvok and Vilnek something of the jinx rumor that had circulated around Claire. "I want to take some readings and samples from Claire and see what I come up with. I don't think a person can actually attract Serpiac, but she could be somehow sensitive to them. If I can find a way to cross check her illnesses with the strange readings from the equipment, it may help us."

"And the Gooze? Did you find anything in the trace samples we gave you yesterday?" Talvok wanted to know.

"There were no traces of Gooze here. But that doesn't prove anything. We need a place that has already had an Outbreak incident so that we can take trace samples off that equipment. Choldor's minestead was close, so I'm glad we came here, but with no reported irregular readings and no Serpiac Outbreak, I think this isn't the most helpful location to us," Faith observed.

"We'll head out to Radnok's then before we go on to my

place. He's had the irregular readings and an Outbreak. Get your readings from Claire, Faith, and we'll be on our way."

Talvok approached Claire as Faith was finishing her procedures. "We've got plenty of room on the transport, Claire. Why not come with us? You don't have to stay here, you know."

Claire and Faith both laughed out loud before they turned to stare at Talvok as if he'd lost his mind.

"Why in this world would I want to go anywhere?" Claire asked, still chuckling. "Choldor is the greatest assignment on Trellian. This minestead is the most beautiful place on Trellian. If I get my way, I'll never leave here again." Then she blushed as she saw Choldor appear behind Talvok.

"You really mean that, sweetheart?" Choldor asked in a choked whisper.

With her face still bright red, Claire answered shyly, "Yes, I mean it with all my heart."

Faith and Talvok sneaked away as quietly as they could, leaving Choldor kissing Claire as if he would never let her go. It crossed Faith's mind that this Peace Initiative seemed to help couples communicate and get along under very stressful circumstances. She even admitted to herself that she felt differently about Talvok after her Adjustment yesterday. If it worked for Shawna and Claire, as it obviously did....

"I just want to say good-bye to Claire and then I'll be ready," Shawna said as she headed for the back workroom where Faith had taken the samples from Claire.

"You don't want to go back there just now," Faith told her, as Talvok caught her arm gently and pulled her back up the passage with them. "Believe me, they don't need any interruptions at this point. We can call them later on the Linkset. Surely they'll come up for air by the time we get to Radnok's."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," observed Talvok. "He looked like a man with a mission to me."

The transport sped along the faint track in the wastelands

that surrounded Radnok's minestead. As they neared their destination, Vilnek used his Enabler to contact Radnok and let him know when to expect them. He had no way of knowing that someone else was near enough to pick up the signal on a contraband interceptor and use the information to form his own plans.

Chapter 11

Bilvon's face showed no emotion as he watched Radnok's minestead. His desire for revenge on Willa for leaving him so openly had made him grow even colder and more vindictive in the past few months. He gloated over her now disfigured face, but since Radnok made no move to eject her from his minestead, Bilvon still felt the frustration and bitterness of humiliation. That she preferred an old worn out miner to the son of the mine owner, the most important miner on this planet, and the heir to the entire operation, stood as an intolerable affront to his pride.

His plan employed simplicity, cunning, and opportunism in equal measure. He monitored Radnok's communications, waiting for the right time to strike. When it came, he would recognize it and bring all his technical skills into play. His brother, Talvok, was not the only member of the family who knew his way around a circuit board or a computer hard drive. Everything in these minesteads was controlled by computer, and Bilvon knew the technical specifications by heart now. All he needed was the chance to put both Radnok and Vilnek out of commission at the

same time in order to get Willa away and make her more than sorry for humiliating him that way.

He'd been waiting now for Vilnek to arrive since he had used his illegal receiver to intercept the Enabler message between Vilnek and Radnok. His transport hidden in a nearby rock formation and invisible from the usual transport route, Bilvon bided his time. He'd wait until Willa came out to the sheds to check the generator like she did every mid-day, then quietly start his attack. Only a few hours left to wait, he thought. That's not very long at all.

"Good to see you all," Radnok greeted the group and Willa stood behind him, smiling shyly. Talvok kept his gaze away from Willa's scars, but Faith couldn't help being interested in a professional capacity. She also wanted to get started right away on the samples Claire had provided and soon Willa was helping her at the Linkset connected to the other bio-analysis equipment.

"I'd like to borrow your Filamith and a quiet shed, if you don't mind," Vilnek requested of Radnok. "I've got a bit of unfinished business with Shawna and we might as well get it over with here."

Radnok provided the Filamith and showed his friends where they could have some time alone.

"But this isn't necessary, Vilnek," Shawna tried to protest. "You already punished me and I promised never to pilot a transport again. What else was there? This isn't fair."

"Was it fair of you to scare me half to death like that? I gave you the rest of yesterday to recover, but I want to make it clear to you that you will not be allowed to endanger yourself, ever! Period! End of discussion! Danger to you equals spanking from me. Any questions?" he inquired as he positioned her over a low worktable and adjusted her clothing to the way he wanted it.

"No, no questions, but I still don't think this is, *ow!* I wasn't ready. Wait! Ow! Please, not the Filamith. You know I—*ow*—hate that thing. Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"I don't need to hear, '*ow!*'" he instructed her. "I want to hear, 'I'm sorry' with every stroke I lay on this beautiful little backside of yours. Got it, little miss?"

"Yes, sir," she gasped as he brought the Filamith down hard on her right cheek. "I'm sorry!" she squeaked. "I'm sorry!" she moaned. "I'm sorry!" she wailed one last time before she completely broke down in sobs. He rubbed her back for a moment waiting for her to calm down.

She thought the spanking was over and waited to be told she could stand up when the Filamith landed once more on her already burning rump. She yelped and covered her backside with her hands in sheer surprise.

"No hands! Move them now," he instructed.

Shawna reluctantly stopped rubbing her bottom and moved her hands out of the way of the evilly biting Filamith. It's hollow core made a whistling noise when he swung it this hard and the whistle warned her just in time before he brought it down again on her blazing posterior.

"I'm sorry," she wailed again. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She could no longer keep up with his strokes so instead she just kept repeating the words over and over again as he brought the flexible fire down onto her scorched flesh. She knew her bottom had to be redder than a dusty sunset by the time he finished. She wouldn't be able to sit normally for a week. She was waiting again for him to tell her to stand up when he brought his hand down five more times with sharp harsh strokes on her already throbbing behind.

"That's five little extras for reaching back," he informed her as she gasped. "Don't do that again, or the next extras will be with the pipe insulation. It leaves more of a mark to remember it by." His tone was harsh, but his hands were suddenly tender and

comforting as he gathered her in his arms and kissed her tears away. "I want you safe by my side, always, little one. That's why I'm so strict with you. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded her agreement. As they walked back to the minestead's main building, Shawna considered again how the choices she had made had totally transformed her life. Now she had a man who cared enough about her to protect her and punish her when she did foolish or dangerous things. She had never felt more cherished and loved.

As he returned the Filamith to its owner, Vilnek thanked his host. "You know I like the pipe insulation, but this Filamith has got its merits."

"Here, let me see that thing," Talvok requested. "What is it, anyway?"

"Haven't I shown you this before? Yeah, I have. I started telling you about it when we got interrupted by Gooze," Vilnek answered. "It's a Filamith. It's great for drilling in the pencils. You know, those thin tall formations that are so good at stopping transports piloted by erring companions? They're usually chock full of Stalcon, but any drill bit more substantial than this breaks 'em up so they can't be mined. This little flexible bit does the trick like nothing you equipment specialists sent us."

"But it's hollow," Talvok protested in his deep concentration. "You don't use it for deep drilling, do you? You don't go below the surface with it?" An idea was dawning in his mind that he could hardly stand to contemplate.

"Sure we do. It goes down just great," Radnok put in. "I figured it out myself, how to hollow out the plexilat and attach it to the standard drill drone so that we could drill through the pencils without disturbing them. Pretty handy, if I do say so myself."

"Then there is a way that the Serpiac could get to the surface. This Filamith is hollow. It drills through a nesting area and up come the larvae like they were on an elevator. Faith was right. The Gooze *could* be Serpiac larvae."

"What are you talking about," Radnok demanded. "Are you saying that my invention is helping Serpiac?"

"No, the Filamith doesn't help the Serpiac, but it does help get them more widely distributed. As Gooze powder, the Serpiac can travel through the air and then land in more out of the way places. That explains the wider distribution area recently. It could also explain the strange readings all the sensors are putting out. If there's any Serpiac residue coming up inside one of these Filamith things, the sensors on the drill will pick it up and give strange readings."

When the men explained their theory to Faith, she exploded. "I knew it! And that must be why Claire is getting sick, too. I'll bet the Gooze that comes up causes an allergic reaction in some people. The caustic composition of the Serpiac would irritate the immune system. She's just allergic to the Serpiac dust. Bring me scrapings off the Filamiths that have been used on the drill drones and I'll see if I can confirm our conjectures using the Gooze I've got back in the containment unit and Claire's specimen samples. If her samples react to the scraping and the Gooze, we'll know for sure."

Because of her past experience with them, Willa could not stand such close proximity to anything relating to Serpiac, so it was Shawna who assisted Faith as she worked over the equipment. "I thought you couldn't keep Serpiac in a lab setting. You said you'd never observed their life cycle because no Serpiac had ever been kept in captivity," she asked.

Faith replied as she completed the transfer of some of the Gooze from the containment unit to the enclosed viewer for examination. "We can't get adult Serpiac to breed in captivity or keep them alive very long, but we can keep some phases of the

cycle going in lab settings. We can keep eggs and larvae pretty well, and pupae like this, on occasion. This Gooze is maturing nicely, for example. Even without the chemical analysis of the samples, the development of the Gooze into the pupal stage of Serpiac pretty much proves our theory. Here, have a look."

"I can see it, yes. Ugh, they are starting to look like little Serpiac," Shawna remarked, cringing away from the eyepiece of the viewer. In the pause that followed, Faith took a moment to observe her new friend.

"Not to change the subject or anything, but are you okay?" Faith inquired as she took back the viewer and adjusted the focus.

Shawna smiled with a hint of embarrassment. "I'm fine. You believe me, don't you?"

"Actually, I do," Faith answered thoughtfully.

"Hope I'm not being nosy, but I just wanted to see if I'm right. You seemed to understand why Claire wanted to stay with Choldor. So are you changing your mind about the Companion program?" Shawna asked.

"You know, I never thought I'd say this, but seeing you and Claire and how happy you are, not just in spite of, but because of your Adjustments, I guess I do admit the Peace Initiative must be okay. The Companion program must be all right, too."

"You and Talvok seem to be getting along better these days," Shawna ventured.

"Perhaps that Adjustment cleared the air between us," Faith admitted. "He didn't really hurt me. He only wanted to protect me. I've never felt that way before. As far as the Adjustment goes, I hope I never will feel that way again."

"But it's good to feel so secure, isn't it?" Shawna mused.

"Yes, it certainly is," Faith agreed. "It certainly is."

As Faith and Shawna worked, the men discussed the various implications of their newest discoveries. "If the Gooze really is Serpiac larvae and if the readings on the equipment really do

show its location before it Outbreaks, the Serpiac problem will be practically solved," Talvok asserted.

Radnok's skeptical nature showed through as he pointed out, "Serpiac have been a problem for years, though. You can't just solve it overnight. For one thing, the Filamith has to go directly into the infestation for the sensors to pick up the traces. What are you going to do, go around with a million Filamiths drilling little boreholes just to get readings?"

"Infestation areas are actually pretty large. Just one Filamith boring one tiny hole anywhere in the infestation area should get picked up by the sensors. And they're only a problem in populated areas really. All it would take would be to attach a Filamith to every drill drone, then make sure the miners drill at least one hole at strategic points around their minelands. When the sensors pick up the larvae, you pinpoint the source and pump the anti-Serpiac chemicals into the ground. It's not hard to kill an infestation if you can locate it," Vilnek put in. It was an exciting morning, and everyone worked busily with calculations, and proposed recommendations for reducing the Serpiac plague to a minor nuisance.

By the time midday rolled around, Faith had her conclusive results. "It's done! It's done! It's done," Faith crowed. "With my tests showing positively that the Gooze really is Serpiac larvae, and they are coming up on the Filamiths, and making Claire and the others sick, I don't see how anyone can doubt us. With your recommendations, we pretty much have this thing licked! I can barely believe it!"

"It's early days yet to be declaring victory, but I can't blame you for your optimism," Talvok admitted. "I don't see why anyone should ever have to endure another Outbreak again."

In all the excitement, no one noticed Willa leave the house for her daily generator check. Though she was happy for their discoveries, all this talk of Serpiac was disconcerting to her. She needed to get away for a moment and her routine check was a

good excuse. In fact, no one noticed anything was amiss until the lights and fans suddenly shut down.

As Radnok went from panel to board trying to find the source of the problem, Bilvon slid the front door open using a remote touch pad which he had rewired to control all minestead functions. Radnok took one look at Bilvon and started toward him, demanding, "What have you done! Did you cause this malfunction? How did you get the door to open? None of the other functions works."

"Shut up, or you'll never see Willa again," Bilvon barked.

"Willa! Where is she? If you've—" Radnok started to roar as he headed once more for the taller, broader Bilvon.

Bilvon interrupted him. "Save it, Radnok. I've got Willa sealed in my transport. Give me your Enablers. All of them, or I'll press a button on this pad and cut off the air supply to my transport. Wonder how long she'd last in there without air, huh?"

Radnok lunged toward Bilvon again, but Vilnek pulled him back as Bilvon held out the touch pad threateningly.

"He'll do it, Radnok and we both know it! Now give him your Enabler before he hurts Willa," Vilnek hissed at his friend.

At that moment, Talvok came around the corner from the back workroom to see what the commotion was about. When he saw Bilvon, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"I came here for Willa, but getting rid of you, little brother, is going to put the icing on the cake for me. Mom will be so upset when she finds out you died in the terrible gas leak I've engineered. It'll take a couple hours, and by then I'll have had all the fun I want with Willa. I may even bring her body back here to be found with the others. Or I may leave it at Vilnek's place so folks will think she went there for help before the gas got her, too. What a terrible tragedy," he grinned. His face was a mask of ruthless hatred as he held out his hands for the three Enablers that the men were now giving him. Faith and Shawna

approached the room just as Radnok threw himself against the front door as it slid shut behind Bilvon.

"That won't get us anywhere, Radnok. Show Talvok where your access panels are. He designed these newer minestead buildings. He can undo whatever hacking job Bilvon has done and restore power to get the doors open and get us out of here."

"We haven't got time for that," shouted Radnok, still throwing himself uselessly at the door. "He'll kill her before we can hot wire that computer back right."

"Then help me try to rig a drill. We'll use the Filamith to cut through a window. Or see if there are enough of the right materials to make a bomb and blow us out of here. But trying to break down that door is no good. It's built to withstand an earthquake, man. You throwing yourself against it is only going to net us one brain-injured miner." Vilnek finally succeeded in restraining Radnok and the two men slumped panting for breath by the wall.

Talvok took over. "Faith, can you rig some kind of gas mask? Bilvon's gas leak can only be from the Brigget tank under the house. That Brigget gas takes about two hours to kill a man, but it starts to slow his cognitive function after just a few minutes. We need to get some filters in place before that happens."

Talvok worked furiously on the computer access panels that controlled all the Linksets and through them all the major functions of the building, including the doors and windows. Faith began in the kitchen, looking at the various materials she had to work with. She sent Shawna back to the workroom to bring the chemical kit. While there, Shawna spotted the containment unit that housed some of the Gooze samples that Faith was trying to incubate. Seeing the immature Serpiac gave her an idea. It was a long shot at best, but it just might work.

"Faith," Shawna posed the tentative question to her friend as she handed her the chemical kit. "How much longer will it take

for those Serpiac in the containment unit to be mature enough to Outbreak?"

"You don't have to worry about those babies, Shawna. They're perfectly safe in that unit," she answered as she worked.

"But how soon will they be mature if we want them?" she pursued the point.

"Nobody wants a Serpiac, but I could mature them in a few minutes of heavy pressurizing if I wanted to. Why?" Faith knew that Shawna would not waste precious moments at a time like this in silly inquiries.

"Why not use them to burn a hole in the wall?" she suggested.

All eyes turned in shock to stare at Shawna. They were all beginning to feel the effects of the gas, but no one else had begun hallucinating yet. Shawna pressed on, the picture of lucidity. "We pressurize them into maturity, and then place the containment unit in an air lock situation at the weakest point in the wall. I know they can go right through anything that's not insulated against them and surely the walls aren't insulated, are they?"

"The idea, crazy as it is, could work. But all it would do would be to make a small hole in the wall. That wouldn't do us any good. Breaching the wall would be easy, but then we'd still have to tear out more of the building material until one of us could squeeze through the opening and get help," Faith observed quickly. "That's going to take a while, but at least we could get some fresh air."

"That won't get us to Willa in time," Radnok protested.

"No need to tear out a bigger hole," Talvok put in. "Once the perimeter of the building is breached, the backup generator will automatically go online again, and we'll have power. Even if Bilvon has completely disabled all the generators, there is a safety feature built into the housing units that will allow all the doors and windows to open manually if there is a breach in the walls. We did that so if an earthquake damaged the living quarters, and

their exit, and ventilation systems, people would not get trapped inside."

Faith and Shawna ran to the workroom to bring the containment unit while the men cleared the space on the floor beneath the place where Talvok showed them would be the weakest point in the structure. Faith fixed the containment unit carefully in place and pushed the button that would pressurize the pupae into maturation. Shawna stood fascinated, watching the horrible little snake-like creatures become more purposeful and agitated in their squirming over and under each other. It seemed to the group like an hour, but it was only a few minutes before Faith determined that the Serpiac should be producing enough acid to burn through the wall of the minestead.

Another button was pressed to raise a small slat in the containment unit to expose the Serpiac to the naked wall, and another anxious moment of dread and hope passed. At first all they heard was a faint hissing then suddenly it seemed as if the containment unit had been dumped out and emptied totally of its contents. The Serpiac's acid had burned the necessary hole in the wall and poured them out onto the ground outside where they would die.

"No lights yet, so Bilvon must have short-circuited the generators. Try the manual setting on the door," Talvok directed.

Radnok was already shoving against the door, in his haste forgetting to switch the control to manual from automatic. Vilnek threw the switch and the door flew to the side in its track. As Radnok ran to his transport, Vilnek quickly instructed Talvok, "Take The Company transport we've been using and go get help. Better take Faith and Shawna with you as witnesses. No one is going to believe what's going on here. I'll take Radnok and go make sure Bilvon doesn't kill Willa before you get back with security forces."

"I'll see you at your place as soon as I can," Talvok replied, already running toward his transport with Faith at his side.

"I'm going with you," Shawna told Vilnek. She headed for Radnok's transport before Vilnek could catch her arm. "You'll need all the help you can get against Bilvon."

"We'll talk about this later, little miss," Vilnek promised as he ran after Shawna and just barely boarded the transport before Radnok tore away from the transport dock.

Just as the Serpiac had taken a lifetime in a moment to burn through the minestead wall, so Shawna suffered a lifetime of agonized impatience while the transport maxed out its speed specifications on its route to Vilnek's minestead. Radnok made no attempt to sneak in unnoticed. He wanted Bilvon to know there were witnesses to whatever he was trying to do now. He slammed the transport to a stop in front of the living quarters and burst out of it into the courtyard shouting for Willa.

In slow motion, Shawna seemed to float above the scene and observe without participating in the next few grizzly moments. Her mind blocked out the horror that followed and when she snapped into consciousness again, Bilvon's body lay mutilated on the ground with a bloody, battered Vilnek standing over him. Radnok lay unconscious with Willa working to bring him around. In years to come, Shawna remembered only bits and pieces of Bilvon's ambush from behind a shed. She knew a drill bit longer than a man's arm had been involved, and Radnok had taken a blow to the head, which might have killed him. She knew that Vilnek had shouted to her and that she had not been able to respond, much less obey. Slowly she realized that she was seeing the scene from ground level and she herself must have been hurt. The pain in her head intruded at that moment and she passed out again.

If Vilnek spans me one more time, I'll die. I'll just die. He's going to kill me. He's been spanking me so long and it hurts so

much. I must have done something really bad for him to be so angry. Right then left, then hard over both cheeks, now back again and then down my thighs. How can he change from his hand to his belt to the Filamith so fast? Ow! Ow! I can't stand one more stroke. I've got to get away but he's holding me so tight. It hurts so bad. Stroke after punishing stroke. I'm sure I feel each stripe and welt. Whack! Whack! How loud it sounds. Ten times louder than ever before. What is he doing? Ow! Ow! Double strokes like that are terrible. Where did he learn to do that two-taps-together thing? It's *so* awful. I can't stand it.

"Please stop! Please stop! Vilnek, please, I'm sorry!"

"She can't even stand me to stroke her hair. Or maybe she's seeing things. She must be in real pain. Help me get her into her quarters," Vilnek pleaded.

Radnok, having recovered under Willa's ministrations now helped Vilnek take Shawna into their living quarters. They left Bilvon's body where it lay so the security forces could conduct their investigations. The Linkset was beeping as they brought the now stirring Shawna inside.

With her eyes still closed, she slowly came to the realization that she was not being spanked at all. That had been just a shock-induced dream. Willa brought her around with a quick pain-relief injection. She woke fully when she heard Pippa's voice over the Linkset in urgent warning.

"So Falsan's out for blood. He's not listening to reason. He's on his way now with security forces to arrest all of you. And Vilnek, he may try to kill you himself. Get out of there, fast!"

"Thanks for the warning, Pippa. You better get off the Link now before he intercepts this and arrests you, too." Vilnek cut the connection without another word. If his career here was over, he didn't intend to take any more people down with him.

Shawna sat up abruptly and shook off her stupor. "What's going on? Why is Falsan going to arrest you? It was self-defense. Wasn't it?"

"Of course it was self-defense, not to mention defending the three of you. But there's no way to prove that. Bilvon disabled the security cameras so that he could do what he wanted to do with Willa. When Bilvon died, his Radplant went into dormant mode and an alarm sounded in the main office. Word soon got to Falsan that his son was dead, and his body was on my minestead. He knows the trouble between me and Bilvon goes back a long way so he just assumed that I killed him. He's seeing red and won't stop till he's got my blood on his hands. From what Pippa said, Talvok never got there to report what happened. He must have still been in transit when he got the message about his brother's death. I'll have to get off world quick or I'm a dead man."

"This transport isn't made for interplanetary travel, but with some higher grade fuel I've got back at my minestead and a tweak or two, you should make it to the staging satellite station. You can get a seat on the next ship out from there before Falsan figures out you're off world," Radnok offered. "You'll have to launch from here, though, to have any chance of making it to the satellite undetected. My minestead is right under the main flight path."

Shawna and Vilnek waited in the minestead's main quarters, busily trying to pack a few necessities while Radnok went to get the fuel. Vilnek had never regretted not having his own personal transport until now. He knew that if Falsan found out Radnok had loaned him his transport voluntarily, Falsan would arrest Radnok too, or at the very least fire him. But he had no choice. Shawna could vouch for Radnok if it came to that.

As he gathered various belongings, Vilnek tried not to think of all that had happened. He blocked out his agony at having to leave Shawna so suddenly like this before he'd had a chance to really win her heart. His mind skittered away from the horrid possibility that these were the last few minutes they would ever spend together. Stopping her in her tracks as she crossed the

common room, Vilnek took her in his arms one last time. "There's so much I want to say," he began, but she cut him off.

"Don't even try. Not now. We've got to concentrate on getting you out of here. You'll need more than the clothes on your back to start over on another planet. But Falsan may be here any minute. Maybe we should start walking down the transport track and meet Radnok before he gets here. It will save a few minutes."

At that moment, the door opened and in stormed Talvok, his face like thunder. Shawna froze where she stood. Vilnek stiffened and prepared to surrender to the security forces he was sure were right behind his old friend. "What do you think you're doing?" Talvok demanded.

It was Shawna who stepped up to explain. She was ready to plead, threaten, or blackmail him, whatever it took to get him to let Vilnek go free. "He was defending us! He didn't want—"

Talvok cut her off. "No time to pack, you idiot! You think this stuff is worth your life? Falsan is right behind me with his thugs. Why aren't you out of here already?"

Shawna was shocked into silence, but Vilnek answered more calmly than even he had thought possible just a moment ago. His old friend believed in him, was going to help him. Some moments in life, however painful, were still profoundly good. "I have to wait for Radnok to bring his transport over. It's not really up to interplanetary travel, but it's all we have."

"Why wait, when my transport's right outside? Look, we met Falsan and his party before they left the house. They were getting organized there and trying to block all your escape routes before they left the highest communication zone. I was able to get my own transport that was stored there. It's interplanetary and it's fast. I left Faith trying to stall them, but that won't last long. They'll be here any minute. I'll pack up here and if I can't clear up this mess in three months, I'll meet you. Same place, same time. You know what I mean. But you've got to get out now!"

"Bring Shawna with you when you come, if she wants. Take

good care of her until then," Vilnek instructed his friend as he headed out the door.

"But why do I need to bring her? The transport will take two of you," Talvok informed him as they made for the transport.

"I can't ask her to come with me now. I'm on the run. And she needs more time to make her choice." He stopped one more moment and turned to look back at her, but she was not in the doorway where he expected her to be. She was barely a single step behind him, heading to the transport.

"No, I don't need more time. My choice is made. It's been made for a long time now, but I didn't know it until I saw Talvok come through that door and thought I'd lost you. I'd have done anything in that moment to keep you, and that's when I knew that—"

Again, Talvok interrupted her, "*No time*," he shouted. "*Get moving!*" He grabbed Vilnek by the top of his tunic and slung him back towards the transport, assuming correctly that wherever Vilnek landed, Shawna would be right there beside him.

The transport door opened and Vilnek stood back to let Shawna in first. He positioned himself in the door so that she would not have to see what he did next. "Right or left side?" he asked, quick and low.

"My left with your right will look more realistic to Falsan when he finds me. Just make it a good one. I don't want to have to take two punches from you," Talvok replied.

Vilnek wasted no more time in apologies or explanations, which could be made later. They both understood that in order for Falsan not to suspect that Talvok had aided Vilnek in his escape, it would have to look like Vilnek had overpowered Talvok and stolen his transport. Vilnek sent an almighty roundhouse punch into the side of Talvok's head, trying to avoid his ear. Talvok went down like a drill bit crunching through sand.

As the transport made the jerking jump into flight mode and prepared to enter Trellian's orbit, Vilnek turned to Shawna. "You

can turn back at the satellite station if you want to. You don't have to come with me, you know. I have been thinking a long time now about starting my own mining company, but the early days will be hard going. Knowing that, are you sure you want to stay with me?"

Her answer to him came to be one of their favorite endearments to exchange with each other through the long happy years of their marriage. "I've never been surer of a choice in my life, Vilnek," Shawna replied. "Whatever happens, I choose to be with you."

Shawna's Chase

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

“I can't take you with me, Shawna. It's too dangerous,” Vilnek explained. Tall and broad shouldered, with short brown hair, the miner towered over his wife of three weeks by several inches. With any number of implements for spanking never far out of reach, it never ceased to amaze him how at ease she was with arguing any point she saw fit to argue. “The moon is just too unstable.”

“If it's too unstable for me, then it's too unstable for you,” retorted Shawna. Her logic was of a better brand than her good-sense sometimes and she pushed her husband's tolerance to the limit.

“I don't have any choice and we both know it. Do you want me to get extradited back to Trellian? Face the charges Falsan will level at me? How much of a chance do you think I'll stand in his courts on his planet run by his mining corporation? And that's assuming he lets it come to trial. His son was found dead on my minestead. The security cameras were disabled. It's my word against Bilvon's corpse. Do you think he's going to believe the truth of his son's attack on Willa and us? We've been over all this before,” Vilnek declared.

“Of course I don't want you extradited. But it can't be that dangerous on Plivit. If it were, the Mining Federation wouldn't allow the company a charter to mine it.”

“If it isn't that dangerous,” Vilnek countered logically, “why do they have to resort to extortion to recruit somebody to settle it for them?”

“You're the one who's studied the planet before. So you tell me. What's so unstable about this moon anyway? Why do they have to threaten to give you back to Falsan to make you take this job?”

“It's L-12, a compound as vital as it is volatile,” Vilnek quoted in a singsong voice. He was doing his best imitation of a narrator on a documentary. “That's a direct quote from the company pamphlet.”

“You remember it well enough to quote the pamphlet?”

“Heck, I wrote the pamphlet, girl. I've mined the stuff before and I know what I'm doing. I'll be fine.”

“Then if you'll be fine, I'll be fine.”

“There's no Radplant system in place. I can't protect you there. There are no signals there for the Radplant in my brain to receive.”

“Maybe there's nothing to protect me from,” Shawna put in sarcastically.

“There are just as many dangers as on Trellian but no warning. You just have to react to the emergencies the best you can. You have to be ready for anything at any moment. I can't watch out for you, watch out for myself, and get any work done.”

“I'm coming with you. You can't keep me away.”

“I wish I had a filamith. Those little drill bits sure were handy for applying a Peace Initiative Adjustment where it was needed.”

“But we're not on Trellian anymore, as you so kindly pointed out. There's no Companion Program.”

“I don't need a Companion, now I have you as my wife,” he interrupted.

"And no Peace Initiative," she went on.

"I don't need one of those either to give me the idea to tan your hide when you won't mind me. You already agreed to it, and since we both want a peaceful home, the Peace Initiative is permanent."

"I'm not disputing that," Shawna gave in on that point, "and I wouldn't have it any other way, but I can't say I'm sorry we had no time to pack one of those darn filamiths when we escaped Trellian one second ahead of the security forces."

"What I wouldn't give for a filamith about now, or even a piece of piping insulation. If I had one, you'd think twice about telling me you're coming."

"Filamith or no filamith, I'm coming with you. It can't be that dangerous. It's just a moon. There aren't any volcanoes, or Serpiac, or packs of roaming Fensel. It's a veritable garden of Eden."

Vilnek shot back, "That's the sort of attitude that's going to get you hurt. I can't take the chance of you doing something foolish."

Shawna tried a different tack. She hoped to get him talking about the moon itself and the details of the job so that he would quit thinking about leaving her behind. "Tell me more about L-12. How is it mined?"

"Well, it isn't exactly mined. L-12 is swept up in the dust and sediment of the moon itself and filtered out, depending on the quality of the product. That process is relatively safe since you add Tosamine which stabilizes the L-12 on contact."

"Where did you work with it before?" she queried.

"On a neighboring moon, Stivit. That's where I met Choldor and Radnok, actually. How many years ago was that? Seems like ages. And that's where Choldor got his scar. In an L-12 explosion. He threw himself in front of a spreading flame to keep it from reaching the fuel cells and killing us all." His tone became accusatory. "You were trying to get me off track, but it won't

work. That just serves to remind me why I'm not taking you with me, much as I hate to leave you behind. I can't risk what happened to Choldor happening to you."

"But Claire would go with Choldor if he decided to relocate to Plivit with you, wouldn't she? We are going to bring Radnok and Willa over to Plivit as soon as we can, along with Choldor and Claire? They're our best friends. And I was even hoping Talvok and Faith could be persuaded to join us. Talvok doesn't blame you for his brother's death and he's no fan of his father's either. He'd come."

"Forget this 'we' stuff. And as for bringing Choldor and Radnok, good miners and friends though they are, I'm not sure how ethical that would be, little one. I can't go trying to steal all of Falsan's best staff, especially his son."

"He's the man out for your blood and you still protect his business interests?" Shawna wondered. "What are you going to do, hire all new miners and hope for the best?"

"I'll start small is what I'll do. The mining company will provide some recommendations on staff, hopefully men who can act civilized without a Companion Program. It's too dangerous, and I'm not having one without a Radplant system in place. And that's another reason why I won't invite friends from Trellian. I don't want to separate these men from their new wives. I can't do that to an old mine-rat like Radnok. How many years has he got left with her, realistically?" Vilnek exaggerated.

"Oh, don't say that, Vilnek. Radnok's not that old," Shawna chided, giving him a mock punch in the arm. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his lap. All this talk of old friends and old times reminded him of how much better things were now, and he wanted to be holding the reason why.

"And how about Choldor? You want him to leave Claire behind? The only woman who ever looked past that scar and his size to the soft-heart inside him?"

"Don't separate any spouses, is what I'm saying. Press for a Radplant system," Shawna encouraged him.

"I can't press for anything at the moment, remember. The only things that're going to get pressed around here are those murder charges if I get extradited back to Trellian. Falsan's company is powerful and they could pull it off. What's standing between me and the Federation's security transport is Turek Productions, Inc. I'm not about to make them mad by getting pushy. It won't be for long, little one. I'll get things set up for them and if I do my job right, I'll be able to leave there soon enough. By then, Talvok will have cleared my name with Falsan."

"We've got two whole months before we meet Talvok. I hate to think of being apart that long," Shawna complained.

"I don't like it any better than you, but there it is. Now, you remember the details, right? Blue Moon satellite station, two months from now, at the Thraxton Hotel. The satellite station is small and you should have no problem finding the hotel on your own. It's out of the way, but not unheard of."

Shawna gave him a gentle squeeze. "Yes, I remember all the details."

"And you haven't communicated with anyone on Trellian about all this?"

"I haven't communicated with anyone on Trellian at all except through untraceable public-use Linksets."

"Good job. I know it's hard for you, but if Falsan can find me, he'll take me illegally. I've got to stay out of sight and out of reach until we can get him calmed down. He's not a bad guy, really. He'll see reason sooner or later and drop the charges."

"Then we'll go back to Trellian?"

"I don't know, Shawna. I loved it there. I have great memories and I met you there, so I wouldn't mind going back." Vilnek paused, choosing his words. "But I was getting restless. I can do more than just run one mine. I'm actually looking forward to

being the boss on Plivit. I like delegating, being in charge, coordinating the work and making it run right.”

“Then you might not want to go back to Trellian? Where does that leave me?” Shawna sounded alarmed.

“If I get Plivit running the way I want, I can expand the staging satellite in orbit around the moon then do my job from there. In fact, I've got a few ideas about all the miners doing their work from there. It would take some major technology investment, but it could work.”

“And I could live on the staging satellite?”

“Just like you live here. It would be small, but you'd still have Linkset communications. It could work.”

“But how long will that be? I don't want to be separated from you. I don't even know exactly where this moon is. How could I find you if I needed you?”

“If you needed help, you would go to Pippa or Radnok. Since you are not to come to Plivit, you don't need to know where it is. And for your information, that's proprietary information for Turek Mining so you won't be able to find it on any computer search. Let it go, Shawna. We need to discuss how you'll get back to Trellian without being traced back here.”

“No, we don't need to discuss any such thing! I'm not going!” Shawna was getting worked up. She jumped out of his lap and started pacing the room.

“I'm warning you now, Shawna. Sit down and listen just a minute.”

“I won't! I don't want to hear it. If you would just be reasonable—”

“I'm not reasonable? That about does it!” Vilnek flipped her over his lap before she knew he had moved at all.

“Let me up off your lap! Be careful, you'll stretch my leggings pulling them down like that. Ow!”

“Say you'll go back to Trellian!”

“Let me go! I mean it!”

"Say it then and I'll let you go."

"Ow! Ow! Stop that. It hurts."

"I mean it to hurt. You've got to know I mean business."

"OW! Stop! No! *No!* Not down there! That hurts worse than the bottom. Not my thighs! That's not fair! *Ow!*"

"Say you'll go back!"

"Let me go! You can't solve a problem like this with a spanking."

"Why not?"

"Vilnek! Be reasonable."

"If that's how you're going to be, maybe I need a bit of help here. This should help cure your stubbornness."

"No! No more! And not a plexilat spoon! Your hand was bad enough! Ow, that stings. Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Your bottom's getting hot enough to melt the plexilat. Why are you being so stubborn? Now, take a minute to catch your breath and then say it. Don't make me get out the pipe insulation."

"Me? Make you? I'm not making you do anything! It's you who's making me--*ow!* No! *No!* Please!"

"It's for your own good. I have to have your word. Say you'll go back to Trellian. Say it, Shawna. You're going to be sore enough as it is. I don't want to try out that Brigade tank tubing, but I will if you don't accept my decision."

"No! I can't take any more. I'm sorry I'm crying. I know you hate that, but I just can't s--stand to let you go without me. I'll be worried the whole time we're apart."

"And I'd be worried the whole time if you were there. I won't be able to work my fastest or my safest if I'm worried about you. So, what's it going to be, Shawna? Your word or your backside? Come on. Sit up here on my lap."

He held her while her sobs subsided. Finally, she calmed enough to sniffle out, "If you put it that way," she admitted, "I guess I'll have to go back to Trellian."

“That's right. That's my good girl,” he soothed her as he carried her to their bed. “You are more precious to me than anything. Better a sore rump tomorrow than real danger to come.”

Shawna woke the next morning sore and out of sorts with Vilnek. Usually, an Adjustment like that would have made everything right in her world, and she wondered fleetingly why it hadn't this time.

Time to sort that out later, she thought. Her first job of the day would be to pack up her carryall. Vilnek should soon finish the repairs on the second-hand glider they had purchased the day before. She knew she had very little time left to make him change his mind and take her with him. She'd rather face a hundred dangers than leave him, even for a short time. Besides, she could take care of herself.

Trying out new and more convincing arguments in her mind, she went down to the guest quarters landing dock, hoping to find Vilnek. The glider was gone.

“He wouldn't have,” Shawna mused aloud to no one, but in her heart, she knew what he had done. With feet like bricks, she trudged back to the guesthouse. The attendant at the front desk handed her a communipad. She took it to their room for privacy. She read the opening sentence three times for clarity. Then she threw it against the wall.

Later, after her crying had subsided, she went to a public Linkset kiosk with a privacy barrier where she could Link Pippa without being traced.

“He's gone, isn't he?” Pippa asked as soon as the video function of the link cleared of static. “I can see it in your face.”

“He didn't even say good-bye. He just left me a communipad.”

"And from the way you're shifting in that pod, I can tell he left a few marks on your seat. So what are you going to do now? You know you can always come back here."

"I can't be a Companion! I'm married! Vilnek would just die if another man tried to give me an Adjustment."

"I know that, and of course, you'd go to someone Vilnek trusts. Or you could work here with me at Headquarters. We're nominally included in the Peace Initiative but since we don't have assigned miners to keep peace with, it never comes up."

"Before he left, Vilnek tried to tell me what he wanted me to do, but I wouldn't listen. I guess I'll have to read the rest of the communipad message and see."

"You haven't even read it yet?"

"Not the whole thing. I had to Link you first, Pippa. I need a friend."

"Then come home."

"I'll be on the first transport I can find."

"Are you sure he wanted you to use a public transport?" Talvok asked Shawna several days later. He was as surprised to see her as she was to see him. Public transport passenger manifests, while not stored long, were easy pickings for anyone with any hacking skills at all. She could be traced if anyone cared to look within a few hours.

"How else was I supposed to come?" Shawna wondered. She thought of the broken communipad and her scramble to get back to Trellian the best way she could. "I didn't come directly. I've been jumping around," she lied.

"There are ways, and our mutual friend," he hesitated to speak Vilnek's name, "knows them all. His acquaintanceship with the shadier side of life in the mining community might surprise

you, but it does come in handy on occasion. Let me Link Pippa and see what I can find out.”

Talvok Linked Pippa and the conversation was brief and low. “She can't be on that transport with you.”

“She is.”

“Well, she can't disembark. The surveillance cameras will pick up her face as soon as she sets foot in the docking area.”

“What is she supposed to do?”

“Let me see who the pilot is.” Pippa tapped a few keys and noted the contents of another screen. “Thank goodness it's him. He's a friend of mine. I'll Link him and get word to you.”

A few more words were exchanged then Talvok came back to Shawna. “Pippa says you're in big trouble and better be glad she's not a miner or she'd Initiate your Peace from now till the next True Dark. All kidding aside, you'll have to by-pass Trellian and contact her once you get someplace else. She'll give you instructions from there. Apparently, our mutual friend isn't the only one with shady connections. Pippa seems to have some herself.”

“Where else can I go?” Shawna asked. “What's the next stop for this transport?”

“There is no 'next stop', but I asked the pilot and he said since he's a Turek employee he's going to their Production Headquarters, which is about two days away. He'll drop you wherever you want on the way there. He's not too particular once his other passengers disembark at Trellian.”

“That's what I'll have to do, then, I guess,” Shawna sighed. “I was looking forward to going home.”

“You think of Trellian as home, too? I know none of us is really from there, but it does feel like a good place to belong. That's one reason I'm fighting so hard to make my father see reason.” He lowered his voice and looked around. “The reason you can't land on Trellian now is that there's a problem at Headquarters. My father is pressing charges and called in a special

investigator to look into the matter. He must have arrived while I was gone to that conference at the University.”

“What are the police saying? Surely they have cleared Vilnek by now, or will clear him soon,” Shawna protested. She hadn't thought of a special investigator.

“You know how things are, Shawna. A company owner as powerful as my father can keep an investigation alive for as long as he wants. The police are siding with 'our friend', but as long as Falsan raises objections and questions, the case will remain open. If the police wanted you-know-who for questioning, he would already be in custody. But they know what happened. They're satisfied with the testimony of the witnesses involved, namely me, Faith, Radnok and Willa. Willa's injuries also helped the case, though she's fine now.”

“So if the police know that Vilnek had to kill your brother in order to save Willa's life, not to mention mine and probably Radnok's, why is Vilnek still on the run?”

“Keep your voice down! And don't say the name. Voice recognition technology can identify key words and names they program it to listen for. We don't know what surveillance equipment is operating where.”

Shawna dropped her voice to a whisper and covered her mouth with her hand as Talvok was doing in a casual way. “Sorry. I keep forgetting. I just don't see why he has to keep hiding. If the police believe us, what's the hold-up?”

“My father is keeping the investigation alive in order to try to get his hands on our friend, if only for a day. That's all it would take. He's insane with grief, Shawna. He's not in his right mind. I don't know what he'll do if he succeeds. Legal or not, that won't matter.”

“Do you know where 'our friend' is?” Shawna probed.

“No, and I don't want to. And neither should you. It's dangerous.”

They landed on Trellian without incident, but before the

doors swooshed open, the pilot approached Shawna. He gave her an appraising look and then nodded to Talvok. "I've got her," was all he said, as he motioned her to precede him through the door that lead to the command hallway and module.

"Where are we going?" she whispered over her shoulder to the pilot.

"The less you know, the less you can tell later," came his ominous reply. "Pippa told me to mention to you one thing—that Choldor's Claire rode with me in this very compartment when she came to bring you your identification documents from Headquarters four weeks ago. I don't know why she wanted you to know that, but I thought it couldn't do any harm to pass on the message." With that, he pressed a very normal-looking panel and it slid sideways.

Waiting in the cramped space behind the sliding panel, Shawna wondered what sort of contraband this oh, so innocent looking pilot usually carried in there. It wasn't big enough for a person to fit comfortably. Her arms began to ache and her legs were going tingly when the panel at last moved to release her from confinement. She rubbed her arms and stamped her feet while the pilot seated himself back in his command pod.

The pilot beckoned Shawna over to the pod next to his. She noticed for the first time that, while handsome enough, for some reason his face did not attract her to look at him. Whether from mistrust of someone so obviously used to extra-legal activities, or from embarrassment at being in his debt, Shawna kept her eyes forward as they conversed.

"So, where to?" he began.

"Wherever you're going, I guess. I already feel like I'm imposing on you enough, continuing on like this when all the other passengers have gotten off. And I only paid the fare as far as Trellian."

"Don't worry about that. There's no fare for little private trips like this. I owe Pippa, anyway. She just got me a job there on

Trellian. I'm going back to Turek Headquarters to pick up my gear. This is my last run for them and I really can't show up there with you in tow, now can I? So again, where to?"

"I have no idea, really," she admitted. Under her breath, she muttered, "Where I'd really like to go is Plivit."

The pilot heard her and gave her a questioning look. "Plivit? How do you know about Plivit? That's proprietary information."

"So I've heard. And if Plivit is proprietary information, maybe it's also proprietary information as to how I found out about it," she retorted.

A surprisingly warm guffaw greeted this answer. "Touché! I deserved that. You've the makings," he complimented her.

"The makings? Of a cigarette?"

"Of a Dodger, of course," he replied as if everyone should know the term.

"Well, thank you," she answered. "By the way, what's a Dodger?"

Another heart-felt belly laugh. "There's no such thing as a Dodger," he grinned. "If you have to ask, you can't know."

"Do you always go on like this, Mr... uh, what is your name anyway?"

"The less you know, the less you can tell," he winked knowingly.

"You might as well tell me. We'll meet again on Trellian," she reminded him.

"And be properly introduced then," he instructed her. "Until such time, you can't let a name slip that you've never heard." Her look of disgust had him chuckling again. "But I haven't had such a good laugh since Croyden was in his cradle, so I'll take you to Plivit and see which one of us they hang first."

"Sounds good to me," she rejoined with a wry smile. "Just one more question. Who's Croyden?"

His laughter echoed through the empty transport.

Chapter 2

When they arrived at the staging satellite a surprisingly short time later, Shawna did not attempt to hide her shock. “We’re here already?”

“This isn’t the moon itself, you know. This is the staging satellite.”

“It’s hardly big enough for this little transport. I don’t see how they’re going to get much L-12 in and out of here.”

“I can tell that you haven’t worked with L-12.”

“And I can tell that you’ll wish you had never heard of L-12,” rumbled Vilnek’s low voice. He was standing in the doorway, looking like his glider had just come through a meteor shower: the damage was done, but he wasn’t happy about it. “How did you find me?”

“I didn’t find you and I didn’t mean to come here,” Shawna returned. The moment she had seen Vilnek, she had flown to his side. They now stood entwined and their embrace left no doubt as to the relationship between them. “But now that I’m here, I’m glad. It hasn’t even been a week and already it feels like a year.”

The pilot gave a mock sigh. “Touching. Simply touching. What a sweet reunion. Now can I get someone to turn on that

generator over there so I can refuel this bug and get on with my trip? And you're welcome, by the way."

"For what?" Vilnek demanded, suddenly alert.

"Vilnek, be nice. This man just saved me from getting caught by Falsan's special investigator on Trellian. He won't tell me his name, or I'd introduce you, but he really has just saved us a lot of trouble."

"A lot of trouble is what you are in, Shawna. Now let me handle this. You've said too much already," Vilnek hissed in her ear.

"I'm doing this as a favor to Pippa, so I have a pretty good idea who you are and what's going on. A better idea, in fact, than I wish I had," the pilot admitted.

"That makes two of us," Vilnek interjected.

"But Croyden's my uncle, so relax," the pilot intoned with a significant look in his eye.

An invisible weight slid off Vilnek's shoulders and he looked long and hard at the man. "You have the makings, I guess," he finally decided.

"I'd better," the other man returned. "So how about that generator?"

Vilnek walked over to the large apparatus in the corner while Shawna watched in consternation. "What is going on here? What are you talking about? And who's Croyden?" Even in the strained situation, her question produced a reluctant chuckle that eased the tension.

"The less you know, the less you can tell," Vilnek replied curtly, as if quoting from a book.

"I wish I knew what is going on here," Shawna griped.

"What's going on here is that you are getting back on this transport and heading out on this transport as soon as he can get refueled," Vilnek shot back. "And I sure hope for your sake that the pods are soft, because you're going to be doing it with a hot and very thoroughly spanked bottom."

"I didn't choose to come here," Shawna argued.

"Yes, you did. You said this was where you wanted to come," grinned the pilot. These were his first words since he finished connecting the fueling hose to the intake valve.

"But I didn't know you could actually do it," she shot back.

"You don't know much about his type then, do you?" Vilnek asserted.

"You mean about Dodgers? I don't know anything about Dodgers but if this man is one, I'm beginning to get an idea." Both men found this uproariously funny, to the point where the refueling process was suspended for several minutes. "If you two can quit laughing for five minutes, I'd just like to ask you why can't I just stay for a while, now that I'm here. I don't have to go down to the moon. I could set up a nice little camp right here. It's only for two more months or so. And I'd be safe."

"You can't stay here. I've already told you that. I won't have any wife of mine camping in an overgrown orbiting storage shed."

"She'll have to stay here, at least for a while," the pilot interjected. "I can't take her with me, like I already told her. I'm ending my job with Turek and signing on with Falsan. That means I have to go back to Headquarters to get my gear. I can't take her with me for that, but I can swing back by here and get her on my way to Trellian. That'll be in about 5 days."

"Five days? That would be fine," enthused Shawna. Surely, I can convince him to change his mind within five days, she thought.

"You'll think fine after the five days you'll get from me, little girl," Vilnek retorted. He turned to the pilot and added in a neutral tone, "If it's got to be five days, then we'll see you in five days. I'll be telling Croyden."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to hear it," the pilot grinned. "I'm one of his favorite sons."

The refueling was completed in a few more minutes and soon

after that, Vilnek shook hands with the pilot one last time. "She's got the makings, that one has," the pilot pronounced in a low voice.

"Don't get too attached. She may have the makings, but she's mine and no Dodger is going to change that," Vilnek countered.

"No offense meant. Just wondering if she has a friend or sister just like her."

"Get out of here before I report you to Croyden for wife-poaching." Then he seemed to reconsider. The man had, after all, helped Shawna out of a very sticky situation. "There's none like her, but if you can qualify for the Companion Program on Trellian, you may find one to your liking."

"I'll have to give it a try. I have to say, not mentioning names of course or anything like that, but I think you've got guts setting up shop as a mouse so close to the cat." It was his way of letting Vilnek know that though he knew about Falsan's hunt for him, he wouldn't inform the authorities.

"The mouse has to go where the cheese is. And if the dog is going to help the mouse evade the cat, the mouse had better learn to steal bones as well as cheese to keep the dog happy."

"I don't fancy Turek in the role of the dog. Not loyal enough." It was a warning that confirmed Vilnek's own suspicions.

"You know what they called the mouse that convinced the dog to put the bell on the cat?" Vilnek asked.

"No. What?"

"Alive." He raised one eyebrow as he delivered this pithy reply and the pilot nodded sagaciously.

"Here's to dogs and their bells then," the pilot saluted as he closed the hatch.

Shawna came up behind Vilnek and he put his arm around her. "What was he talking about?" she inquired.

"Small mammals and their predatory habits," Vilnek

answered. "I'll have to explain it to you sometime when we have the time."

"We've got five days," Shawna smiled contentedly. She was back together with her husband and all was right with her world again. She'd worry when the five days were up. Until then she intended to enjoy herself.

Unfortunately for her, Vilnek had other plans.

"And that will be just about time for me to finish up the Peace Initiative Adjustments I have in mind for you."

"What?" she gasped. "I didn't do anything wrong. I had no choice but to come here."

"We've been over that before. You should never have mentioned the name Plivit to anyone, much less some Dodger. And what were you doing with a Dodger anyway?"

"What's a Dodger?" Again, Vilnek laughed on hearing the question. "I don't think it's that funny, Vilnek. Obviously, I'm not as well traveled or as widely experienced as you are. I haven't been knocking around the mining sectors of the galaxy for decades like you have."

"You could knock around the galaxy for a millennium and that question would still be funny. You never ask 'What's a Dodger?' The correct question is 'Where's a Dodger?' And why it's so funny is that females who mention the word 'Dodger' or even Croyden's name are hinting that they would like a kiss. Any male who hears them can give them that kiss or an appropriate punishment for such forwardness."

"What's the appropriate punishment?" Shawna asked suspiciously.

"A spanking of course. It's the most appropriate punishment I can think of, though there are others that come to mind. I'll probably be using them all this week while you're here. But the spanking is the most effective, so I might as well get started."

"Wait!" she protested. "I haven't done anything to be

punished for. And you never answered my question. If not what, then where is a Dodger?"

As he pulled her over to a packing crate, he shot back a cryptic, "Anywhere he wants to be."

He pulled her over his lap and pulled her leggings down to mid-thigh. Pushing her forward, he raised his target higher and began to apply quick hard slaps. The flesh of her bottom turned pinker with every swat until it turned a bright red. She wriggled and tossed but to no avail. He held her immobile with his left arm around her waist while his right hand finished its relentless assault on her left cheek to begin again almost immediately on her right.

"What I told you before still holds. Even knowing you are here in relative safety will be a distraction to me. Now you tell me, why didn't you Link the co-ordinates I gave you in that communipad I left? Why did you wind up on that public transport in the first place?"

She took a couple of quick breaths to make sure she wouldn't sob when she answered. She knew what would come after she answered, but there was no way to get out of the consequences now. "Because I was so mad when I read the first sentence of your message that I threw the thing against the wall and it broke. I couldn't read the rest even after I calmed down and tried. I would have done what you said, but there was no way of recovering the message without going to a technician who might have reported me to the authorities once they saw your name on the pad." She knew he would not let her get away with ignoring his words like that. Losing her temper just put the icing on the cake.

He looked down at the back of her head. "I can see we've got a lot of work to do here. All right, this will be for giving in to your emotions and throwing that pad. That showed major disrespect, not to mention lack of control. I want you to get up and without pulling up your leggings, look in your carryall and get me your ID documents."

“What do you want them for?”

“You’ll see when you give them to me. Now go!” He gave her a hard swat to help her start moving. She hobbled over to her carryall stashed carelessly on the floor by the wall of the station. Retrieving her identity papers, she began to pull them out of the plexilat tube they were in, but he stopped her. “Bring that with you. Just bring all of it.”

She did as she was told and handed him the tube. The way he accepted it from her hand, the way he hefted it back and forth told her more than she wanted to know. “Oh, no. You’re not going to use that are you? It’s too wide. It’ll leave terrible bruises.” She knew he did not object too strenuously to leaving marks, but she had to try something. That tube looked like trouble.

“It wouldn’t leave bruises if I didn’t have to swing it down on your hide, and I wouldn’t have to do that if you had minded me in the first place. If I had anything else to hand, I wouldn’t use the tube. But I don’t, so I will.”

So saying, he directed her firmly with a hand on her back. She knew the signal well. He meant for her to bend over and grab her calves, as far down as she could reach without falling over or making it hard for her to breathe. She complied despite her trepidation, knowing that resistance at this point would only incur more wrath.

He rubbed the tube up and down her bottom for a moment to let her get the feel of it. Then he swung. She jumped. It stung much more than she would have thought and the thud was terrible. He swung again and again until her heart was pounding with the thuds and she couldn’t get her breath. She had never dreamed that such an innocent looking object could be used to such effect.

Finally, he was satisfied that she would remember this lesson for a while. He let her stand up and brought her close to him while she sobbed. “I’m sorry I got so angry. I should have known

the message was important. I'll never throw a communiPad from you again."

"You shouldn't throw any communiPad ever. To help you remember that, you are going to spend the five days up here entirely without communications. Our ability to stay in touch with the outside world and with our friends is nothing to be taken for granted. We'll see how you do without it for a few days, just to remind you what a great gift it is."

Her heart plummeted when she heard his words, but she knew there was no use arguing with him. When he gave out a punishment like that, he rarely altered it. "I'm going to have to leave you now and come back later with some blankets and a temporary bed for you to sleep on. The other two miners are waiting for the supplies I came up here to retrieve. When I get back," he added over his shoulder as he entered his glider, "we'll discuss the rest of your punishment."

Trellian

In her office, Pippa tried to stare down the pair of cobra eyes Pelchak turned on her, but she couldn't quite manage it. Finally, she broke the stare and the silence. "I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about. I have no knowledge of anyone named Shawna landing on the staging satellite. I have more important things to do with my time than read public transport manifests."

Pelchak simply continued to stare. Not that he minded staring at Pippa. She certainly was easy on the eyes, but at the moment, he felt more like tanning her hide than trying to bore through her reserve and get her to trust him. Perhaps the desired action would assist the needed goal. If it came to that, he would try it. Getting that close to her beautiful backside would give him more than a little satisfaction.

This Pippa, whom Falsan had assured him would be his

greatest asset in the investigation, had turned out to be his biggest headache. Since the hour he had taken this assignment as special investigator in this strange case, Pelchak had met with nothing but stonewalling and resistance on every side. Though Falsan seemed perfectly reasonable and obviously had grounds to keep the investigation open, no one here on Trellian, least of all Pippa, seemed to have any interest in seeing this Vilnek character brought to justice.

Early days yet, he reminded himself. Only met Falsan a few days ago. Don't know the lay of the land. Eyes open, mouth shut. This policy had served him well before and he intended to pursue it now. This was why he was surprised to hear himself chide this little slip of a woman Pippa. "Don't lie to me. You Linked that transport. Why?"

"Whether I Linked that transport or not is none of your business. You can't monitor Linkset transmissions. It's illegal."

His answer was that disconcerting stare. Every time she saw it, that stare did something to Pippa, something she could neither explain nor control. Her mouth got the better of her patience and she blurted out, "Unless the mining company owner Falsan gave you permission, that is. And if he did, and won't rescind it, then I'll turn in my resignation."

At least he did something other than stare this time, she thought. He raised one eyebrow. Infuriating man.

"I know I've threatened that several times over the last few weeks since Vilnek evacuated, but now I'm serious. I really mean it. I'll resign. There are other mining worlds and other jobs, and well Falsan knows it!"

Pelchak nodded, his stare never wavering. Again, Pippa was the first to back down. "So if that's all you have to say, I'll be getting back to work." She turned her pod to face her Linkset but he reached over her desk, covered her hands on the arms of the pod with his own big hard hands and turned it back to face him.

He waited until she quit sputtering, then repeated his question. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you Link that transport?"

"I already told you I don't have to answer that. You have no right to monitor—" she noted the stare and the raised eyebrow. "Oh, all right, I guess you do have the right. I'm going straight to Falsan. This is ridiculous. I can't work under these conditions." She attempted to free her hands, but he held her fast. "Let me go. I'm going to Link Falsan and get you out of my office."

He released her hands and watched impassively as she Linked Falsan on his private at-home Linkset.

"Falsan, I've had enough. I will not tolerate—" Pippa's voice rose with her anger.

"Slow down, Pippa. What's this all about?" Falsan shouted back.

Pippa answered in kind. "It's about this useless investigation you are letting this baboon pursue. He's been wasting my time and trying my patience all morning."

"Last time I checked, it was my name on the charter. You work for me, so it's my time, as I see it."

"I already told you I would not continue to work for you if you don't leave me out of this stupid persecution."

At that point, Falsan's wife Sarah appeared behind him. "What's all the yelling about? Falsan, you know the doctor said you are not to excite yourself unduly. Pippa, I'm surprised at you, shouting at him. You know he needs to take it easy."

"I'm sorry, Sarah, but maybe you don't know what's going on here. If Falsan needs to take it easy, then tell him to drop this investigation."

"I'm not asking you to investigate. Just let Pelchak do his job," Falsan interjected.

"Let me speak to him. I'll get back to you later, all right, Pippa?" begged Sarah with concern. Falsan got up and marched

away in disgust. "Please don't do anything rash. I'll straighten everything out. He needs you. We all know that. He can't run this world without you."

"He's going to have to if something doesn't change, and soon," Pippa retorted. She gestured over her shoulder at Pelchak. "He's making it impossible for me to do my job. Hey, what are you doing?" She had noticed that he was taking some kind of reading with some kind of device, sweeping it up and down the back of her Linkset.

Without a word, he flipped the device shut, stood up, and pointed a finger at Pippa. "Don't leave the planet." With that, he was gone.

"What did he just do, Sarah? What's going on? What kind of powers has Falsan given him? I can't continue to work under these conditions."

"I have no idea, Pippa, but please be patient. I'm doing the best I can."

With a growl of frustration, Pippa Linked off, then sat there and wondered what he had just learned from her Linkset. What had she said to Talvok in that last Link? Could Pelchak see it? Could he hear it? The pressure was getting to her. She didn't know how much longer she could last, but until she made up her mind to leave, she still had her duties to attend to. She turned off her Linkset and left her office.

The Selection Meeting was proceeding without incident, she could tell from the chatter. Pippa greeted first one miner then another Companion answering questions and settling nerves as best she could. "Yes, there are more miners than Companions this time. You'll more than likely be chosen by someone," she told one jittery young woman. "No, there is no way to ensure you getting your first choice," she chided the shifty-eyed miner who

sidled up to her. She would have to watch that one and review his qualifications for the program, she realized. That sounded almost like an offer of a bribe.

Pippa was looking for the new Companion Candace. Finally, she located her off in a corner by herself, looking bored and put out. When she saw Pippa, she hurried over, complaints at the ready. "I haven't had any luck at all. What is it with these guys?"

"I told you it would be nigh onto impossible to find someone to go for your idea," Pippa returned.

"But why?"

"Because the Peace Initiative works. All the miners know that. Maybe a new man might consider your proposal, but the experienced ones? I just can't think of any who would go for the idea of having a Companion who does not accept the Peace Initiative."

"What happens now?"

"If you don't put down a preference and if no one puts you down, you just wait here at Headquarters."

"I don't much like the idea of waiting around idle," Candace mused.

"You won't have to. I'll put you to work if you want me to."

"What about the Peace Initiative?"

"We at Headquarters are nominally under the Initiative, but since there are no miners around, and we stay indoors practically all the time, it's just a formality."

"If there are no miners around, how do we get warnings? If we don't need miners to warn us of dangers here, why wouldn't it also work out in the mining sectors?" Candace sounded hopeful and eager. Pippa hated to burst her bubble, but it had to be done.

"We get warnings through any number of Linksets all around the complex. There are covered walkways between the buildings to protect from most dangers. Radplants are not really need here. In fact, when the guys who usually work in Headquarters go out to the mining sectors, some of them have trouble understanding

the Radplant impulses at first. Nobody needs them at Headquarters and the guys get out of practice. It's not possible to enclose a whole minestead. The area is too great. The Radplants are the only way to transmit warnings reliably enough."

"I still say it could be done. I could carry a radio or stick near enough to a transport, or something. I'd be safe. I'd be fine. Or let me try getting a Radplant."

"No! Don't even think about such a thing. The two ladies in the first experimental group are still lying in the infirmary in a vegetative state. The Radplant is definitely not compatible with female brain chemistry. Give that thought up, Candace."

"I just want to mine. I want to run the big equipment. I want to be out there alone, just me against the Stalcon, hunting it down, bringing it up, wrestling the planet and winning."

"A very romantic view, indeed. There's no 'alone' for a woman on Trellian. I'm sorry. Headquarters is the best I can do for you."

"Then it will have to be Headquarters."

"That's good news for me. I can use the help. And you can try again at the next Selection Meeting. It's scheduled for two weeks from today. There should be some newly qualified miners in that mix and some miners new to Trellian. You never know what you might work out."

Pippa made her way back to her quarters, not far from the Selection Meeting Center. She was considering several of the newly qualified miners she had just described to Candace. One or two were laid back enough to handle such an arrangement. And then there was always the Dodger coming. That might be a very interesting combination indeed.

Chapter 3

It seemed like an eternity to Shawna before Vilnek made it back to the satellite. Loaded down with blankets and a lightweight bed, he climbed awkwardly out of the glider. Shawna came to help him, hoping to get him in a better mood before he pronounced her sentence, but the judge was not so easily swayed.

He pointed out where the supplies were kept and showed her how to heat her own food in an actual metal pot set on an electric wire coil. She was not used to such primitive methods, but hoped that before long, she could join him on the surface where life would be easier.

“Now you see why I didn't want you coming here?” he chided as he helped her serve their plates with hot noodles and protein chunks in gravy. “This is no life for you.”

“I wouldn't have this life if you'd let me come down to the surface with you,” she wheedled.

“You think it's better down there? Think again. Until the housing units are delivered, we're in canvas housing. We don't even have the electricity to waste on cooking. It's cold protein

wafers and whatever junk food we brought with us. At least up here you'll have decent climate control and wall-to-wall floors."

"What? You mean you're kind of camping like? I've heard of it as an ancient form of punishment or exile for spiritual purposes, but I never thought of people doing it these days."

"That's about the size of it."

"When do you expect the housing units?"

"I have no way of knowing and that's the frustrating thing. Turek Inc. is keeping this place secret until the settlement is started. Once the moon is producing L-12, their charter will no longer be in danger of dispute. Until then, things like delivery schedules and even personnel matters are all under wraps. In fact, when I saw that transport coming in, I hoped it was my new technical assistant. I'm hoping for one any day, so I came up here hoping to find him. Instead, I find you with a Dodger."

"So that's why you were so mad. I did wonder."

"I guess the pressure has been getting to me. I was glad to see you. I'm glad to have you here, for my own selfish reasons, but you still have another spanking coming for being here at all. You shouldn't have mentioned the name of the moon, Shawna. And when you go to Trellian, you've got to be careful not to let it slip again."

"I am sorry about that and I will be more careful, but really, I did not actually ask him to bring me here. I had no idea he could do it. And besides that, I didn't know where else to go."

"If you had not thrown the communipad against the wall, you would have known what to do and where to go would not have been an issue. You would have been on Trellian where you belong."

"Where I belong is with you, but anyway, you already spanked me for throwing the communipad."

"I've heard your side of the story, but my decision stands. I don't want arguments right now, Shawna. I want you over my lap for the Adjustment you have earned."

She could tell it was no use arguing with him further. He had heard her side and that was something. It might make him go easier on her. She laid herself over his lap with a roll of her eyes. He hated to do it, but he knew it was needed. He pulled her leggings down just below her rump and began to pepper her with short, hard swats all over. He alternated sides and kept no particular rhythm, but did not really pause either. It was disconcerting and she shifted uneasily. Soon she was wiggling in earnest, trying to avoid the burn that was growing all over her exposed flesh. Finally, she started scooting forward, hoping to get protection by putting her bunched leggings between herself and that overheated drill bit he called a hand.

“Stay still,” he ordered her. “This is just the warm up. I'll say when it's time to move forward for the main event.”

At this, her heart fell and she started to sniffle. “But it already hurts so bad. I'm still sore from the last spanking you gave me. Please, that's enough. I promise, I'll be more careful. Please.”

Her pleas fell on deaf ears. He had his plan in mind and would not waver from it. After ten more minutes, she wondered between her sobs how his usually pleasing hand could be so hard. After twenty minutes, she wondered how he could stand the heat from her rump, as surely it must be setting fire to his hand by now. After thirty minutes had passed with barely a pause, she was crying out with each swat.

Finally, he stopped and she took a deep breath, then fell limp over his lap. All she could do was groan when she realized that he was only stopping to move her leggings farther down her legs. He wasn't done after all.

Her thighs received the thorough attention her bottom had just endured. The skin below the white line that marked where her leggings had rested soon turned a deep red to match the skin above. From time to time, he rubbed her bottom, looking at the color and texture of her usually soft skin. It looked like goose flesh, so he knew he was near his goal.

With his left hand, he grasped her right buttock and pulled it upwards towards her back, exposing the tender crease between thigh and bottom. After holding it there for a moment, he gave that crease three sharp smacks and she shivered with a sob. He moved to the other side and performed the same maneuver, holding her flesh taut just long enough to signal what was coming. Again, she groaned but did not move. "Now, we're done," he informed her. "You can get up when you're ready."

She rose slowly, stiffly, hesitating to move. She knew each stretch of the abused flesh would cause new and different sorts of pain, but her heart longed for the comfort his arms would bring. She pushed herself up, and then turned as he rose with her. He grasped her hard around the waist and carried her with him to the bed he had set up for her.

He held her then, lying with her on top of him on the mattress. Eventually, he spoke softly into the silence. "I want to protect you. I want to take care of you. To do that, I have to be able to trust you to do what I say. When you don't, these are the consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. And I know you only spank me because you care. It's hard to take when it's happening, but I know it's for the best," she sighed.

"You know what I want to do now, more than anything in the world, don't you?"

"I have a pretty good idea," she answered doubtfully, "but I'm awfully sore."

"I know you are, sweetheart. And I can't stay anyway. I'm going to slide out and let you get some rest. I'll be back tomorrow if I get the chance. If you need anything, you can use the Handheld in the box by the airlock door."

"Handheld?" she inquired.

"It's that box on the wall over there. You pick it up and wait for the static to clear. It's totally unreliable and completely open for anyone to listen in on us from anywhere on Plivit, but since

there are only five of us down there, it's not too much of a problem. You can also listen to our conversations if you want, so you won't be totally cut off."

"What about the Linkset?"

"It doesn't work. Security again. Turek Inc. doesn't want anyone tracing Links in or out of here."

"What? That's awful. No Links?" Shawna was shocked. Now it was dawning on her how difficult life would be for her here and why Vilnek couldn't bring her with him. He didn't want her even knowing how the conditions would be, much less living them herself. But here she was, and it was her own fault.

"You wouldn't be able to sit down to a Linkset for a couple of days anyway, after the Adjustment I just gave you. In fact, I'm sure you could use a little peace and quiet. And if quiet is what you want, Plivit staging satellite is the place for you. At least for four more days." He kissed her tenderly, then slid out from under her, being careful to keep her throbbing backside from touching the bed. Before he was fully strapped into the glider, she was deeply asleep.

The days fled by faster than she had anticipated. She occupied herself studying the manuals for some of the technical equipment stored in the small staging satellite, including the cooking apparatus. By the time the pilot returned, she was able to cook him what she considered a very acceptable meal.

"I've used the Handheld to call Vilnek up here. He should be here shortly. Why not take a seat while I finish up this stew?" she invited.

"If you put those seeds in now, they'll dissolve by the time you serve the stew. Just put them in a bowl and scald them. Here, want me to do it?" he offered.

"How do you know about this primitive cooking business?"

“If I want to eat, I have to be able to cook,” he replied. “We go into some pretty primitive places with just our wits and our smiles to get us through sometimes.”

“By 'we' you mean...”

“Dodgers, of course,” he answered.

“But what are they?” She knew better than to use the word this time, and she also knew she would regret asking, but she really wanted to know.

“The question isn't 'what'. It's 'where',” he tossed out.

“Okay, so where is a you-know-what?” she asked. She remembered having this conversation before and it made no more sense to her now than it did the last time.

He laughed at her euphemism, but understood her perfectly. “Anywhere he wants to be,” he informed her and she joined in with him repeating the last words.

“How am I supposed to learn if all I get is this double talk?” she complained.

He gave a slow shrug. When she let it drop, he seemed to shake his head in a disappointed manner. “And I thought you had the makings,” he sighed.

“I don't know if I have the makings or not. I can't figure out one thing about these people.”

“The less you know...”

“The less I can tell,” she completed the adage with him again. “So the only thing I know about them is that they like to repeat things.”

“That's a start,” was all he would reply.

“And I know they won't give their names. You still haven't told me yours.”

He nodded in acknowledgment just about the time Vilnek's glider landed in the bay as they watched through the airlock door. He entered in time to hear her gripe, “But that's not anything. Why all the secrecy?”

“Why indeed?” Vilnek agreed. He kissed Shawna, then

turned to the pilot. "You were right. She definitely has the makings."

"How's that?" she demanded, rather put out.

"Because of all you've gotten him to tell you," came his confusing reply.

"But he hasn't told me anything."

"Of course not."

"Here, the seeds are done. Just put them down like that and we'll sprinkle them on the stew. Let them rest for a minute and they'll bloom with flavor."

"Poets! That's what they must be. Poets and cooks. Now we're getting somewhere," she giggled, but the men were in earnest this time as they viewed her with approbation. "I meant it as a joke. That's ridiculous. All I did was take one little thing he said and pretend it was a clue." More raised eyebrows from the men. Then it dawned on her. "I have to figure all this out by myself, don't I? It's some kind of group that only shows itself but never talks about itself. And that must mean..."

"That this good stew is going to get cold if you don't eat," the pilot interjected.

"But I—" Shawna began.

"Don't want to be rude or nosy," Vilnek interrupted her by finishing her sentence for her. "It's time to eat." He said it in such a marked manner that she realized she ought to mind him. After the daily Adjustments she had endured, minding Vilnek was uppermost in her mind. She knew this would be her last meal with Vilnek and she didn't want to ruin it with her curiosity and her prying. Plenty of time to pry later, in the transport back to Trellian. If only Vilnek were going with her, she could really enjoy the thought.

The meal was soon finished and the cargo loaded, including the human cargo stowed in the secret compartment of the transport. Shawna wondered how landing in this transport now would be any different from landing in it a few days ago, but she knew

better than to ask. Vilnek would have worked everything out for her, but there was no time now to discuss it.

“I’ll miss you. Please let me know when it’s safe to come. And please keep in touch. I can’t stand the thought of hearing nothing from you until the rendezvous.”

“Neither can I, sweetheart. I’ll find a way of keeping in touch. But until then, do what he tells you to,” he instructed her indicating the pilot, “and then what Pippa tells you to. She’ll steer you right for sure and keep you out of trouble.” They kissed and he watched as Shawna passed through the airlock and out to the waiting ship.

She was soon enclosed in the secret compartment again. The trip back to Trellian seemed longer because of the cramped sitting position, and she could not see anything. At last, she felt the transport come to a halt. She kept expecting the pilot to slide the panel back and rescue her, but instead she felt another jolt and another lift off. Several hours later, she felt another landing and wondered what in the world was happening.

Finally, the pilot slid back the panel and let her out. She took one look out of the viewport and gaped. “How did we get here? You can’t land this huge transport on a planet. It’s too heavy. It would never lift back off without the help of the boosters a satellite station provides.”

“As you’ll notice, this isn’t that huge transport. The bridge detaches for flexibility. It’s about the size of a glider now, or a personal transport. I left the main cargo hold and passenger lounge in one of the landing bays on the satellite and scooted on down here.”

“But where is here?” Shawna wondered. Looking around, things seemed familiar but she couldn’t quite recall. “Or is that another question I’m not supposed to ask?”

The pilot chuckled as he replied, “No problem with asking that one, but you shouldn’t have to. Look up there, beyond that ridge.” She followed his pointing finger and gaped in shock. The

buildings of the Headquarters complex were clearly outlined against the fading sunset.

"I had no idea there was a... what? A canyon? Valley? What do you call this?"

"I call it darn convenient for my line of work."

"And how will we get out of here? And why did you land here?" Shawna was more confused than ever.

"We landed here because of you. I'll have to go back up to the staging satellite and check in the normal way. It's you who can't arrive through official channels."

"But I can't just stand here in the middle of nowhere for two months!"

"You think I'd do that to you?"

She shot him a look as if to remind him that in their very short acquaintance he had already shoved her in a secret cargo hold and stranded her on Plivit for five days.

He grinned. "You do have the makings, don't you? Ha! Ha! Ha! Pippa knows to come here and meet me after sunset any day I arrive."

"But why?"

He gave her his usual stare as an answer, so she tried to answer herself. "All right. Time to think for myself again and not ask so many questions. When you stop talking it usually means I have enough information to figure it out for myself. So let's see. What do I know? I know we're out in the middle of nowhere. Why would anybody land here?"

"Sometimes, what's missing is as important as what's there," he commented cryptically.

Shawna took this comment for the hint it was. "What's missing? Everything's missing, except dirt, pencils, and empty lonely air."

"Pencils?"

"That's what the miners here call those tall formations jutting out of the dirt, like that over there." She pointed. "Made of Stal-

con, so they're very valuable if you can mine them right. Say, are you trying your hand at illegal drilling?"

His cocked eyebrows told her she was on the wrong track. "No, that's not it. No drill drones in sight. Besides, that's not missing. What's missing are buildings, with food and a place to sleep, which are what I'd really like about now."

Again, the stare. "What else is missing? People. People are missing. And why is that important? Because you don't want to be seen." He continued to stare. "You want to be seen?" Again the stare. "Not you. Me. I don't want to be seen. Oh, that's right. What am I doing here then? How can I live without being seen?"

"Look, here comes Pippa, right on time." His grin told her that she was on the right track, but her conclusions had her more confused than before.

Later that evening, Pippa and Shawna sat in the back of Radnok's personal transport chatting with Willa. "I want to thank you all again for coming to my rescue, but I still don't like this plan at all. I thought I would have official status like normal," Shawna exclaimed. "I had no idea I would have to stay unofficial the whole time I was here."

"I didn't either. Not until today when I overheard the special investigator talking to Falsan. I tell you, my blood ran cold just to hear Falsan laugh at the thought of the new information drug he's going to try." Pippa shuddered at the thought.

"Falsan's really lost it, hasn't he? What's Sarah going to do with him?" Willa wondered.

"Falsan's her husband, not her child. There's nothing she can do except try to talk him out of this insanity."

"We can help her best by getting rid of the Investigator Pelchak," asserted Pippa. "He's a menace."

"Do you think he'd really use this new drug to get Vilnek's whereabouts from me?" Shawna asked.

"I'm afraid he would," Willa conjectured. "I don't know Pelchak, but I've read about Zipwrath. It's been deemed safe and effective by all the medical authorities if used by a trained dispenser. He'd have no reason to hesitate."

"But what will happen to Choldor and Claire if I'm found at their place?"

"Nothing. You're not illegal. You're just not on record. Falsan makes the rules around here, but he doesn't make galaxy law. Sometimes jurisdiction gets a little iffy out here in the outlying sectors, so if you are discovered, you may be forced to spill the beans, but nothing terrible will happen."

"But it would be terrible if Vilnek were found because I blabbed."

"I mean, nothing serious would happen to you. And if you do get caught, we immediately Link Vilnek and he moves. It's easy enough."

She was about to counter that Vilnek could not just leave at will or be contacted that easily but she decided against it. If either of her friends were questioned with Zipwrath, they would know little of value.

"Claire is really looking forward to you coming, I can tell you," Willa put in. "She missed you and in that remote location, she doesn't meet too many new people."

"She's so shy anyway, it's hard for her to make new friends," Pippa commented.

Shawna nodded. "Not that Choldor helps much. He's not exactly the social butterfly either. And that suits both of them just fine, doesn't it?"

"Sure. They're still crazy in love, but with Vilnek gone, Falsan is relying more on Choldor. He tries to pull him in more and more often, but it's so far, Choldor won't make the trip any more than he can help."

“At least Claire gets to see someone then,” Shawna noted.

“That's right. They usually stop by our place and sometimes she stays with me rather than going all the way in to Headquarters. Choldor doesn't like leaving her that long, but for a short trip he will. It's so cute how he'll get all gruff and give her a warning Adjustment before he leaves her, as if he's afraid she'll misbehave or disobey Radnok or something. She makes a show of rubbing her petute like it hurt her, but she doesn't fool me. I know he never spansks her hard enough to warm her seat, much less make her sore,” Willa pouted.

“As if Radnok blisters you regularly,” Pippa scoffed. “We all know what an old softy he is.” She said it loudly enough for Radnok to hear from the control pod.

“Hey! I heard that!” he called back to them. “And if you want me to prove to you how wrong that statement is, I'll be happy to oblige. This transport is mine and any of you who don't have an assigned miner are subject to the Peace Initiative decisions of the miner on whose property you stand at the moment of infraction. That would be me.”

“If you're itching to give an Adjustment, I'm sure Willa will do something soon enough to give you a reason,” Shawna teased. “Leave me out of it. And as for Choldor spanking Claire, all I can say is whatever they are doing was working for them last time I talked to her.”

“And it still is,” Pippa stated proudly. “A testament to my matchmaking skills if ever there was one.” Shawna wondered why Pippa always made matches for other people but never herself.

With Shawna comfortably installed with Claire and Choldor, Radnok took Pippa back to Headquarters. There, she slipped into her office for a bit of late night catching up so that it would

not be so obvious that she had been gone a night and a day. If she had known Pelchak better, she would have known how futile her efforts were.

"Working late," Pelchak accused slowly from her doorway.

"Oh, you scared me!" Pippa gasped.

"Gone all day. Why?"

"None of your business." She used resentment to mask her fear. This man was smart enough to figure out where she had been and why if she was not careful.

"It's Falsan's business. I'll just Link him." He turned to go.

"No! Wait!" she called after him. He turned. "I had to go out and check on some minesteads. Companion Program problems, very confidential and personal. Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Choldor and Claire? Problems? She's not his Companion, now they're married."

"What makes you think I went all the way out there? It wasn't Claire at all. It was someone different and really, none of your concern."

"Lies? Not a good idea." He looked grave. "Silence is bad enough, but lies?" He spread his palms upward in a gesture that showed he felt he had no choice in what he needed to do. Then with lightning speed, he stepped behind her desk and tipped her pod forward tumbling her out onto his forearm, which he had extended for the purpose.

He scooped her over his lap as he sat down in her pod. The stinging swats he started raining down on her backside surprised her more than hurt her at first. She was so shocked her vocal chords wouldn't obey her command to shout. She lay there paralyzed and mute until at last the burn built up enough to assure her that this really was happening.

"What? What do you think you're doing!" she shouted. "Get off me!"

"Not on you."

"I mean, let me up. Let go!"

“No.”

“Stop that this instant!” This time he ignored her all together.
“I’ll report you to security!”

“I am security,” he stated, never even slowing down his rhythm.

“I’ll report you to Falsan!”

“Good. Save me the trouble.”

“No, wait!”

“Then answer my question.”

“Ow!” She had never realized that Adjustments hurt so much. How many times had she explained the program to new Companions, assuring them that Adjustments were no big deal? Just a part of life. Nothing to be afraid of. Little had she known. “I can’t answer your question like this. I can’t even think! Please, let me up!”

“No.” But he did give her a break. As much as he enjoyed giving her the spanking she deserved for lying to him, he wanted even more to get the truth from her. He wanted to show her that he could be trusted. Once she told him the truth, he could begin to prove to her that he was not just Falsan’s flunky. He intended to see justice done, no more, no less. But first, she had to give in. He couldn’t let her win with dishonesty.

Chapter 4

“**A**ll right, tell Falsan then. Or keep spanking me until your hand falls off. I'm not telling you anything!” Pippa was defiant, even in this awkward position.

“Why so stubborn?” he demanded. Pelchak knew he had to be hurting her bottom by now. She probably wasn't used to this kind of treatment, working here in Headquarters, so that should make it even worse. Her loyalty impressed him, but still he spanked on, his palm flicking upward with each swat.

“If you had any friends, maybe you'd know.” That stopped him. He stood up and plunked her back down in the pod, keeping her there with just the power of his presence bending over her, bringing his face close to hers.

“I do have friends, and I do know. If you knew me, you'd know that the best way to serve your friend is to trust me. I can't clear this up if I don't have the facts. You're holding those facts. Give them to me and let me do my job.”

“You've got all the facts you need. There was no murder. It was self-defense and you know it.”

“Tell me why you were gone for more than a day. Who's out there? What were you doing? Tell me, or I go to Falsan.”

“Go to him, but I'll get there first and hand in my resignation.”

“Could be a good plan,” Pelchak admitted as he pushed off from the arms of her pod and turned away in frustration. “Falsan isn't stable. Rather you were out of this.”

She looked at him in confusion. “I've worked here since Falsan first got the charter to this planet. I've poured my life into Trellian and this organization. I'm not walking away lightly.”

His eyes bored into hers and told her what his voice could not. She knew the man before her wasted no words on unimportant matters. When he repeated his thought slowly and deliberately, she listened. “Trellian isn't safe in Falsan's hands.”

“So are you saying walking away now doesn't constitute walking away lightly? If you realize that Falsan's not acting responsibly, then why are you pursuing this investigation?”

“It's my job. I have to see it through.”

“You can always quit. You're telling me to quit. Let's turn in our resignations together.” She had no idea why she was proposing joining forces with this irritating and intractable man, but for some reason, it seemed like the most reasonable thing in the world for her to suggest.

“The next investigator won't give your friend as fair a deal as I will. You want to protect Vilnek? Tell me everything. Start with where you were today.”

“You're impossible. I don't know why I even bother.”

“Because you're smart. You know the truth when you hear it. So do I. Start telling it.”

“Telling what? The truth? The truth is that I don't have to tell you anything. I'm tired and I need to finish these reports, so if you don't mind...”

He was tempted to just continue standing there, watching her work. He hoped that it might provoke her into contacting Falsan. That might produce between the two of them the break he needed to remove her from this situation that was turning more

dangerous than she knew. Just then, the message indicator in his Radplant went off. He had to get to a Linkset to see if this was the message he'd been waiting for from his informant. Catching her eye one last time and tilting his chin downward, as if waiting for her to speak, he took his leave. Her sigh of relief, just barely audible to him as he turned the corner, brought a smile to his lips.

“You've selected Tiemek, Candace,” Pippa counseled. “Are you sure?”

“Are you crazy?” shrieked Faith. “Talvok will blow a gasket.”

“Talvok isn't in charge of the Companion Program,” Candace replied.

“But he's your friend, since I'm your friend, and he's my... well...” she hesitated.

“He's your what?” Pippa encouraged her to continue. She would dearly love to know what their relationship exactly entailed.

“He's my friend, too,” Faith replied with a bit of haughtiness in her none-of-your-business glare. “We're all friends and we care about each other. I know you haven't been here long, but I feel close to you. Close enough to let you know that this is crazy. You can't go with Tiemek.”

“Why not?” Candace demanded defiantly.

“You know good and well why not. He's a Parth smoker. Pippa, Talvok told me that men have to qualify to get a Companion. How would that man ever—”

“You have to qualify as a stable, reliable, safe miner. You don't have to qualify for sainthood,” Pippa explained. “He does his work. He's certainly not violent or dangerous.”

“Well, I should say not. He acts about like your average lizard. In fact, he pretty much looks like that as well, with the way

he slouches around, never bathes or changes his clothes, and generally avoids doing anything that involves one minute's extra work." Faith had no problem giving her opinion.

"I didn't know you knew him so well," Pippa commented.

Candace shot her an indignant look while Faith chuckled. "He's not so bad. You hardly even notice the smell once you get to know him." Pippa rolled her eyes while Faith bent double laughing. "All right, so he's not the type of man I would usually choose to work with, but he agreed to my terms and he's going to let me work in the fields with him, not just do the reports inside."

"He can't do that," Faith protested.

Pippa covered her ears. "I don't want to hear another word," she sang out in a loud voice. When she was sure Candace would be quiet, she continued in a deliberate voice. "I can't know that, Candace. It's against regulations, so as of now, I officially take what you just said as a joke and change the subject."

"But what's the big deal?" Candace wanted to know. "You work in the field with Talvok all the time, checking samples from all over Trellian, making sure that those Serpiac things are under control and that the sensors are picking them up like they should. That's dangerous work. How's a little drilling going to hurt me?"

"It's against regulations that are set up for the Companions' safety and well-being. If the Companions could do all the work, what would stop them from being manipulated into working themselves to death? The miners would be mere Radplant receivers, telling the Companions what to do. Is that what you want?" Pippa sounded defensive now and not entirely reasonable.

"That wouldn't happen," Candace protested.

"I've seen it more times than I care to mention, on other worlds of course. It starts out as a partnership, then the Companion wants to branch out and try more, so the miner lets her. Before she knows what's happening, she's doing all the work,

and he's sitting around on his backside," Pippa explained cynically.

"No man worth his salt would do that to his Companion," Candace argued. "Can you see Radnok or Choldor making their Companions do all the work while they goofed off all day?"

"Not every man is a Radnok or a Choldor," Faith pointed out.

Pippa shrugged. "There are plenty who try to take advantage, I'm sorry to say. You've got to remember, we are a mining planet. It's not always the most savory characters who wind up working mines. That's part of the reason for the Companion Program. We want to attract a better class of miner, but no world can be fully staffed with great guys. We try to make sure that those miners get kicked out of the Companion program or never make it in the first place here on Trellian, but other planets I've worked were not so concerned about fairness."

"I can tell Falsan must have been a pretty good guy about some things, like when he set up this program. That's what makes it so hard to see him losing it like he is now," Faith put in.

"You're right, Faith," Pippa sighed. "Candace, I can't stop you from going with Tiemek. He does smoke that stuff, but he gets his reports and ore shipments in on time, so I can't really complain. I can strongly counsel you to reconsider, which is what I'm doing now. This is official. If you go with him, you'll have to sign a waiver saying you understand what you are getting into."

"I'll sign, no problem. This is what I've always wanted," Candace grinned.

"What is what you've always wanted, Cupcake?" inquired a voice from the doorway.

Candace turned around to see who was so rudely interrupting their private conversation. "This is the women's wing of the Selection Meeting Hall, if you don't mind. What are you doing here?"

Pippa gave another long sigh with a reluctant grin as she got

up out of her pod to hug the new arrival. "Candace, Faith, this is Celdek. He's a pilot turned miner and he's late for the Selection Meeting."

"But what is he doing in this wing of the Hall? That surely can't be allowed," Candace asserted. Faith looked at Pippa expectantly, but she just shrugged.

"You know what they say about his type," Pippa commented as she waved a hand to indicate Celdek.

"No, I don't," Candace replied. "What type?"

"Dodger," Celdek grinned. Pippa saw the trap but couldn't prevent Candace falling into it.

"What's a Dodger?" Candace asked.

"Not, 'what's a D,'" she said. "The question is, 'where's a D.' Isn't that right, Celdek?" Pippa informed them, careful not to say the word.

"Okay, where's a Dodger then?" Candace asked, the look on her face making it clear that none of this made the least sense to her.

"Anywhere he wants to be," announced Celdek in an amused tone. Then he studied Candace again. "Candace? Not Cupcake, then, but Candy." Turning to Pippa he announced, "Pippa, this one reminds me of Shawna. Can I have her?"

Candace bridled. "Have me? Nobody 'has' me. And for your information, I already have an assignment. And my name is Candace, not Candy."

"Oh, really? Well, that's too bad, Candy. But I can wait." His grin was cocky enough to make Candace grind her teeth.

"You can wait till I've drilled all the Stalcon out of the entire planet," Candace shot back and flounced out the back door of the dorm room.

"That exit would have been much more effective if I didn't happen to know that door leads only to the tiny balcony overlooking the courtyard. She's three stories up. Where exactly does she think she's going?" Celdek asked.

"How did you know that detail about these rooms? You can't have ever been here before," Faith wondered.

"If a Dodger is going to get wherever he wants to be, he has to know where that is," Celdek replied.

"If D's are good for one thing, it's directions," Pippa confirmed. "Which is why I know you didn't get lost on the way over here. Why are you so late?"

"You don't want to know, Pippa," Celdek assured her. "Croyden's business."

"You're right," Pippa agreed. "If it has to do with him, leave us out of it."

A voice filtered through the back door. "Leave us, period!"

Celdek pulled a mournful face. "You wound me, Candy," he groaned. "Rebuffed, but not defeated, the warrior retreats to lick his wounds and plan his next strategy."

Pippa called after him, "You could make some quick selections tomorrow from the Companions who haven't already committed themselves to their choices yet. You still have a chance."

"Not necessary, but thanks," he threw back over his shoulder. "I have a sweet tooth. Nothing will do but Candy."

"It's Candace, you buffoon," Candace shot back.

His laughter could be heard echoing down the hall. "I'll be back soon to collect on the debt you owe me," he called back.

"What debt?" Faith wanted to know.

"Candace used the word 'Dodger' in front of him, two or three times at least. In their tradition, that means you want a kiss so in essence you owe him two or three kisses. He intends to collect them."

Faith just laughed, but Candace rolled her eyes. "Let him try," she mumbled.

Pippa had every confidence that in the very near future, he would do just that.

At Choldor's minestead, Shawna was settling in nicely. The days went by much faster for her as she had work to occupy her mind. She was even learning to enjoy the view from the top of the cliff, which she was admiring one evening when she spotted a personal transport snaking its way up the ravine. She watched it melt into the shadows of a Stalcon formation, and went down to investigate.

"You again?" Shawna asked. She had recognized the transport and the pilot just climbing out of it.

"A pleasure to see you again, too," the pilot retorted. "With that kind of reception, I've half a mind to take this communicapad right back to Vilnek and inform him that he needs to teach his wife better manners."

"Communicapad? From Vilnek? You've seen him? How? When? Where?"

"Three yeses, two none of your businesses, and one at Croyden's place, in the order named," the pilot quipped. Shawna didn't bother working it out. She hadn't really expected answers anyway.

"You're right. It doesn't matter. Just give it to me!" Shawna begged.

But at that moment, Choldor appeared around the corner of a large pencil. "Hold it right there," he commanded. Shawna stopped instantly. "What's going on here?"

"I came to give Shawna this communicapad from Vilnek," the pilot answered. He neither straightened his slouch nor slowed his step, but still Shawna could tell that he was now on high internal alert.

"Don't you know you're supposed to come to a man's minestead to let him know you're on his place before you go gallivanting around it, sneaking meetings with his guests?" Choldor reprimanded the newcomer. Turning to Shawna, he added, "And

I know you know better than to meet strange men in strange transports away from the landing bay. What's gotten into you?"

"He's not a stranger," Shawna countered. "You know him, too."

"Why would you think I knew him? Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Vilnek's who'd rather not be here much longer, if it's all the same to you. Here, Shawna. This is yours." He handed her the commupad and this time, Choldor allowed it.

"Who is he, Shawna, and why do you think I know him?" Choldor demanded.

"I still don't know his name, but I thought you knew him because Claire rode with him when she came to deliver those identification documents to us several weeks ago."

"Claire did what?" Choldor sounded as shocked as he looked. His long jagged scar stood out white against his reddening cheeks.

"Maybe we'd better go up to the minestead and get this straightened out," Shawna suggested.

The pilot's amused expression irked Choldor into agreeing. "Maybe you're right." He expected an argument from the pilot who had already expressed his desire to leave, but the man suddenly seemed to change his mind.

"Fine by me," he grinned. "I'd love to see little Claire again."

"You could just explain, you know," Shawna taunted him in disgust as they climbed the path up the cliff face. "And you could introduce yourself. There's no one here but us so we don't need to hide the fact that we've met before."

"Croyden wouldn't approve."

"Oh, one of them, are you?" Choldor accused. "I've heard of your type. Dodgers! No use for them, myself. Who's your client?"

"If you have to ask, you can't know," the pilot repeated his formula.

“Let's Link Pippa. She'll be able to explain,” Shawna suggested.

Seated in the common room of Choldor's minestead, Shawna Linked Pippa while Choldor glared and the pilot stared impudently around. As soon as Pippa's face materialized on the Linkset, she spotted the pilot and gasped. “Celdek! What are you doing there?”

“A name! At last!” Shawna crowed in triumph. “I knew I'd get one out of somebody sooner or later.”

“All right, I guess it is time for some explanations and introductions. Choldor, Shawna, this is Celdek. He's been doing some work for me.”

“Then why didn't he just tell me that? Why all the secrecy?” Shawna asked Celdek.

“Just like a Dodger. All the game playing and silly answers. Bunch of nonsense,” Choldor put in.

Celdek just kept smiling like an otter in the sun.

“He couldn't. It's not his information to tell. When a Dodger has a client, even his name is not his own. The D never knows how much confidentiality his client may need, so he never gives away any information. Only the client can do that. It's a matter of pride with them. He can't mention his name, his client's name, his mission, or even the fact that he is what he is. Not while he has a client, anyway. When he's not actively working for anyone, he can tell more, but most of them still don't.”

“Bad habits are hard to break,” Celdek murmured to himself.

“Their cultural traits are usually built around their need for secrecy. The name Croyden, for example, is just a way for them to identify each other and anyone else who has used their services. Only someone connected with them will recognize that name,” Pippa informed them. “Even off duty, some will not give their own names as a way to kind of keep in shape, so to speak. They use Croyden and the answer formulas to keep from saying

too much. I admit, it gets confusing until you learn what they mean and what they can do.”

“So you're his client?” Choldor accused.

“That's not something I'll admit to, and neither will he. There's no point. Let's just say that I know him and trust him implicitly. But what are you doing there? I didn't send you.”

“And I really don't think you want to know why I'm here,” Celdek answered.

“More cloak and dagger stuff!” Choldor rolled his eyes. “What I want to know is, what's this about Claire going somewhere with him?”

“You knew about that. At least Claire said you were fine with her being gone,” Pippa answered.

“I'll go find Claire,” Choldor decided. “Somebody's got some things to answer for.”

Claire must have been nearby, for in a moment, Choldor was back with Claire in tow. Shawna could read her friend's face like a picture book. The moment her glance fell on Celdek, her eyes popped, her jaw dropped and she even stumbled. Choldor caught her elbow and kept her moving toward a pod.

Pippa's face in the Linkset turned to Claire. “Tell me you didn't do what I think you did.”

Shawna looked confused. “What's the big deal? She did us a big favor is all. What's wrong with that?”

“What exactly was that big favor?” Choldor ground out, patience forced into every syllable.

“You don't know?” Shawna gasped. The light was dawning but she couldn't believe what she could see by it.

Pippa weighed in next. “Choldor, I want you to know I had no idea. It never even occurred to me that she would leave without you knowing.”

“Pretty careless of you to misplace your Companion like that for two days and not notice,” Celdek threw in. It was the match Choldor's powder keg needed to set it off.

“I knew she was gone! I left her at Radnok’s! And that’s how she got away with it, because it never occurred to anybody that she would do such a thing. That’s why I have to watch her like a hawk. Nobody ever suspects her of doing anything.” He turned his reddening face towards his wife. “What I want to know is how did you get off-world without me knowing?”

“Well...” Claire began.

“He doesn’t need to know that,” Celdek interrupted.

“How did you find out about that anyway?” Claire inquired. “I thought the whole trip was so hush-hush that he’d never find out.”

“Claire!” Choldor’s shout rocked the room.

Shawn couldn’t help chiming in. “He heard it from me, more or less. I thought he knew Celdek and said as much when Celdek showed up here. I didn’t know Choldor hadn’t met Celdek and approved her trip. When I got in that compartment...”

“Compartment? What compartment?” Choldor roared over her.

“That’s enough about that,” Pippa interrupted.

“Celdek told me that Claire had ridden that way, too. I took that to mean that Choldor trusted him. If Choldor trusted him, I knew I could, too.” Shawna looked from one face to the other in total confusion.

Pippa jumped in before Shawna could reveal any more than she already had. “It was me that trusted Celdek and I still do. I’m a bit disappointed in his attitude about now, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s the best pilot I’ve ever dealt with, especially under unusual circumstances.”

Shawna didn’t understand the comment about the attitude until she looked over and noted the continued grin of amusement on his face. As long as his private business arrangements were not the topic of conversation, he seemed to be enjoying the fact that Claire was getting in trouble.

“Little Claire seems to need a stronger hand to guide her

than she's had up till now," Celdek commented amiably. "And maybe you do too, Pippa, for helping Claire sneak off like that."

"I've got as strong a hand to guide me as I need, thank you," Claire denied.

"I didn't know she was sneaking," Pippa defended.

"I've heard all I need to," Choldor declared. He pulled Claire to her feet and made for the equipment shed, leaving Shawna staring, Celdek smirking, and Pippa fuming.

"I can't believe Claire did that to me, much less to Choldor!" Pippa complained.

"After that big ape gets through with her, she won't be doing it again, I'm guessing," Celdek grinned.

"His bark is a lot worse than his bite, so don't look so worried about her welfare," Shawna commented sarcastically. She wasn't used to men criticizing Claire and felt defensive of her very mild, sweet friend. "Most men aren't so quick to urge Choldor on when it comes to Claire's Adjustments."

"That's another thing you may not know about D's," Pippa explained. "They have a propensity for spanking first and asking questions later."

"Nothing like a well-spanked bottom for opening a girl's ears and sweetening her disposition," Celdek put in.

"Claire's already sweet enough," Shawna exclaimed. "She did what she did for me. I don't know why she felt she couldn't tell Choldor, but I'm sure she had a very good reason. Maybe there just wasn't time to inform him before she left. Then when she got back, she didn't feel it was necessary to worry him. Vilnek would have asked her not to mention it, anyway, more than likely."

"When a woman tries to defend another woman, she generally needs whatever the other woman is getting. Since Vilnek's not here, maybe I'd better see to you like Choldor is seeing to Claire," Celdek mused aloud.

"You'd better not try it!" Shawna threatened.

Pippa just laughed. "He won't. But that is their way, so don't tempt him. It's another way to protect their secrecy. They back each other up in the matter of discipline and gender relations."

"I might even back up that rather angry looking copper standing behind you if he was going to give you the attention you deserve," Celdek informed Pippa, who whirled around to find Pelchak looming over her.

As Celdek spoke, he calmly stepped in front of Shawna and pushed her gently out of the camera's range behind a pod. She was about to demand an explanation when he mentioned the word "copper" and realized the peril she was in.

"What are you doing talking to a Dodger?" Pelchak demanded.

"How do you know what he is?" Pippa fumed turning back and forth from the man to the screen. "And how do you know he's a cop?"

"The smell," both men answered in unison, but for some reason Pippa could not fathom, there seemed to be no rancor in their voices. They stood there, glaring at each other across the miles. Shawna could just barely get the screen in view if she lay on her back and twisted just right.

"Enabler discussions are private?" Pelchak asked Pippa. Seeing her nod, he turned to Celdek. "Word?" he proposed.

"I'd be happy to have a word with you, but the range is short on the Enabler mechanism. You'd have to be a lot closer."

"Done. Tomorrow?"

"Make it the next day and you're on, Copper."

"Not a Copper. Special Investigator."

A look of grudging respect passed between the two men, then Shawna saw Pelchak start to reach across Pippa to turn the screen off. "I'm not done," she protested.

"Yes, you are," chimed both Celdek and Pelchak in unison. The Linkset connection was broken at both ends.

"Why did you cut Pippa off?" Shawna demanded as she got up off the floor and straightened her leggings.

"I didn't want to take any more chances that you might be seen. That copper didn't seem half bad, but if he saw you, he'd be on your tail before you could sneeze."

"But I don't like the thought of Pippa alone with him. Something strange is going on there. I've never seen her look like that before."

"Neither have I. That's another reason to cut the Link," Celdek grinned.

"And why did you agree to meet with him? You don't even know his name."

"I will, before I meet him. I'll know anything about him I want to know, right down to his shoe size and what he has for breakfast."

"Well, what I want to know is what's taking Choldor so long."

"It's only been a few minutes."

"That's all it takes. He isn't hard on her. He doesn't have to be."

He gave her his usual answer and she frowned. That stare of his could crack glass.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Claire cried. "Please stop. I'm sorry!"

"Not this time, little one. I'm nowhere near done yet. Save your breath for later. You'll need it," Choldor scolded.

"But I said I was sorry," Claire moaned. "What more do you want. Ow! Ouch!" He had spanked her harder in the first five minutes than he had in the last three spankings combined. This was a side of Choldor she hadn't seen since the first time he spanked her. No sweet little reminder spanking this. No heart-warming rituals and bottom-warming love pats. He had sat down

on an upturned ore case, turned her over his knee, yanked down her leggings and laid into her bare behind with a will.

His hard hot hand was rougher than any paddle or tool he had ever used. It stung like a filamith and he could aim it as accurately as the short piece of pipe insulation he sometimes employed. All over her backside he swatted, first one side then the other in quick, measured cadence. When she wiggled, he just readjusted his hold on her waist with his left hand and spanked harder.

On and on it went. Her shock at his determination and endurance soon gave way to a bit of rebellion. "Why are you doing this to me? You never do this to me! You never go on this long. Oh, ow! That hurts! It burns like fire! Stop it!"

"Why? Why am I doing this to you? Why did you do what you did to me?"

"But I'm sorry! I said I was sorry!"

"I'll bet you are sorry and you'll be sorrier still. Have I been going too easy on you? Did you think I didn't know I'm the mildest spanker on the planet? I'm only the mildest spanker because you're the sweetest girl. You haven't needed anything harsher, but now, all that's changed. I can't trust you to obey me. I can't rely on your trusting me to keep you safe. If you are going to sneak off behind my back, I'll have to take measures to make sure you think twice before you do it next time."

"No, it's not like that. Not at all," she sobbed. His words were stinging worse than his swats.

"What do you expect me to think? Lying and taking chances like that? Going with a Dodger? You think I'm going to tolerate that?"

"But Pippa trusted him! And they needed those documents so badly. Please, can't you stop and let's talk about this?" He hadn't slowed his rate or eased his force in the least.

"I'm talking just fine. I want to get this done and get back to that Dodger before he gets away. I figure that communipad he

gave Shawna was from Vilnek and I want him to take word from me to Vilnek if he knows where to reach him.”

“Then go back and talk to him. Please! I've learned my lesson. I won't ever deceive you again. I didn't mean to this time. If you'd just let me explain! Ow!”

“All right. I do need to go back and see if this Celdek can take word to Vilnek.” Choldor gave her three more hard spansks, then set her on her feet with a quick hug. “You go stand in that corner and get ready for the second part of your spanking. I'll be back as quick as I can.”

A very surprised and chastened Claire stood in the corner and couldn't decide if she wanted him to hurry or not.

Chapter 5

Relief warred with apprehension in Claire's heart as she heard Choldor return a few minutes later. She hoped to dissuade him from continuing with his purpose, but she should have known it was useless.

This time, he used a filamith. Its whippy length, which made it perfect as a drill bit for penetrating the most delicate Stalcon pencils, made it the perfect implement for stinging a bare backside as well. He didn't move her out of her corner, but rather positioned himself behind her and let it fly. Each stroke was harder than the one before, and lower down on her bottom until he reached the crease between cheek and thigh. He paid special attention to that area before moving even lower to her upper legs.

She danced in place, yelping and kicking her heels up, but he paid no attention. He patiently waited until her feet were out of the way before he placed the next stroke. She pleaded with him again and again, but he only replied that he would finish when he knew she would remember this lesson for a long time.

He was looking for a particular shade of red and at last, her bottom showed the hue he was seeking. He had only seen it once before, on that first day when he had been forced to spank her for

running away from him. Trellian's vagaries allowed for no such foolishness and neither would he. Her running away had endangered her sweet self back then and now her lying had endangered their relationship. He had to make sure it would never happen again. Maybe she thought him weak. Maybe she thought him indifferent. She would learn the truth in the surest way he knew to teach her.

And then there was the lie that had come between them even though he hadn't known it was there. That would have to be dealt with. "Are you ever going to lie to me again?" he scolded her. Swat!

"No, never," she sobbed. Swat!

"No matter what?" Swat!

"No matter what." Swat!

"I know you thought you didn't have a choice." Swat! "But you always have a choice." Swat! "Because I always love you." Swat! "No more lies!" Swat, swat, swat!

They both continued to stand there, him breathing hard, her sobbing even harder long after he had set the filamith down on a workbench. Finally, she turned to him and he held her, cherishing her warmth and repentance. "You do know why I had to do it, don't you? You do admit I had to show you? I don't want you to think I don't care. I know I spank more often and less severely most of the time. It works for us. But this time, I couldn't. I can't have you lying to me. I can't have you taking risks, even to help a friend. We could have found another way. I could have gone. Why didn't you trust me to go?"

"You wouldn't have fit in the compartment. I'm not supposed to tell you that," she sniffed, "In fact, I couldn't even tell you I'd gone. I hated keeping it a secret, but once I started with the lie, I couldn't seem to stop. I was afraid you'd be angry. You won't tell anyone I told you about the compartment, will you?"

"Of course not. I don't want to know a Dodger's business. I don't want to have anything to do with them and I don't want

you having anything to do with them, either. I knew Vilnek had some dealings with them in the old days, but I had no idea about Pippa. I'll have to have a word with her."

"But why? Are Dodgers dangerous? Outlaws or something?"

"They're not outlaws, actually. They operate mostly in that gray area between what's right and what's legal. For example, did you know that for us to get apples from Fortens, we're supposed to buy them from a dealer on Earth?"

"What? That's crazy? That would take months. Fortens is just a few hours away."

"That's the law. All imports and exports of certain classes of goods, including some fresh produce, are supposed to be regulated. Only approved dealers are supposed to process them. Well, if a Dodger picks up a load on Fortens and accidentally loses part of it here on Trellian, I've got nothing against that Dodger making a profit in the process. Most of our food here on Trellian is actually off the books like that and the mining federation just turns a blind eye. In fact, they recruit the Dodgers sometimes and even the regulators themselves don't prosecute unless someone really complains. They realize the laws are outdated and we ought to be exempted. But by the time we could get the law changed, Trellian will be mined out and we'll have all moved on. It isn't worth it."

"So the Dodgers do some good," Claire sniffed. She was regaining her composure and starting to feel the drowsy lethargy that overtook her after an Adjustment of this scale.

"They have their place, all right, and you have yours and never the twain shall meet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do," she nodded. She rubbed her face in his chest and hugged him tighter. "I'm tired, my love. Can I go back to the minestead now?"

He scooped her up and carried her like a kitten back to their bed.

Choldor had indeed given his message to Celdek who never actually admitted to being able to contact Vilnek. Cagey didn't begin to describe his manner with everyone but Pippa and sometimes Shawna. That was why Shawna was so surprised when, as they were walking back to his transport, Celdek began to grill her about the Companion program.

"Why would you want to know? You don't want a Companion, do you?"

"Nothing wrong with a bit of company now and again," Celdek replied evasively.

"It's not now and again," Shawna retorted. "It's a three month commitment."

"And isn't there any way of getting out of it early?"

"You haven't even got a Companion and you're already planning on ditching her early? Yes, there are ways, especially if the Companion is unhappy, but most people will try to stick it out. They feel like they've failed if they break the three month contract."

"I heard the term 'early release' when I was at the Selection Meeting. What's that?"

"That's totally different," Shawna explained. "It's where a miner and companion hit it off so quickly at a Selection Meeting that they don't complete the process. They just select each other and go. It's a pretty big deal."

"Why is it a big deal? Some people just make up their minds faster than others."

"The Company discourages it. Quick matches sometimes work out and sometimes, they don't. So the Company charges a hefty fee for it, just to make sure the miner is really convinced that she's the one for him."

"So it has nothing to do with getting away from an assignment early?"

“No, not at all.”

“I guess most of the girls try to get miners to pay for an early release, just for the prestige of it?”

“No, actually, the Company tries to keep the Early Release option under wraps. They don't advertise the details and most girls don't even know about it.” Here, Shawna blushed, remembering her own ignorance of the short cut.

Vilnek had forged her acceptance and whisked her away from her first Selection Meeting in a way he never could have done had she been fully informed on the procedure. She always wondered exactly how much Pippa had been involved in that and other deceptions, but since things had worked out so well, Shawna didn't pursue the matter. Returning from her reverie, Shawna realized that there might be more to Celdek's questioning than just idle curiosity. “But why are you asking all this? Why do you want to know?”

“If you have to ask, you can't know,” was his only reply.

Shawna shook her head and rolled her eyes with a rueful smile as she contemplated the poor girl who might try to match her wits and ingenuity with this schemer. She preferred her straightforward Vilnek any day of the week. With Celdek finally gone, Shawna had a few moments privacy to read his communi-pad. Of course, she could not be sure it was from Vilnek, but she could not imagine the Dodger bringing her a message from anyone else.

She flipped the communi-pad open and began to read, then gave an excited yelp. She ran all the way back up the path and only hushed when Choldor came out to scold her.

“Sh! I'd decided not to give you an Adjustment, but I may change my mind if you don't pipe down. Claire is trying to sleep.”

“But it's from Vilnek! He's ready for me to join him. They've got housing units and a Radplant system in place much earlier than he expected. Plivit is going public! He wants me there now!”

She hissed her good tidings in an excited whisper and Choldor grinned.

"That's better news than you know," Choldor informed her. "The reason I just sent word through the Dodger that I wanted to talk to Vilnek wasn't just because I was mad at him about Claire's little trip. I also wanted to let him know that I want to work for him whenever he's ready."

"Really? But that's great. I'll be so happy to have you and Claire along."

"I just can't deal with Falsan anymore. He's gone over the edge. And anyway, I'm a miner, not an administrator. All I want is to do my job and come home to my wife. I'll leave the running of things to Vilnek."

"But you've got great leadership skills. He'll be glad to see you on Plivit. He also told me you have experience with L-12."

"L-12? Is that what he's working? I didn't know that." Choldor touched his scar and his face clouded over.

"I'm sorry, Choldor. Vilnek told me about the accident, but still I didn't think about how you might feel about L-12. How stupid I was to just blurt it out like that." Shawna hesitated before she murmured, "He'll understand if you change your mind."

"I want out of here, but L-12? I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

Celdek found her, face bright red in the hot sun, limp hair stringing down her shoulders, cursing the drill drone to blazes. "If you belonged to me," she threatened it, "I'd sell you for scrap! I'd shred you for packing materials! I'd turn you into ration cans!" In frustration, she beat the offending drone with the tool she was holding.

"I'm sure it's shaking in its shoes, Candy," Celdek commiserated.

"What! Oh, you startled me," she exclaimed. "I didn't hear you come up. And how did you get here? How did you find me?" Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And my name is *Candace*."

"I followed the rumors of the best looking miner in the region and knew I couldn't miss," he grinned.

Candace swiped the hair out of her face and rolled her eyes. "You looked me up in the directory."

"If you knew that, why did you ask?"

"I was trying to imply that I wasn't happy to see you."

"You'd best be careful, Candy. Lying is cause for a Peace Initiative Adjustment."

"Not from you, it's not. You're not my assignment." Candace turned back to her work.

"I can tell your assignment and get him to do it for me."

Candace laughed. "As if he would. I can see you don't know Tiemek."

"And I can see you don't know Tiemek."

Candace turned to face him again. "Not know Tiemek? I know enough to know that if breathing didn't come naturally, he'd be in big trouble. But you can go see him, if you think it will do any good. I'd be glad for you to go. He's far enough away from here that I'll be able to get these drones running."

"Far away from here? You're kidding, right? He's somewhere nearby. He has to be. You've got no Radplant otherwise."

A look of apprehension flashed across Candace's face, as she remembered the earthquake the day before. If she had been any nearer that Pencil when it dropped, she would have been hurt. Then there had been that Fensel pack last week. She hated to think what they would have done to her if she hadn't beaten them back to the transport. But a miss is as good as a mile, isn't it, she thought as she shrugged. "Yes, of course. He's around here somewhere. Go find him, will you? Take your time."

"After I do what I came here for." Celdek took the tool from her hand after a short struggle and laughed. "Hydraulic force mitigator? What's this supposed to do on a drone?" He reached into the open panel she had recently vacated and looked around.

"I was going to re-set the fuel lines, if you must know."

His voice echoed from inside the drone. "No use re-setting them if they're this clogged. I'll admit it is a clever idea to try to work on them with the hydraulic force mitigator, but really, a bit of routine maintenance would have done the job." He pulled his head out of the drone, bringing with him a handful of black tubes. "These are supposed to be clear."

"Of course, they're clear. That's just the black casing."

"It's not the casing. Look."

"Good grief! Look at that! Tiemek told me these drones were operational. I assumed he'd been doing the maintenance." She took the tubes from his hand and turned to her portable tool table.

"Better take those home and clean them where it's safer. Tiemek would have a hard time getting to you in time out here if he got a Radplant impulse. Where is he, anyway? He should be checking in on you. And he should have heard my transport."

"Why should he? I never heard it. And while we're on that topic, why didn't I hear it?"

"If you have to ask, you can't know. I'll call Tiemek on the Enabler. Just a second."

"No, don't do that!" Candace objected, but it was too late. Celdek already had the small disc in his hand. He placed it on his temple and listened intently. She saw the look of anger come over his face and backed up. "I told you not to do that."

"And why did you tell me not to use the Enabler? Could it be that you knew he wasn't in range? And if he's not in Enabler range, that means he's much too far from here to warn you if there were to be a danger impulse. What do you think you're doing out here alone?" His tone stayed deceptively mild and

Candace was fooled into standing her ground. That's why it was so easy for him to catch her and haul her over his shoulder.

"Let me go! What are you doing?"

"What Tiemek should have done long ago, obviously." He carried her over to a rock, sat down on it and began raining hard hot spanks all over her bottom. Left, right, left, right, he alternated as she screamed and twisted, trying to get away.

"Let me go! You can't do this!" she shouted.

"You stay still and take it or I'll tell Headquarters that I found you out here like this. You'll be out of here faster than Croyden can croak."

That stopped her. She fumed, but in silence. She realized he had her exactly where he wanted her, both physically and theoretically. If he reported her, there would be no appeal. She knew what she was doing was against the first and most basic regulations of life on Trellian and that the punishment would be much worse than a spanking. She would be escorted to the staging satellite and evicted from Trellian for good.

"But let me, *ow*—explain. Tiemek lets me come out here. We've got it all wired up. *Ow!* The transport, I mean. It's wired to broadcast Radplant impulses."

He missed a beat in his spanking. She had given him something to think about. It was a clever idea and the technology involved was.... He shook the thought away and started in again, only faster. "But what if the transport broke down? What if the power supply went bad?"

"How likely is that? *Ow!* Not very! Not very! Not likely at all! These transports are very reliable," she protested. "*Ow!* What are you trying to do? Knock the cheek right off my body? Have a heart!"

"I do, and you've stolen it, so this is your own fault, Candy. If I didn't care, I wouldn't be so mad," Celdek scolded. "Why would a man spank a woman he didn't love?"

"What is that? Some kind of Dodger logic? *Ow! Ow! Ow!*"

"Ask Croyden. You'll meet him soon enough." He finished off with three particularly resounding whacks, then held her to him. "When I realized what you were doing, out here and alone, I got so mad. Don't let me hear of it happening again."

"But the drones need to be fixed. I can't be taking the time to take them back to the minestead every time. That's crazy. Doing it all myself is turning out to be a bigger job than I thought." The words slipped out and she covered her mouth with her hand, wishing she could call them back.

"That's good. At least you've realized it. And I'll speak to Tiemek. This has gone far enough."

"I keep trying to tell you, it won't do any good. Even if you did see Tiemek, which you probably won't because he's never home, he's the laziest miner ever to set drill bit to Pencil."

"Would you like to make a little wager about that?"

"No, I wouldn't. Why should I? You need to leave and let me get on with my... hey! What are you doing in there?" Celdek's head and shoulders had disappeared under the drill drone.

"You're welcome," echoed his voice inside the cavity.

"For what?" Candace demanded.

"Fixing your drone. I'll do the others if they're having the same problems. You go get the tubing out of all of them so you can take it with us when we go."

"But you couldn't fix them from that bottom panel. The problem is in the side, up here." She pointed at the open panel where she had been working.

"Yes, but if you increase the oxygen uptake, and restrict the bypass flow, you'll get the same result."

"Let me see!" she ordered. He slid out from under the drone and she took his place. Suddenly he found he had to look away from the sight of her supine form to keep his thoughts from wandering to places they had no business being. "Good grief! Look at that!" Any anger she had felt during the spanking quickly dissipated, to be replaced by a grudging respect.

He reached down and pulled her ankle until she rolled out into the sunshine again. "Now, get busy. Tiemek will be here any minute and I want to be ready to go." He gave her a slap on her still sore rear end as he helped her up and she gave a quick yelp.

"How will he know to come all the way out here?" she asked skeptically as she rubbed her burning posterior.

"He will have heard my transport." Celdek noticed her discomfort and congratulated himself on establishing a few ground rules right from the beginning of their relationship.

"How could he hear it from wherever he is when I couldn't hear it from right here?"

"Think it through. If he can hear it, doesn't that mean that he's got a similar sounding transport?"

"His transport is anything but silent. I can hear it all over the sector."

"Sure, when he hasn't got the adaptations functioning."

"But what are those adaptations?" she inquired.

"I already told you, if you have to ask, you can't know." That formula, spoken in the same tone each time like a catch phrase, was beginning to annoy Candace. To hide this fact, and to conceal her growing, reluctant admiration for this rascal, she stalked to the nearest drone and began removing the tubing.

Before the task was done, she was surprised to hear two men whispering behind her. She could tell they thought they were out of earshot, so she held still and listened closely.

"... working her too hard." Celdek sounded accusatory.

"That's the way she wants it. It's the perfect cover for me."

"Croyden wouldn't appreciate you putting a woman at risk just to make an extra spending credit, cousin."

"She's not at risk. Didn't she show you the transport she rigged? She's a great one for working with the machines. She's got the makings, for sure."

"Don't go getting any ideas on that score. I've already told

her she'll be meeting Croyden soon." Celdek spoke too loudly at first, then lowered his voice again when he saw Tiemek's grin.

"So that's how it is? I should have known. Well, there goes my great cover."

"You have the Parth smoking as your cover. By the way, you've done a good job on that. Everyone goes for it, hook, line and sinker."

"They'd better. I'm not done here yet, by a long shot."

"Say, did you really agree to leave off Adjustments? What would Croyden say?"

"Croyden would ask why a man would want to spank a girl who's willing to do all his work for him."

"Just go get the tubing out of those last three drill drones. You've let this equipment get into terrible shape."

"All part of the Parth cover, cousin. Parth smokers don't do routine maintenance. But you'll find most everything runs. Or at least it ran until she took over. Now, she can keep it running." He grinned and patted Celdek's shoulder on his way to the farthest drill drones.

Celdek leaned over behind Candace and whispered, "How much did you hear, Candy?"

"What? Huh?" Candace straightened out of the panel and tried to look surprised.

"I know you were listening, and really, I don't mind you knowing what we said. There are things you need to know. It'll take time, but you'll learn, if we go ahead and get started."

"Get started with what? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you signing an Early Release and coming with me now." By the time she realized what an Early Release really was, it would be signed and she would be committed to him for at least another three months after her first term.

"No way! I'm fine. I don't need a new assignment, especially not you." Inwardly, he cheered. He had her!

"Oh, yes, you do and I need you too." He looked at her from

under heavy, lazy eyelids, confident in his conviction that she liked him as much as he liked her.

“But what will Tiemek do? I realize now that the Parth was just a put on, but obviously he still needs me as his cover. I take my commitments seriously.” She couldn't believe she was trusting this Dodger enough to admit to him that she had overheard their conversation. It was even crazier for her to try to advise anyone on maintaining a cover.

Celdek laughed and hugged her to him, giving her bottom a sharp slap. “I'm counting on you and your commitments more than you know. As for Tiemek, he'll release you and lump along without a Companion like he always has. Now, if you don't want to be reported for being out without a miner, you'll sign.”

“That's blackmail,” she pointed out.

“That's good business,” he gloated. “And while we're talking about business, your ledger is in the red with me.”

“I'll repay you for your work on the drones,” she assured him.

He caught hold of her and drew her to him. “That's not the debt I mean. It's the Dodger debt you owe me that I want to collect on. By my count, you've said the word at least three times now, so you owe me three kisses.” He spoke slowly and deliberately, holding her loosely with one arm and using his free hand to trace lazy outlines of her face.

She couldn't seem to breathe or think, much less pull away. By the time he bent his head to hers, she was willing him to hurry, but he took his very sweet time. “One,” he counted when he was done. He held the moment suspended between them until she broke it by rising to meld her lips with his again. He responded and took over the kiss until she stepped back.

“Two,” she whispered. Changing her mind, she approached him again, but the master showman in him knew when to leave his audience wanting more.

“Oh, no. That wasn't two. I didn't kiss you that time. You kissed me. That one didn't count.” He smiled and closed his eyes

with a comical pucker to his lips that he spoke through. "You can kiss me again all you want, though. I don't mind one bit."

She laughed and punched him on the arm, so he shrugged and stepped back rubbing the pain away in an exaggerated pout. "Ouch! Oh, well. Another day, perhaps. As for the rest of your debt, I'll collect that when I'm good and ready." Knowing he had her in a receptive mood, he continued. "And if you don't make any more fuss, I'll show you how I adapted my transport for stealth."

She scowled, but she signed and that evening he had her once again right where he wanted her. They were on their way to his minestead in his transport.

Pippa was very surprised the next morning to hear about the change, but if it got Candace away from the Parth smoker, she was in favor of it. She thought it strange that Celdek handled the details, but as long as both Tiemek and Candace agreed, Headquarters would not object.

The second surprise came later in the day, when Choldor Linked Pippa. "I have some interesting ore samples I'd like you to look at."

Pippa was immediately suspicious. "What do you mean by interesting? And why are you Linking me? Where's Claire? She usually does this sort of thing. Is she sick? Is it Serpiac?"

"Easy does it! Nothing like that at all. Since when do you jump to such downer conclusions so fast? That isn't like you, Pippa."

"I know, and I'm sorry. It's all this stress. You would not believe what Fal... I mean, uh..." She let her voice trail off, afraid that her communications could be intercepted. She would put nothing past Falsan these days.

"Yes, I would believe and you can tell me all about it when

you come. I think a few hours rest and relaxation are just what the doctor ordered.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can,” Pippa promised and closed the Link.

She had no idea it was not high tech bugging, but low tech, patient eavesdropping on the part of Pelchak that would be her undoing. He smiled grimly to himself in the corridor outside her office.

“Where?” he questioned.

She jumped at the sight of him. She had been miles away, wondering why Choldor needed to see her. “Wh-where what?” she stammered.

He gestured to the Linkset.

“Oh, you mean where am I going to get as soon as possible? To Choldor’s, that’s where. Yes, indeed. To Choldor’s place.”

“But after that, where? Where are you really going?”

“Just Choldor’s. Nowhere else. He’s an old friend, you know. Very old friend. Good old friend. And Claire may need me. She didn’t Link me, you see, so I’m afraid she’s sick. She was very sick once, a while back.” She wound down finally and Pelchak looked at her quizzically. “I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

He nodded, his eyebrows raised in invitation.

“Then surely you don’t want to hear any more of my ramblings. I just can’t seem to settle down.”

He looked quite satisfied with that statement.

“But not because of you, of course. I’m just nervous.” Once more, she paused, noted his expression, and began anew. “Again, not because of you. It’s Falsan.”

“Sure,” he nodded. He took a step closer.

She tried to keep him away with her words, but he just kept advancing. “You heard? About the new requisitions? All that security equipment? Spying really. He’s gotten paranoid. And the new regulations? How all the miners have to report in each week? It’s crazy. Some of the sectors are really far out and it’s a

hardship for them to get all the way in here. I don't know what I'm going to do. The extra paperwork! The hassle! Not to mention the miners complaining. And the thing is, they're right. It is stupid. But Falsan's the boss. Even Talvok is ready to mutiny. Reporting in is only the beginning. Falsan's over the edge. Which is driving me over the edge. That's why I'm rambling. Like this."

With each of her silly, choppy little sentences, he drew closer. She retreated behind her desk. He followed. She tried to continue around the desk but found that someone had blocked her path with her heavy extra pod she usually kept in front of her desk for visitors. She turned to face him then tried to turn back. She gave the pod a few ineffectual tugs, but he captured her hand and turned her back to face him. Like a swallow with a cobra, she couldn't look away.

He spoke more eloquently with his hands than many men could in a lifetime of words. One hand held while the other caressed. One hand stroked, while the other hand pulsed. And all the while, his eyes made promises she longed for his lips to keep.

He knew he shouldn't approach her yet, not before this case was settled. If only she would trust him, he could end this mess and get down to the important business of winning her. Just a few minutes for himself. That was all he would take right now. He could wait, if only he had a quick taste of what he was waiting for. He bent his head over her hand.

She watched the top of his head as he kissed her gently. She felt the warmth, knew his intent, and wondered if he would continue or if she would explode before he could get past her wrist.

Then he was past her wrist and on up her arm, over her shoulder and spreading fire through her neck. Then her hair, her ear, her cheek and at last, after at least a lifetime of waiting, her lips. Gently, oh, so gently, he brushed his lips over hers, like a watercolor brush over a rice paper canvas.

“Where?” he whispered. He looked down into her eyes as his query registered in her mind.

Molten passion turned to red-hot anger as he knew it would. He stepped back in time to avoid her open palm as she tried to slap him.

“How dare you use that kind of trick to get information out of me? I thought... I thought...”

“You were right,” he snapped back. His anger matched hers in heat, but in him, the red ran white. He knew more of the danger than she did and he wanted her out of it. “But I need information so I can end this quagmire Falsan calls a case. Trust me. Where?”

“In a lake, which is where you should jump,” she retorted.

Walking out into the hall, he contemplated his options. If he followed her openly, he knew he would only observe a perfectly correct visit to Choldor. If he followed her secretly, he might just stand a chance of finding out what was really going on.

Underhanded? Yes. Highhanded? Certainly. His best choice? Definitely. This was going to take some careful maneuvering, but he had never enjoyed following a subject more. At least he got to keep his favorite target in view.

Chapter 6

Pippa kept looking around and running scans for Pelchak, but she never found him. She hotly denied to herself that she was disappointed. The last thing she needed was to be watched by him as she met secretly with Celdek to arrange a clandestine meeting at Choldor's in the dead of True Dark. With both of Trellian's suns going down at the same time, the temperatures would drop to extremely low ranges as would the chances of observation. Whatever Choldor needed, it would probably involve the need for secrecy, so having Celdek on standby was just a sensible precaution.

She was over the moon when she heard Shawna's news. Choldor wasn't thrilled with them meeting Celdek in True Dark, but even he had to agree that it was the safest way to smuggle Shawna off world to meet Vilnek.

As they waited in his personal transport, lights doused and engine stilled, Choldor and Shawna exchanged final plans. "Take your time making up your mind, Choldor. We understand this is a big decision for you, but we'd really like you to come," Shawna reminded him.

"I'd hate to lose one of my best miners, but I wouldn't

blame you at all,” Pippa put in. The wind whipping past the Pencil formations surrounding them made an eerie howling noise.

“Is that Celdek's transport?” Shawna wanted to know.

“No, his transport is modified to run silent. That's just the wind,” Pippa informed her.

“Is that possible?” Shawna asked.

“Any man who makes his living getting places he shouldn't be is wise to be able to do his own mechanic work on the transport that's going to get him there. Dodgers are often very handy with a hexa-torque,” Pippa replied. “And when I think of that Candace, no slouch with a hexa-torque herself, teamed up with that Celdek, it gives me pause. What kinds of amazing technological wonders could they not come up with!”

“Candace? Who's she?” Shawna asked.

“If this is going to turn into a hen-party gossip session, I think I'll kick back in my pod here and let y'all have at it,” Choldor drawled.

“Good night,” Shawna teased. “We'll wake you when Celdek gets here. But if we can't hear him, how will we know when he's here?”

“He'll use his Enabler to pulse Choldor, so actually, that will be a fine wake up call for him,” Pippa answered.

“The temps are dropping fast out there. I hope he gets here soon. I don't like the idea of being out in this, even for a minute to change transports,” Shawna admitted.

“There's nothing to it. Just follow the tether we'll string from one to the other and don't uncover your head. We'll let the men transfer your gear while you settle in the compartment. The biggest danger of you getting caught is on the flight between here and the staging satellite, so you'll be in the secret compartment that far. After that, you'll be fine.”

“I'll give it my best shot. Now, back to Candace. Who is she?”

“She a new Companion who doesn't like the Peace Initiative.

The only miner who would agree to take her on without it was Tiemek," Pippa scowled at the memory.

Shawna scowled with her. "Is he that slouchy miner who smokes Parth? Ugh!"

"That's right. But now she's not assigned to Tiemek. She left him and went to Celdek's place. Nobody put up a fuss about it. Actually, I think the biggest feeling from everyone concerned was relief. She can be a bit of a fireball and I'll bet Tiemek was getting tired just watching her work."

"I hope it works out for them, but from the impression I got, I doubt Celdek will live without the Peace Initiative," Shawna voiced her doubts aloud. "I hope she makes it till the next Selection Meeting without earning any Adjustments."

"Funny thing about that. Candace already signed an Early Release, so even the next Selection Meeting won't save her. I guess she's changing her mind about the Peace Initiative. I know that Talvok's Faith changed her mind. She was very much against it when she first came here." Pippa smiled at the memory.

Shawna laughed aloud. "And didn't the sparks fly? It makes me miss the old days, just thinking about it."

They continued catching up on all the latest news until Celdek arrived. Was it her imagination or did Shawna notice a new twinkle in Celdek's eye. Could it be that this rascal was about to be caught and tamed? Shawna would love to see that.

The escape plan was going off without a hitch until Shawna was in the middle of the tether that led from one transport to the other. Suddenly a bright light flashed and it felt to Shawna as if a heavy mist were falling all around her. "Don't move!" boomed a voice through the blinding brilliance. "Freeze!"

Shawna froze and then realized that in less than a minute, if she didn't move, she would certainly literally freeze. "What's going on?" she shouted.

"This is Special Investigator Pelchak, and I'm ordering everyone to halt where they are."

Shawna wasn't sure who could hear what, but it seemed that the voice could hear her so she shouted again. "I've got to move or I'll freeze out here."

"You won't freeze. I've started the projection of an environmental Bubble that will shield us from the worst of the cold. You're safe enough where you are. You can board my transport if you want, but I'll stun any of you who moves before I tell you to."

"Get her out of that cold, blast you!" Choldor shouted.

"Up to her. Want to board?" Pelchak's voice was even but not friendly. Pippa knew he was not kidding. He would stun them without hesitation.

"Pippa? What should I do? I'm getting really cold out here."

"Tell her to get in his transport. Nothing's worth her standing out there like that," Choldor ground out.

"If she gets in his transport, he'll have her. He'll question her. There will be nothing we can do. He'll have Vilnek."

A loud thump and a crunching of metal and plexilat next to their transport let Pippa know that Celdek had attempted to take off. Pelchak's voice boomed again into the bitter cold. "No good, Dodger. The Bubble cuts off air flow for a space of ten feet above itself. Your engine can't run if it can't get air. Try it again, and I'll reduce the Bubble size and kill your engine.

Choldor's fist hit his open palm hard. "That Dodger was trying to leave her. Coward!"

"He was trying to lift off and swing around above her so he could snag her with one of his hooks and take off with her, even if she did get stunned."

"Then why didn't Pelchak stun him? I wish he would! Darn Dodger!"

"He can't be stunned inside his transport. He hadn't opened his portal so he's safe. Our portal was open, so we're vulnerable. I'm so sorry I got you into this Choldor."

"I'm just glad Claire is safe at home. I'll get us out of this.

Let's just get Shawna in from that cold and then we'll figure something out."

"Get in the transport, Shawna. There's no other way."

Another thump and a whir this time told Pippa that Celdek had managed to do something Pelchak hadn't anticipated. The Bubble started to break up. "No, Celdek can't break out of the Bubble. It's all that's standing between Shawna and freezing. Use your Enabler, Choldor. Tell him to land or Shawna will die." The whir stopped and there was another loud thump as it landed hard once more. "Thank goodness you told him in time."

"I didn't do it. I couldn't get through. He was getting another Enabler pulse when I tried."

"It must have been Pelchak. So he didn't carry out his threat to shrink the Bubble. I knew he couldn't do it. But what did he say to Celdek?"

"I don't know. Maybe he offered him money or something. Look, Celdek is getting out and moving Shawna to Pelchak's transport." Choldor lunged out of the open portal but Pippa restrained him just in time for the stun pellet to miss him by inches. That threat, Pelchak was obviously ready to carry out. "Traitor! Coward!" Choldor shouted helplessly.

"Shut the portal, Pippa. Your transport's hot air blowing out that portal won't keep you warm forever." Pelchak's words reassured Pippa for some reason. If he was concerned with their comfort, surely he couldn't be all bad.

"We want to know what's going on," Pippa shouted back.

The next voice they heard was Celdek's. "Just cool it, Pippa. I'm bringing an offer from Pelchak."

Celdek crossed the open space between the transports, exposing none of his skin to the dangerously low temperatures even inside the Bubble. Choldor got in one quick right cross to the side of his head before he dragged Celdek inside and waved the portal closed behind him.

"Leash that tame bear, Pippa, or the deal is off," Celdek

hissed as he held his sleeve up to the side of his face that was now throbbing and beginning to bruise.

“Please, Choldor. We've got to work this out. Celdek, what deal?”

“Pelchak is going to let her leave.”

“What?” Choldor and Pippa chorused together.

“But there is a condition. He wants you to go, too.”

“What?” Pippa repeated. “He's crazy!”

“He says Falsan's not to be trusted and he wants you out of this situation now. If you both get in my transport, he'll release the Bubble and let us go. He'll even let me return to Trellian once I've delivered you two.”

“And what about Choldor? Any charges?” Pippa wanted to know.

“That doesn't matter. He's willing to let you out of here. Just take the offer and run before he changes his mind,” Choldor urged.

“I want to be sure—” Pippa began.

Choldor cut her off by gruffly ordering Celdek. “You bring Shawna. I'll load this one for you.” He wrapped his arms around Pippa and hoisted her into the air.

It was all Pelchak could do to restrain himself when he witnessed how Choldor was manhandling Pippa into the transport. He hated the necessity of sending her away, but he was afraid things around Trellian would get worse before they got better and he wanted her safe. He didn't need to trace Vilnek through Shawna now, anyway. He was within an ace of arranging a meeting with the man on neutral territory without resorting to following anyone.

He watched as Celdek disappeared into his transport carrying Shawna, then as Choldor reappeared and ran along the tether to his own transport. Pelchak felt like he was shutting the power down on his own heart as he powered down the Bubble that kept the transports rooted to the ground. Without their

restraint, two transports leapt into the blackness while Pelchak stared after them.

The first leg of their escape trip passed first in tense silence, then in vigorous debate and speculation. In their secret compartment, both Shawna and Pippa had their doubts as to whether Pelchak would really let them go. Shawna expected at any moment for Pelchak to spring a trap and bring some sort of charges against them all. She assumed Celdek might have some method for dealing technologically with such a contingency, but if Pelchak was able to keep him under that Bubble long enough to effect this strange situation, he might have some hold over Celdek that would also buy his co-operation. Shawna trusted neither man.

Pippa, on the other hand, argued her points in total confusion. She trusted them both and could make neither heads nor tails of what had just occurred. She knew Pelchak wanted her off world, but had not foreseen his going to such lengths to achieve his ends. They were able to break their silence and hash out their conflicting views as soon as the staging satellite was behind them.

"That's easy enough to figure out," Shawna told her as they were discussing the matter in the passenger lounge later. "He's in love with you. I could see it while I was in his transport for those few minutes. He wasn't just deciding on this whole scenario on the spot. He came there with this scheme in mind. He had to be prepared to pay the Dodger off, too, not to mention the tracking device."

"Celdek didn't betray us. He did the most sensible thing he could do. And there is no tracking device. Not on this ship. Celdek continuously scans for such things. He only allows them if he knows he'll draw more attention to himself by disabling them. But there's nothing like that on this ship. He said so."

"You take his word for it? I don't. I'm sorry, Pippa, but I'm

sure we're being followed. We can go to the rendezvous point and wait there. It's only three more days. If I can wait, so can you."

"I don't think it's necessary, and any way, if Pelchak is following us, we would lead him right to the rendezvous point." Pippa's words made sense, which frustrated Shawna.

"Have you got a better plan?"

"Go on to Plivit. Look, if Celdek were ready to betray Vilnek, he could do it himself. He knows where Plivit is and could take Pelchak right there."

"But then everybody would know he was a traitor. This way, he can claim it wasn't his fault and that he was followed. He's safe and his reputation is fine, too."

"Saying that a Dodger's reputation is fine is a bit of a contradiction in terms, but we'll let that go," Pippa drawled. "If you're bound and determined to stay away from Plivit then I guess we'll go wherever you want. But Vilnek isn't going to be happy."

"Why not? He knows where the rendezvous point is. That's been the plan from the beginning, to meet there. He'll be proud of me."

"I'm going to throttle her!" Vilnek muttered. "I'm going to spank her within an inch of her life! I'm going to..."

"All those options require physical proximity, a commodity in limited supply at the moment," Celdek taunted. "No wonder you're not with Croyden. He doesn't allow his clan to let their women run amok."

Vilnek punched him on the arm. "Why didn't you just bring them here? Why did you listen to them in the first place?"

"Hey, it's not my job to keep your wife in line. You handle her. Crossing that little minx when she's angry is not in my list of duties."

"She can be a handful," Vilnek agreed.

“Especially when she's got dreck in her drill drone about me being a traitor. She doesn't like my plan at all. Thinks I'm going to get you caught and killed.”

“She'll have to get over it. I want to at least meet with Pelchak.”

“I've done some asking around about him and met with him myself more than once in the past few days. He's pretty uptight about the law and all that, but he's fair and he's honest. He also realizes that Falsan is a few gears shy of an engine at this point. This meeting will definitely help Pelchak get all this straightened out.”

“I hope you're right. And I want to get this completely clear now. You left them at the rendezvous point? The Thraxton Hotel on the Blue Moon satellite station? That's where they both are?”

“That's right. And they know the meeting day is Thursday.”

“And you're coming to get me that morning, right? Are you sure you won't have trouble getting away without being followed?”

“Leave those details to me, my friend. Believe me, you don't want to know.”

“You're probably right. I'm going to regret asking this, but the Radplant tracks you, as you well know. What's going to keep Falsan from following your Radplant off world and then here?”

“Why should he follow anyone anywhere? My Radplant shows that I'm in my minestead quarters all night, then hustling around my minestead chasing drill drones all day. Ask anyone at Headquarters.”

“I guess I'll take your word for it,” Vilnek replied, looking skeptical.

Celdek couldn't resist showing off. “By the way, have you heard about the new relay technology? No, I guess you haven't, seeing as I distinctly recall neglecting to patent it. I thought the patent registry people might take exception to an invention that lets me program my Radplant to relay to another device, then

stick that device on a drill drone and walk away without a care.” Vilnek clapped his hand to his head and rolled his eyes as he laughed.

“That completely defeats the security purposes of the Radplant, you know. If you get hurt or need help, no one will ever find you.”

“Croyden looks out for his own,” Celdek shrugged. “And Falsan can look for me all he wants. He’ll never track me with the Radplant. I’ll deliver you to those two troublesome females without a problem.”

“All right. Just one more question. Speaking of those troublesome females, do you think we’ll have room for a filamith in that transport of yours?”

“Without a doubt, my friend. Without a doubt.”

When Celdek and Vilnek arrived on Blue Moon satellite station three days later, they found the Thraxton Hotel completely full of ex-Trellian employees and completely empty of Pippa and Shawna.

“Talvok, I can only tell you what Choldor and Celdek told me. Pippa had to go off world. She and Shawna are waiting at the rendezvous point, which they said you would know about. Celdek dropped me off here at Headquarters to take Pippa's place until Falsan or you could hire someone else.”

Trying not to squirm in her seat, Candace remembered the spanking Celdek had given her when she tried to fight that decision. He had used the filamith like a pro all over her backside and thighs until she was sure she would scream. Then after she had agreed to leave the minestead and go work at Headquarters as he wanted, Celdek had given her twenty more swats to remind her to behave while she was there. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but this second spanking hadn't made her any angrier

than the first one had. Candace found herself feeling even fonder of him. More respectful, too, of course, but the affection was certainly growing. Her mind snapped back to the present. "Pippa had nothing to do with these new orders. They are totally your father's responsibility."

"I know Falsan gave the orders, but I can't believe he would start a project of this magnitude without Pippa here."

"Why don't you ask him yourself? He's around here somewhere. He's always around here, giving orders, countermanding those orders, and then exploding when those orders weren't carried out. No wonder Pelchak wanted Pippa out of here. I don't like this latest move at all."

"I know. I've tried to talk Falsan out of it, too. That's why I can't ask him about it anymore. He's refusing to see me. I'm totally out of favor. He's even forbidden me the house. Faith had to move back into Companion housing and I'm in the Headquarters' dormitory, like a new arrival."

"If you would marry her, at least you two could be together," Candace needled him.

"Don't remind me. I've been trying for weeks to get her to accept my proposal, but no dice."

"Keep trying. She'll come around."

"It would have to be a long-distance relationship for a while. She'll be going back to her research center soon. Her work here is almost done, now that the Serpiac problem is under control. And that may be for the best, if my father keeps up with his schemes. I'm thinking about sending her off world now, just to get her out of harm's way. You should think about leaving too."

"How bad is this latest plan? I know all the miners coming in to have their Radplants adjusted is going to be a pain, but it isn't dangerous, is it?"

"It all depends on how the planet reacts to the new electrical traffic in the atmosphere. You know the Radplant system works on electrical impulses, right?"

“Right. I understand that the Radplant senses the various threats and dangers on Trellian through the electrical signatures of the various phenomenons. Even the animals give off certain signatures, and the larger atmospheric events are really easy for the Radplant to pick up. But the Radplants are just receivers, right? They only transmit a very low level signal.”

“That's right. Up till now, the transmitted signal was so tiny, we've needed to add the Enabler, an external device, if we wanted to send actual impulses from a Radplant. What my father wants to do is make each Radplant a transmitter as well as a receiver. I'm afraid the only reason for the change is so that he can keep track of all communications all over the planet. He can tap Linksets easily enough, but Enabler tapping technology is scarce and unreliable. He wants to increase the range that he can send direct announcements as Radplant impulses and he wants to be able to listen in to anything anytime. That's bad enough, but what's worse is that I have no idea how it will affect the electrical environment of the planet.”

“Sounds like it could make problems,” Candace mused. “I haven't been here long enough to know much about the planet, but depending on how powerful the signals are, that could be a significant amount of interference he's thinking of generating.” Knowing engines and mechanical principles like she did brought her into close association with electronics as well. What Talvok was describing had her worried.

“Exactly. I'm not sure he remembers how unstable Trellian is. We've been here long enough to have gotten comfortable with the storms, earthquakes, infestations, and other joys of living here. If he starts messing with the electrical environment, things could get hairy for a while.”

“At least, it won't be possible for all the Radplants to be changed over at one time. We'll be able to see the problems developing before the situation gets out of hand.” Here again, Candace looked serious. Various possibilities were swirling

around in her brain, none of which made her feel any more secure.

Talvok, whose mind was running along parallel lines to Candace's, made a decision. He would have to talk to Faith and get her off world today, before it was too late. It wasn't hard to find her. The lab was the best place to look when you wanted to find Faith.

"Hello there, beautiful," Talvok began, wrapping his arms around her waist and hugging her tightly to him. He picked her up, spun her in a circle, and set her back down to kiss her hard on the mouth.

"Talvok! Hi! What are you doing here at this hour? It's not time for lunch or anything," she answered with a smile.

"I came to steal you away. How does a quick trip to Blue Moon satellite station sound? We could relax on the sun deck, play some Four Ball if we get bored, then fly Zoomers all evening. We could even save on the hotel bill and make it a honeymoon if you'll just wise up and marry me," he grinned and rubbed his chin over the top of her head in a familiar teasing gesture.

"No wedding! You'll just have to cough up for the two rooms, but the get-away does sound nice. How about in two weeks?"

"How about today? Right now? You go get the Zoomers all warmed up for me, and I'll join you this weekend." He wished he could tell her about the rendezvous, but it wasn't his secret to tell. She had always understood that.

She pulled away from him and looked him in the eye. "Today? Why? What's this all about?"

"It's only for a few days."

"But why?"

"Just trust me. I need you to go. Those Zoomers are calling our names."

"You can't fool me with talk of Zoomers. What's going on?"

"It's this Radplant modification my father is planning. By the

end of today, quite a few will be completed. By the end of the day tomorrow, over half may be done. That's too fast and we don't know exactly how the planet will react. You know how unstable the core is, not to mention the electrical atmosphere. I'd just feel more at ease if you were safely off-world till we know what's going to happen."

"If it's safe enough for you here, it's safe enough for me," Faith replied. "I'm not leaving you. If something goes wrong, you may need me."

"If something goes wrong, the last thing we are going to be doing is pouring over research results. Serpiac will be the least of our worries. We've got the pest population under control now, anyway, thanks to you."

"Cut the bull, Talvok. You're worried. Now is not the time for me to cut and run. In fact, with the changes in electrical fields, I really ought to get out into the infested sectors and monitor the situation more closely."

Talvok grasped her by the elbows and shook her slightly. "No way! You can forget that right now. You're leaving for Blue Moon and that's all there is to it. I wanted to make it fun, but if you want to do it the hard way, that's how we'll do it. I want you packed and off this planet by dinner time tonight. Do you understand me?"

"I understand that you are being totally silly, highhanded, and unreasonable," Faith shot back, pulling away from him.

"Unreasonable? I'll show you unreasonable!" With that, he hoisted her up so that her upper body was lying on the lab table while her legs dangled in the air. Holding her down with one hand, he began laying hot hard spanks to the middle of her right cheek. He counted twenty, thirty, then forty before he switched to the other side, trying not to feel how sore his own hand was becoming.

"I am serious and you have to listen to me!" he shouted above her wails of pain and shock. He looked around and caught

sight of a short pointer such as his professors used to use back in his college days. As he recalled, they were also rather handy for getting daydreaming students' attention, which was why some of the professors still preferred them to the more modern laser pointers that were not nearly as easy to swing around and "accidentally" tap someone in the back of the head with. He snatched it up and let it do the teaching for a while.

"I'm responsible for your safety. If for no other reason, that means you have to do what I say. I don't care what the other men do about the women under their care. You are my assignment, whether you accept my proposal or not, and my decision is final. You are leaving." He wielded the pointer with grim accuracy, trying not to enjoy the way it bounced off her shapely legs and backside.

"Ow! Ow!" she continued to wail as she had since he started.

"Promise me you'll get to the transport dock and off-world by tonight."

"Stop just a minute! I can't think with you doing that!"

"All right," he agreed. He stilled the pointer, but held her down to the table while he spoke softly in her ear. "I'm sorry I was so harsh with you, but you weren't taking me seriously."

"Well, I'm certainly taking you seriously now," Faith complained. "Let me up." He released her and she reached back to rub furiously. Her mind was in a whirl. While she no longer raged at him for spanking her as she used to do, she did realize that when he gave her this serious of an Adjustment, it was a strong indicator that he thought she was in real danger. Confusion made her uncertain.

"Your private passage has been paid for, Faith. I'll meet you on Blue Moon when the coast is clear. Could be as soon as tomorrow night. You will be there. Do I need to call security and have you escorted off Trellian?" He punctuated his words with a finger pointed at her nose. Then he opened his hand and caressed her cheek. "I couldn't live if anything happened to you."

She let a look of doubt and apprehension cloud her face. “This is all so sudden. It will take a while to get ready.” Her shoulders drooped and she clutched at his forearms. “You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

He took her back into his arms for another quick hug before he turned to leave. “Sure, beautiful. I’ll be careful and I’ll see you as soon as I can.”

As soon as he was out of sight, she packed up her research essentials and Linked Willa. It took a while to get a clear picture, but finally they connected enough to speak. “Could I come out to your place?” Faith asked. “I’ll need a base central to the most Serpiac-infested areas.”

“Sure,” Willa answered. “We’d be glad to have you and Talvok.”

“Actually, Talvok doesn’t exactly know I’m coming, so we’ll kind of have to keep it quiet, alright? He doesn’t understand how important this research is to me.”

Willa shrugged. “What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him, and I won’t say anything to Radnok. Talvok isn’t your husband or anything.”

“That’s right,” Faith replied. “He’s not and he has no right to control me.” How strange and lonely her words sounded, even to herself. She Linked off and went to reserve a transport and escort out to Radnok’s minestead. She would have to wait a while, but she would get one eventually.

Chapter 7

Falsan, sitting in his office at Headquarters, tapped his finger on the desktop. “You can go, Redek. I’ll call you when I need you.” Falsan watched his personal security chief exit, then stared across the desk at Faith, now thoroughly confused and frightened. “You are still Talvok’s assignment, isn’t that right?” he demanded.

“Yes, sir, you know I am,” she answered warily.

“Then why were you trying to sneak off-world tonight?”

“I wasn’t, actually. I was headed out to Radnok’s minestead. I was waiting in the Companions’ Lounge, as your security officers told you.” She silently wished Falsan had not dismissed Redek. Sitting across the desk from him like this brought to mind all the comments Talvok had been making about his father’s deteriorating mental state. If only she had taken that transport off world as Talvok had wanted, she would not have been spotted in that lounge and brought in, she mused regretfully.

“But your passage was paid for a private transport off-world. Where was it going to take you?”

So he knew about that. Something told her this innocuous sounding question had more meaning than he was letting on. “I

have no idea what you are talking about. There must be some mistake.”

“I don't have time to waste on this,” Falsan muttered. He turned away from her to the Linkset and cursed in frustration when the connection could not be made. Finally giving up, he went to his locked cabinet and withdrew a small container. “If Pelchak can use this, so can I.”

Taken by surprise, Faith barely had time to struggle before he grasped her by her hair and shoved a knee in her lap to keep her in the pod. She tried to hold her breath, but he kept spraying the compound in her face until she had to gasp for air. Her struggles ceased and the interview turned much more to Falsan's liking.

“Now, let's try this again,” Falsan hissed. “Where was that private transport going?”

“The Blue Moon satellite station,” came the reply as if from an automaton. Faith's visage was void of expression, her voice sounded somewhere between dead and flat, and her breath was beginning to quicken.

“I should have known,” Falsan crowed as he released his hold and let Faith fall to the floor. “I've got Vilnek now. It won't take long to get to Blue Moon. I'll be there and back in time to oversee the completion of the modification project. If I had done this years ago, I could have listened in on the plot to kill my son. I could have prevented his death. How fitting that I will be bringing Vilnek back to stand trial just as I put in place the means to prevent a crime like his ever happening again. I'll be sure to tell him all about it just before I execute him.”

He stepped over Faith's inert body on his way out the door.

Tiemek finally located Talvok in the communications center at Headquarters. “What are you doing here?” Talvok demanded. “I thought—”

Tiemek interrupted him. "She never showed, but when I asked around, some people thought they had seen her being taken out of the Companions' lounge by two security officers. She knew she was on a private transport, right? Why would she go wait around trying to catch a ride? Bumping a ride off-world is really hard."

Talvok was already heading for the door before Tiemek finished. "I'll have to find out what's going on," he told Candace and the rest of the team who had been working with him trying to fix the problem with the Linksets. "You all keep at it," he advised unnecessarily. He already had a good idea where to start.

It took only a few minutes for him to reach the security station. The officer he spoke with looked harried as he tried to adjust several Linksets and monitor Radplant impulses while people darted everywhere around them. "Yes, there was a report filed just few minutes ago. Faith was picked up from the transport docking area for questioning."

He knew this man was only carrying out orders, but he found it difficult to contain his rage. "Questioning regarding what?"

"I'm sorry, Talvok, but this is your father's business, not mine, nor yours either, come to that. I've got a dozen reports to file. Alarm systems all over the complex just went off for no reason. And, in case you hadn't noticed, we've had five quakes already today. That's a lot, even for Trellian. I don't know about you, but my Radplant is buzzing like a beetle in a beet bin. I just can't be too concerned over one missing Companion, now that you know she's not missing."

"It's all this craziness that's got me so worried. Does Falsan think she's got something to do with it? Is he trying to get her to fix it? Her expertise is Serpiac, not electronics. Please just tell me what you know."

"Keep your shirt on. This is no big deal. Alarms malfunction all the time. Look, I can tell you this much. Several days ago, Falsan requested that we keep tabs on several people. If the

cameras picked up any of them in the transport docking area, we were supposed to let him know. Faith set off the alert, and Falsan sent Redek to pick her up. I assume he took her to his office. Purely routine and nothing to do with the alarm problem," he informed Talvok.

"Thanks!" Talvok tossed over his shoulder as he headed quickly out of the security office.

When he found her collapsed on the floor of Falsan's office, his heart seemed to stop beating in his chest. Rushing to her, he found a weak, thready shadow of a pulse in her pale and clammy throat. Catching her up to him, he took her straight to his personal transport and drove her to the medical complex. They treated her as best they could once they analyzed her blood and found the problem.

While Talvok was waiting in the hallway, sick with worry, he received the Radplant impulse that let him know he had a Linkset message. It was from his mother, so he quickly Linked her back, thankful that Candace and the team seemed to have solved the problem. She wasted no time in getting to the point. "He's missing, Talvok. Falsan is gone. He took Redek and the transport, the interplanetary one. Where could he have gone? What am I going to do?"

"Mom, I don't know, but I can't do anything about it right now. I just found Faith on the floor of Falsan's office. I don't know what Dad did to her, but she was barely breathing."

"Oh, no. No! Please tell me she's going to be all right. If he's hurt her, I can't stand it. That sweet girl!" Sarah cried. "I'll never forgive myself."

"It's not your fault, Mom. Look, I've got to go. I'll Link you when I know anything."

"No, I'll be right over," Sarah insisted.

"But what if Dad turns up? I actually need you to stay there and keep me informed."

"All right," she answered reluctantly. "But Link me as soon as you know anything."

The doctor came out to the hallway a few minutes later. "It was poison, Talvok. Someone overdosed her with Zipwrath."

"That new truth drug? I thought it was safe," Talvok objected.

"In moderate doses, handled right, it's perfectly safe. He gave her about five times too much. She's lucky to be alive."

"She's going to be alright, isn't she?" He couldn't keep the desperation out of his voice.

"Yes, actually, the antidote is quite effective. The meditech is infusing her with it now and she should be fine in an hour or so. You can take her with you, as long as you'll keep an eye on her."

"I'll take her to my mom's. She'll be fine there."

Talvok Linked his mother with the good news and made all the necessary arrangements. There was no more question of her getting off world, but the danger seemed to have passed, so as long as she stayed in his family compound, he felt confident she would be fine. He took the still shaky Faith and settled her as quickly as possible in the Companion's suite she had occupied until the recent falling out between Talvok and his father.

"I'll have to leave her with you, Mom," Talvok sighed. Turning to Faith, he became stern. "You, stay put. I'll be back as soon as possible."

She started to object, but Sarah spoke first. "Where are you going?"

"First, to Headquarters to make sure things are stable. Then tomorrow, I'll go look for Dad," came his brief reply.

"But where will you start? His Radplant has disappeared off the system, which means he's off world. If he's out of range, which he undoubtedly is by now, you'll never track him."

"There are ways to get around the Radplant system of track-

ing. I'll have to do an actual search for him. He's probably just in some obscure corner of the planet, supervising the modification project. If I haven't found him by tomorrow, I have a very good idea where to start off world. I'm afraid I have done a very foolish thing and now I have to try to make up for it. See, my choice of Blue Moon as the place for you to escape to wasn't by accident. I can't explain why, but I think Dad will eventually go there looking for Vilnek." Sarah and Faith sat digesting this news for a minute.

"The rendezvous?" asked Faith.

"I can't say. You know that."

"But whether it's true or not is really immaterial," Sarah agreed. "Falsan will believe it and act on it. He'll go looking for Vilnek on Blue Moon."

"And I need to get there fast. The container of Zipwrath wasn't in the office. He's got it with him."

"I'm sorry, Celdek, but I really can't stop to talk to you right now," Candace told him over the Linkset the next day. "I've got a quarter of the miners on Trellian in my dormitories here in the Headquarters complex and more coming in every hour. After all the problems we had last night, we've got a ton of reports to file, too. Where are you anyhow? You're scheduled to come in with the noon contingent."

"My Radplant shows you where I am, Candy," Celdek grinned.

"Yes, I know where your Radplant is. I want to know where you are. And don't call me 'Candy'."

"Did you know that Linksets aren't secure means of communication, my dearest Candy?" Celdek asked in a singsong voice that let Candace know that she could expect a sharp reminder of Celdek's privacy rules when next she saw him.

"I only mean that with all the trouble with the Radplants yesterday, I can't be sure of anything anymore," Candace explained.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about," Celdek insisted. "Don't get me sidetracked. What I want to know is, has anyone considered what will happen as the electrical signals all over the planet get scrambled like that?"

"We've been considering it all day, actually. I really don't think..."

"But you don't know for sure. No one knows for sure. Now I know what Pelchak was so uptight about. I want you out of there."

"Ha, ha," she said tonelessly. "Very funny. Now, really, I've got too much going on here to sit around shooting the breeze with you, so if you don't mind, you'll have to excuse me."

"But I do mind. I said I want you out of there. Just until we know the effect this Radplant tampering is going to have. I'll have Tiemek pick you up. He's making a delivery today anyway."

"Tiemek is on his minestead," Candace said with mock innocence, "so he must have decided not to do the delivery after all."

"My dearest Candy," Celdek began, with more threat than affection.

Candace cut in. "Sorry, Celdek, but you're the one who wanted me to work here at Headquarters. Now I'm committed, at least until this major project is over. Talk to you later."

"Don't close this Link, Candy," Celdek told the suddenly blank screen. As he stared at it, he promised himself that if she wanted to see a major project, he would show her what sort of major project he could make out of tanning her hide. But he had people depending on him and he couldn't take care of that right now. Checking the setting on the relay that would hide him from the tracking function of the Radplant, Celdek prepared his transport for departure. Once he delivered Vilnek, he could return and deal with Candace. Vilnek mentioned something about a

filamith fitting in the transport. He wondered if perhaps Vilnek had an extra one lying around to loan.

Just after sunset was usually the quietest part of the day, but not that day. Alarms blared. Small fires burned from electrical outlets in walls and from the air intake panels near wireless power supply units. Linksets with Falsan's face bawled instructions. "All hands, report to emergency stations. Radplant modifications have been suspended until further notice. Linksets will be used for official communications only." The turmoil was widespread and pervasive. Every street, and even the covered walkways, showed signs of the total breakdown of order.

Pelchak stood guard at the main entrance to the Headquarters building. Wild animals were on the prowl and looting was a serious possibility. All the other obvious entrances had been blocked, but he wanted to be sure the communications center would be under control for as long as it could be made to function. He had no idea how far the present broadcasts were reaching, but when Falsan's security people did brief him, they only said that less than half the personnel were reporting that they had received any news through the Linksets or Radplants.

Talvok exited the internal lift and approached Pelchak from the main lobby. "I came by to thank you for standing by us. In light of the present situation, I think we can say your duties and the investigation are on hold. I'll get you off-world as soon as I can, but I don't know when that will be."

"Want me to leave? Now?" He gestured to the anarchy in the courtyard outside the glass front doors. People were rushing in all directions, some arguing, some crying, some fighting the fires and some fighting each other.

"What I'd really like is to put you in charge of our family security." Talvok searched the other man's eyes for a moment,

then decided to confide in the steady strength he read there. "Can I talk to you privately?"

Pelchak summoned another man over from a hallway nearby and walked with Talvok to an empty conference room off the main hall.

Talvok closed the door and began, "We've got a situation over at the house. My father and the family's personal guard are missing. We assumed he was over here trying to co-ordinate the response to the disaster, but I just found out that after recording the message that's playing on all the Linksets, he left the building headed toward the transport docks. Our security chief just briefed me on the malfunctions and damage, not to mention the looting, but didn't know anything about Falsan. I put him on to looking out for Dad, but for right now, I'm in charge. I can't look out for Mom and Faith while I'm out here trying to get a handle on the general disorder."

Pelchak just nodded, so Talvok went on. "Would you be willing to go out to the house and make sure no one takes advantage of the situation to try to settle old scores with my dad by getting at my mom, or anyone else close to us? They're all at the house now except Candace, who should go out there with you."

"Escape plan?"

"What, like off-world? Mom wouldn't go, and neither would Faith or Candace. If I tried to force it, word would get around and it might start a panic. I have a few ideas for getting things back to normal, but all of them are going to involve a gamble. If you go out to the house and secure it for me, I could get several of the leaders and department heads together out there. We could have an actual counsel and I could get some of the guys behind my plan. Some organization and structure would help, but I've got to have a safe place to set them up."

"I'll start a signal fire when I get the house secured. When you see the smoke coming from over there, you'll know." A quake shook the building underneath their feet and both men braced

themselves for the impact, which never came. When the walls stopped swaying, conversation continued as if there had been no interruption.

“Smoke signals. Sheesh! What's this world coming to? Still, it should work. You can also try your Enabler, if you find a live zone. They still work, depending on the area.”

“Your mom know I'm coming?”

“No, but if you take my transport and this ring, she'll believe you.” Talvok handed Pelchak his college ring.

“May not be able to get your transport there. Will the ring be enough?” Talvok understood what Pelchak meant. The transports ran on electrical fuel cells for the most part. Because of the electrical disturbances in the atmosphere, the transports were no longer reliable. Pelchak might have to walk most of the way, or he could get lucky and make a smooth run. Just then, a flash of brilliant green lightning cracked the glass in the front doors of the building.

“It'll have to. She knows Dad trusts you. She'll let you in.”

Candace and Pelchak had a relatively easy ride out to Falsan's house, with only a few delays where Pelchak had to get out and push the transport down the track. The Enabler worked, but Pelchak built the fire anyway, adding a powder that turned the smoke a neon blue. Soon Choldor and several of the other leaders of the mining company had made their way to the owner's compound for a counsel with Talvok.

“If I can take the Radplant system down for a few hours, it may help,” Talvok finished his briefing with his strongest idea.

“With all the events taking place,” Vinchet, head of sector four, put in, “I don't see how we can take the Radplant system down. It will leave the miners in the outlying sectors entirely exposed. I'm one of the very few from my sector who was called in early for the Radplant modifications. All the rest of my people are still out in this.”

The room gave a quick jerk as if to emphasize the point.

“And it could make things worse,” argued Morkot gesturing around him. “We don't want to bring anything worse down on our heads. Maybe it's time to quit Trellian.” Just then, a Fensel pack set up a howling that sent shivers up and down human spines. All the men there had faced the large canines native to Trellian. They hunted in packs, and menaced anything in their territory they felt was a threat.

“In order to evacuate, we need the electrical condition of the planet to stabilize. Again, I think our only choice is to shut down the Radplant system to cut back on interference.” Talvok hoped this idea would get the support of the counsel soon. He needed to get this settled so he could pursue Falsan.

“We could spread out and warn all the miners in the outlying sectors, even bring in the ones who want to evacuate once that's possible. I've got lists to coordinate everything,” Candace proposed, “and with a simple tweak of the fuel cell system, almost any transport can be taken off its reliance on electrical power, at least for essentials. You'd need to do your own navigation and you wouldn't have reliable Radplant warnings, but it could be done. Inside the transport, you'd be pretty safe.”

“That would be a colossal effort,” Vinchet objected. “Notify the whole planet?”

“At least half the sectors were called in before the real problems started and those who came early mostly didn't leave. We're not talking about that many sectors, really,” Talvok argued.

“Have you got any other ideas?” Choldor challenged the dissenters. Turning to Talvok, he continued, “If that's what we have to do, that's what we have to do. Count me in.” His forceful voice and no-nonsense manner won the others over and in no time, plans were underway.

The coordination effort proved to be massive, and Candace had Faith and Sarah working all night. The next morning volunteers from the Headquarters complex spread out all over the planet bringing in anyone who wanted to be ready to evacuate as soon as the electrical conditions were right. At least half the miners stayed behind, hoping to ride out the difficulties in their own minesteads, but at least they were warned and knew to stay inside until further notice. Candace just hoped that the notice would be sent out by functioning Linkset signal.

Radnok and Willa were on Choldor's list, so he was glad to be able to check on them as he notified them. He filled them in on the situation in the rest of Trellian, but then they also wanted to know about Shawna and Pippa.

"Talvok isn't worried about them. They're safely with Vilnek as far as he knows. It's anybody who might know anything on the Blue Moon satellite station that could be in danger," Choldor informed them. "Talvok is convinced that's where Falsan is headed."

"How did Falsan find out?" Radnok wondered. Even he had not been privy to the secret.

"Falsan drugged Faith. She didn't know anything about Vilnek, but she did know that Talvok was sending her there to get away from the troubles. If she had obeyed him and gone there on the private transport Talvok had arranged, Falsan might not have caught her."

Radnok looked puzzled. "Going to Blue Moon? She was on her way here. Didn't you tell me she was coming here, Willa?"

Willa's face registered guilt and defiance in equal measure. "It's none of our business how they work out their affairs, Radnok. She's my good friend and she wanted to come here. With or without Talvok's permission, I wanted to support her."

"I can see we'll have some talking to do later on," Radnok stated ominously.

"If you're sure you won't come with me, I'd better be moving

on," Choldor admitted. "Lots of ground to cover before the Radplant system goes dark at midnight. Just let me get the readings as to how much service you actually have out here now and I'll be going."

When Radnok returned from seeing Choldor off, he stood in front of Willa scowling. "What's all this about Faith? Why were you going to help her run away from Talvok?"

"She wasn't running away. From what Choldor just said, it sounds like she didn't want to go to Blue Moon. Why should she have to? I was just trying to help her in her work. She's always been so good to help me."

"I know you like to help her, to try to repay her for all the help she gave you after the Serpiac attack, but that doesn't give you the right—"

Willa interrupted, "And who does Talvok think he is ordering her around? He isn't in charge of her."

"Yes, actually, he is," Radnok corrected, "but that's not the point I wanted to—"

Again, she cut him off. "She's a grown woman, not that he cares. He's so self-centered, always off-world, leaving her alone, then dragging her around the planet with him."

"Willa, I want you to listen a—"

"How inconsiderate can one man be?" Willa was working herself up into a fine state.

Radnok knew only one way to get her to calm down when she was like this. As she continued her rant, he went to the corner where he kept two or three long-handled tools standing in a decorative bin. Among them, looking much more innocent than it felt was a filamith.

Even the sight of her most hated implement didn't stop Willa this time. She continued to rail against Talvok and then men in general with complete disregard to anything Radnok was saying. The present crisis, most of the evils in the sector, and even the

bad weather were all the fault of men and Willa didn't intend to stop until she had laid every—*whap!*

That brought her up short. The filamith hit the back of her pod and the noise made her jump.

“That will be about enough,” Radnok intoned. “Stand up and get in your corner.”

“Corner?” Willa began, but this time Radnok cut her off.

“Fine. You won't obey me? I'll take care of that, too. You know the consequences.” He jerked her out of the pod, spun it around, put her over the back of it, and landed three hard whaps with the filamith on her backside.

“Ow! *Ow!*” she screeched.

He gave her five strokes before he paused this time. She gasped then yelped. “Ouch! Radnok, stop it!”

“Not yet,” he countered, giving her seven licks this time before he paused. The pattern wasn't breaking through to her, so she pushed him again.

“No more! Radnok, this isn't fair. I didn't do anything!” Nine strokes fell, each one burning her rear end worse than the last.

Finally, she broke down and sobbed. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll be good, I promise. I'll be quiet. I'll listen.”

“Will you?” he demanded, adding nine more stripes to her already painful collection.

“I will. I promise.”

“Hold still then, while I remind you how things are here.” With each statement, he brought the filamith down again, casting a line of pain wherever it landed. “Talvok is responsible for Faith's safety and well-being. I'm responsible for your safety and well-being. What we say goes. Dishonesty will not be tolerated.” He put the filamith down, much to her relief then continued as he let her up and rubbed her back. “Do you remember all those facts now? You've known them all along. What made you think you could forget them all of a sudden?”

In a few minutes, Willa was able to get herself together

enough to answer. "I guess I'm just too stressed out with all that's going on. I didn't mean to keep on interrupting you that way or badmouthing men. You know I don't mean it, don't you? You know I love you?"

"Yes, I know, and I forgive you. But there's still your dishonesty to deal with."

Willa started to tear up again. "Oh, no, please don't. Not tonight. I won't be able to take it."

He could see she was on the edge. She had needed the Adjustment to calm her down. Now, she needed comfort more than she needed correction. It would wait until the crisis was over. He could understand how stressed she was. "Not tonight," he assured her. "Tonight, we'll wait up and keep on the alert. But I won't forget about it, Willa. I forgive you, but you know I can't let it pass."

"I understand, Radnok, and I'll accept whatever you give me when the time comes. Just not tonight. Thanks for understanding." She leaned heavily on him and began to cry again, partly from relief and partly from worry. They would be cut off completely. Without the Radplant system, they would be totally without warning, by themselves, and vulnerable.

Chapter 8

“**Y**ou could go ahead and leave, you know,” Candace assured Talvok near midnight. “We’ve got everything under control here. We’ve got all the sectors covered, the Headquarters complex is relatively stable as you can see, and Pelchak is watching our backs, so we’re fine. Go on.”

“I know you’ll be fine, but I can’t just walk out on the first, and hopefully last, full shut down of the Radplant system in Trellian’s history. My family has poured our lifeblood into this planet. I have to see this through. My place is here at Headquarters.” Talvok knew his duty.

“Unless I miss my guess, and I’m not asking you to confirm, because I know you can’t anyway, you have people waiting for you wherever it is you need to go. What are they going to do if you don’t show?” Candace asked.

“They’ll check out the situation on Trellian and probably get a nasty shock when they hear the rumors about the anarchy that’s going on here, but otherwise, they’ll be fine. They can take care of themselves,” Talvok answered.

Candace shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I don’t want you

telling anybody we kept you here. Pelchak and I can handle whatever comes along almost as well as Pippa could.”

“And I can't tell you how grateful I am for that,” Talvok commented.

“And to think, Celdek wanted me to leave you high and dry. When I get my hands on that rascal—”

“He wanted you to leave? Then why didn't you?”

“You're kidding, right? I couldn't leave. I'd taken the job of filling in for Pippa and that's a serious commitment to make. Until she comes back, you're stuck with me.”

“I don't know much about that culture, Candace, but one thing I have heard is that they take protecting their women very seriously. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when all this is over. Where is Celdek, anyway?”

“He never came back from taking Pippa and Shawna. I don't know why he hasn't come back yet, but he had no way of knowing we'd need him, anyway. As far as he knew, things were under control here,” Candace admitted. She knew she would be in for the spanking of a lifetime when next she saw Celdek. She'd felt his idea of protection before and had no wish to feel it again, but the thought of not accepting what he deemed necessary barely crossed her mind. All she could think about was how much she wished he were here, bringing the miners in from his sector. At least she would be sure of his location. At the moment, his Radplant registered that he was in the transport bay on his minestead so she knew he was anywhere but there.

One by one, the messengers brought back news and evacuees. By midnight, all was in readiness.

“All right. Let's throw the switch,” Talvok announced. It took three people to actually manually kill the system, so Talvok, Candace, and Choldor were standing at the ready. “On my mark. Three, two, one, mark!”

For the first time in his memory, Talvok felt the Radplant still. He hadn't remembered what it was like to be without it. Neither

had he been aware that it gave a slight sensation behind his left ear until it ceased. He felt like he had lost an old friend.

All over the planet, men were raising their hands to their heads and touching them in consternation. The Radplant that had warned them, tethered them to each other, and thus protected their sanity, was gone.

Willa paced, then sat on Radnok's lap, then got up to pace some more. She tried to clean, then sat at the useless Linkset, then wandered over to the window to look out into the night. Suddenly, she screamed and jumped back. Radnok could see behind her that a Fensel, with its long canine teeth gleaming in a snarl, was prowling by the minestead, right underneath the window.

"It can't get in," he reassured her as he took her in his arms. "You're safe."

"But it's so close," Willa shuddered. "I've never heard of them coming right up to a minestead before."

"They're upset by the changes in the atmosphere. They can sense something is different," Radnok explained. "They'll move on soon, when they don't find any prey. It's okay."

An earthquake rocked the minestead, taking Willa's mind off the Fensel. Then another. And a third. Willa stood in the middle of the floor and started to shake.

"Come here," Radnok ordered. He took her by the hand and sat down in his favorite pod.

"If I didn't know better," Willa said in a small voice, "I'd think you were calling me over in order to spank me."

Radnok smiled up at her. He patted his lap. "It's up to you. Sit or lay down. Whatever will make you feel better."

She sat in his lap again and cuddled for a while, cringing when a gust of wind shook the minestead to its foundations.

"Why are all these things happening tonight?" she wailed. "I don't understand."

"It's only a little more than usual," Radnok explained patiently. "It just feels like a lot because I can't warn you."

She tried to get up, intent on pacing again. He held her fast. She looked down at him and let the corners of her mouth turn down. "Maybe you had the right idea after all." She turned herself so that she was face down over his lap.

Slowly, gently, he patted her bottom, whispering words of love and encouragement all the while. Then he began to swat, increasing strength and rhythm. After about ten swats, he would rub away the sting then start to swat again. At last, she relaxed and began to giggle. "I wish all my Adjustments were like this," she sighed. "Thank you."

He rubbed her back and stroked her hair. "Any time, little one. Any time."

For over four hours, all over the planet, miners and their Companions sat in tense silence. Reports filed later documented hundreds of incidents.

Packs of Fensel howled in search of prey, lightning flashed, floors rocked, and tornadoes touched down across the planet. Each time an event began, men in its path jumped and felt suddenly useless. Was this what it was like to be the Companion? Dependent and helpless?

But by the end of the ordeal, most of the men had adjusted to the lack of warning. Let Trellian do its worst. Inside their well-designed strongholds, couples and lone men waited out the experiment with varying degrees of maturity and hope.

Finally, after hours of frantic toil, then seemingly endless waiting, Talvok gave the word. "It's been four hours. No casualties so far. We could keep it like this and get everyone off world.

Or we can start it back up and hope for the best. Are we still all agreed?" Talvok took in Candace's smile and Choldor's nod. The rest of the counsel voiced their "yes" votes, much to Talvok's relief. "All right, then. On my mark. Three, two, one, mark."

It was almost comical to Candace to see the look of relief and joy on the faces of the men around her. To a man, a hand went to an ear and a grin exploded across a face. Some rubbed at the spot as if trying to acclimate to the faint buzzing effect given off by the Radplant, while others just looked off into space as if trying to hear something. The impulses were functioning correctly.

"Try an Enabler," Talvok asked Choldor, holding up his device. They both put their hands to their temples and smiled broadly. Choldor mouthed a few words and Talvok mouthed an answer at which both men laughed.

"What was that all about?" Candace asked.

Talvok grinned. "Choldor just told me to get going. I answered back to him that after this trip, if I ever get back to Trellian, I might never leave it again in my life. But first to business. I've got to run by the house and then I'm gone."

"Run by the house?" Candace wondered.

"Faith is still there. She could have been on Blue Moon. That's not something I can let slide," Talvok noted.

"But she's just been through a terrible physical ordeal," Candace objected.

"She's fine. She said so before I left. She worked all night getting the evacuation and notification schedule ready, didn't she? If she can do that, she's ready for what I've got planned," Talvok announced.

Faith greeted Talvok with a hug and a kiss. "It's over! It's done! It was a success, wasn't it? Pelchak looked so relieved when it came

back on. His seems to be working fine. I think all the men's Radplants are functioning as normal."

"Yes, they are, thank goodness," Talvok reported.

"I wish I could have been at Headquarters with you to see it all happen," she complained mildly.

"I wanted you out here where you were safe," Talvok reminded her. "In fact, I didn't want you on Trellian at all." As they talked, he led her into his private office. He shut the door behind them and Faith began to understand.

"You're still upset," she realized. "About my not going to Blue Moon."

"That's right, Faith." They looked at each other for a long moment. She had a choice to make. Would she fight or would she accept what she knew he intended to do.

"You don't have to do this, you know," she began, backing away. "I'm not your Companion in the strictest sense of the word."

"You are more than my Companion. You are going to be my wife. If you are going to live on Trellian, you will have to learn."

"I'm a grown woman. I made my choice," Faith claimed. "So it turned out wrong. It could happen to anyone. You're not perfect either."

"I know that. I should never have sent you to Blue Moon, knowing how secret we needed to keep the rendezvous point. That was my mistake and I only hope I can intercept my father before he does any damage there. Maybe then Vilnek will forgive me."

"So your mistake was as great as mine. Why am I to be punished and you not?" Faith appealed.

Talvok looked at her for a long moment. Then he sat down and let his shoulders slump in near exhaustion. "I'm not sure I have the energy for this discussion now."

She could see in his face the despair creeping up. She could tell he felt defeated by all the events of the past few hours, no

matter how well he had acquitted himself. The total psychological collapse of his father, he had withstood. The near-demise of the Radplant system that made it possible for his family's business to survive, he had handled with dispatch. But her denying him the role he felt was his seemed to be his undoing. She didn't want to be the disaster in his life that sapped his strength and killed his confidence.

Finally, while her thoughts stormed, he went on. "Would you really want to spank me?"

"No," she answered. "Of course not. But why do you want to spank me?"

His guard down, his strength almost gone, he answered without thinking. "Because it works. It's always worked. It works for Shawna and Vilnek. It works for Radnok and Willa, and Choldor and Claire. I even think it may be working for Pelchak and Pippa. They're happy and safe. Why not us?"

So many questions left unanswered. So many doubts unresolved. Still, here was a man whom she wanted now with all her being to support and help. Did she have such power over him, that her refusal to accept his ways dispirited him so? And did she love him so much that she was willing to do anything he needed in order to see that spine stiffen in resolve once more? She had but another moment to decide.

"You've got to get moving if you're going to find Falsan before the rendezvous," Faith began.

Talvok tried to interrupt. "You are more important to me than—"

But Faith rolled right over his words. "So maybe you'd better start with a filamith or the plexilat control panel protector there. Your mom told me it is particularly effective on her."

Talvok stood rooted to the spot. The thought of his mother and his love discussing Adjustments in that manner shocked him somehow. Then he realized that time was passing and she was ready for him. Draped over the pod, tunic raised, she was

presenting herself to him as a gift. They would get the rest of the issue worked through later. Right now, he needed to accomplish his duty and though she didn't understand it yet, he knew she needed him to do it, too.

He raised the plexilat strip high and brought it down on her backside. He let that stroke settle for a moment, then brought it down again on the other side. She bounced on her toes but kept silent until the pace of the spanks got to be too much for her. She started to squeal and toss side to side as the pain intensified with each descent of the makeshift paddle.

The heat was unbearable. She hadn't remembered it burning so much. The sting she recalled from the last time he had spanked her, but this awful burn was too much. Finally, she thought she could take no more and she stood up. He placed a hand on her back to keep her down. "I'm only half finished. Take the rest like a good girl."

"Half finished?" she cried. "You can't mean that! No! No!" With every swat, she bounced and cried.

Talvok had to restrain her with his whole arm around her waist now. He increased his pace and spanked harder. "I have to get through to you. I have to be sure you understand. I love you, and to protect you, I have to know that you will be honest with me and never go behind my back like you did."

"I understand. I promise. I won't ever go behind your back again. I'll obey you. Please just stop!" she begged.

"If you really mean to do that, quit fighting. Relax. Prove to me that you can obey."

She forced her back to bend and her limbs to go limp. He realized what a supreme effort she was giving. Was it perfect? No. But it was a start they could build on. He gave her three more swats and stood her up. Taking her in his arms, he held her and kissed away her tears.

"I hate to leave you like this. I feel like you're still not sure. I want you to understand why I have to spank you. There's so

much more I need to say," he whispered. "It's a terrible way for me to leave you."

"Don't think about it that way," she responded. "Think about it as a time for me to reflect and get ready for our next conversation. And come back as soon as you can. I'd come with you, but I think I'm needed more right here."

"That's right," Talvok rejoined. "I have to do this alone. I'll bring him back and get him the help he needs, then we'll be able to work through all your doubts and questions, all right?"

For an answer, she gave him a kiss and a watery smile.

Talvok had barely left the room when the Linksets started buzzing. The director of the transport docking bay needed an urgent word with the counsel. "You were expecting a mass evacuation, weren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," Choldor answered. "In fact, we welcome it. Feeding and housing all these people after what we've just gone through is going to be a challenge. Whoever wants to leave, let them leave. Just be sure to get contact information and assure them that they will be notified and welcomed back once things return to normal."

He Linked off and addressed the others. "I guess there's no way to warn the surrounding stations and planets that they can expect heavy traffic from Trellian for a while, is there?"

"I suppose I could Link around and spread the word. It might help curb the chaos," Candace offered. "We even have some agreements with a few of the nearby stations. I'll pull up the list. Just a second."

"Oh, boy," sighed Choldor, staring as the list came up on his communicap. "Would you look at that? The first station on the list is Blue Moon."

At noon on the day of the rendezvous, Vilnek stared out the viewport, not believing his eyes. "It looks like a used transport lot out there," he griped. "How are we ever going to get in? I'll be a day late just because of the wait here in orbit."

"I know of a private docking bay, but it will cost you," Celdek offered. "I wouldn't mind getting this trip done, if you'll excuse my saying so. I've got business to attend to back on Trellian."

"Go for it. I'll pay. Just get us on that station," Vilnek confirmed.

As he pulled out of the general crowd and redirected the transport to the side of the station, Celdek noticed something about the transports. "See that? They're all from Trellian." It took a while for the idea to register in both their minds.

"Do you think this could have something to do with the electrical problems you told me they were having on Trellian?" Vilnek wondered. For an answer, Celdek put on a burst of speed. They were soon docked and pushing their way through the crowds of displaced people from Trellian. It didn't take long for them to hear about the disaster and its aftermath. The two men walked faster, and never knew that they were missing Talvok in the crowd.

"There's the Thraxton. I just hope that in all this mob, Shawna and Pippa were able to get a room."

"They should have checked in before all this happened," Celdek answered.

But when they asked at the desk, they were informed that the ladies had checked in days ago and not been seen since.

"What do you mean? Not been seen? You mean they've been in the room all this time?" Vilnek asked incredulously.

"Could be," answered the harried desk clerk. "I really couldn't say." He bustled off, having taken the requisite hand

scan on Vilnek so that he could wave himself into his wife's room.

Up the elevator platform, into the room, and into stark cold fear Vilnek leaped. "It could be nothing," he told Celdek.

"Sure, they could just have found a great new beach and decided to stay there overnight for fun. They could come waltzing in any minute," Celdek replied.

Vilnek turned to the door, almost as if he were hoping Celdek's words would come to life and produce his wife and their friend at that moment. What met his gaze was the unchanging emptiness of the room. "This can't be happening," Vilnek breathed.

"No sign of struggle," Celdek noted. He was going into battle mode and he could feel it. Until the two women were found, he was all Dodger, and on a mission. Pippa was his employer and his responsibility. "They walked out of here under their own steam. Check the stuff and see what they took with them."

Vilnek rummaged around. "It looks like all their stuff is here except communipads. I don't think they packed. Her carry-all is here."

"All this room tells us is that she didn't expect to be gone long when they left," Celdek noted.

"Too bad they won't let us in Pippa's room," Vilnek interjected with a quizzical look at his friend.

Celdek gave him a "please, don't be insulting" stare and continued out the door. "Where is a Dodger, Vilnek?"

Vilnek laughed as he quoted, "Anywhere he wants to be."

Celdek quickly let himself into the room with a device Vilnek felt quite sure was illegal. He followed the Dodger anyway, but saw nothing of interest. The room showed no signs of struggle. Everything looked neat and orderly, but stuffy from lack of occupancy.

Celdek locked the door behind them with the same device and nodded toward the elevator outside Shawna's room. "Next

step is to start asking around. You take the south side of the street. I'll take the north. Maybe somebody's seen them since three days ago. ”

Three days earlier...

Pippa finished her unpacking first and set her carryall under her bed, then went across to Shawna's room. Shawna let her in and finished her unpacking at a leisurely pace. “What do you want to do first,” Pippa inquired. “Relax on the simulated beach? I hear you can pick a section as realistic as you want. With or without jellyfish? With or without relentless salt breezes? Or take in a show?”

“Beach, definitely,” Shawna answered. “I need another nap. On the transport here, I had this terrible dream about Vilnek taking that filamith to my backside. He flailed away like there was no tomorrow. It was so vivid and real that I woke up and started rubbing my rear. So let's find a nice beach to snooze on. No jellyfish, either. Just sand and sun. I'm still not thoroughly thawed out from the True Dark cold.” She looked out the window and shuddered at how far down it was. Shawna hated heights. “But I can't look. Can you check to see how crowded it is on the street?”

Pippa gazed out the window, too, but could not believe her eyes. “Is that Falsan? It can't be!”

Shawna swallowed her dread and looked out long enough to make the identification. “That's Falsan all right.” The two women looked at each other. They knew this could mean nothing but danger for them all. Shawna immediately jumped up and made for the elevator. “Come on. No time to lose.”

“We can't go after him,” Pippa objected. “It's crazy. Just wait a second and I'll call Celdek back. He'll be here—”

“Too late,” Shawna interrupted. “We've got to go after him.”

She beckoned Pippa onto the lift platform and when she boarded, pulled the lever to start their decent. "Just don't tell Vilnek I did this, okay?"

"If I did tell him," Pippa ventured, "that dream of yours would certainly come true." She wondered briefly what Pelchak would think of the project but decided she didn't want to know.

They followed Falsan all day, sneaking quick bites to eat whenever Falsan stopped, fading into doorways or shops when Falsan turned. He had covered most of the main strip that constituted the tourist area of the satellite, going in and out of the shops, working his way back toward their hotel. Neither Shawna nor Pippa had any doubt as to what Falsan was doing there. He was hunting for Vilnek.

"What are we going to do if he goes into the Thraxton?" Shawn wanted to know as they peered around a small teashop catering to the older tourist trade. Falsan had just gone in.

"Well, he won't find us there, will he?" Pippa reasoned. "We're here in this alleyway spying on him. Maybe he'll wait for us in the Thraxton lobby. One of us can keep watching him while the other finds a Linkset kiosk and calls Celdek. Or maybe we should call the police."

"Or maybe we could trap him in my room and then call the police," Shawna suggested.

"Or maybe," said a voice directly behind them, "you can both get drugged and tell Falsan what he wants to know." It was the last thing they heard before darkness descended on them both.

"Vilnek?" Shawna whispered. Then she remembered where she was and what was happening to her. "Pippa? Are you there?"

"I'm here," Pippa's groggy voice replied.

"Good," Falsan rasped, his voice chalky with drink and rage.

"Awake at last. It's time to go." He unhooked their feet but left their arms bound in front of them as they had been for the last three days.

The memories flooded back into Shawna's aching head. Three lost days. The drugs. Atomizers for Zipwrath. Transdermal injection units for sedatives and stimulants. Falsan's questions. Pippa's answers under the Zipwrath. Her turn under the truth drug. More questions she could almost remember. More drugs. Darkness. Hunger. Thirst.

"We can't go anywhere like this," Pippa answered. "I'm too weak to stand up, much less walk."

"You won't just walk. You'll climb. Now, get up," he ordered. Taking out several transdermal injection units and an atomizer, he quickly administered more of the drug he had used before to counteract the effect of the knock out drugs he used to subdue them.

"Where are we? What day is it?" Shawna demanded.

"Get moving or I'll forget all I've learned in the last three days about how to work with Zipwrath. The first time I gave it, there was too much in the atomizer and that little tart, Faith, almost died, I hear. Too bad I couldn't complete the job. She was distracting Talvok. Influencing him against me. When I get back, I'll be sure to finish what I started. But first things first. Time to catch a murderer. Now, get up. I've got this injection unit at your back. Loaded with plenty of sedative strong enough to make an end of both of you. I don't need it any more after today, you see. It already did its work."

While Falsan was raving, Pippa tried to look at Shawna to communicate something to her about trying to escape. Her eyes, when they could focus, told her that Shawna was in even worse shape than she was herself. Shawna kept swaying on her feet. Her jaw was slack and her eyelids droopy.

Pippa knew better than to go willingly with him. Why would he want to take them anyplace except to kill them? Or perhaps to

set a trap for Vilnek, then murder them all. Through the haze in her brain, a determination rose. She would not give in, not be used to take down Shawna or Vilnek or anyone. One desperate attempt would be all she would have, but it would have to work.

He can't kill both of us at the same time, she reasoned. One of us will escape. Slowly, she swayed toward him and shouted, "Shawna! Run!" She threw her body at him, trying to knock him over.

Chapter 9

Falsan easily sidestepped and she crashed to the ground. Shawna barely reacted with a wince.

Looking down at Pippa, Falsan spat. “Don't try that again. I really only need one of you as bait.” He grabbed Shawna's hair and pulled her to him. “She'll die, then you'll still bring the killer in. I know you, Pippa. I know you'd never endanger your friend. You'd let my son's murderer go free, but you wouldn't let me kill this little piece of trash. So get moving or it's all over for her.”

Pippa knew she was in no shape to try again or struggle. She could not take the chance on Falsan killing Shawna. He had played his hand well. He knew her inside and out, having worked with her for years. He knew she might endanger her own life but never the life of a friend. The problem was, everything she had thought about Falsan might prove false now. He was out of his mind, unpredictable and irrational.

Shawna's eyes were still glassy, but she was able to walk in front of him while he directed her by pulling at her hair. Pippa walked in front of them both, looking frantically to the left and right, but she could barely recognize her surroundings. The sky

was just getting light. They were in a forested spit of land where wide paths and grassy meadows cut through the greenery. The day grew warmer, though Pippa knew the climate was controlled to simulate the normal passage of time on most planets. It must be at least midday, she thought.

Several times, they passed platforms in the air, connected to the ground by steep ramps that ascended in segments around the outsides of square towers. It took a moment for Pippa to comprehend. Zoomer towers. These were made of some sort of bars, utilitarian and basic, not like the beautifully painted Zoomer towers closer in to town. Still, they had gates at the bottoms of the stairs, from what she could observe in passing. There were railings, safety holds and other improvements.

“What are you going to do?” she demanded. “These Zoomer towers are all locked. You have to pay a fee and register to use them.” This had been true the last time she had visited Blue Moon and she hoped it was still so.

“The Zoomer towers nearer town are secure, but out here, nobody bothers with locks. If you're willing to hike out this far, you can have your pick. I pick this one. Now, get up there.” Falsan gestured with his free hand.

Pippa started up but Shawna held back. “I can't go up there,” she mumbled. Slowly, she shook her head side to side.

“You'll get up there or get another dose of the Zipwrath. Wonder how much it takes to start a reaction. If you don't start moving, we'll all find out.” He jabbed her hard in the back.

Pippa hesitated. “She's really afraid of heights. Can't you just leave her down here?”

“I can leave her corpse down here. She's no good to me any place but up there on that platform where she can be seen.” Falsan sounded like he really didn't care whether he killed her or not.

“Shawna, listen to me,” Pippa entreated her friend. “You have to do this. Just close your eyes and start up the ramp. There

is a handrail you can hold to, even with your hands tied, see? I can do it." She showed Shawna how she could hold to the handrail with both hands.

"I can't," Shawna pleaded. "Even with my eyes closed, I..."

Falsan's smack to the back of her head dazed her and she stumbled forward onto the ramp.

"Don't open your eyes. Just keep walking," Pippa instructed.

"Shut up, both of you!" Falsan shouted.

Radnok woke Willa at noon after their late night of watching and waiting.

"We'll need to get you packed up and ready to go," Radnok stated sadly.

"Ready to go?" Willa wondered. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are, young lady," Radnok replied.

"But the worst is over. You said so yourself last night. The danger is past and your Radplant's working again. Why should I be going anywhere?"

"I Linked Choldor and once I actually got to talk to him, he told me what they're going to announce later in the day. The electrical crisis is not over yet. There's been severe damage to several of the planet's systems, including the transport tracks. That's how we bring in our supplies and take out the ore samples. It's too heavy to fly the transports fully loaded like that, and there are some places in the outlying sectors where flying isn't even possible. They'll have to get the track system repaired and until that happens, they're asking all Companions to gather at Headquarters."

"They can't do that!" Willa objected.

"They can and they have. It's a good idea, anyway. With all the electrical shenanigans, there's bound to be problems with the quakes and critters."

"I don't mind a few quakes and critters. And I don't mind short rations for a while. We can make this work. I don't want to leave you," Willa pleaded.

"I know you don't, and I don't want you to leave, but it has to be. Willa, the Serpiac monitoring system has been knocked out by all the quakes. It was set up underground, you know. They made it flexible, but a plate shifted right over one of the transformers and that was it."

"So we'd have no warning?" Willa whispered fearfully. Her eyes betrayed her conflicting emotions. Ever since the Serpiac attack that had left her maimed, Willa had fought a paralyzing dread of the terrible acidic worms that plagued the planet.

"That's right. No warning at all."

Willa started to cry as she started to pack. Radnok helped her as much as he could. "Claire is at Headquarters. You will be able to work with her and help the admin types get Trellian back on her feet once you get back."

Confused, Willa asked, "Get back? To Headquarters? But that's where I'm going."

"Didn't I mention? They want you Companions to gather at Headquarters for evacuation off-world."

"Oh, Radnok, no!" Willa protested anew. "You can't mean this."

"It's only temporary while we rebuild. You'll be back before you know it. Think of it as a vacation. You'll be going to Blue Moon satellite station." Radnok put as good a spin on it as he could manage.

"They're packing us off like unwanted baggage. We could help the recovery," Willa pouted.

Radnok hated to do this so soon after what he had given her yesterday, but he knew he had to get her back on track and keep her there while they were apart. Besides, if he got her mind onto her backside and off her complaining, it might help.

"You're not unwanted baggage, little one, and that's more

than enough. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk. Now, give me that carryall and get yourself ready. We have one more Adjustment to make before I take you to Headquarters."

"No! You can't mean... I couldn't take... *no!*"

"Yes, you can and you will," he returned. "We've still got the matter of your lying to me to deal with. Get yourself ready or I'll get you ready, and you know what that means."

She knew indeed that if she fought him from this point on, he would give her whatever punishment he felt she had earned, then add to that five stripes with the filamith. Still, she couldn't bring herself to comply. Backing up, she shook her head and looked around for an escape route.

He caught her easily enough and her struggles barely slowed him down. Age had not diminished his speed or his agility. And his strength was evident in the way he held her over the bed with one hand while the other hand brought her leggings to her knees in one swift pull.

"That's five extra, little one. Don't make it worse."

"But I'm already so sore from yesterday. Please, you can't do this!"

"I can and I have to. I don't know for sure how long you'll be gone," he began the swats as he spoke, "so I have to make sure you'll remember whose you are and how you should behave. I won't tolerate lying, no matter what else is going on around us." The skin on her thighs and bottom looked bruised already. He hardly had the heart to punish her more, but better a throbbing backside than an aching heart.

He brought the webbing out from under the bed where he kept several of the tools he used for Adjustments. Whap! Whap! Whap! The sound carried over her cries and pleas.

The thud of the webbing made her already tender backside immediately burst into flame as if he had never stopped from the previous day. "No more! No more, please!" she begged, to no avail.

“Any lie between us gets this same treatment. You know that. You've always known.”

He was counting strokes to make sure he did not skimp on what she needed. He could usually tell by her body, the way she held her slim legs, her perfect shoulders, her beautiful head, when she had truly had enough, but this time he could not. He could see she was bruised and aching, but he needed to teach her a lesson she would remember for a long time to come.

On and on he spanked, holding her down until she went limp over the bed. Usually that would have ended it, but not this time.

He put down the webbing and used only his hand, holding each swat for a moment to make it sink in. His palm landed on her scorched flesh. Usually, she loved to feel his hand on her nether cheeks, but now all she could do was lie there and sob. He paused and let her catch her breath.

As she lay there panting, he replaced the webbing under the bed and drew out the filamith.

She saw it, but it barely registered. He knew it actually might be kinder just to get it over with, but the impact would not be as great, so he sent her to the corner. She walked there willingly enough and hiccupped out the last of her distress.

“Come on back over here now, and no delays this time. That's what got you in that corner in the first place. We could be done now except for your attitude.”

“I know,” she sniffled. “And I'm sorry.” She shuffled to him, her leggings still around her knees, her tunic raised to her waist, as she knew he expected. “But before you start, could I just have a hug?”

“Sure, darling,” he sighed, and held her a long, long time.

At last, she drew away. “I'm ready now.”

He guided her to bend back over the bed, which was high enough so that she could rest comfortably on her elbows with her feet still firmly on the floor. He put his face down near hers and stated, “I want you to remember this as long as we're apart. I love

you, no matter where you are, or who you're with. Planets don't matter. Months don't matter. What matters is the fact that I love you."

She nodded and tears robbed her of words, but he could read her answer in her eyes.

"You count out five," he ordered.

Whap! "One." Whap! "Two." Whap! "Three." Whap! "Oh, ow, ow, *ow*, four." Whap! "Five. Five. Five," she breathed.

Finally, he finished by turning back the covers so she could crawl into bed. As she lay there on her tummy, he rested his chest carefully on her back for a moment and whispered, "Now, you'll remember." She nodded and fell fast asleep.

Blue Moon Satellite Station

"Have you seen either of these women?" Vilnek asked the third shop owner. He was too anxious to sound polite, but people were being understanding. They realized that most of the refugees from Trellian were on edge. They had no way of knowing the desperation growing in Vilnek.

"I saw them both yesterday, acting really strange. I think they were following Falsan, but I figured it was none of my business," he replied. He was happy to finally be able to help one of the dozens of people who had been asking his help all day until he heard the explosion from Vilnek.

"Falsan? He's here? What are you talking about? Are you sure it was Falsan?" Vilnek fairly shouted at the poor man.

Celdek stepped into the shop, pushing Vilnek back with a glare. "Sorry about that. My boss here is a bit agitated because his wife is missing. He didn't mean to yell at you."

"That's okay. I know you Trellian folks are having a hard time of it," answered the shopkeeper.

Celdek didn't find it necessary to correct the man's false

conclusion, so he just rambled on in his innocent-sounding way. “Funny thing about Falsan being on Blue Moon. We weren’t expecting to see him here. Does he come here a lot?”

“Not that I know of. I know him from back in my younger days when I worked for him on Forthkent,” the man replied.

“An old miner, are you?” Celdek asked conversationally. Vilnek started to interrupt, not understanding why Celdek was taking all this time to chat.

“No, I kept a store there for Falsan, too. He was always a fair man and a good boss to work with,” the shopkeeper answered.

“Yes, he always has had a good head for business,” Celdek put in. “Was he here on business today, do you think?”

“It wasn’t today. It was a day or two ago. And he wasn’t here on business. He was just taking a short vacation, he told me.”

“So he hung around and shot the breeze a while? Boy, I’d sure like to catch up on old times with him myself. He didn’t happen to mention where he was staying, did he?” Celdek prompted.

“Now that you mention it, he didn’t. He didn’t hang around, either.”

“That’s not like him.”

“No, it isn’t. I wondered about it then, and again when I saw those two ladies hanging around watching him through the window. I pointed them out to Falsan before he left, but he didn’t seem to have time for them either. He just jerked around and lit out of here. It surprised me.”

“Well, people change. Maybe he had something to do. Say, if you see him again, would you mind Linking the Thraxton? I’d sure like to meet up with him if I can, once we get these two ladies found, that is,” Celdek went on. By then, Vilnek had caught on to Celdek’s ploy and was playing along.

“No problem,” the man answered.

On the street again, Celdek turned on Vilnek in a low, course

whisper. "If you want to find your wife, either you get a hold of your temper or you let me do the talking from now on. Got it?"

"Where do we go from here?" Vilnek wanted to know. "Finding Falsan won't be any easier than finding the girls."

"We don't know for sure that they're together," countered Celdek.

"Together? You make it sound like a tea party! He's got them! He's—" Vilnek shouted.

"He's holding them as bait for you," Celdek interrupted. "He won't hurt them until he gets you. That's assuming that he has them, which we don't know for sure. They may be leading him a merry chase, just like they've been leading us."

"We're wasting time talking. What are we going to do?" Vilnek demanded.

"We're going to go back to the hotel and you're going to order a double pineapple and olive pizza," Celdek informed him. He turned his back on Vilnek's incredulous look and strode off down the street with a deceptively casual strut.

"So this is some kind of code," Vilnek posited as he and Celdek waited in the crowded lobby. "Some kind of signal to the Dodgers in the area that you need help."

"Anchovies gets you help. Double pineapple with olives gets you information. That's all we need right now," Celdek replied. "By the way, eat carefully. The message may be baked in the crust."

Vilnek would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so grave. He could barely contain himself in these four walls when what every inch of his being told him to do was storm out those doors and move heaven and earth to find Shawna. And Pippa, too. She was a good friend. Vilnek wondered where Pelchak was.

“Where do you figure Pelchak and Talvok are?” Vilnek asked Celdek. “You’d think they’d be here by now.”

“Remember the refugees? In that crowd, we may have missed him.”

“If he knew Falsan was here, Talvok would come after Falsan. They’ve had a cabin here for years, so Talvok may be headed out there to search for his dad,” Vilnek mused.

“Could be. And with all the trouble on Trellian, he may not have been able to get away, nor Pelchak either. And that may be why Falsan was able to escape. Talvok had bigger fish to fry,” Celdek commented.

Vilnek nodded. “That brings us to another question. How did Falsan find out about Blue Moon? He couldn’t have come here by accident.”

“Here comes the pizza. We’d better take it up to your room and eat it in privacy,” Celdek suggested.

They scarfed down half the pizza before they came upon the note, written on old-fashioned paper with actual ink. Vilnek had only seen one or two other such oddities in his life. The only words on the paper were, “Light and Dark.”

“What’s this supposed to mean?” Vilnek queried, but Celdek was already on the move.

“Get hopping. This could take some time.”

“It means something to you, then,” Vilnek asserted, remembering how pointless it was to ask a Dodger a direct question.

“I’ll explain on the way.”

“You know where we’re going then,” Vilnek reasoned. “It can’t be directions to Falsan. You haven’t even been able to tell anyone what information we need. I’m thinking we’re probably going to meet someone and this message tells you the meeting place. Light and dark. That could mean that we’ll meet them there at dusk.”

“It could, but it doesn’t,” Celdek answered.

They were past the main strip now and out of the main body

of the crowds, though there were still plenty of people scattered around. "There's a whole system of slang we still use sometimes. The answer always rhymes with the last word. For example, 'Uncle Fred' is 'bread'. See? Light and dark is an ancient slang phrase for 'park'. He'll meet us at the light and dark—park. Got it?"

"Sure. So that's where we're headed. But there must be a half dozen parks on this station," Vilnek exclaimed.

"That's right. That's why I said it might take a while. This slang helps keep things private, but it's not foolproof."

"And the meeting time must always be immediate, or there would be no way to tell when." Vilnek increased his pace.

"So let's shake a bacon and egg," Celdek joked.

Vilnek took a moment to figure it out. "Bacon and egg... leg. Right."

They hit it on the second try and Celdek held a quick conference with a rather mousy looking older gentleman whom Celdek did not introduce. Vilnek would never have believed that man could be a Dodger. No way to tell if he was a Dodger or only a messenger.

"Are they going to be able to help us?" Vilnek asked as soon as Celdek came close enough for him to address.

Celdek gave him an indignant look as he passed by on his way back out of the park.

"I guess I should have known better," Vilnek muttered to himself as he followed after his friend. When he caught up with him, he tried again. "You know where we're going next and you're in a hurry to get there."

"You've got it. Right in one. We'll talk on the transport." They practically flew to the transport and once they were strapped in the command pods, Celdek admitted. "We got lucky, Vilnek. I know where Falsan is staying. He's a famous man and well known in this sector of the galaxy. My contact knew right away where he docked and when. It was three days ago, and he's

been out in the Mountain sector at his cabin since then. Or at least, he hasn't been seen much since then."

"So he could have had Shawna and Pippa all this time and no one would know!" Vilnek leaned forward in his pod as if his tension could force the transport to go faster.

"We'll sweep by there at a high altitude and do a scan for human figures. He won't see us, but we'll be able to spot him," Celdek suggested. They flew in silence for several minutes as the beautiful simulated forests of the station rushed by under them. Soon the forest was patched with meadows and paths. The scanner alert sounded and Vilnek nearly jumped out of the pod.

"That's them! Three human figures! It's got to be them!" he shouted.

"Keep it cool," Celdek replied. "I'll try to get a better reading." He punched in a few numbers on the control panel and the scanner monitor showed the moving outlines of three overlapping human figures. They might have been dancing by the way they swayed and jostled each other. Then Vilnek saw one of the figures reach out and slap the other on the head.

"You've got to go in closer! Set me down so I can get her!" Vilnek ordered.

"Come down on him like that and he'll shoot you out of the sky like a duck," Celdek countered. "Let me get closer and we'll get an actual picture of what's going on, not just the outlines of the forms."

He matched action to word and it was at that point that all time slowed down for Vilnek as if the camera of life had been switched to slow motion. Below them they saw the Zoomer tower, with Pippa, Shawna, and Falsan performing some bizarre parody of a dance. As the trio down below heard the transport approach, they all looked up and Pippa was momentarily able to get a hand on Shawna's arm to drag her up the ramp and out of range of the transdermal injection unit.

Falsan's grimace of hate was clear even at that considerable

distance. He brandished the injection unit at Vilnek and motioned to the top platform above him.

"He wants me to come down there," Vilnek declared. "I'll be more than happy to oblige. Just let me get my hands on that scrawny old neck and I'll—"

"You'll never get that far," Celdek answered, veering off in a wide arc.

"What are you doing? That's Shawna back there! Go back now!"

"You've got to trust me. I know what I'm doing. We have to be smart about this. Now, do what I say!" Celdek shouted.

Falsan watched the transport start to dip then recover, dive, then shoot upward. "They're fighting over the controls," moaned Pippa. "Oh, please, let them get safely away from here. Don't let Vilnek win. Celdek's got to go get help!"

"Vilnek will kill him like he killed my son. Then he'll fly that transport right up to the platform to rescue you both. Then, I'll have him. Finally, it's time. Just a little closer. Just a little closer," Falsan coached the transport as if he could will it into range.

The transport reappeared out of the trees and headed straight for the platform. From a pack on his back, Falsan withdrew a small but very powerful Fineston 12 automatic laser cannon. Pippa knew instantly what his plan had been all along. He didn't need for Vilnek to be on the platform to kill him. He was going to shoot him out of the sky.

The laser cannon rose with the arc of the transport. Pippa threw herself back down the ramp trying to knock Falsan down and block the shot. Shawna screamed as Pippa hit her on the way down and all three of them rolled in a tangle down the ramp as the transport exploded overhead.

Chapter 10

Crashing through the trees, Vilnek threw himself on the struggling pile of bodies. He had not heard their fall over the explosion. The thought flashed across his mind that this was the reason Celdek had insisted on abandoning the transport and controlling it from the ground by remote. Celdek had known about the cannon. Then all thought vanished in the fight to free Shawna and Pippa.

Vilnek caught Falsan's shoulders and dragged him backwards, off the women. Falsan rolled away from Vilnek and swooped down on something lying in the grass. When he came up he was brandishing an injection unit.

"I'll use it!" Falsan shouted. His voice was hoarse and congested with rage. Spittle flew from his mouth as he spun, first toward Vilnek, then back to Pippa. Shawna lay helpless on the ground, posing no threat to him. He barely bothered to step around her. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you all! Come on! Try to kill me! Try to kill me like you killed my son."

"It wasn't like that! You know what happened! Talvok told you..." Vilnek shouted back.

“Don't you speak his name to me! Traitor! Betrayer! He sides with you against his own father!”

Celdek, circling in the background, kept a wary eye on Vilnek, who wondered where Celdek had been and why he was hanging back. The thought of true betrayal flashed across his mind again. Celdek had known about the cannon. How had Falsan gotten a hold of such contraband? Who could move anything anywhere for a price? A Dodger. It was his job. Notoriously amoral in business dealings, Dodgers had been known to supply both sides in a war. Why not in a dispute such as this?

Vilnek's inattention almost cost him his life. Falsan posed little threat. He was too far gone to be of much danger now. Stumbling, blinded by fury, he ranted, the injection unit flailing this way and that. Vilnek could almost pity him if he hadn't tried to...

Celdek dove at Vilnek who braced himself against the tackle. They held for the moment Redek needed to get off a clean shot from his sniper position in the woods.

Vilnek regained consciousness to find Pippa kneeling beside him, holding her hands to his chest and yelling at him. “Stop that bleeding! Stop it now! You can't die on me. I've gone through too much to save your life for you to die on me now! Celdek! Celdek! Hurry! Oh, please, hurry!” She kept shouting over and over, but the pressure never let up.

Vilnek's voice wouldn't obey him. He willed it to be strong, to sound confident, to give her strength. All that came out was a faint gurgle.

“Don't try to talk. You're going to be fine. Celdek is going for help. He's going to hurry.” Pippa's eyes were streaming with tears. Vilnek wondered why, then realized how far out in the middle of nowhere they were. With the transport destroyed,

there would be no Linkset to summon help. He would have to go on foot. And he would never make it in time. Vilnek knew the wound was bad and his time was short.

Pippa kept babbling, trying to distract Vilnek and keep him from asking about the still unconscious Shawna. “Redek! Who would have thought he was still around? I had no idea. They kept him hidden from us for three days, I guess just in case something like this happened. I'm sure Falsan would have told him to take over in case he failed or to cover his retreat. But Celdek figured he would be there. Celdek threw his aim off just enough so that he missed his shot. Well, maybe not missed altogether, but missed the heart.”

She took a deep breath, looking around, willing Celdek to hurry. Perhaps, by some miracle, he would run into someone on the path that had a transport nearby. “Celdek's been a rock through all of this. I had my doubts about hiring a Dodger, but he's been loyal through everything. Well, loyal for a Dodger. He helped you find us. He figured out what Falsan would do and then stopped him from doing it.”

Finally, Vilnek managed, “Shawna?”

“She's here and she's fine. Her pulse is strong. I see her stirring now. She was just knocked out in the fall.” Pippa turned to Shawna and spoke as calmly as she could. “Shawna, honey, come over here a minute. It's Vilnek. He's hurt and he wants to talk to you.”

Shawna took one look at the way Pippa was trying to staunch the flow of blood with a sleeve torn off her tunic and knew her world was about to end. She dropped to her knees, tears streaming down her face. Hoping that in his state he wouldn't notice the tears, she smiled at him.

She tried to make some smart-alec comment, like “That was some entrance,” but the words froze in her throat. After several false starts, she gave up and sobbed.

"I know," Vilnek gurgled. "I know. I love you, too."

"Another touching reunion," Celdek commented sardonically as he approached the base of the tower. "But again, the timing is off."

"What are you doing here?" Pippa demanded. "Why aren't you...." Then her trust won out and she rose, ready for his instructions. She had much more confidence in his abilities than Shawna.

"Why aren't you getting help? You've got to save him!" Shawna screamed.

"That atomizer? The Zipwrath? Where is it? Find it, Shawna. *Now!*" Celdek ordered over the din.

"What do you want—" Shawna demanded.

"*Do it now!*" Celdek yelled. "Do you want him to lie there and die?"

"Do it," Vilnek whispered with a cough.

Shawna didn't hesitate again. She didn't even have to get up, but spun on her knee and grabbed the atomizer from where she had seen it fall. Shoving it at Celdek, she held her breath, expecting him to spray it on the wound. Perhaps, she hoped, at least it would make his last moments more comfortable.

Celdek continued to spray the Zipwrath in Vilnek's face until he coughed again.

Shawna's demand of, "What did you just do," was drowned out by the sound of a transport landing.

"Got here as quick as we could," one of the emergency team informed them as they ran up. "Did you apply the Zipwrath?"

"Yes, just like you said," Celdek answered.

"I wasn't sure you would be able to understand me," the doctor commented, as his hands seemed to function on their own, pressing, pulling, smearing, and sticking. "I've never Linked without visuals before."

"It's a bit of a challenge to add visuals when all you've got to

transmit with is two ball point pens and a piece of bailing wire,” Celdek commented.

Shawna stared at him open-mouthed. He must have rigged some sort of communication device and called for help.

The doctor gave a quick injection and pronounced, “The Zipwrath slowed his heart rate enough to stop the worst of the bleeding like I thought it would. Now, with the patch applied, I can get the heart rate back up with this.” The doctor gave Vilnek another quick injection. “He’s ready to be moved. Easy does it.” He was on his feet and striding back toward the emergency transport. “They’ll send someone back for you as soon as they can. We’ll be going straight to surgery.”

And then they were gone, leaving a great gaping silence. “Where’s Falsan?” Shawna asked suddenly. He hadn’t even crossed her mind since she had seen Vilnek lying on the ground, looking so pale and still.

“Halfway back to Trellian by now, I assume,” Celdek remarked.

“He wouldn’t go back there, would he?” Shawna objected.

“Where else would he go? Feeling hunted, what does an animal do?” Pippa observed. “It goes back to its den.”

“I can’t go after him,” Shawna admitted. She looked pleadingly at Celdek and Pippa. “But I can’t let him go free. He’s likely to come after Vilnek again.”

“I say you’ve both done enough Dodgering for one week. For a whole life, really. Leave this to me.” Celdek looked stern, despite his haggard expression.

Shawna looked satisfied to leave it in Celdek’s hands. “We’ve got a long walk ahead of us. Who knows when those emergency guys will think to send someone out here? Let’s just get moving.”

“No need,” Celdek put in at that point. “Here come my cousins now.” A pizza delivery transport looked a bit incongruous in the pastoral setting, but a more welcome sight they could not imagine.

The delivery driver opened the portal and Pippa saw Redek, trussed up and gagged on the floor of the passenger compartment. "I'll take you to the healthcare center before I make one final delivery to the security office," the driver promised.

"Must be nice to have such a big family," Pippa remarked.

"Pippa, you have no idea," Celdek grinned.

Celdek left Shawna and Pippa at the healthcare center, with Vilnek in guarded condition. He was in an intensive treatment medi-pod, but his prognosis was good. In record time, Celdek was setting down in the docking bay at Trellian, ready for the hunt. A Dodger was anywhere he wanted to be, and where he wanted to be was wherever Falsan was at that moment. If he could jerry-rig a Linkset in the middle of the woods, surely he could find one crazy old man, even on a medium-sized planet.

But first, he had personal business to attend to.

He found Candace in Pippa's old office, just where he had expected to find her. She was one of the few females allowed to remain on Trellian through the first phase of the recovery. Now that the crisis was over, he had no problem with her continuing in her work at Headquarters. Pippa was in no shape after her ordeal to resume her responsibilities, and Shawna was in no shape to be left alone on Blue Moon so he could see why Candace had to endure whatever hardships the other Companions were being sent away from. It was her behavior just before all the problems started that he objected to.

She saw him come in the office and her heart leaped. "You're here! You made it back! Good to see you," she cried in greeting. She stood to receive his embrace, and for a long time they just stood in each other's arms, enjoying the closeness again.

"How about some dinner, Candy?" he invited. "Then we

need to talk.” He had that look in his eye that made Candace wary.

“Don't call me 'Candy.' You know I hate it. I would love to go eat, really, I would,” she hedged, “But you know the kind of pressure we're under here. It's a madhouse. Food is in short supply. Water is rationed. Half the Linksets are malfunctioning from the electrical surges. The list of things to do is endless.”

“That's exactly why taking a break won't hurt, Candy,” he countered. “An hour or two out of the hundreds you've already spent and the hundreds you are heading into, isn't going to make any difference.”

Not giving her any choice, he guided her out of the office and down the hall to a cafeteria, where they enjoyed an unrushed, though meager meal and some needed reconnection time. She told about the crisis. He told about Vilnek's brush with death. They both knew that it would take months to work through all they had experienced in the last few days, but what was really important to discuss now was the present. As they put their trays and utensils in the Insti-san unit, Celdek filled her in on his mission to find Falsan.

“It will speed things along if I don't have to Dodger into the Radplant locator system,” he confided.

“You think it will lead you to Falsan? It certainly wouldn't lead anyone to you,” Candace observed.

“Falsan's not me,” Celdek replied cockily.

“I can hack you in, but I'd feel better about it if Pelchak or Talvok knew.”

“Not Talvok. He needs to keep his mind on this recovery. He's too close to the situation, anyway.”

“That's right,” Candace agreed. “But what about Pelchak?”

“Not a problem,” Celdek replied. “I'd like to take Falsan myself, but Pelchak on the job might speed things along.”

“What? You'll work with someone who isn't a Dodger?” Candace mocked.

"Where's a Dodger?" Celdek replied cryptically. "I don't see any."

"You make no sense whatsoever," Candace complained.

"I'll tell you what made no sense," Celdek corrected as they arrived back at the office. "What made no sense was you closing that Link on me when I told you not to."

"What Link?" Candace asked with her best imitation of innocence. "I can't quite recall."

Celdek closed the door behind them. "Let me refresh your memory." With that, he yanked Candace to the pod in front of her desk, plunked himself down in that pod and pulled the struggling woman over his lap. Leaving only her thin leggings in place, he pushed all other protection up out of the way. "Is it coming back to you?" he asked as he rained fiery spansks all over her behind.

Smack! Smack! Smack! His hand landed again and again on her rounded nether cheeks. He covered all the area thoroughly, not forgetting the tender crease where bottom met thigh.

"Let me up!" she screeched. "How dare you? You can't do this! Not right here in the office! I never agreed to the Peace Initiative. Let me up or I'll file for Early Release!"

"I've already got your Early Release," he calmly informed her as he continued to set fire to her seat.

"That was to get me away from Tiemek," Candace protested, struggling with all her strength to escape.

"Better learn your forms and terms," Celdek countered. "The Early Release isn't to get you out of an assignment. It's to get you out of a Selection Meeting. So, I've got you this rotation and the next one, too. You've already signed the form saying you agree."

"I'll *un*-agree!"

"Then I'll inform Talvok that you were out in the Stalcon fields without a miner," Celdek threatened. He moved his attention to her upper thighs, trying to make his message clearer.

“But... But... *oh!*” she boiled over in frustration. “How? Why?”

“Because I love you, that's why.”

“If you loved me, you wouldn't treat me like this!” She hated the very idea of being spanked. She had no intention of submitting gracefully to this treatment. She pitched and rolled, trying to get away from the pain.

Her reactions surprised him. This was not her first spanking and it should not have come as such a shock to her. She was acting like he was killing her. He paused in his work, making sure to keep his arm around her waist so that she couldn't escape. “Quit making such a fuss. These are just a few love taps. Wait until I get out the paddle to start your wailing,” Celdek ordered.

“Paddle? What's that? What are you talking about?”

Celdek knew he had her attention this time. “It's a paddle. Croyden says they're the best way to keep peace in the house.”

“But what is it?” she begged.

What was that he heard in her voice? Could it have been fear? She'd never admitted to being afraid before. But then, she wouldn't, would she?

He pulled a wooden object out of a large pocket in his roomy jacket. Holding it out where she could see it, he considered his options. The wood was polished and smooth, oval in shape, carved all of one piece with the handle, as was Dodger tradition. This one was full-size so that it covered the whole cheek of most ladies. She had never seen anything like it before, of course. They weren't common among anyone but Dodgers, as far as he knew. Suddenly, a lot of things became clear to him, but he needed to play this hand carefully.

“This is a paddle. It hurts worse than my hand, but less than a filamith.” So saying, he applied it to her rear end four times without pause as she jumped and yelped.

Then he waited for her to calm down. After several calming breaths, she relaxed just a bit.

"Now, five more to each side and we're done. That's all, see?" He gave her five solid cracks, as hard as he could, pausing between each one to let her breathe. "Good girl," he praised her. "You took that fine. Have you learned what I need you to know?"

"Yes, whatever it is, I've learned," she agreed.

"I want you to never close a Link on me again. When we need to talk, we'll talk and work it out. That can't happen if you go around closing Links, or walking out of rooms, or anything else like that."

"I understand," she nodded. "I guess I should be glad you want to talk things out."

"It's a matter of respect, too. There's got to be respect between us, or love is a joke," he declared.

"Respect?" she sounded incredulous. "Was that respectful? Is spanking a woman respectful?"

He repeated what had been told him all his life. "Respect can be shown in lots of ways. How I show respect to you includes expecting you to show respect to me. If you don't, I'll remind you. That's all. I don't spank you on a whim, you know. I take my commitments seriously, too."

"I never wanted to live under the Peace Initiative. I can be respectful without it."

"I never thought otherwise. You won't need me to spank you often. I can tell that. And that's good, because with my line of work, I'll be away from home a lot. You'll have to take care of yourself a good deal. But when I am home, and when I'm gone, too, I'll expect you to act like you know how."

Somewhere in her heart she had been expecting this and even hoping for it. He was showing how much he cared and that caring was breaking through her fear. A flood of love for him washed over her and she buried her face in her hands as he held her to him.

"I'll be introducing you to Croyden soon," he whispered into her hair.

“Who's Croyden?” she asked, wondering why he would bring up another man at such an intimate moment.

“You'll learn soon enough. There's so much for you to learn. But most of all, you have to learn to trust me. You know I'd never do anything to harm you, don't you?” he challenged.

“Harm me? Well, I guess not. But I wish you could find another way of not harming me.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “And that's why I've got to introduce you to Croyden, Candy. You make me laugh. And not my usual I-just-don't-give-a-flying-Fensel laugh. You make me laugh a feel-good laugh.”

“I also hack a pretty good Linkset,” she shot back playfully. “Just don't look too closely at the underside of this desk if you're squeamish about breaking rules. I've got more illegal hardware under there than a drill drone has power cells.”

“Squeamish? Me? They don't call me 'Hotwire' for nothing. Out of my way before I take the paddle to your backside again.” He helped her aside and bent down to inspect her handiwork. She saw the paddle lying on the desk and felt an overwhelming temptation to pick it up and let him feel what she had just been through.

Just one good swat is all it would take, she thought. It's all I'd have time for before he caught me and gave me another Adjustment, worse than the first. She rubbed her bottom in unconscious reaction to the thought.

As if he could read her mind, he intoned from below the desk. “I wouldn't do that if I were you. You'll think you sat on a 'hot wire' if you touch that paddle.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?” Candace asked on a chuckle.

“If you have to ask, you can't know,” came his cryptic reply.

This got her comical dander up so much that she did make as if to reach for the paddle. “Why you...” she threatened.

He was out from under the desk and reaching across her to grab the paddle before she knew he had moved. He laughed as he chased her all around the office, landing silly swats with the paddle any time he got near enough.

"If a woman touches a paddle, she gets to feel it in action," he informed her.

"All right, all right!" she laughed. "I give in! Truce!" She turned to face him, holding her hands in front of herself to keep him at bay.

"Give me a kiss then, to seal the cease-fire bargain."

She turned her palms upward in a shrug then laid them gently on his shoulders as he drew closer. Then she pushed him away with a mock suspicious scowl. "Put down that paddle first!"

He made a great ceremonial affair of laying the paddle reverently on the desk and showing her his empty palms.

"No filamiths up your sleeve?" she teased.

"Get over here and give me my kiss or the cease-fire is off," he asserted. He reached for the paddle and she caught at his hand.

"Okay, you win!"

"I usually do."

She expected him to grab her to him and kiss her, but he surprised her. He stood there, waiting, grinning that sardonic grin of his.

How she loved that grin, she realized with a jolt of revelation. I'll kiss that grin, and keep him grinning so that he'll never want to spank me again.

Her kiss was long and sweet. "Worth waiting for," he murmured. "But one more would make a nice matched pair." He reached for her and brought his mouth down to hers. His kiss was short and searing.

He was just hitting his stride when Pelchak waved himself into the office. They heard the door whoosh open and jumped

apart. Pelchak grinned at them. “Sorry to interrupt, but I heard Celdek was seen in the cafeteria. I wanted to get the firsthand story about Pippa.”

“Just like a copper,” Celdek accused ruefully. “Always showing up in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Candace blushed and punched him playfully on the arm.

The three of them sat down so that Celdek could fill Pelchak in on the events on Blue Moon.

“Start hunting tomorrow noon, okay?” Pelchak asked. “Got something to attend to first.”

“We can handle your recovery duties, Pelchak,” Candace assured him. “Finding Falsan is the most important thing right now.”

“Second most important,” Pelchak corrected her. “Priority is on Blue Moon.” He looked at Celdek and asked, “Spare paddle?” Celdek searched in his copious jacket pockets and came up with a smaller version of the paddle he had used so recently on Candace.

“It's small, but it will get the job done,” Celdek informed him. Pelchak nodded his thanks.

As he got up to leave, Candace shook her head at the thought of what Pippa was in for. She toyed with the idea of Linking her at the healthcare center, but again Celdek anticipated her. As soon as Pelchak was gone, he warned her, “Don't interfere with a man and his Companion.”

“She's not his Companion.”

“Try telling him that.”

Pelchak had no trouble finding his first priority at the healthcare center. He greeted Shawna and Vilnek in his medi-pod. Vilnek looked groggy, but that was to be expected. Then he spotted Pippa. The look that passed between them was mixed. On her

end, relief warred with uncertainty. On his end, relief warred with irritation bordering on anger. The anger won out.

"What?" he ground out finally. When she didn't answer, he elaborated slowly. "What were you thinking?"

"What do you mean? I... I..." Pippa sputtered. Her disappointment that he had not folded her in his arms for a comforting embrace after all she had been through startled her. Why should she turn to this stranger for support? She had no time to contemplate the answer.

Shawna, trying to hide her alarm, jumped in. "I'm sure this is going to be a private conversation. There are plenty of conference rooms and small waiting areas you can use. Don't worry about us. We'll be fine."

"You know what I mean! You! Falsan!" His temper was rising with every passing second of her standing there denying she had done anything wrong.

"This excitement isn't good for Vilnek. You'll have to go out to the hall, at least," Shawna insisted. She did not want Vilnek to know that she had followed Falsan and even talked Pippa into accompanying her in the crazy scheme.

"Is it my fault Falsan went crazy?" Pippa shot back, her temper rising to meet his. "What are you so mad about?"

"Following a known dangerous lunatic? Your idea of a good idea?" Pelchak demanded.

"Out!" Shawna shouted. Then in a hoarse whisper, she repeated, "*Out!* Right now!" Pelchak and Pippa both looked abashed. He bowed in a parody of a courtly gesture and motioned for Pippa to precede him into the hallway. She was so angry, she twisted her face into a spiteful snub as she dropped a mock curtsy before making her way out the door. He fairly growled as he followed her.

They hit the conference room and began again. "Never!" he shouted.

“What business is it of yours what I do or where I go?” Pippa yelled back.

“Making it my business!”

“Interfering, meddling, snooper! Who told you anyway? Celdek?”

“Who else? Should have known better than to try to fool a Dodger.”

“I wasn't trying to fool anybody. I don't have to. I've got nobody to answer to!”

“I'll show you nobody!” With that, he grabbed her wrist and brought her close to him. He intended to turn her over his knee and spank the living daylights out of her. He honestly did. But what happened next surprised even him.

He came back to conscious thought with her in his arms, breathless and very thoroughly kissed. He remembered it almost as if it had not been his own lips doing the kissing. Something strange was happening to him and he wasn't sure he could control it. Even more, he wasn't sure he wanted to control it.

She finally disengaged herself from him and stepped back. He stepped forward. She stepped back once more and found herself cornered. She wondered if he intended to kiss her again, but wasn't really surprised when he spun her around and gave her twenty hard swats with his hand. What did surprise her was when she felt him pause. Could he be done? If that was all the more irritated he was with her, he must not care very much.

Then she felt the paddle meet her upper thighs at high velocity and realized the full force of his concern. Swat after stinging swat, Pelchak told her with the paddle what he could not express in words. He let her know what he thought of her endangering herself and what would happen if she ever did anything like that again. He let her feel all over her bottom just how much he really cared about what she did. By the time he truly finished, she was dancing and yelping, trying to get out of the corner he had her trapped in.

At last he stopped. "Never again!" he whispered as he clasped her to him in a rib-cracking bear hug.

"No, never," she whispered. Perhaps she wasn't exactly clear on what she was promising, but it felt so right to stand there in his arms, she let that thought slide.

Chapter 11

T*rellian*

The two men worked in silence as they always did. Pelchak manipulated the Linkset database while Celdek flew the transport. Neither man considered the lack of progress daunting even after two weeks of fruitless searching. If anything, it challenged them both to keep forging ahead. Methodically, they ticked off the possibilities listed on the Linkset screen. The problem was that there were too many lone human forms on the sensors. While the system had been under his total control, Falsan had obviously registered a false name and Radplant signature, so they had no idea which one of these blips could be him. After yet another dead end, Celdek broke the silence. “Where next?”

“You’re the Dodger,” Pelchak asserted.

“I’ve picked the last five sites. You can see how far my instincts are getting us.”

“Need to use our heads,” Pelchak noted.

“We’ve already checked out every place Sarah and Talvok could think of.”

Pelchak considered long and hard. Time for some fresh ideas.

“What about Pippa? Worked for him for years. Knows him better than anyone else.”

The nearest minestead where they could Link from was Radnok's. It took no time at all to establish communication with Shawna through the healthcare center staff on Blue Moon. “Vilnek's improving steadily,” she smiled. “How's Pippa?”

“What?” asked Celdek.

“Pippa! You know, your employer?” Shawna prompted.

“When?” Pelchak asked.

“He means when did she leave?” Celdek interpreted.

“Huh? Leave? She leaves every day and comes back every night, of course. You two should know that. She is there with you, right?”

“Not so much,” scowled Celdek. “And you think she's here with us? She may very well be here on Trellian.”

“No Radplant!” Pelchak realized aloud.

“Not necessarily. I think I may know how to find her.”

“Tiemek,” Pelchak conjectured after a moment's consideration.

“Right in one,” he shook his head in frustration at the situation. “Shawna, if she shows up there before we find her here, Link Candace at Headquarters, please. She'll get a message to us through the Radplant system. And we'll check Links if we have to.”

They both promised to keep each other apprised if they found her and Linked off.

“You take the controls when we get moving,” Celdek requested. “It will take a few minutes for me to reverse the relay on Tiemek's Radplant.”

“Relay?” Pelchak asked. He had never heard of such a thing, but he had the feeling that this might explain a lot of things.

“Ever wondered how a Dodger can move around without being tracked by a planet's Radplant system?” Celdek asked.

Pelchak nodded.

“Well, keep wondering,” Celdek advised. “You don't want to know.”

“If he knows you can reverse the relay, he'll have planned for a reversal and blocked it,” Pelchak reminded him.

“He doesn't know I can reverse a relay,” Celdek replied. “It's never been done before.”

Following the reversed relay signal turned out to be more complicated than following a normal Radplant signature. They made out the best they could and after tracking two derelict drill drones and a personal transport, they finally hit on a method that seemed to work.

“When we screen out these ranges,” Celdek mumbled, “that leaves only these possibilities.”

“Eliminate those,” Pelchak suggested, punching a few buttons. Only three sensor hits were left.

Celdek pointed to the screen. “That's got to be him. The Canyon behind Headquarters. That's got to be Tiemek, and hopefully, Pippa with him.”

“Already checked there. Never gave us a lone human hit, so if they're chasing Falsan, they didn't find him there.”

“Falsan may have someone with him. We were looking for lone humans only. Redek may not have been his only accomplice. Anyway, this is where Tiemek is. Let's find him and then get back to Falsan.”

“Pippa might not be with him.”

“It's our best bet,” Celdek stated, and since Pelchak didn't protest, Celdek turned the transport in the direction of the canyon and entered flight mode. Then he engaged the stealth adaptations and gunned the engines.

The beacon alarm went off just before they reached the canyon.

"Trouble! Go!" Pelchak shouted.

"Keep your shirt on," Celdek calmed the investigator. "Unless I miss my guess, all three of them are fine."

"Three?"

"Just wait and see. But it won't hurt to keep your hand on your weapon," Celdek grinned.

Their landing was so silent that they startled Pippa as they approached. "Oh! Where did you come from? Thank goodness!" She saw Celdek first as he came around the damaged bulk of the personal transport Tiemek had piloted them here in.

"What took you so long?" laughed Tiemek from where he lounged indolently on a rock.

"What's going on here?" Pelchak demanded.

"You forgot to disengage the stealth. I was the only one who could get your beacon, and only because I was in stealth mode, too," Celdek chided Tiemek with a cuff to his ear.

"I knew that. I didn't forget. I just didn't want anyone else coming in and getting him," Tiemek assured him with a shrug.

"Where?" Pelchak asked as he took Pippa in a rib-cracking bear hug.

"Where's Falsan? Over here, where I can keep an eye on him," Pippa answered when he had released her enough to get her breath. She looked down at her former boss with loathing and at least a little pity. He was tied up like bale of hay with several long plexilat strips wrapped tightly all the way around him, immobilizing his arms and legs by trapping them to his sides. Those plexilat strips gave Pelchak an idea, which he immediately put into action.

"In a hurry?" he asked Celdek and Tiemek.

"Not especially, now that we have them," Celdek gestured to Pippa and Falsan.

"I've got nothing better to do," shrugged Tiemek. "Pretty nice rock here."

"Good. Come on," he instructed Pippa as he caught up

several of the extra strips from where they lay on the ground. "Mind?" he asked Tiemek.

"Help yourself," Tiemek replied.

"Where are we going?" she wanted to know.

For an answer, he took her by the hand and led her toward the mouth of the canyon.

"Funny time for a stroll," Tiemek noted with a grin.

"With those plexilat strips? And knowing that Pippa's not supposed to be anywhere near Trellian right now? I'd wager that will be a pretty eventful ramble."

Tiemek chuckled. "I can imagine they'll have a nice little talk."

"Right in one," acknowledged Celdek. "So we've got plenty of time for you to tell me how it was that you came to be squiring Pippa around Trellian. And how you let Falsan disable your transport here."

"Well, that's a funny thing, how that happened," began Tiemek. "You wouldn't believe this but that gal of yours, Candace, started it all. She has this gizmo attached to her Linkset that can run a trace back through a Radplant impulse direct to the implant. We knew Falsan wasn't using his own Radplant, so Pippa figured he was using an external Radplant and an Enabler to decode it for him. His own Radplant with his own electrical signature was scrambled and hidden, but there again, it only took a few days for your little Candace to hack into the shields."

"She's been a busy little gal, all right. But that doesn't get me to the part of the story I really want to hear."

"I'm coming to that," Tiemek admonished. "Let a man talk, will you?" He was warming to his story, enjoying the discomfort he saw in Celdek's face whenever the account involved Candace too heavily. It was high time that Candace met Croyden, he decided as he went on. "So Candace and I were getting these ideas, but you and Pelchak were off gallivanting all over the planet, never giving us more than a passing 'how do you do.' So

we decided to get our heads together and see if we couldn't figure this out.”

“If this is going to take much longer, I'd better put in a crop. I'll be able to harvest it before you're done,” Celdek complained.

“All in good time,” Tiemek drawled. “Candace hacked the shields and started to track Falsan. It was slow going and he was quick moving. I made a couple of false starts and came back empty-handed. Then out of the blue, Pippa calls me. I run over there to Blue Moon and bring her back to consult. Next thing I know, she's looking at the pattern of his movements and getting ahead of him. As you see, she helped me set up a trap right there in the canyon and we just waited a few hours till he showed up. He managed to get off one wild shot with that laser cannon of his before we disabled him. That's why my transport is in need of some Dodgering.”

“And it never occurred to you that Pelchak might object to her being on Trellian, even if she did go back to Blue Moon every night?”

“Oh, it occurred to me all right,” Tiemek grinned. “If I didn't intend for Pelchak to catch her, why do you think I stayed in stealth mode to send the beacon? We've been waiting quite a while, but it was worth it. Did you see the look on his face? And the look on hers was even better! Ah, to be a drill drone working out in those Stalcon formations right about now. What a treat! I can almost hear the plexilat strips doing their work now. I'll have to find her a couch-type pod so she doesn't have to sit down on the way back to Blue Moon.” He got a dreamy look on his face and Celdek punched him in the arm.

They had to walk a good distance before Pelchak was satisfied that they had enough privacy to do what he had in mind. All the way, Pippa kept up her story of how she had felt useless there on

Blue Moon. "Once the other girls got there, Shawna didn't need me anymore. And Vilnek was out of danger. So I contacted Tiemek."

"Not Celdek?" Pelchak asked.

"I knew he'd refuse to come get me. Tiemek is different. He's much more relaxed about rules."

"Dodger."

"Yes, well, so is Celdek, but even Dodgers have their rules. Tiemek doesn't seem to care at all about them, but he can definitely get the job done. I just wished that he had sent a general beacon instead of waiting for Celdek. It could have been days before he found us," she complained.

"Served you right. Running off like that." Rounding a cluster of Stalcon formations Pelchak prepared to show Pippa what else in his opinion served her right. He found a smooth-sided Pencil and brushed it off.

"What are you doing?" Pippa queried, but she received no answer.

Pelchak merely pulled her to the Pencil and then caught her wrists. Bringing her hands up on either side of the Pencil, he used a plexilat strip to bind them together so that she was effectively stuck there, hugging the thin Stalcon formation. He tucked her tunic into the top of her leggings.

"What are you doing?" she repeated, but when he positioned himself behind her, she thought she knew. She braced herself, but nothing had prepared her for the searing flame that suddenly scorched her bottom. At least six plexilat strips had landed, all at once, full-force on her rear end. She yelped and then kept yelping as the pain seemed to grow. "Ah! Ow! Ow, ow, *ow!*"

He came around to face her. She looked up at him ready to give him a piece of her mind, just as soon as she caught her breath, but then she noticed his expression and she froze.

So few words, but he hardly needed them. It was all there in his eyes. The hurt. The fear for her. The frustration at her obsti-

nacy. The love. She dropped her eyes, but he tapped a finger under her chin until she raised them again. Another lifetime in his gaze and she began to cry. "I'm sorry," she sniffled. "I won't do it again."

"Said that before."

"Yes, but that was different. I didn't follow anyone."

"You promised."

"But I wasn't alone. Tiemek was with me. I didn't drag anyone else into danger with me. And we found Falsan."

He nodded once to acknowledge this point, but all he said was, "Fifteen."

Counting fifteen stripes with that plexilat flogger was one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. Each searing strike burned the skin right through her leggings, then sank deep into her flesh. The pain seemed to grow and he knew how to wait until it had reached its fullness before he placed the next stroke. The strips stung individually and then melded into a haze of agony, all up and down her bottom and thighs. She jerked each time they touched her, but there was no give in her bonds.

Her breath was coming hard and fast by the seventh stroke. By the tenth, her legs would barely hold her up. By the fifteenth she hung limp, barely aware that he was cutting the plexilat at her wrists and holding her to him like a precious treasure.

Then he set her on her feet. "Going to turn my back. Pull your leggings away from your backside," he instructed.

She could barely stand up, but she could hear in his voice how important this was to him. "You're not going to spank me anymore, are you?" she questioned as she reached out to steady herself on his arm. "If you were, you wouldn't turn your back."

"Just do it," he repeated.

She followed his instructions and felt an immediate relief. The pain lessened to half what it had been and she was able to get her breath. "What's happening?"

“The plexilat strips stimulate the nerve endings. Any contact sets them off again. Nothing touching the skin, they’ll be fine.”

“So as long as I don’t sit down or wear clothes, I’ll be fine,” Pippa admitted ruefully.

“Tiemek will take you back to Blue Moon, where you stay until all the Companions come home. Effect wears off in a few hours, from the surface of the skin inward. Deep soreness lasts a few days. Safety lesson lasts a lifetime?”

“Yes, a lifetime. I promise.”

Later, Celdek and Tiemek knocked on the door of the private room where Vilnek was recuperating in the healthcare center. “We just dropped Pippa off at her dormitory. She’ll be here in a minute, I expect. We thought we’d come by to harass you for a while,” Celdek began.

“Glad to see you,” Shawna greeted them. “And you’re sure, right? Falsan is really safely caught and under restraint?”

“And Pippa’s fine?” Vilnek inquired. “I still can’t believe she was sneaking off like that and we didn’t even know it wasn’t you she was meeting, Celdek.”

“Yes, Pippa’s fine, though she didn’t sit down much once we were in flight,” Celdek noted. “And as for Falsan, Sarah’s taking him off-world to a top-notch psychiatric center. They should be able to help him there.”

“And the investigation?” Shawna asked.

“Officially closed. That was Talvok’s first official act as head of Trellian Mining.”

“Speaking of Talvok, has anyone heard what happened to him? Why didn’t he make the rendezvous? I haven’t had a chance to ask him.”

“You were right about the family cabin. When Talvok got here, he didn’t have time to come find us or anything. He just

took out for the cabin looking for his dad. By the time he got there, Falsan had taken the girls to the Zoomer platforms. By the time he tracked them there, all the excitement was over and you were in surgery, so he went back to Trellian as soon as you were out and stable.”

“How is Talvok taking all this?” Vilnek asked.

“About like you'd expect. It's his father who's just tried to kill his best friend and almost had him killed from ambush. But Talvok will live. He's a tough guy and now he's got Faith behind him, he'll be fine.”

Just then, Pippa arrived, making the small room even more crowded. “Pippa, I'd say how surprised I am at you,” Vilnek commented, “but I should have known this would happen, with you hanging around Shawna so much.”

Pippa shrugged and laughed it off, but Shawna noticed that she didn't take a seat when Tiemek offered her one.

“And how is Faith? I haven't heard from her and haven't seen her here,” Shawna noted.

“She's staying on Trellian to help with the recovery.” Celdek looked grave for a moment. “There are rumors that a permanent assignment is in the offing, but...”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Shawna chimed in. “Now, what about you, Celdek? I hear you've got a Companion assigned to you now, too.”

“You hear right. I'm going to introduce her to Croyden first chance I get,” the Dodger replied with a broad grin.

Vilnek laughed and tried to punch him in the arm, but the tubing feeding him his intravenous fluids limited his reach.

“Who's Croyden? Or shouldn't I ask that question either?” Shawna inquired.

“If you have to ask, you can't know,” chorused Tiemek and Celdek.

Pippa came to her rescue, being careful to substitute a “D” for the word “Dodger” since there were two Dodgers present and

she had no desire for a kiss or an Adjustment. “Introducing a woman to Croyden is a D’s way of saying he’s going to marry her. Croyden is the legendary original D, founder of their society, or culture, or gang, whatever you want to call it.”

Celdek and Tiemek looked at the floor or the ceiling, as if pretending not to hear this blatant explanation going on in their presence.

Vilnek took up the tale. “That’s why a Dodger will say that Croyden is his uncle. It identifies him to people who understand the culture. And when he says he’s going to introduce someone to Croyden, which means he’s going to confide in her, if it’s a woman.”

“If it’s a man, that means he’s going to recruit him into the life,” Pippa went on.

“They’re recruited? I assumed it was something you were born into,” Shawna admitted.

“Some are born into it. But D families are not that common. Their way of life makes it hard to settle down and have a family. Most of them are brought in by other men. And there is a tradition that if a D does want to marry and have a family, he either leaves behind active Dodgering or introduces his prospective bride to at least one other D who gives her the low-down on what she’s getting into. This cuts down on the ‘If I had only known’ syndrome,” Pippa explained.

Pippa seemed very well informed about the culture, Shawna thought. “I can see where that would be a wise thing to do.”

Celdek gave her a curious look. “You go around telling everything you know, and your brother is going to come after you.”

Pippa grinned. “Right in one, as a D would say.”

“What?” Shawna yipped. She was clueless.

“I have a brother who is a nephew of Croyden’s,” Pippa confessed.

“But how did Celdek know about your brother?” Shawna wondered. “I didn’t know. He seems to know so many things.

Like Falsan's plans and his possession of a cannon and... oh, lots of things.”

“He didn't really know any of those things. That's a D's way,” Pippa revealed. “He is taught to look at the facts and draw the most likely and logical conclusions. Then he acts on them as if they are true.”

Vilnek looked interested. “Now, that bit of information, I didn't know. I always wondered, though. Please, don't be offended, Celdek. I hate to admit it, but when you tackled me out there in the woods, I thought maybe...”

“That's why you resisted me and got shot. I know. And it's okay. I don't blame you. Dodgers have been known to work both sides of the street, so to speak, when they don't have an employer to be loyal to,” commented Celdek. “I'm just glad it didn't cost you any more than a trip to the healthcare center.”

“But if you just act on things like you know they are true, then what happens when you're wrong?” Shawna pressed.

“Wrong? Who says we're ever wrong,” Celdek challenged. With an offended look, he continued, “For example, I know how it was that Falsan came to get you out of the hotel without anyone seeing you.”

Shawna put on a nonchalant face, trying to brazen it out. “There's no secret to that. The crowds. The confusion. But back to you and Candace—”

Vilnek, on the other hand, became suddenly even more alert. “I have been wondering about that, but just too groggy to really think it through,” he interrupted her attempt to change the subject. “Show me this great Dodger logic at work.”

“Since no one saw Falsan take them...” Celdek began.

“I see no reason—” Shawna interrupted.

“And it was in broad daylight...” Celdek continued.

“Why we should drag up this ancient history,” Shawna tried again.

“Stop interrupting, Shawna, if you please,” Vilnek warned.

“It stands to reason that Shawna and Pippa were not taken in the hotel.” Celdek took a breath to create an effect and Shawna jumped in again.

“There was nothing wrong with being out on the street.”

“You were not supposed to be on Blue Moon at all,” Vilnek reminded her. “You’ve still got that to account for, and as soon as I’m able, I’ll settle that debt. If you don’t want to add more to the ledger, let the man talk!” Shawna took a breath to answer back, then caught sight of Celdek’s evil grin. He was enjoying this. He was setting her up, just like he had set her up by taking her to Blue Moon so willingly. This had all been in his plan! She hushed with a pout on her lips.

“Now, they could have been drawn away from the hotel by some message as a trick by Falsan, but there are no records of any messages or any contact at all between Shawna or Pippa and anyone else at the hotel. That suggests that they left under their own power. If we assume they went out under their own steam, we have to wonder why they left. If you’ll remember, the window in Shawna’s room did overlook the street.”

Here she could not help herself. “With all that crowd and chaos, of course no one would have noticed us or remembered a message.”

“You arrived at least a day before the flood of refugees from Trellian. I was there, remember? I delivered you myself. I know we didn’t wait long in the docking queue. You’ll have to do better than that.”

Shawna took one look at Vilnek’s thunderous expression and decided she’d said enough for one day. She started edging toward the door.

“I assume they looked out the window and saw Falsan, who would have been easy to spot, as he visited all the shops, just as we did.” Celdek paused once again for effect then hammered the last nail home. “Shawna must have been attempting to follow Falsan. The shopkeeper told us almost as much when he told us

about pointing out to Falsan that he had two women following him.”

“Is that how Falsan knew!” Shawna groaned.

“You admit it!” Vilnek exclaimed as he reached for Shawna to draw her back. He missed, but Celdek caught her arm and brought her gently back to where Vilnek could reach her.

“Somebody has a lot more to answer for than I thought,” he intoned as he looked at Shawna.

“He's only supposing, you know. He could be wrong,” Shawna asserted.

Celdek frowned in concentration, searching for alternative theories. Then his mind seemed to snap back into focus. “Am I wrong?”

Shawna couldn't answer and Celdek burst out laughing. “I will admit that it does very rarely happen that we miscalculate.”

“That's part of the reason Ds seem to have an 'I don't really care' attitude. They cultivate a joking persona so people shrug off wrong assumptions as them just being funny,” Pippa offered.

“Or mysterious,” Vilnek put in. “I've seen Dodgers get away with some outrageous stunts and everyone just assumed it was for some secret purpose. Now I've got your number.” He laughed as he pointed a finger at Celdek and Tiemek, who grinned back unrepentantly. “I know how you 'know' things and won't be so suspicious and get myself shot!”

“Speaking of Vilnek's getting shot, you'll be interested to know that Redek is going to rot in detention for a long time. This isn't his first run in with the law,” Pippa informed them as a way of changing the topic.

Celdek nodded. “Sounds like just the place for him.”

“That's about all the loose ends I can think of,” Vilnek declared.

“So we're free to come back to Trellian? Everything's all right now, isn't it?” Shawna wanted to be sure.

“We can be anywhere we want to be,” Vilnek stated. “Just like a Dodger.”

“I'm looking forward to being back on Trellian again,” Shawna stated as she looked out the viewport. “Even if it's only for a little while and we Companions have to stay at Headquarters.” She looked over at the sleeping Vilnek and decided not to disturb him. He could catch a glimpse of Trellian from orbit another day.

“When will you and Vilnek decide what you're going to do?” Claire asked. “Plivit or here?”

“I don't know. If Vilnek doesn't go back to Plivit, Turek isn't going to complete the charter. They say they've got no one reliable enough to run it for them, so they'll have to wait for him. I think he does want to do it, eventually, but the doctor says he needs more recovery time first. So here we are.”

“Once we're able to leave Headquarters, where will you go?” Willa asked.

“Back to Vilnek's minestead. It's just been waiting there since we left. Falsan tried to send other miners out there, but no one would take it. At least, that's what I heard,” Shawna answered.

“That's right,” Pippa affirmed. “Falsan even tried to get Choldor to take it. Did you know that, Claire?”

Claire nodded. “Yes, I did know about that offer, but of course Choldor declined. There was no way he was going to take that minestead. We knew that eventually Vilnek would be back. It's so sad that just when it's safe for Vilnek to return, he's in no shape to run the mine.”

“It will be slow going at first. We're going to take it easy, and let Vilnek ease back into working. Then, we may either return to Plivit or stay on.”

“If you do return to Plivit,” Claire put in hesitantly, “would

you consider taking us with you? Choldor isn't happy with the way things are going here." She cast an apologetic glance at Pippa. "I only mean, you know, they're letting Companions return to Trellian, but we'll still have to stay at Headquarters for who knows how long."

"I would be absolutely thrilled if you came to Plivit with us," Shawna exclaimed.

"Choldor's been a mess without you, Claire. He's surly one minute and depressed the next. That much Radnok's told me when we've Linked in the evenings. And we've discussed leaving Trellian, too," Willa admitted.

"Wouldn't that be great? Can you just imagine it? You'd have to come, too, Pippa. The four of us together on Plivit! It would be fantastic!" Shawna enthused.

"That would be great, making a new start with good friends. But I have to admit, part of the reason I'm even considering it is that I don't know how long I can take being away from Radnok, even if we can Link any time we want. It isn't the same as being together. At least on Plivit, I'd have him home every night, wouldn't I? I mean, I know it's dangerous there, but we would be together."

"Anywhere you live has its advantages and disadvantages, but yes, you would be with Radnok. Actually, we'd all be together, in pretty close quarters, I guess. But of course, I kind of hope we all stay on Trellian. I really love it there," Shawna confided.

"Falsan's company can't be in great shape after all the unexpected expenses due to the disaster. I imagine Talvok is anxious to have you stay," Willa interjected.

"He has been around to see Vilnek," Shawna informed them. "And he's Linked a few times. He's made no secret of the fact that he wants Vilnek to stay."

"It's Talvok's company now. He'd be crazy to let Vilnek go," Pippa declared. "He knows how valuable Vilnek has always been to the operation."

“It might help if Talvok gave him more responsibility,” Shawna hinted. Giving Pippa a significant glance, she confided, “Vilnek’s been talking about wanting to do more than just run a minestead.”

“I’ll be sure to mention that to Talvok,” Pippa promised. Along with my recommendations to snatch him up before we lose him completely, she added mentally, and with him half our best miners.

They chatted the rest of the journey away. Docking completed, Shawna woke Vilnek who leaned on her arm as they made their way into the docking bay.

“It’s only been a month but it feels like a year,” Pippa sighed. She slung her carryall over her shoulder and left the transport, Willa and Claire at her heels.

“I think I see someone else here who may just feel the same,” Willa commented with a smirk. In front of them, just down the corridor stood Pelchak, tall, silent, and immovable.

“What clued you in?” Claire asked in mock innocence. “Was it the thousand communicapads a day?”

“No, it was the hours-long Links at night,” Willa answered. “I couldn’t believe he actually talked to her every day, much less for that long at a shot!” Both ladies smiled knowingly at each other then watched with unabashed curiosity. They felt they had a duty to make sure things turned out right between their dear friend and this taciturn stranger.

Pippa hesitated. Her halting steps led her to him and she tried to pass the moment off with a cheery, “Hello! How nice of you to meet me here. I’ll need to drop my carryall off before I report in to Headquarters. Want to come with me?” She tried to step around him as if she expected him to walk with her.

“No,” he answered and stepped in front of her again.

She tried the other side. Again, he blocked her. “Is something wrong?” she queried.

“No,” he answered again.

"Then why won't you come on?" she tried again, this time making a wider arc around him, but to no avail.

"Put down the carryall," he instructed.

"What?" she asked.

He repeated his request. "Put it down."

"But why? I need my... oof!"

He interrupted her by grabbing the carryall, tossing it across the corridor where it hit the wall. Then with her hands free to steady herself, he picked her up by her waist and spun her around before claspng her to him harder than she could ever remember being embraced by anyone before.

"Know how hard it was to get all those words out? All those communipads? And the Links? Used up my words for the next year. So the only words I've got left to give are 'I' and 'do.' The rest? Just going to have to make them up for yourself."

Pippa laughed uproariously. "All right. Fair enough."

He set her on her feet and gazed down at her seriously. She answered his silent question with a nod. He gave her a nod of his own and turned to retrieve her carryall. They walked out of the transport docking bay heading for Headquarters.

"In all this chaos? What a way to have a wedding!" Willa declared.

"Isn't it romantic?" Claire sighed.

"Would you all come on? I'm ready to get home!" chided Shawna. Vilnek just grinned.

Shawna's Chance

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

A warm, dry breeze was blowing dust across the arid landscape, but inside the climate controlled private office, Pippa physically felt nothing but comfort. Emotionally, it was another story. “Are you sure you want to go over this list now?” she asked her boss.

Talvok sighed as he nodded. “If Trellian Mining Corporation is to continue running as my father intended when he started it, I’ve got to know the worst and plan accordingly. So don’t just give me the official numbers. Give me the rumors and any predictions you can make. Who is Turek Mining stealing from me?”

It was Pippa’s turn to sigh. As the longest standing employee on the mining world, she knew everyone and everything, but when it came to telling Talvok about it all, she balked. “I’ll tell you what I know and what I guess, but I gave up reading fensel bones a long time ago.”

He nodded, his handsome face a mask of stoic calm so she continued. “Of course, Vilnek and Shawna. You have to admit, Vilnek owes Turek for the time they took him on, no questions

asked. Your father would have found him if they hadn't given him that top-secret job on Plivit. And if you thought you could get Shawna to stay when he goes..."

"I know better than that. They have permanent assignment status, so I know she's out of the companion pool anyway. She'll be a loss, for sure. Her reports and other information skills helped make Vilnek's minestead the best on Trellian."

"True enough, but Shawna was also a leader among the companions as a group. They looked up to her. I suppose Faith could step into that role."

Talvok considered for a moment the beautiful, beguiling creature that was his Faith. "She's technically in the program, but they all know she's a Serpiac expert, not a companion. Maybe Willa?"

"Sorry."

Talvok made a face. "Radnok's not on the list. Turek isn't going to hire that old mine-rat, surely!"

"They will if Vilnek tells them to. Radnok and Willa aren't on the list, but it's just a matter of time. Willa and Shawna are best friends. Do you think Radnok can resist Willa's wheedling?"

"If I looked like Radnok and had a Permanent Assignment who looked like Willa, I guess I'd do just about anything she said, too," he admitted.

"But that's the worst of it. The rest of the names aren't as prominent. Celdek isn't going for example, so we get to keep Candace. She's been vital to the rebuilding process. Trellian wouldn't have recovered from the crisis nearly as quickly without her." Pippa tried to step lightly around the topic of the recent troubles, since they had been caused by her boss's father.

"That's good news," Talvok agreed. "How about Choldor? I can't imagine he would want to go, what with his history. What they mine on Plivit is what gave him that scar."

"No, he's not on the list. I am a bit surprised, myself. Claire is

close to Shawna and Willa, too, of course, but Choldor and Claire are staying.”

“That’s excellent news. Claire may be shy, but she’ll be able to help Candace rebuild the companion program.”

“Claire, maybe, but I don’t think Candace is such a great example. You remember when she first got here? How she tried to run the minestead herself?”

“There’s nothing in her file about Tiemek registering a complaint.”

“As if Tiemek would bother! Anyway, they were happy enough. It isn’t too hard to keep the Peace Initiative requirements if the miner isn’t giving any instructions, and has absolutely no intention of enforcing them with a spanking, or any other way whatsoever.”

“So if there was no problem between them...” he queried.

Sarcasm tinged her reply. “My point is, she’d be a fine one to explain to the new companions how the Peace Initiative works when she didn’t want to obey her assigned miner, not even when he got a Radplant impulse. No way would she have taken an Adjustment from him, so how could she explain that they have to submit to one if their miners think they need it.”

Talvok’s smirk annoyed Pippa. “Good thing that Dodger Celdek came along then to personally instruct her in the Peace Initiative. Nothing like a good hard spanking... I mean, Adjustment to teach a recalcitrant companion a good lesson.”

“But the way she started out. Remember how she wanted a Radplant herself?”

“So, you explained to her about the Radplant being incompatible with female brain chemistry.” Talvok shrugged dismissively. “She’s seen firsthand what can happen if the Radplants aren’t sending out their warnings, so she understands the programs here.”

“It’s just that when Celdek is away, which is often, Tiemek is

nominally her assignment. That means she's on her own most of the time."

Talvok frowned. "If he's such a slacker, why do we keep him on?"

"I didn't say he was a slacker. He's a Dodger, is all. Sometimes you don't see what a Dodger is actually doing, but you can bet if he's doing it for you, then you need it done."

"You put an awful lot of trust into a person whose main claim to fame is that they can straddle the legality fence without falling off on either side," Talvok frowned.

Pippa didn't like the way this conversation was going. "Just trust me. We need the Dodgers. Celdek can be trusted to keep the others in line and doing things that we really don't want to do for ourselves."

"For example?" Talvok demanded, his voice rising.

Pippa thought about giving him the whole truth, but that would take too long. There were some aspects of the operation that it was safer for him if he didn't know, or at least, not yet, but it irked her that she still had to protect him from them. Still, she needed to placate him and make sure he didn't take it into his head to do something drastic, like dismiss all the Dodgers.

She remembered the late night visits from men whose transports had no registry. She recalled the carryalls full of cash and then later the names of non-existent miners she had paid over the years. There were never many at one time, only one or two, nothing to arouse suspicion. Then suddenly, the Dodgers had appeared and the names had disappeared. She hadn't asked any questions and Trellian Mining's bottom line had started improving again. That had been years ago, when Talvok had been away at school.

"Example? How about that dust up with Reynolds and his bunch? Remember that? Union, they called it. Thugs, it looked like. Remember how they promised their 'union' workers would accept lower percentages than our independent miners?"

Talvok looked thoughtful. "Did the Dodgers have anything to do with that? I know Dad was concerned enough to call Security in. That's when Dad first met Pelchak."

"That's right. Pelchak couldn't do much because unions aren't illegal. Neither is hanging around on all the surrounding moons and space-stations tying up loading docks and transit points until we couldn't get our product shipped on time."

"But the Dodgers? Where do they come in?"

"Under the scans is where. I wasn't in on the details. One day, Celdek is on the payroll and the next day, product is moving again. How, I didn't know, and I didn't want to know. There's a reason why Dodgers don't like questions."

"And we've gotten away from my original question. Back to the list. Anyone else I should know about?" They exchanged a long look.

She contemplated telling him about her own struggles, how she dreamed of starting out again on a new world with all the challenges and promise that task held. But then she sighed. It was nothing more than a dream. She could never leave Trel-lian, even for a few months to help Vilnek get started, as he had asked. "No, that's all," she assured him. There's no one else."

"Talvok, believe me, this will work out all right," Vilnek asserted. "It's just temporary." The two men stared at each other across the table in the small living area of the Companions' dormitory.

"I thought I could depend on my best friend," Talvok grouched, shifting his body in the seating pod to lean on his left elbow rather than his right.

"If you don't want me to go, I'll Link Turek Mining back and tell them to forget it," Vilnek offered with a shrug.

"No, we've been over it a hundred times. You have to go. I

realize that. Turek helped you out at a time when you really needed it. You can't slap them in the face now."

"Oh, so glad you agree," Shawna chimed in sarcastically from her pod at Vilnek's side. "You think that's enough to merit his loyalty? A little thing like keeping him from getting arrested on a false murder charge? Not to mention the chance to run his own operation."

"It won't be mine, Shawna. Simmer down," Vilnek warned his wife.

"You'll be in charge," Shawna said, glaring first at Talvok, then back at her husband, "which is where you should be."

Vilnek very purposefully addressed his next comment to Talvok, hoping that Shawna would take the hint. "I can understand you wanting to keep running the family business, old buddy. You'll do great here and I'll do great on Plivit. I've always wanted to start something and build it from the ground up."

"If you aren't careful with that L-12 you're mining on Plivit, you'll be ground up, in little pieces, that is. That stuff is nothing to mess around with," Talvok observed.

Shawna winced. "You would have to remind us of that. Too bad all mining worlds can't be safe and civilized like Trellian. But, gee, if this planet is so safe, why do you have the most extensive Radplant system in this sector? What dangers could there possibly be here that would make it necessary for the men to have brain implants to give them instant warning?"

"That's enough, Shawna," Vilnek warned.

But Shawna was past hearing.

"No, she's right. I was out of line," Talvok said defensively. "There are plenty of dangers here, as the last six months so generously illustrate. Maybe you will be better off on Plivit."

"Now, hold on. Nobody is saying you don't look out for your people. Those earthquakes, fires, and all were the result of the planet wide electric chaos generated by your father's efforts, not yours. It wasn't his fault, was it Shawna? Everybody knows that."

The way he stressed her name, she should have received his signals, but she was beyond caring.

“His father got Trellian into this mess, I'll admit that. Time will tell if Talvok can get the planet out of it.”

Talvok gave her a hard look. “One thing I'm going to do for sure as soon as possible.” His voice sounded sour in her ears. “I'm going to make sure the Companions and miners get back out to the minesteads, where the miners can enforce the Peace Initiative like it needs to be enforced. I can think of at least one lady who needs an Adjustment in the worst way.”

“Like I told Turek, a mining world needs a working Companion program to keep the miners civilized, but a Companion program needs a Peace Initiative to keep the Companions civilized,” Vilnek stated pointedly.

Talvok put his Enabler to his temple and sent a private message to Vilnek through the electrical impulses that linked all men to the early warning system on Trellian and at close range allowed for interpersonal communication. “We'll finish this conversation later, if you want, but if I stay here much longer right now, I'm liable to do something we'll both regret.”

“Go on. I've got to deal with Shawna it looks like. This may take some time. I'll Link you when I'm done practicing what I preach.”

“Glad that's over and he's gone,” Shawna declared as soon as she had Vilnek's attention again. “He can be so supercilious just because he was born to money and inherited Trellian. You would think he would show some shame over what his father did and what he tried to do.”

“I don't blame Talvok for what Falsan did, or for the shape Trellian is in, and neither should you. You can't hold a man's family against him. It's no more shame to be born into wealth than it is to be born like us. Where did this attitude come from, Shawna? Where is the sweet, hard-working Companion I brought out to my minestead not so many months ago?”

“Brought? Shouldn’t you say ‘tricked?’ If I had known all that we would go through...”

“I did trick you, because I had to have you,” Vilnek grinned unrepentantly. “You, and only you, for me, I knew from the first time I met you. Remember that spanking I gave you that day?”

“Yes, I do,” Shawna pouted at the memory.

“Well, it will be nothing compared to what you are about to get!” Vilnek declared, totally changing his tone mid-sentence. His arms wrapped around her faster than her mind could perceive what was happening to her and she shrieked.

“Wait! Not here! Willa or Claire could walk in any moment!” she protested, thinking how embarrassed she would be if her roommates came in and saw her getting an Adjustment.

“Then you’d better be quiet,” Vilnek shot back as he positioned her quickly over his knee. He took a hexa-torque off the tool belt he habitually wore. Extending the tip to its full reach, he applied it vigorously to her now upturned bottom. “I gave you a chance to change your mood, but you still wouldn’t, so here we are. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but it will get out now or you’ll regret it.” He paused to listen to her answers each time, then continued in his spanking as he spoke.

“Oh, ow! Stop it! Stop it! You can’t do this! I haven’t done anything wrong!” Shawna defended herself verbally as her hands flew back to defend her stinging buttocks.

He caught her wrists up neatly in his left hand and held them at her back while his right continued its work. “Then what would you call it? Being so judgmental and obnoxious to my best friend isn’t wrong? You practically told him that he should give me Trellian.”

“He should give you Trellian. You deserve it. You’ve been here so long and worked so hard.”

“A man doesn’t just give away his father’s life’s work. As for working here longest, that would be Pippa. If anyone deserves to

run Trellian, she does. And even she doesn't dispute Talvok's right to be in charge."

"But if Talvok weren't so hard-headed, we could all stay. Everything could be the way it was," she moaned. The heat and sting had built to the point where she could not remain still. He had to hold her as he applied swat after burning swat of the sturdy but flexible hexa-torque. He had never used this tool for anything but fixing drill drones before, but he seemed to find it quite efficient for getting the attention of stubborn wives. At least, it had helped him pry the truth out of her this time. And she hadn't realized it herself until she said the words out loud.

"So that's what this is all about," he sighed and put down the hexa-torque. "You are upset that things are changing. Not so long ago you were so insistent on coming to Plivit, as I recall, that you even stowed away on a transport to do it."

"That's not how it happened," she argued quietly. "Will you let me up, now? I can't talk in this position."

"I'll let you up for the moment, but we're not done. I need to be sure you hear what I am about to tell you. I understand you don't want to leave Trellian. You've been happy here and you have some close friends. But you have to understand something, too. Moving from job to job is part of a miner's life. You'll have to get used to it. We'll see our friends again, but things change. You can't keep them the same by being obnoxious, nor is it good to push people away before you leave them so you won't miss them. I know what you've been doing in the dorms at night when I have to leave you. Willa and Claire have filled me in with all the details I need. You will stop this foolishness and be sweet again or I'll come back and give you a sound Adjustment every day if I have to." He held the hexa-torque firmly to her backside to show her he meant business.

"No, you don't need to do that," Shawna assured him. Sighing and relaxing against him as he put his strong arms around her, she continued, "I'll keep my mouth closed from now

on, I promise. Just no more of that hexa-torque. It hurts!" She rubbed her throbbing backside.

"No rubbing," he chided her as he took both her hands in his again. "You'll let that lesson sink in. Don't know why I'm giving you a second chance like this. I probably should go get a filamith and do this thing properly."

"No, you can't! Everyone would see it! They would know!"

"They all know anyway, little one. They're all under the Peace Initiative just like you. It's not like they don't get spanked sometimes, too."

"Not here in the dorms they don't," she countered.

"I guess that's why there is so much trouble here," Vilnek posited. "Things will settle down in a few weeks when Talvok can allow the Companions to go back to the minesteads."

"We'll be gone by then, won't we," Shawna asked.

"Probably."

"Do you think we could go back to the minestead, just for a visit before we leave?" Shawna asked.

"I'll see what I can do," Vilnek promised her, giving her an extra squeeze before he released her. "But it will have to be a quick one and soon, too. Turek is getting impatient."

"The health center will have to release you first, and they haven't done that. You still need two more treatments at least."

"I'll have them, don't worry. But just as soon as we get them behind us, I'll have to give Turek an actual arrival time."

"And an expected number of people you'll have with you?" Shawna queried.

"Yes, that too, but you let me handle that part. I don't want Radnok and Choldor complaining to me that their wives are making their lives miserable until they consent to come to Plivit with us. They have to make their decisions on their own."

"But I really want them to come," came her plaintive refrain.

"Radnok is getting pretty old to be learning to handle new

materials, especially dangerous ones, like L-12. And Choldor... well, you know his history with the stuff."

"That scar on his face," Shawna agreed. "I suppose it would be hard for him to work with L-12 again."

"It's not that it was a mistake of his that got him that scar, mind you. He was saving a lot of lives when he got that scar, but it was L-12 that was involved."

"Claire doesn't mind his scar."

"But she may mind his getting back into the business of mining L-12."

"You said the mining technology has improved since then. You said it was safe now."

"Safer," he said, emphasizing the last syllable. "No mining is totally safe. It will be a big decision if they come with us to Plivit. Both of them could have a fine future for several more years, right here on Trellian. Still, I'm with you on this. I hope they do come. I'm just saying they need to think about it long and hard before they commit."

"Oh, shoot. There's the alarm tone. You have five minutes to be out that door or security will be showing up to escort you out."

"And I've had enough problems with security to last me a lifetime. No thanks." He bent down to kiss her, but she shied away.

"Security, remember?"

"I've got four minutes to kiss you and still have a minute to get out the door. It's plenty of time," he said.

"But..." she protested.

"If you don't use up the time with arguing, that is," he chided. Then he made sure that she couldn't argue anymore anyway, even if she wanted to.

“Isn’t that cute?” Claire sighed as she and Willa scooted in the door just ahead of it sealing itself closed for the night. “The way he waits till the last minute, then runs out the door? He was probably kissing her till the last second.”

“Or finishing up a much needed Adjustment,” Willa said in a more cynical tone. “I hope it was the latter. She needed it, the way she’s been acting.”

Claire looked shocked. “He wouldn’t spank her right here in the dorm, would he? Anyone might come in!”

“It would serve her right,” Willa declared.

Claire was uncomfortably reminded of the distant past when Willa’s self-absorption and conceit had been outmatched only by her beauty. “She’s only being so catty because she doesn’t want to leave us.”

“You’re just being your usual sweet, understanding self, Claire. I don’t have it in me to be so nice about it. If she’s so upset about going, maybe they should stay. Talvok will get tired of running Trellian and beg Vilnek to take over before a year is out.”

“That’s as may be, but right now, Vilnek owes it to Turek Mining to go help them complete their charter. They won’t get it without him. And if Vilnek stays, do you think the other miners will ever really accept Talvok’s leadership? They’ll always be turning to Vilnek when things don’t go their way. Next thing you know, it will drive a wedge between two friends.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Willa admitted. “Nothing is more important than friends, which is why I hope Vilnek spanked some sense into Shawna.”

“Willa!”

“Well, I do.”

“Would you like me to show him the flamith Radnok hid in your bed?” Claire asked. Just a bit of sweetness had been replaced with acerbity.

Willa gave in. "That won't be necessary. And how did you know about that?"

"I'm not as sound a napper as he thought."

"You mean you heard us? Yesterday afternoon? Oh, I can't believe this." Her blush told Claire she was indeed embarrassed.

"Let's say no more about it, okay? If you don't tease Shawna about getting an Adjustment in the dorm, it probably won't occur to me to mention the topic either." Claire didn't believe in blackmail, but she did know how to motivate someone into silence if she needed to.

"Agreed."

"Don't even ask her why Talvok strode out of here looking like a thundercloud," Claire warned her.

"You think that had something to do with it?"

"Must have, but it's none of our business. Look, here she comes. And remember, no talking about Adjustments in the dorm. They're serious business and not something to be joked about."

Shawna plopped herself face down on the floor beside Claire's feet. "Can you believe it? Vilnek just gave me an Adjustment! Right here in the dorm! And all because Talvok got mad at a few little comments I made."

Claire just stared at Shawna, but Willa started to laugh.

"What's so funny? You wouldn't be laughing if your backside was as sore as mine is."

"Oh, really?" Willa caught Claire's eye, then grinned. "Truth to tell, I am laughing and my backside is sore. Radnok gave me an Adjustment too, just yesterday."

"You're kidding. I can't believe this. How do they dare? Right here, in the dorms and everything." Shawna turned to Claire. "Choldor didn't... did he?"

Claire hoped her wistfulness wouldn't show on her face. She tried to look shocked instead. "Oh, no! He would never. And you know how he is. I can pretty much do as I like."

“That’s only because you don’t like to do anything a miner wouldn’t approve of. You’re so sweet, you don’t really need Adjustments,” Shawna put in. “Not to mention the fact that Choldor adores you. He’ll do whatever you ask him to, you know.”

“I know. And that’s why,” she stated pointedly, “I’m not asking him to go to Plivit. If we go, I want it to be because he wants to go and thinks it’s the right thing to do.”

“I know he doesn’t want to help Talvok run things if you do stay,” Willa asserted. “He’s said so often enough.”

“That’s right. All he wants to do is mine,” Claire agreed. “Talvok needs his advice, so he helps all he can, but his heart is out in the field.”

“Then you should come with us,” Shawna cajoled. “Vilnek will take care of everything and Choldor can just do what he does best, work with the machines and product.” As she said this, her hand instinctively rubbed her sore backside.

“I saw that,” Willa accused. “Why did you rub just then? Feeling guilty about something?”

“Willa!” Claire chided.

Shawna just laughed. “Vilnek told me to leave it to him to do the recruiting. He told me I’m not supposed to pressure you about coming. I’m not pressuring you, am I?”

“Well, at least you’re not crying and throwing things, like last week,” Claire admitted.

“See there, improvement already,” Shawna bragged. “But I can at least talk about Plivit, right? About the brand new housing units? How roomy and comfortable they look in all the Linkset images? And about how they are all in one compound together, and the miners just go out during the day and come home every night? I can talk about that, can’t I? I wouldn’t want you to worry about me when I’m gone, would I?”

Claire knew someone skirting around an instruction when she heard it, but she didn’t feel the need to complain to Vilnek

again. This was much better than the tantrums Shawna had been throwing.

“With the housing units all being in one compound, aren’t you afraid of having to live too close to the other miners and whoever it is they bring with them? You never know who else will be there and what they’ll be like. I’ve heard some stories about mining worlds that would turn your ears inside out,” Willa declared.

“Vilnek will be in charge of personnel. He won’t let anyone in who we wouldn’t want to live nearby. And besides, if you both come, he won’t have to bring on so many strangers. It’s just a small operation. Not too many miners needed.”

“I’ll make sure Choldor understands all that before he gives his answer,” Claire assured her. “I just have to be sure he isn’t just going in order to please me. It is L-12 they are mining out there.”

“Nobody’s mining anything at the moment,” Shawna asserted. “That’s why we have to get things going as soon as possible.”

“You’re leaving soon, then?” Willa wanted to know.

“That’s what Vilnek thinks. As soon as his treatments are done, we have to be ready to go. If you want to take advantage of this great opportunity, you’ve got to act fast.”

“You sound like a used transport salesman,” Willa laughed. “But I’ll do what I can.”

“I won’t mind leaving quickly if it will get us back together with our men,” Claire declared. “I miss Choldor. These visits are not enough!”

“If he won’t give you an Adjustment in the dorm, then you really do need to be reunited,” Shawna teased. “We can’t have you running amok, now can we?”

“It’s you who’s been running amok, even with Adjustments,” Willa countered.

“No, it’s Candace who’s running amok. Celdek needs to visit more often and take that girl in hand,” Shawna asserted.

They all nodded their heads at that statement. “Did she even come home at all last night?” Claire wondered aloud.

“Not that I heard. Worked all night at Headquarters. When I got there this morning, she could barely keep her eyes open, but she wouldn’t hear of taking a break. Just kept gulping energy drinks and plowing ahead,” Willa reported. “Candace did always have a lot of ambition. Remember how she tried to run that minestead all by herself until Celdek came along and put an end to that idea?”

“Yes, I do recall it,” Claire agreed with a shiver. “She even asked if she could have a Radplant.”

“She didn’t know they aren’t compatible with the female brain chemistry,” Willa reminded her. “Still, it’s a good thing for her the Dodger came along when he did.”

“Where is Celdek, anyway?” Claire asked.

“Pippa says he’s busy out at the various minesteads and can’t make it in very regularly.” Willa looked interested. “Speaking of Pippa, have you heard? Her Pelchak has put off the ceremony again!”

“What! That’s the third time, isn’t it?” Shawna asked.

“Fourth, but who’s counting,” Willa answered.

“What excuse did he give this time?” Shawna wanted to know.

“Faith told me Pippa wouldn’t say why. She just told her she didn’t need the week of vacation after all so Talvok could go ahead with the final phase of the Radplant testing.”

“Oh, him,” Shawna muttered.

“We were talking about Pippa and Faith, not anyone else,” Willa noted pointedly. “Pippa would need to be available during anything big like the Radplant testing. Being the chief administrator and assistant to the boss for so many years, she knows better than anyone else how to make things happen around here.”

"And once they test the Radplants, we'll be able to go home?" Claire asked.

"I guess so," Willa posited. "I don't know what else they could be waiting on."

"I don't know how Faith can stay with that man," Shawna griped. "You notice she's not in the dorms. Oh, no. Not good enough for his precious wife."

"Shawna, be fair. Talvok is the owner of the charter. His family compound is just as safe as these dorms. Why should she live here? She pulls her weight around the office, you must admit."

"I don't see how you can say that," Shawna stated. "She's a scientist. How can her work help, now that Serpiac are under control?"

"She is putting her work at the university on hold while she helps with getting Trellian back on its feet," Willa explained with annoyance. "Without her, Serpiac would still be a constant threat." It was her turn to shiver.

"I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject," Shawna apologized. Willa's face and foot were still not totally healed from the ravages of the horrible organism. "I like Faith well enough. I appreciate what her research did to help Trellian. I just hate to see her boss people around, only because she's the boss's wife."

"She's not bossy, at least not to me," Claire informed her.

"Nobody's bossy in your opinion," Willa sighed. "You like everybody."

"What's wrong with that?" Claire wanted to know.

"Nothing. You liked me, didn't you, when no one else did. I've got nothing to complain about on that score," Willa declared, giving Claire a hug. "It's Candace I want to strangle. Celdek really needs to get back. I don't care if he is a Dodger. Being on the shady side of the law doesn't affect how well he can handle Candace."

"I'll ask Pippa when he's expected. That will give me an

excuse to talk to her and see what's up with her Permanent Assignment to Pelchak.”

Claire wondered what Vilnek would think of Shawna interfering in other people's affairs, especially since he was due to leave so soon, but she knew better than to try to stop Shawna. It usually took Shawna a while to make up her mind, but once she did, there was no changing it. Willa was about the same way. If she wanted Celdek back, he'd get back if he knew what was good for him.

Chapter 2

Talvok threw the communicapad onto the desk in frustration. “Then what the heck did I sign those papers last week for?” he demanded.

Pippa was tempted to yell right back at him, but knew it would only make matters worse. Her new boss was not an unreasonable man, just unseasoned. It was bad enough to yell at the man at headquarters, but this was his private office in his family compound, so she inhaled some patience and tried again. “That was for the acceptance of bids for the track purchase. Installation is different. You still have to decide on a winner among the contractors, and then start negotiations with them.”

Talvok sighed and dropped back into his seating pod. “But they already put the details into those bids. More negotiations? On what?”

“Believe me, there will be more haggling, once the contractor is chosen. Circumstances will have changed and there will be details, like dates, for example. Starting in the dry season, the installer—”

“Whom I haven’t even chosen yet?” he interrupted.

“Whom, as you say, you have not chosen yet,” Pippa went on carefully, “But when you do choose him, he will be able to proceed faster. You’ll have to press for quicker delivery and maybe offer an incentive for beating the contract date.”

“So the installer can install faster?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“I’m really supposed to negotiate each contract and each step twice?”

“Or three times, or whatever it takes, Talvok,” Pippa answered in exasperation. “There’s a reason why your father worked the long hours he worked all those years. A mining operation the size of Trellian takes more than just a passing glance to run.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think these last six months have been a picnic?”

“They haven’t exactly been a picnic for me either, and this isn’t helping. Let’s get on to the next file.” She scrolled down her communipad screen until she found the name she was looking for. “Here it is. I got this invoice from Stallworth for twenty residential sanitation systems. Do you want me to pursue him through the mining authorities, or go straight to Interplanetary Security?”

“What?”

“For the fraud. You know, invoicing for nothing?” Pippa looked at his blank face waiting for comprehension to dawn. It didn’t dawn for him, so it did for her. “Please don’t tell me you contracted with Stallworth.” The look he gave her had her throwing the communipad on the desk and walking away in disbelief.

Talvok spiked his six-foot frame halfway across the desk. “Last time I looked, it was my name on the charter and my name on the CEO’s office door at headquarters.”

“But I thought I was handling sanitation systems. That was supposed to be my project.”

"I was only trying to help you out a bit. He came to me with an offer of a quick delivery on some extra residential grade units he has. I saw a good deal, so I took it. He seems like he knows what he's doing."

"You stick to your drilling equipment and leave me the minestead residential headaches, all right?"

"I don't see why you're so—"

"He's only the biggest crook in the business. Not that all sanitary systems' guys aren't crooks. They are. But that doesn't mean you have to..."

"I didn't have to, but I wanted to. It's my operation, or have you forgotten that?"

Pippa drew in another deep breath meant to give her time to count to ten. She could have counted to fifty and it wouldn't have made working with Stallworth any more palatable or safer. "Yes, it's your operation and maybe it's time I let you run it. All of it." Her tone nearly froze bits off his ears.

"I didn't mean..."

"Then what did you mean? Do you want my expertise or not?"

"I do. And I trust your judgment, of course. If you think that Stallworth is really that crooked, I'm sure I can just pay him off enough under the table to void the contract."

"No, don't do that. It will only make things worse. Leave the shady dealings to me, will you? No need of both of us risking a criminal record." Her attempt at lightening the mood worked and both visibly relaxed.

Talvok even tried to grin at her as he let himself fall back into his pod. "What does Investigator Pelchak think of you and your Dodger connections?"

Pippa stiffened again. "I'd rather not discuss him if you don't mind."

"Sorry. I was out of line there. I only thought..."

Pippa shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Forget it. And if you see a

line item in the budget titled ‘Shade’ you’ll forget that, too, right? I’ll have to bring in a few more Dodgers and the kind I’ll need don’t come cheaply.”

“More of them? How many more?”

“You don’t want to know that.”

“You sound like one of them,” Talvok complained. “All right, so I don’t want to know how many. Fine. Where will you get them? You can’t exactly look up ‘Dodger’ in the Federation Index can you?”

“Well, I guess you can if you contact the Security and Detentions Branch, but that’s not the point. We want ones that are free and at liberty to work. As you say, I have connections. You don’t want to know any more on that subject either.”

Talvok couldn’t leave it alone. “Celdek?”

“He’s the best chance we’ve got of handling Stallworth. But let me handle this from now on. I’ve dealt with him before and between Celdek and me, we should be able to work something out.”

“What do you want me to do, Pippa? Ask you for permission every time I want to buy a case of hexa-torques?”

“No, of course not, but on something like this...”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know!” she shouted. “I can’t describe it. Your father let me handle things, but he was still in charge.”

“Maybe what your definition of being in charge is different from mine.”

Pippa sat back in her pod, her tone chilling even further. “I’m thinking it may be.”

Just then, Faith walked in the room. “Is everything okay? I thought I heard shouting.”

Pippa got her communicapad and stood up. “Let’s leave the rest of this for tomorrow. I need to get back to headquarters.”

“Can Pelchak give you a ride back? He was here a few minutes ago,” Faith asked.

"Oh, was he?" Pippa asked, cold as True Dark, when both of Trellian's suns set simultaneously and the temperatures reached life-threatening lows. "I hadn't noticed."

Just then, the Linkset beeped and Talvok tapped the access key. "Pippa there?" asked Pelchak's voice. Pippa noted the way Talvok didn't seem put out by Pelchak's terse manner. She supposed everyone knew that Pelchak had very few words in him to waste.

"She was just looking for a ride back to headquarters," Talvok answered.

"Landing dock," was all the investigator replied before closing the Link.

Pippa wished there was another way for her to return to her work, but since no female could have a Radplant, there was no way for her to pilot a transport by herself safely. She could hardly wait for Celdek to get back from installing those reinforced storage tanks out in the southern sector of the minefields. She needed those tanks, but even more, she needed to send Celdek to get those extra Dodgers with their special talents.

Pippa met Pelchak at the landing dock and with barely a glance, strapped herself into the transport for departure. "I really should wait for an escort," she declared by way of greeting.

Pelchak just looked at her. Finally, she got tired of waiting and continued, "If we aren't going to enter into a Permanent Assignment, we should have an escort. Those are the regulations." When he continued to stare at her, she grew even more impatient. "Well, what are you waiting for? Do you really want me to go find an escort?"

"Waiting for you to say something makes sense," Pelchak said.

"What I said makes perfect sense. Please start the transport. I've got to get back to headquarters and start to do some damage control on this latest stunt of Talvok's."

Pelchak started the transport with a disgusted, "Escorts!

Huh!” and pulled away from the landing dock with the characteristic jerking thud of the ground transport system of Trellian.

“I really hope the new track they install will be a bit smoother than this present design,” Pippa sighed as she settled back in her pod.

“Don’t change the subject,” Pelchak objected. “What’s this? No Permanent Assignment?”

“You’re the one who put it off. Again.” It was Pippa’s turn for the disgusted tone.

“One week. Huh.”

She realized he was talking about the amount of time she had requested for their vacation after the Assignment ceremony. “What do you want me to do? Take a month off for a honeymoon?”

He nodded. The man could put more meaning into one little nod, Pippa mused, than most men could convey in an hour of talking.

“I can’t quit my job, Pelchak. I never agreed to that.”

He shook his head this time and gave Pippa a look filled with such hurt and sadness mixed with disappointment that her heart melted, at least for the moment.

“I’m sorry. I know you never asked me to quit. It’s just that taking a month off would be tantamount to quitting at this point. If I left Talvok to his own devices for an entire month, Trellian would go bankrupt.”

His response was to give her a quelling look, eyebrows raised, head cocked to one side as if he’d heard more believable stories from the drunks he arrested after payday.

“I know what you’re thinking. That no one’s irreplaceable. That Talvok is a grown man and could get along fine without me. That if I would just try it, I’d see. But I can’t just try it for a month. A month does not qualify as ‘trying’ in my book. It qualifies as suicide,” she ended under her breath.

When he only continued to monitor the transport’s control

gauges, she continued. "You don't believe me, do you? Well, try this on for size. He just bought twenty sanitation units from Stallworth. Bruek Stallworth. You heard me. The Bruek Stallworth. That's what I have to go fix now."

"No." His vehement tone startled Pippa.

"No, what? No, he can't be fixed? I know Stallworth can't be fixed, but I do have some ideas as to how I can salvage some semblance of a few sanitation units out of the deal so it won't be a total loss much less the usual liability you get from dealing with him."

"No."

She thought for a moment but still couldn't figure out what he was saying, or rather, not saying. "No, what?"

"No you. You are not handling Stallworth. Me."

"Oh, no. You're not going to handle that crook. All we'll get is a big fat investigation. You arrest him, he starts singing fit for the opera and next thing we know, we'll have the authorities all over this place. I run a tight ship, but no ship is tight enough to withstand one of their inspections."

When he didn't reply, she went on. "If you must know, I'm going to use Celdek. He's got the connections we need and that's all I'm saying on that subject." There was still no reply from Pelchak, so she continued. "He'll be bringing in a few of his friends and with their re-engineering expertise along with their powers of persuasion, we should be fine." Again, no reply came, so she felt confident enough to finish up with one last complaint designed to change the topic. "We'll be fine, that is, if Talvok doesn't get any more bright ideas about bargain hunting. He should stick to the drilling equipment and let me run the rest of the operation, like his father did."

"He's not his father. He's your boss."

"I know that. It doesn't mean I have to let him drag this company down into total ruin. He'll thank me in the end."

They were quickly approaching the landing dock of the

headquarters complex. Pelchak pulled up to an open bay and brought the transport to an expert stop, but before Pippa could unstrap herself, he had his hand on the mechanism, releasing her restraints. This put his hand in position to take her wrists in his hands and pull her out into the transport aisle.

Putting his foot in the seat of the pod, he swung her firmly over his knee and trapped her with his left arm. With his right hand, he began methodically covering her backside with swift measured swats. By the time her brain caught up with reality, her bottom was already feeling the sting, even through her tunic and leggings.

The man must have hands made of Stalcon, she thought. Aloud, she protested, "What are you doing?"

"Spanking you."

"Ow! Well, I can tell that, but ow, *ow*, why?"

"Talvok is your boss. You respect him."

"What, even when he's wrong? He made a deal with Stallworth! Hey, please, okay, enough. Let's talk about this."

"You didn't yell at him when you found out?" He never paused in his hot assault on her posterior. Up and down her buttocks and upper thighs, he swatted with controlled precision.

"Well, of course I did. That was only natural. But, ow! But how did you know?"

"I know you."

"Well of all the... oh, ow, ow, *ow*, that's enough. Enough!"

"You let Talvok be the boss. You follow orders. You take breaks and go to sleep at a decent time. From now on." He emphasized the last three words with the three sharpest spansks yet, then let her up. He gave her a firm scowl before folding her in his arms.

It was the scowl that got her. It did it to her every time. The way he wrinkled his nose and pursed his lips together as his eyebrows joined in a coarse black seagull shape above his eyes cracked the shell of her resistance.

"Who's been squealing?"

"About what?"

"You've got more than one snitch?"

"Everybody's my snitch. Some of them just don't realize it."

His tone was so smug that she couldn't help but laugh.

When he heard her mirth, he gave her a look that she interpreted to mean, "Laugh if you want. Funny-looking drills still mine product."

"I know," she replied. "Just because a statement is the height of conceit doesn't mean it's false."

"Never lied to you. Won't start now," he intoned.

She knew this to be true as well and was grateful for it. He might be secretive, pig-headed and demand his own way, but he was always honest. If he gave information, it was truthful. There just wasn't enough of it to suit her.

She tried to push away from him, but he held her up against him. When she squirmed in his grasp, he reached back and popped her bottom twice more, harder than before.

"What? Why won't you let me go? I've got work to do before tomorrow."

"No."

"Not this again. I haven't got time for the guessing games."

Again came the hurt look. She knew he wasn't trying to frustrate her. Words just didn't come naturally to him. "I'm sorry. Take your time. Why won't you let me go?"

"Promise. Time off. Rest. Respect Talvok."

She wondered again who had been telling him what. "I suppose I haven't been as respectful as I should have been with Talvok. I've known him since he was no bigger than a good sneeze." Pelchak nodded but made no move to release his hold. In fact, he gave her two more stinging swats on her already sore backside.

"Ow! All right, all right. I promise to be more respectful. I'll

try not to shout at him. That isn't necessary and doesn't help. There. Are you satisfied?"

"Time off? Rest?"

"Oh, those. Yes, well, I suppose I could try for two weeks off."

"Four."

"Four weeks? Really, I couldn't. Three. That's the very longest. Four weeks would be a whole reporting cycle. If the product doesn't get processed and out on the transports, we don't make payroll."

"Okay. Three." Still, he made no move to let her go. She squirmed again and he gave her rump several stinging swats.

"You agreed to three weeks. Fine! What more do you want?"

"Rest?"

"Oh, that. I'm not sure what you want from me there. I get plenty of sleep. I even have a cubicle set up in my office so I can sleep in peace on the nights I don't have time to return to the dorms."

"Not enough."

"Not enough? How do you know what's enough sleep for me to get?"

"Your eyes," he said, indicating the dark circles underneath her eyes with a small finger circle and a gentle brush of his thumb.

"How do you do that? Know everything about me and you don't even have to ask?"

"Have to look. Love to look." His eyes showed her what he could not say. Her last resistance melted like butter on a drill drone.

"Well, you'll have to continue looking later," she sighed. "I've got work to do." She had no wish for further swats, so she waited until he let her go. Then she pushed away and gathered her things.

He stopped her with one last warning. "I'll find Celdek. He

handles Stallworth. Not you." Pelchak emphasized his last point with a finger pointed forcefully at her nose.

"Sure, of course," Pippa agreed. "No problem. I have no trouble with that. It's why I hire a Dodger. They can take care of anything. Celdek can handle Stallworth. When you find him, send him to me. I promise to let him take it from there."

"When it's over, you're mine," he continued. "Permanent Assignment. Three weeks, just us."

"Agreed," she said. "Just us. Three whole weeks." She wondered how Trellian would survive it.

Celdek scowled at Tiemek who grinned sheepishly back at him from the co-pilot's pod. "I had to bring her, don't you see?"

"No, I don't see. We're going to an established mining planet, complete with law and order and everything, or had you forgotten that? I have enough on my plate without looking after a midge." Celdek didn't really approve of Dodger girls, so he used the derogatory slang name for them.

"Don't call her a midge. She's darn good at what she does. I'm sure she'll be useful," Tiemek argued. "And anyway, it's too late to take her back."

"She'll stir everything up," Celdek complained.

"That's what I'm counting on," came Tiemek's provocative reply. "You're losing your edge. She's got the makings, right enough."

"I know she's got the makings. Isn't she already one of us? Introduce her to Croyden, if you like, but leave me out of it." Celdek used the Dodger slang that referred to the necessity of telling a potential mate most of the many secrets that Dodger life entailed. Even if the girl were one of the rare female Dodgers, the ceremony would still have to be carried out.

“Speaking of that, are you sure about this thing with Candace? You really want me to tell her everything? You think she’ll let you keep on being related to Croyden once she’s got you tied up good and proper with this Permanent Assignment deal?”

Celdek noted with pride the fact that Tiemek still held to the tradition of never mentioning the word Dodger. “Truth to tell, I’m not sure I want to stay in the life, Tie,” Celdek admitted, using the nickname reserved for the very rare safe moments when a Dodger felt he could speak his whole mind. “You said I was losing my edge. Maybe you’re right. You know what they call one of us who’s lost his edge.”

“An inmate?”

“Exactly. The warrants out for my arrest in this sector would paper the wall of a good sized room.”

“All under false names, of course,” Tiemek asserted.

“Of course, and most of them just for questioning, or smuggling, but still, there they are. I have two choices seems to me: stay on Trellian and settle down under Pippa’s protection or leave the sector entirely.”

“Plivit wouldn’t be far enough?”

“Not by half. Not that I wouldn’t like to work for Vilnek. He’s not a bad sort, for what he is. But no, it’s Trellian for me or I move in with Croyden.”

“And if you move in with Croyden, who’s going to look after these ten chappies we’ve got in the basement?”

“Look after them? I’ll be looking after Trellian is what I’ll be doing. They can look after themselves,” came Celdek’s indignant reply. Just then a raucous laugh filtered up from the smuggling holds where the ten men and one woman were secreted for their clandestine trip to Trellian.

Tiemek laughed. “Sounds like they’re having fun already. Maybe Lara’s leading them in a game of charades.”

“She might at that, young Tie, but you listen to me. She

causes any trouble and I'll send her little Dodger hide right back to her mother, you hear me?"

"Her mother is a niece of Croyden, too," chuckled Tiemek.

"I should have known," lamented Celdek. "I should have known."

Chapter 3

“If she covers her mouth and giggles one more time,” Shawna declared, slapping the communi-pad down on the desk in front of her, “I’ll slap her silly.” She pushed away from the temporary desk where she had been assigned to help with the vast administrative task of recording and correlating all the changes and incidents associated with the recent upheaval.

“And I’ll buy a ticket to watch you,” Willa agreed. “What is that giggling supposed to do, attract the men or what?”

“It seems to work for her,” Claire put in doubtfully. “All the men go gaga at the sight of her.”

“Then they must be gaga already,” Shawna growled. “Among those Dodgers Celdek brought back, it’s bad enough, but our own men? Complimenting her and fawning over her like she was some kind of queen or something. It’s a wonder Pippa and Candace can get anything done in the head office with her getting in their way all day.”

“She needs more than a good smack,” Willa proposed. “I think we ought to speak to Celdek.”

Claire looked alarmed. “But he’s a Dodger. I thought you

told me that all Dodgers spank their women. We don't want him to spank her."

"We don't?" Willa asked. "Why ever not?"

Shawna nodded her agreement. "And I know a place where we can..." she hesitated as she saw the look on Claire's face. "Where we can tell Celdek and be assured of privacy while we do it. We'll speak to him at the dinner tomorrow night. There will be a big crowd and no one will think it's strange if we approach him."

"But Celdek is assigned to Candace. How can he give an Adjustment to anyone else?" Claire protested.

"That's their business, Claire, dear," Willa explained sympathetically. "Candace will have to understand about their culture."

"Or maybe Celdek will hand the duty over to Tiemek, if he can keep off the Parth smoking long enough to take care of it," Shawna suggested.

Willa waved a dismissive hand. "That Parth smoking was just a ruse, Candace told me. She should know. She did live at the man's minestead for over a month."

"And Tiemek did not do one lick of work while he was there," Shawna asserted. "The rest of the Dodgers aren't like that. What's wrong with Tiemek?"

"Ask Celdek for yourself, but you know what his answer will be."

All three young women chorused the stock reply together. "If you have to ask, you can't know."

Then Shawna continued, "Celdek has done right by Pippa by bringing the others, if that's what happened. Who knows for sure how they got here? As far as I can tell, they just appeared, along with that giggler, but they are all good workers. I don't know where Trellian would be right now without them."

"And I don't know where Trellian will be without Vilnek and you," Claire sighed. "Do you really have to leave so soon?"

"Vilnek's last treatment is day after tomorrow. If the doctor

certifies that he's fit to return to full duties, he'll Link Turek Inc. and tell them he's ready. That's when he'll have to tell them how many people he's bringing with us. It's coming down to the wire."

"I'll remind Choldor that he's got to make up his mind," Claire promised Shawna. "That's all I can do."

"And I'll get onto Radnok. I think I can talk him around," Willa asserted.

"Good," Shawna remarked. "Just don't let him tell Vilnek you bugged him about it."

"No problem," Willa assured her.

"If I'm going to Link Choldor, I'd better go find a free Linkset," Claire said. "Good night."

"Good night," Willa and Shawna said sweetly. Willa wondered if Claire was falling for it or just wanted to leave them alone to do whatever plotting she suspected they were doing.

"Now, spill it. You know a place where we can what?" Willa demanded as soon as Claire was gone.

"You noticed that recovery, did you? Good. I had almost forgotten about Midge. I know a place where we can watch her get her comeuppance, if we can just get Pippa to let us into the security suite."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Willa crowed.

Claire found a Linkset in an out of the way corner of the dormitory's large first floor lobby. She made the connection to Choldor without problem, but when she saw the worry on his face, she frowned, too. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," Choldor was quick to reply. He even made the effort to curl his scarred face into its best attempt at a smile. Claire sighed in relief as he went on. "It's only some report writing and survey work Talvok's got me doing, is all.

Someday, I'm going to invent a drill drone that writes its own reports."

"That would put me out of a job," Claire quipped.

"No way," Choldor assured her. "No drill drone could ever replace you."

Claire smiled again, knowing that in his own way, he had just paid her a very high compliment indeed. "And the surveys? What's he got you doing this time?"

"Tallying how many minesteads still need repair and replacement of transport track and such like. Nothing hard, just not mining."

"And all you really like is mining, isn't it?"

"You know it's true," Choldor admitted.

"Then we could go to Plivit with Vilnek and Shawna. No more reports. No more surveys." Claire thought she detected a hopeful look cross Choldor's face, but couldn't be sure. The scar only bothered her to the extent that it interfered with her reading his feelings through his facial expressions.

"No, we don't have to do that. I'll make out fine here. Talvok needs us. We love Trellian. Don't we?"

She could hear it in his voice, his fear of her being unhappy, his dread of losing her. She hastened to reassure him. "Yes, of course we do. We love it here. We're very happy here. I'm happy with you, wherever you are."

The relief on his face showed through despite the scar. "That's okay then." He visibly relaxed.

She sighed once more, sad that they would miss this opportunity, but proud of herself for not pressuring him into doing something he obviously didn't want to do."

"Vilnek, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I don't see any way I can ask Claire to leave Trellian."

Choldor's early morning Link had not surprised Vilnek but it did disappoint him. "I understand, old buddy. You have to do what's best for you. There'll be a job waiting for you on Plivit if you ever change your mind."

"It's not me," Choldor assured him. "I'd go in a heartbeat, but Claire loves it here. It kind of surprises me that she doesn't want to go with Shawna, but she'll still have Willa left."

"No, she won't," Vilnek admitted slowly. "Radnok and Willa are coming with us. Didn't Claire tell you?"

"She didn't mention that."

"Well, I'm sure she's got lots of other friends among the Companions, and they can all keep in touch through the Linksets," Vilnek assured him. "And we will, too, okay?"

"Sure thing, Vilnek," Choldor agreed. "I'll see you at the party tonight, won't I?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Vilnek declared. He wasn't looking forward to saying all the goodbyes that would be necessary tonight, but at least he could get them all over with at one time.

"Celdek, it's about Midge," Shawna began as she cornered the Dodger in a dark, private spot, hidden from the mass of party guests. With everyone on the compound either working on or enjoying the festive event, Shawna had no fear of being overheard.

Celdek loved hearing the girl referred to by that nickname. That had been his subtle revenge at Tiemek having sneaked her onto his transport, and he laughed every time it was used. "What about her?"

"You know what about her." Shawna's expressive face told him more than he wanted to hear. He knew from the moment he saw her that Midge was pure trouble. Hadn't she caused trouble for him and Candace already?

Celdek sighed. "You're acting like a Dodger now, girl. Speak plain and maybe, just maybe, I said, I'll see what I can do about her. What exactly are you objecting to?"

"Exactly? Speak plain? Huh! That's the pot asking the kettle not to be black."

Celdek leveled a look at her that apparently had her rethinking her position.

"All right, I'll spell it out if I have to. If she flutters her eyelashes at Vilnek, or bends over him in that low cut tunic, or calls him 'Boss' in that come-hither voice one more time, I won't be responsible for my actions. You brought her here. Do something about her!"

"I know she's a bit hard to get used to sometimes. She can catch a man's eye, but you know you have nothing to worry about from Vilnek."

"He's a man, isn't he? It's not his fault, but he can't help looking. It's distracting for him to have to constantly avoid her, or ward off her attention. And the other men aren't so dedicated. Their Companions are getting mutinous. We'll have real trouble on our hands if..."

"I see your point. It isn't good for business if half the men have their tongues hanging out and half the women are ready to riot."

"You've noticed it too, haven't you? Then why for goodness sakes haven't you taken her in hand?"

"It's not my hand she needs. And besides, nobody has complained until now." He grinned at her with the sole purpose of provoking her into doing something unladylike so that Vilnek would take appropriate measures, but she must have seen through his ploy.

"Oh, no, you don't. You're not getting to me like that."

He grinned again, this time in real pleasure. "You do have the makings, right enough. Are you sure about this thing with

Vilnek? If you ever get tired of him, I know a fellow who could make something of you.”

“Yeah, but what exactly would he make? No thanks,” Shawna declared, sounding as if she knew that he meant no disrespect.

“Ah, the story of my life. Always a day late and all that.”

“You aren’t getting any sympathy from me. I know you are perfectly happy with Candace. When are you going to make things official, by the way?”

“If you have to ask, you can’t know,” came the required Dodger answer to any direct question.

She tried again. “I know it’s your custom to have someone explain things to a girl before she marries into the life. To explain things to a smart girl like Candace, it would take someone equally as smart. Someone a person could respect.”

“Indeed it would,” Celdek agreed with a grin.

“Tiemek is a good man,” Shawna mused.

“That he is. A very good man. He may come in useful for more than one duty tonight, I think.”

Shawna sighed and rolled her eyes. “I guess that’s the closest thing to an answer you’re likely to give, so I’ll take the hint and get back to the main dining area. I’ll bet Vilnek is waiting for me.”

As she walked away, Celdek could hear her muttering, “I’ll just have to leave it to Willa to find Pippa and talk her into doing what we want.” He grinned, trying to imagine what that might be.

“I couldn’t find her,” Willa announced to Shawna a little later. “Where could she be? She’d have to be here at this dinner. It’s too important an event for the Program Manager to miss.” She looked around at all the miners and companions colorfully

dressed in their best clothes, milling around chatting. Pippa's face was not to be seen.

"We can go look in her office suite. That's where we need to go anyway. I don't want to wait too long or we'll miss all the fun," Shawna whispered back casually. "I'll just tell Vilnek that we're taking a walk around the complex for old times' sake."

"Why tell him anything?"

"Don't you think I'd better? And you'd better tell Radnok, too."

"They'll never notice we're gone," Willa replied. "We've got to get moving. Isn't that Tiemek approaching Midge? It must be almost show time."

Shawna hesitated as if she knew that she was treading on thin ice as it was, but was not able to let Willa leave her behind. "Oh, all right. I'm coming."

"Great! Where are we going?"

"If you don't know where we're going, why are you leading?" Shawna queried.

"Not knowing where I was going has never stopped me from wanting to get there first or as fast I can," Willa admitted. Her lovely long legs were setting a blistering pace across the open expanse of the entrance atrium to the main office building.

"Well, just head to the head office suite. We may find Pippa there, but even if we don't, we can still go in. I know where the key is being kept," Shawna confided.

They slinked into a side hallway in the office suite that was so busy during the day but by night had an eerie, threatening feeling. "Which way now?" Willa wanted to know. "How do you know where Tiemek will take her? Why would he take her here?"

"We don't have to know where," Shawna told her. "We just have to know how to access the security cameras." Shawna gave Willa a knowing nod.

"That really is perfect," Willa whispered as they opened the door to the security station in the head office suite.

“Here, lock the door. Now, I can’t access every single room in the complex or anything, but I have a pretty good idea how to... there, that’s them, isn’t it?” Shawna’s fingers tapped and prodded the command console’s various touch pads and screens making pictures flicker and resolve on the panel of monitors that lined the fan-shaped wall in front of them.

“It is indeed,” purred Willa.

Shawna waved another quick command and the largest of the monitors filled with the indistinct image of two figures facing each other in obviously heated conversation.

“Can you get the audio going?” Willa begged. “I don’t want to miss a single swat.”

“Not outside like that,” Shawna admitted disappointedly. She was able to get the images in sharper focus, but only muffled sound accompanied the visuals. “The microphones only pick up so much. It could be recovered with a lot of technical enhancement, but not on the fly like this.”

“That’s no fun. I want to hear. We can sneak over there now that we know where they are,” Willa proposed.

“It might be over before we got there,” Shawna argued. “Let’s just stay and... Oh! Look! He’s got her arm.”

“Wonder what position he’ll use.”

“Looks like he’s bending her over that bench. Good. He’ll be able to get a better swing that way,” Shawna noted.

“Talk about swing! Look at that. I didn’t figure she’d fight him that hard. She could have knocked him out with that roundhouse.”

“But that’s good. It will put him on his guard and he’ll get a better hold on her. I knew he would need to.”

“Here comes the paddle. What is that, a novelty item? That’s not big enough to get through to her.”

“I don’t know. The way he’s swinging it must be causing quite a bit of heat in her seat.”

"The way she's writhing to get away, you'd think he was scalding her."

"That's about what it feels like, isn't it? I'd say he's doing it up right. Listen, it's faint, but you can hear it. That ticking sound is the paddle meeting her saddle."

Willa laughed in delight. "It is! We can hear after all. And now he's getting serious. I knew those legging would have to come down for him to make an impression on an ego that big."

"She's already pretty red. Surely she'll get the message now."

"Yes. See this camera angle over here?" Willa gestured to another monitor to their right. "That shows her face. She's crying. Maybe he's telling her how much trouble she's been and why she has to straighten up."

"I hope he doesn't forget to mention that miners assigned to other Companions are off-limits, especially those who are on Permanent Assignment."

"She's going to be one sorry little Dodger when he gets done with her."

"And you're going to be one sorry little Companion when I get done with you," Vilnek promised flatly.

"Vilnek! What are you doing here?" Shawna gasped.

He indicated the screen with a gesture. "Looks like I'm getting some tips from the Dodgers on how to treat erring females," came his acid retort.

"Look here," Willa began. "Let's be reasonable about this. We didn't do anything wrong."

"Sneaking into this off-limits security station isn't wrong?" Vilnek demanded.

Willa shrugged. "It shouldn't be. As employees of the mining company, we might have been assigned to monitor the grounds during a significant event."

"Might have been, but weren't," was Vilnek's pronouncement. "And what about the interfering? Celdek told me it was you who told him about Midge."

“Nothing he didn’t already know. I just registered my complaint and asked him to do something about it before the situation got any worse. I have a right to speak my mind,” Shawna defended herself.

“We didn’t lie about her to get her into trouble. We just wanted to make sure she got what was coming to her,” Willa added.

“We really did it for Pippa and Candace. You know what a bother she is to them. And we did it for you. We know how you hate her falling all over you. Well, now you won’t have to worry about that, will you?”

“Good try, little miss, but it isn’t going to fly with me. Telling Celdek, I can understand, maybe. Watching it happen? Nope.” With that, Vilnek pulled Shawna up from the seating pod and lead her by the wrist out the door. “Willa, Radnok is looking for you. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get back to the dorm as quick as you can.”

Willa gave one more longing glance at the monitor, wishing she could stay to see the end of Midge’s punishment. It was so good to see that little flirt, who reminded her so uncomfortably of her old self, get the Peace Initiative Adjustment she so richly deserved. Reluctantly, she dragged her feet back out into the main office suite just in time to hear Pelchak’s voice.

“Vilnek, have you seen Pippa?”

Willa was surprised to see the special investigator. Since his job looking into the death of Talvok’s brother had ended, he had been a frequent visitor, advising Talvok on security matters and helping Pippa straighten up the mess left after the upheaval. “No wonder she’s hiding from you. I’d hide from a man, too, if he led me on like that. Three postponements? Really, Pelchak!”

“Willa, this isn’t the time to harass the man,” Vilnek chided. “What’s wrong, Pelchak? You don’t look like a man who’s just looking for a quick cuddle with his Companion.”

“I can’t find Pippa anywhere and I’ve been looking for her

for the better part of two days. She told me she'd be out at Talvok's working, but he just told me she hasn't been there. Candace told me she hasn't been here at Headquarters. Where is she?"

"You checked the dorm?" Vilnek asked.

"No dorm," Pelchak replied in his usual taciturn manner.

"She usually uses the little room off her office here," Shawna confirmed the investigators words. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen her in a while. We've been so busy, I hadn't really noticed. She does often work out at Talvok's compound."

"But she doesn't live there," Willa agreed. "She hasn't been in the Companions' dorm. It's my job to tally the nightly checks."

"Then let's take a look in her room here," Vilnek suggested.

Pelchak was already headed to the door. He waved his hand over the entrance pad and Willa was surprised to note that it opened to his handprint. Pippa would have had to program it that way, so she obviously would not object to his entering. Perhaps she even meant him to enter.

The room was completely neat and almost empty. On the sleeping pod lay a communi-pad. Pelchak tapped it into operation and read the contents in silence, passing it on to Vilnek when he was done.

Vilnek read it aloud. "Needed a change of scene. Taking some time off. Will return when able."

"What? Pippa taking time off? That's crazy," Shawna exclaimed.

Willa looked down at Pelchak who had collapsed into a slump on the low sleeping pod. "Can't say as I blame her. Put off like that, not once, not twice, but three times. I'd be embarrassed, too."

"It was her."

"What was her?" Vilnek asked, but Shawna thought she understood.

“You mean it wasn’t you that postponed the ceremony? That’s not what Pippa said.”

Pelchak shook his head as if to shake loose more words. “Going to make things official. She wouldn’t take enough time off. I got mad. Wanted more time. Just needed time. Just needed a chance.”

“Well, you’re out of chances now,” Willa scolded. “Nothing to do but wait and hope she comes back to you.”

“I guess we’d better tell Talvok. He’s not going to be happy. Pippa leaving now?” Vilnek shook his head as if to say he couldn’t believe Pippa would be so inconsiderate.

“Right when you’re leaving, too,” Willa agreed. “It is hard to believe. It took something drastic for her to put Talvok in such a bind.”

Shawna took Vilnek’s hand as if to reassure him. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known she would do this. Anyway, Turek needs you on Plivit. We’ve got to go. There will never be a good time to leave Trellian.”

Willa nodded agreement. “And this can’t change our decision either. Radnok and I are going with you. Talvok will have to figure this out for himself.”

“First things first,” Vilnek replied.

“Talvok’s place,” Pelchak stated as he rose.

“We’ll go with you,” Vilnek agreed. When Shawna sent him a confused look, he explained, “We’ll have to check Talvok’s compound before we start a search.”

“Search?” asked Shawna. “Why should he search? Pippa left him. He’ll just have to wait until she makes up her mind to come back.”

“If she wants to come back,” Willa put in.

Pelchak didn’t wait for them to finish.

Chapter 4

“**S**he wasn’t at your place,” Vilnek informed Talvok upon their return from the family compound. “Do you have any idea where else she might be staying?”

“No, and this just isn’t like Pippa.” His concern showed on his face and sounded in his voice.

Pelchak grunted, which Vilnek took to mean that Talvok’s comment was a grave understatement.

“You’re the investigator, Pelchak. What’s our next move?”

“Think like the quarry,” came Pelchak’s succinct reply.

“The quarry, as in Pippa?” Vilnek asked.

“No. The quarry is whoever took her,” Talvok countered.

“Took her? Now hang on a minute,” Vilnek protested. “I thought this was a matter of her leaving Pelchak. We need to get her back, sure, but if somebody took her, that puts a different light on things.”

“It puts a different light on things if she left on her own. I’m not helping get her back if she doesn’t want to come back.” The looks exchanged between Talvok and Pelchak told Vilnek that neither man liked the other’s involvement in Pippa’s life.

“There’s no way to tell until we find her whether she left or

was taken,” Vilnek put in reasonably. “If she was taken, we’ve got to move fast, so let’s rule that out first. Think like the quarry, huh? Who would that be? Who would want to take Pippa?”

“Stallworth.” Pelchak could put more venom into one word than most men could express in a half an hour’s cursing.

“Yes, of course. She brought in those Dodgers and now Stallworth is seeing red. He may think that if she isn’t around, he’ll have a freer hand and the Dodgers will disappear,” Talvok muttered.

“It’s just not Stallworth’s usual style,” Vilnek mused aloud. “Fraud, yes. Kidnapping? Not that I’ve ever heard.”

“Does everybody know about this guy but me?” Talvok wondered.

Pelchak gave him another withering look. “If he tried to buy her off, she might have threatened to Link the authorities. That would make him desperate enough.”

“And if he’s thinking like his quarry, then he was thinking like Pippa,” Vilnek added. “He knows by now that she’s more than dedicated to this planet and this mining operation. He would have snatched her from one of her workstations.”

“About that note she supposedly left. Do you think it was genuine?” Talvok asked.

“No way,” Vilnek replied. “Time off is a four letter word to her. She would never have said that.”

“So we are assuming that she was taken?” Talvok queried. “I have to say, she has been unhappy with Pelchak recently. There was trouble between them.”

Vilnek glanced over at Pelchak, wondering how he liked being talked about as if he weren’t there. If he minded it, he gave no outward sign.

“If she was mad at me, it was because of you.” He directed his comment at the floor, then brought his head up to meet Talvok’s eyes.

“What are you saying? Are you accusing him of trying to

come between the two of you? If you are, that's crazy. He's got Faith for one thing and for another—"

"For another, if I wanted to break you two up, I would have done it without taking her away from her work. I need her too much. This whole planet may as well close its doors without her." Talvok looked away, then turned and paced to the viewport to look out on the barren landscape that characterized his chosen home.

"Not accusing him. Wouldn't be sitting here if I thought he had her," Pelchak pronounced.

Vilnek knew what a referee in an old-fashioned boxing match must have felt like. "So if she was taken from work, there should be security camera records. Nothing happens in the headquarters area that isn't recorded somehow."

Pelchak stood and strode out of the room. Vilnek turned to Talvok who grimaced as he dropped himself heavily into a seating pod. "I assume he's going to look at whatever security's got?"

"I guess so," Vilnek agreed. "I'll go over there and see what he'll let me do to help."

"Wait. Before you go, I need to know: how many are you taking with you?"

"Twelve."

"That's not so bad," Talvok said.

"I don't mean to leave you stranded. I didn't know..."

"That Pippa would leave?" Talvok finished for his friend.

"She didn't leave. I thought we established that."

"You established that. I'm still not convinced. I think I ran her off. I made it impossible for her to stay and the heck of it is I don't even know for sure how I did it. I didn't mean to. But it happened all the same. Life was a lot simpler when we were just fighting off a planet-wide menace."

"If she left on her own, then she'll be back. She may have just needed some time to cool off. But if you are so sure you

drove her off and she wanted to leave, why didn't you tell Pelchak?"

"Would you tell Pelchak that you were the cause of Pippa leaving?"

"I see your point."

"I thought you would. I plan to see Trellian through this mess with all my facial features intact, thank you. If I want my nose on the other side of my head, I'll go to the health center and have it moved there."

"You sure about that? Because if Pippa does show back up and tell Pelchak you made her mad enough to walk away from him, I'm sure he'll be more than happy to move your nose and a couple of other body parts for you."

"Meanwhile, I still have to get this mining operation back up to full capacity. It will mean relying more and more on Choldor. He's not one of the guys you're taking is he?"

"No, but Radnok is. He's not leaving because of you. It's his Willa. She's dying to come with Shawna and get in on the ground floor, I guess. I was kind of surprised about Choldor. He said that Claire didn't want to leave, so they are staying. Now I'm glad it's working out this way."

"Me, too. I'll need Choldor for fieldwork and supervising. Candace can step in with the office work. And Faith helps out as much as she can."

Vilnek mirrored his friend's doubtful expression. "Faith's research isn't going to help that much in rebuilding minesteads, is it?"

"She's putting her research on hold for a while," Talvok admitted. His tone told Vilnek that Talvok hated to ask the sacrifice of her, but since he was making a similar sacrifice by giving up his career in research and development of mining equipment, he had to allow it.

"We all have to take what chances we get. I'm sure you'll

both get back to doing what you love once Trellian is up and running like normal.”

“I’ve promised her that. This will only be for a while. She’ll get back to her work, for sure,” Talvok muttered, almost to himself.

Vilnek nodded then rose to go. “I better go help Pelchak with the security camera records. Once he figures out where she may have gone, he’ll need someone with him to keep him from doing something crazy.”

“I thought you had another treatment at the health center,” Talvok reminded him.

“I do and I’ll be there tomorrow bright and early. That leaves me the rest of the day free. You, on the other hand, have a million things to get done. Better get at them so Pippa isn’t overwhelmed with work when she gets back.”

“Right. And keep me posted, will you? I want to know the minute Pippa is found.”

Vilnek nodded again and was gone.

The next morning found Shawna, Willa, and Claire talking at the table in their dorm unit’s common area. “Radnok hasn’t changed his mind, has he?” Shawna wanted to know.

“Not at all,” Willa announced. “When I convince them, they stay convinced. Radnok told me this whole thing is just making him more determined to leave Trellian. He says he can’t stand to see what a pig’s breakfast Talvok is making of this operation and he’s done.” Willa looked smug until she saw Claire’s concerned face.

“Of course, he doesn’t really mean that,” Shawna inter-vened. “Talvok will hit his stride. You and Choldor will be fine here.”

“That’s right. He’s just trying to make himself feel better

about leaving at such an awkward moment. He'd stay if I let him. It's inertia. He just doesn't want to move, but it's for the best, so I made him see reason."

Shawna thought she saw a lot of things, but since it resulted in her getting to take one of her best friends with her, she was willing to overlook them."

"And you had no luck with Choldor?" Shawna asked Claire.

"I couldn't pressure him," Claire reminded her friends. "It had to be his decision and he just didn't want to go. He gets all upset and worried about us any time I bring it up. I guess he just wants to stay in his quiet little corner of the world. And I'm fine with that. Or I would be if we could just be together out there."

"That should happen soon," Willa reassured her.

"Even with Pippa gone?" Claire asked.

Shawna rolled her eyes dismissively. "Pippa ran things so well that even in her absence, her systems keep chugging along. There will be a few more glitches, of course, but Candace can handle them."

"Do you think Celdek is handling her?" Willa wanted to know.

Shawna shrugged. "You tell me. Has she been better around headquartering these last two weeks since Celdek got back?"

"Hard to tell, with those other Dodgers he brought, not to mention Midge. She and Candace can't stand each other," Willa explained.

"With Pippa gone, that will put the pressure on Candace and Faith," Claire remarked with concern in her voice. "Then you'll be leaving soon, too, Willa. What will Talvok do?"

Shawna tried hard to dismiss her worry with a shrug. "He'll manage. They'll all manage. And you'll get back out to your beloved minestead soon enough. I just wish I could see our old minestead one more time before we leave. Vilnek promised, but what with this totally useless search for Pippa, he's too busy. He's

going for his treatment, then straight over to the security station to keep reviewing records.”

“But they were up all night reviewing records, weren't they? How many records are they going to scan?” Willa enquired.

“As many as it takes is what Vilnek told me,” Shawna informed them. “So he can't take me out to our old place and here I sit with nothing to do.”

“We could go out there together,” Claire suggested. “I'm sure we could get someone to drive the transport for us. It's not that far.”

“Hey, I know!” Willa exclaimed. “Let's call Celdek. We can ask him about Candace and get all the juicy details on the way.”

“Didn't you learn your lesson last night?” Claire demanded of Willa.

She had the good grace to blush at the memory.

Shawna recalled that Willa and Radnok hadn't gone out to Talvok's place. Where had she been and what had she been doing? Shawna thought she could guess. “Spill it,” commanded Shawna.

Willa shook her head at the memory. “What's to spill? I got my rump roasted good and proper. He asked Claire to go down to the big common area and stay there until he came down. He then proceeded to treat my backside like a dirty old rug.”

“Leggings up or down?” Shawna wanted to know.

Claire looked scandalized at this kind of talk, but Willa answered without a qualm. “Both. He starts out with my leggings up, just flipping up my tunic, then he lowers them to just below my bottom where they kind of cinch it in and hold it up to make a better target. Then, just when I think there surely must be smoke rising from my derriere, he lowers the leggings halfway down my thighs and spansks where the leggings were.”

“Oh, my goodness. He does that, too? Vilnek does that sometimes and gets me right where it hurts the most. It's such a sensitive spot,” Shawna commiserated.

“Sitting on a seating pod is bad enough, but if I have to sit on the edge of the sleeping pod or anything like that, it’s the spot that hits the hardest. Sometimes, like last night, he makes me sit on the table and tell him what I did wrong.”

“He doesn’t lecture beforehand?” Claire wondered.

“Sure, he does. Then he makes me repeat it all so he knows I listened. I had to promise him that I would quit interfering in other peoples’ business. I had to apologize for being rude to Vilnek, the old tattletale. I don’t know when he had time to tell on me, but somehow, he did. And I had to promise to quit pressuring him and nagging him about things. Apparently, he’d already made up his mind to move to Plivit, but he didn’t tell me. I brought it up once too often, I guess, but he was letting it slide.”

“Maybe he figured since he had you in a convenient position he might as well take care of everything all at once while he had the chance,” Shawna suggested.

“Glad I didn’t put him to any trouble,” Willa griped sarcastically. “I’m still sore this morning.”

Claire looked with sympathy at her friend, but Shawna was more practical. “Then we’ll ask Celdek to bring some extra cushions for his seating pods.” Turning to Claire, she added, “And we won’t ask any intrusive questions about Candace. We will have to ask how she is, for politeness sake, but we won’t mention the Peace Initiative or anything, I promise. Okay, Claire?”

“I guess that would be okay.” Claire turned away and the other two girls looked at each other with knowing winks.

“Where were you?” Shawna demanded of Celdek as she fastened herself into his transport. “If it hadn’t taken us so long to contact you, we could have gone yesterday and I would have more time.”

“As it is,” Willa added, as squirmed in the pod, “we have to

rush in order to be back before..." Celdek heard Shawna kick Willa discreetly on what sounded like an ankle and she continued, "...before it's time to come back and finish packing."

Celdek smiled at the control panel. He knew the symptoms of a Companion with a well-spanked bottom trying to find a comfortable position, which was practically impossible in the form fitting pods, padded though they were. If his assumptions about what Willa was about to say when Shawna kicked her were correct, they would both be sitting tenderly by the end of the day.

He considered feeling guilty about aiding them in their attempt to outsmart their men, but decided on the whole he was really helping them. They needed to learn a lesson and he was just helping them gain valuable experience. The fact that he enjoyed thinking of them getting their comeuppance couldn't be helped.

Claire scooted in a moment later and apologized for making them wait. "I just had to let Choldor know where I was going."

"He isn't here in the headquarters compound, is he?" Shawna asked with concern in her voice.

"No, but I always Link him before I go anywhere," Claire answered. "That way, he knows not to Link me at the dorm or office."

"Vilnek is too busy finishing up last minute details for the move to Plivit for me to bother him. Between that and helping Pelchak look for Pippa, he's running at top speed," Shawna commented.

Willa nodded. "The way Radnok is carrying on, you'd think we were going with you tomorrow, Shawna, instead of waiting for the next day's transport."

"If Pippa would just see reason," Shawna complained, "and come back on her own, it would sure help the situation. As it is, I could barely get Vilnek to stop working long enough to take his final treatment."

Celdek listened with growing understanding. “What do you mean, if Pippa would just see reason? You don’t think she got snatched?”

“No, of course not,” Willa answered. “Do you think we’d be going on a pleasure trip if we thought she were in danger. Those men are crazy to think she could be taken against her will here on Trellian.”

“The security records have been tampered with,” Celdek pointed out.

“Of course they have,” Shawna admitted. “Pippa tampered with them so as to leave fewer clues as to where she went. And what a good strategy it was, too! Look how much time they’ve burned up trying to restore records. Pippa is one smart cookie.”

Celdek wanted all this clarified. “So you girls all think Pippa just walked away from Trellian? After all she’s done for this place? After all her hard work?”

“Not from Trellian,” Willa contradicted. “From Pelchak. He doesn’t deserve her. I mean, really! Who does he think he is, postponing the Permanent Assignment ceremony half a dozen times?”

“Just four times,” Claire corrected her softly. “And he only did it because she wouldn’t take enough time off to do the thing properly.”

“Says him,” Willa countered.

“And you girls know better than he does?” Celdek asked.

“Of course we do,” Shawna declared, rolling her eyes. “Men!”

Celdek no longer felt any guilt at all in helping Shawna and Willa in this little escapade. If things went south, and he fully intended to make sure they did, Vilnek and Radnok would know exactly what to do with them. He couldn’t wait.

They coasted up to Vilnek's minestead having made good time on the old track. Shawna wondered why there was so much new track being laid for the transports around Trellian when the old track still seemed serviceable. Celdek pulled the transport into the loading dock with an expert flourish then waved the door open to hand each of the girls out. Shawna had to smile at his good-humored gallantry. He certainly was being helpful this morning. She thought that perhaps he was making this trip as a nice send-off for Willa and herself.

Shawna stepped off the transport and looked around, remembering the last time she had seen these buildings. The fear she had felt then came back to her in a rush as she recalled Willa's first assigned miner, his plans to kill them all and his violent death. Shaking off these unhappy memories, she forced herself to recall the happy times, as she and Vilnek worked side by side, first in the mining, then in the Serpiac research. They were happy times, full of purpose and love. Her heart swelled at the thought of the chance she had been given and of the life she was so glad to have chosen.

Willa and Claire preceded her inside. Celdek went off to find the hoses needed to connect the transport to the power grid to recharge while they looked around. Finally Shawna went inside to find Willa and Claire talking about old times.

"Remember how sick I was? How much you had to do to take care of me?" Claire recalled.

"You were no trouble at all," Shawna countered. "It was Willa who was the problem. Remember the Adjustment you got after that one trip here?"

"I remember the one I got the time I refused to come here," Willa noted. "I'm never doing anything like that again."

Shawna felt a twinge of guilt at that comment. She knew Radnok and Vilnek would not approve of this little jaunt, so she and Willa had merely neglected to mention it to them. If they were too busy to notice, what they didn't notice wouldn't hurt

them. She just had to be sure they got back in plenty of time for her to finish her preparations.

Soon enough the girls were ready to leave. Celdek uncoupled the power connection and helped the friends back into the transport. "While we're here, we might as well swing by Radnok's old place, don't you think?" he asked.

Claire frowned. "I don't think it's such a good idea to change our plans like that."

"She's probably right," Celdek commented. "Vilnek and Radnok wouldn't like it. They are in charge, so I guess..."

His comments seemed to rankle Shawna. "They're in charge when they're here," Shawna countered. "When they're not, we can do as we like. Why not go to your old minestead, Willa?"

Willa quite agreed. "Sure! It would be wonderful to see it one more time and say good-bye."

"But we'll be in such a rush to get back," Claire worried. "Some of the track isn't in very good shape. It could slow us down."

"Nonsense," Shawna disagreed. "The track has been fine."

"What about emergencies? We've just been lucky so far. Celdek hasn't had any Radplant warnings in a while. What if a pack of fensel wanders by? Those awful beasts could keep us in the minestead or trapped in the transport for hours."

"You worry too much," Willa declared. "We'll be fine. Celdek, that would be lovely. Let's go!"

Chapter 5

“**T**hat track wasn’t anything to Link home about,” Shawna noted as they got out of the transport at the loading dock of Willa and Radnok’s minestead.

“Radnok’s been Linking about it, all right. He’s been complaining every chance he gets,” Willa laughed. “I haven’t been out here in ages, but it’s gotten worse. Thank goodness we’re done with this disaster area. Without Pippa, Talvok will never get all these repairs made.”

Celdek noted Claire’s hurt look and scowled at Willa. “It’s not as bad as all that. My Candace will put things to rights, just you wait and see.”

“I’m sure she’s doing a fine job,” Shawna assured him as they waved themselves into the main living quarters. “Willa didn’t mean any criticism.”

Celdek looked skeptical and added a mental note to an ever-lengthening list of observations he planned to share with Vilnek and Radnok at the soonest opportunity.

“No, of course, I didn’t,” Willa agreed. “How is Candace doing, anyway? I’ve been working with her at headquarters and she’s been very jumpy and agitated.”

“She should be doing better now,” Celdek noted in a concerned tone. “I would have thought the attention I paid her when I first got back would have done the trick.”

A look came over his face that was hard to mistake as he recalled the events of the last several days. He made a quick decision and then plunged into his tale. “I heard about her shenanigans even before I got back from collecting my brothers. There is no reason for that kind of goings on. So over the transport’s Link, I told her she was getting an Adjustment just as soon as I stepped on planet.

“That made her worry, I’m guessing, because next thing I know, she’s sending me on eighty-five errands taking me in every direction except the right one, all supposedly from Pippa. I wasn’t having any, I can tell you. I just dropped those cousins of mine and left it to Tiemek to get them settled.”

“I thought they were your brothers,” Claire noted innocently.

“Brothers, cousins, it’s all the same to us,” Celdek laughed.

“It’s part of the Dodger thing, Claire,” Willa told her. “Don’t interrupt or ask questions. If you do, we’ll just have to listen to a whole bunch of Dodger gobbledy-gook and I don’t have time right now. What did you do to her, Celdek?”

Willa should have learned by now what asking a direct question got you. “If you have to ask, you can’t know,” came Celdek’s cocky reply. Oh, how he enjoyed annoying Companions.

Shawna obviously understood the Dodger mind much better, as her next comment revealed. “Too bad you couldn’t follow through on your promise to give her an Adjustment.”

Celdek pulled an astonished face, glad for the chance to regale such a lovely and eager audience. “But of course, I did follow through. I couldn’t leave poor Candace in such a state now, could I?”

“No decent man could,” Shawna commented, with just enough emphasis on the word “decent” to rile Celdek.

“If it wasn’t an Adjustment I gave her then I don’t know

what it was! She seemed impressed enough by it, with the way she was carrying on. She squirmed when I got hold of her and squealed when I slung her across my lap. Never saw the like of fighting, and that was just for the appetizers using my bare hand. By the time I got to the soup course, she was wailing so loud I thought they would hear her in the next office."

"You didn't do it in the office," Shawna declared. "You wouldn't be so bold." Ah, that Shawna did know how to talk to a Dodger.

"None bolder, by Croyden! Office or minefield, that girl is a challenge to spank. I found it hard to hold her, but hold her I did. She didn't seem to like my soup ladle, I'm guessing," explained Celdek.

"Which looked suspiciously like a hairbrush, I'm guessing," said Shawna in a fair imitation of his voice.

Celdek's glance at Shawna held admiration with just a bit of challenge. "It was convenient, that hairbrush. I had it in my carryall. The paddle was convenient, too. That's why Croyden's lot generally carry one around with them."

Shawna prodded just a little more. "So Candace didn't like the main course."

"Not in the least, to judge by her pitching and rolling," Celdek agreed. "I did quite a thorough job, too, all over her backside. No real rhythm, but no real pauses either. I switched it up a lot to keep her off kilter."

"Is that why they do that?" Willa asked, but Celdek ignored her. He was watching the blush that spread over Claire's lovely features as she listened, almost unwillingly, to the intimate details.

The blush reminded Celdek of the deep red that had bloomed all over Candace's fair skin. He wouldn't mind if she had a few bruises for a while, just to remind her that he was watching out for her. No better way for a woman to know she's cared about and loved than to see it with her own eyes in a place where only her eyes, and maybe his, would see it.

Shawna stepped in again to prompt the Dodger toward more explanation. "I think it's just that they can't keep a steady beat. That's why Vilnek doesn't spank in a predictable pattern."

This drew a scornful snort from Celdek. "Helps her hear what I'm saying better if she can't think all that clearly and I wanted my message to get straight through to her like an Enabler message. I told her that I didn't want her working such horrible hours any more or being such a slave driver. The emergency is over, and I told her she's got to slow down."

Willa and Shawna nodded their agreement but it was Claire who expressed what they all seemed to be feeling. "I hadn't really thought of it that way before. Still, it does seem a shame to punish her for trying so hard to help the people she loves."

Celdek looked at Claire with a mixture of pity and indulgence, tinged with disbelief. In his world, no one was that nice. He enjoyed the novelty of dealing with her, but found it very difficult to take her seriously. "She can't help people if she's in the health center being treated for exhaustion."

This comment visibly sobered his listeners. "Do you think that's where Pippa is? Could it be that she isn't really missing? That Talvok drove her to the edge and she's had some kind of collapse?"

Celdek had to turn his head away. Some girls were just so easy to lead it was almost unfair. Still, that had never stopped him before. He murmured softly, "If anyone would give of herself until she had nothing left, it would be Pippa. My Candace would run a close second, but Pippa has been at this for a long time and with no one to look after her, either. Isn't it bound to catch up with a body sooner or later?"

"She has Pelchak," Shawna pointed out, but without much conviction in her voice.

Celdek gave a derisive sneer. "Security," he declared, as if to him that word said it all. In fact, his tone let them know that he

didn't like using such words in mixed company. "And anyway, he hasn't been here long, nor looked after her well."

He watched as they went over the minestead one last time, remembering all the experiences they had shared. He listened with half an ear to their reminiscences, especially when Willa recalled some of the more memorable Adjustments she'd received at Radnok's well-experienced hand. Claire even had a story or two to tell from her short time with the older miner, before he and Willa had requested Permanent Assignment.

"All right, ladies. I hate to say it, but I've got to finish the recharge on the transport and then it's back to the dormitory for you three." He was getting anxious to get back and make his report.

"Let me just use the Linkset for a moment," Willa requested. "I need to tell Radnok one thing before we leave."

His grin widened as he answered, "Take your time. I'm ready when you are."

"Radnok," Willa began once the Link had been established. "this is important. You've got to tell Vilnek and Pelchak immediately. Pippa isn't missing."

"What are you talking about?" Radnok demanded. "Why else have they been spending all their time looking for the woman? And speaking of looking for women, where are you? I haven't seen you all day."

"I'm out at the old minestead, just looking around, but that's not the important thing," Willa said impatiently.

Radnok cut her off. "It's the most important thing! It's the only thing important to me. How did you get—"

Willa interrupted him. "Celdek brought us. We're perfectly fine. We were talking to him when we figured it out. He mentioned that Candace was working herself to death and he

wouldn't tolerate it. Then Shawna realized that maybe that's what happened to Pippa. Maybe she's worked herself into a state and had to be sent away for treatment."

"They've checked the health center," Radnok countered, doubtfully.

"Not our health center," Shawna put in. "Talvok would send her away so no one would know. I knew that she hadn't been kidnapped. That's just too far-fetched. Still, I wondered what could have made her abandon Trellian at this crucial time. This explains everything. Talvok drove her crazy then put her somewhere to hide the evidence."

"Shawna, you have no proof of any of this, do you?" Radnok asked reasonably.

"Not proof exactly, no, but I can just tell," Shawna answered.

Vilnek's voice joined Radnok's. "Where have you been, Shawna? With Pippa missing, you think this is the time to disappear without telling me where you are?"

Shawna knew that tone of voice. She swallowed hard. She hadn't planned on his finding out about her little jaunt quite so soon. "I've been here and there, just saying good-bye. Look, Celdek is ready to go. We really have to run. We only wanted to tell you our idea about where Pippa is, so you wouldn't worry about her anymore. Just check some nearby health centers and I'm sure you'll find her, safe and sound. We'll see you in a little while. Bye!" She closed the Link before they had a chance to say anything further.

Shawna looked at Willa and Claire. "I didn't like the sound of Vilnek's questions. We'd better get back pronto and do some damage control."

"Why is Celdek smiling like that?" Claire wondered out loud as they walked out towards the transport. "He looks like the cat that ate the canary."

"Why are we stopping, Celdek?" Shawna asked. "And what was that noise?" The transport shuddered and jerked to a stop.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Willa complained. "What's Celdek playing at?"

"Not to worry, ladies," Celdek declared from the control pod. "This section of track has yet to be replaced is all. It rides a bit rough and something vital has obviously turned loose. I'll just have a look and tighten it right up." He exited the transport while the three friends looked at each other in dismay.

"I can't believe this is happening," Willa groaned.

"I'm already in enough hot water as it is," Shawna agreed. "This delay will send Vilnek right over the edge."

"Maybe we should go out and try to help him. It can't be that bad, can it?" Willa and Claire moved to the viewports while Shawna buried her face in her hands.

"What's that smoke?" Claire asked. "Is the transport supposed to do that?"

"Transports don't give off exhaust like old combustion engines," Shawna said, joining Claire at the viewport. "This is really not good."

They all headed out to see what was happening, arriving just in time to see Celdek lower his hand from his temple as if he had just finished sending an Enabler message.

"What's so funny?" Shawna demanded.

Celdek turned to face his audience. "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that we are in range. I was able to send a direct message to your men. They're on their way to pick you up."

"What's the bad news?" Claire wanted to know, but Shawna had no doubts.

She and Willa were shaking their heads and sighing. "The bad news is that we are in range so he was able to send a message to the men and they are on their way to pick us up."

“But that’s the same as the good news,” Claire noted in a confused voice.

“Exactly,” Celdek grinned. “Depends on your perspective, doesn’t it?”

Shawna gave him a shove that was only half-joking. “You didn’t do this on purpose, did you?”

“I have to admit, it has been on my mind the way you girls went out of your way to get poor Midge in trouble,” Celdek admitted. “She’d done nothing to you.”

“Poor Midge?” Willa protested.

“Nothing to us?” Shawna agreed with Willa. “Why, you can’t—”

“So, while I might not stoop so low as to lead you girls into temptation, I wasn’t about to stand in the way. This technical difficulty is just a bit of icing on the cake.” Celdek’s grin was smug enough to crack Stalcon.

By the time Vilnek’s transport arrived, Shawna had worked herself up into quite a state of righteous indignation. The first words out of her mouth when Vilnek stopped his transport were, “He tricked us, Vilnek! He set us up! This is so unfair!”

“Come on, Shawna,” the big man replied as he firmly took her elbow to guide her into his transport. “We’ve got things to discuss before we finish up getting ready to leave.”

Shawna knew what he meant by “discuss,” so she tried to pull back. “Not with Willa and Claire on board,” she protested.

“They’re not coming with us,” Vilnek informed the group. “We figured each of us was going to need some privacy so we all brought our own transports. Choldor has even got permission to take Claire back to his minestead tonight. His sector has been cleared for Companion habitation again. Radnok will be out here as soon as he finds the replacement coupling Celdek needs, then stay and help him fix it before he brings you back, Willa.”

Willa and Claire waved a dismal farewell to Shawna who

dragged her feet all the way into the transport. The ride back to headquarters had never seemed so short.

Vilnek lost no time docking the transport and blocking Shawna's way as she tried to disembark. "Where do you think you're going?"

"We have a lot to do, so I don't think..."

"That's right, you didn't think!" Vilnek interrupted. "If you had thought, you wouldn't have pulled such a stunt, especially not just when I need all my concentration to manage this transfer. Do you know how worried I was?"

"We were easy enough to find," Shawna countered. "We weren't hiding. It couldn't have taken you long to—"

"That's not the point. I shouldn't have to look for you or wonder. You should have been with me, helping me, not distracting me!"

"I know, and I'm sorry, but you did promise I could go see the old minestead one more time. I was just taking care of that for you without bothering you."

"Well, next time, bother, okay?"

"All right. Next time, I'll be sure to let you know where I am. I'll tell you beforehand." Relieved that he didn't seem to be making any move to give her the Adjustment she had been so sure he was planning, Shawna relaxed back into a seating pod.

"Oh, no you don't," Vilnek declared as he pulled her to her feet. "No seating pods for you. I want you bent over, touching your toes."

Shawna couldn't help trying to argue. "Now, Vilnek, really, no harm was done. Everything turned out fine. I didn't break any rules. Just give me one more chance and I'll prove to you that I understand now what you want me to do next time."

"Nothing doing," Vilnek answered. "I've given you too many

chances already and maybe that's the problem. You think you can get away with things just because I'm busy with the move and Pippa's disappearance."

"About that," Shawna began.

"Not now!" Vilnek ordered. "Over! This minute!"

Shawna knew that tone. She knew better than to delay any longer. She was in for an Adjustment whether she felt she deserved it or not. This was just a fact of her life that under normal circumstances, she cherished. It simply didn't look so good upside down.

He began with his hand. Hard, strong, and work-roughened, Vilnek's palm was as formidable as any paddle. Shawna found it beyond difficult to stay in place after the first five minutes. She squirmed and bounced on her toes until at last she could stand it no longer.

"Back over," Vilnek commanded.

"Oh, please, no more! I can't!" Shawna begged, rubbing her stinging behind furiously. "It hurts so much."

"It's supposed to hurt, little one," came Vilnek's not ungentle reply. "I have to get my point across and be sure it stays there."

He continued on with his thorough tanning of her tender hide, this time leaving his vice-like arm around her waist to encourage her to stay bent over. All the while, he scolded and warned her. "You know how to act. You know what I expect. You know what's needed and why. How could you run off and do whatever came into your head without any regard to me? Did you think I wouldn't notice? Have I been letting you get away with that much that you thought I had forgotten what to do about a wayward wife?"

Before she could answer, he went on, never pausing in his rhythmic swatting. "I did notice, and I do notice, and I haven't forgotten a thing. I haven't forgotten about all the other little infractions that have been building up as well. Spying on other Companions getting Adjustments? The Peace Initiative is not a

spectator sport. Being snippy and disrespectful to our friends and co-workers? That's not allowed either here or on Plivit. And worst of all, influencing your friends to nag their husbands into letting them come with us? Did you really think I would let that pass?"

She knew he did not expect answers. He expected her to be still and listen to all he was saying, to really hear it, and to remember it. She tried hard to be still, but with his hand covering her buttocks and upper thighs with horrible stinging flames, she found it impossible to make her body obey her mind's commands.

Finally, she felt his arm release her waist, so she stood up, ready for the comforting hug of reassurance that always followed such a long Adjustment. Instead, she felt his strong fingers slip inside the waistband of her leggings and pull them down to her knees. "Back over," he commanded as he flipped her tunic up and trapped it in place with his elbow as he repositioned his arm above her now exposed hips.

"No, you can't!" she cried out in horrified realization. "I can't!"

"Oh, yes, I can," Vilnek informed her and began spanking again, this time on her reddening bare flesh. "And you will!"

It took longer than any other spanking she could remember. He used no implement but his hand and she wondered how he could continue, but he managed. Somehow, perhaps because he had used only his hands, the spanking seemed to sink deeper into every inch of her skin, the pain and burn blanketing the whole nether portion of her body and seeping into her bones. By the time he was finished, she could do nothing but sob into his shoulder as he held her, stroking her back. Even words were denied her, and she found herself melting into the overwhelming calm of his presence.

When she fell silent, he pressed a kiss to her tear-dampened face. "I want you to remember, little one. You mean more than

the world to me, more than any world, more than Trellian, Plivit, or any other world you can think of.”

She knew that he meant every word, just as he had meant every swat. She wiped her face with her sleeve, then despite the pain throbbing through her bottom and thighs, stretched up to kiss his mouth. She ended it with a whispered promise, “And you mean more than the world to me, both the old world and the new. I’ll do better from now on and be a help to you, for sure.”

“I know you’ll try,” Vilnek assured her, “but don’t worry. You’ll be fine, and when you aren’t, I’ll still know what to do about it.” He reached around and patted her backside playfully. She yelped and rubbed, while he opened the hatch to the transport and led the way into the headquarters complex.

Chapter 6

Before the noise of Vilnek's transport had died away, Radnok's transport came into view. Willa had no illusions as to why the men wanted privacy, so she had to make a quick decision. Which argument was most likely to delay or even postpone indefinitely this impending Adjustment? He didn't leave her long to contemplate her options.

Pulling off the main track just over halfway back to Headquarters, Radnok unstrapped himself from the pilot's pod and came to stand in front of Willa. She pretended not to notice him, having decided that assumed innocence and ignorance would be her best defense when he began to list whatever it was he thought she had done wrong.

It occurred to her later that perhaps he was anticipating this ploy. His next actions certainly showed that whatever strategy she had decided on would have been useless. There had been times in their life together that she could weasel her way out of a spanking. This wasn't one of those times.

His hands went around her waist and she found that as usual, the strength of his grip belied his age. Mining had given his arms great strength and kept them in tone despite his years. She

marveled at the ease with which he carried her to the back of the transport where the cargo area was outfitted with several convenient shelves that folded bench-like out from the walls.

He perched himself on one of these empty shelves and flipped her unceremoniously over his knees before she was able to find her voice.

“Ouch! Wait! Aren’t you—*ouch!* going to give me a chance to... ouch! explain?”

“Is there something to explain?” he asked. His hand never stopped its stinging assault on her backside as he spoke.

“No, actually there... ouch! Ouch! Isn’t. I haven’t done anything wrong!” Here she began to grit her teeth with the effort of staying in place and controlling her cries.

“Then why do you want a chance to explain?”

“Well, at least you usually warn me, or scold me or something. You can’t just... oh, *ow!*”

“I can’t, huh? Can’t warm your backside like this? Can’t heat your seat like this? Can’t make you squirm and squeal like this, huh? Well, that’s too bad, because somebody sure needs to do it. If I can’t, then who can? Celdek?”

She was shocked into stillness, despite the burning sting in her rump. “No! You know I’d never...”

“Vilnek, then? You’re so keen to go to Plivit with him. Is it Vilnek you want to spank you?”

“No! No! Not Vilnek! You know you’re the only one for me!” He was spanking her upper thighs now to ensure that she would feel this spanking every time she sat down for days to come.

“So if it’s my job, let me get on with it,” he commanded.

“But I don’t need to be spanked! I have obeyed the Peace Initiative in every way!” she pleaded.

“You think so, huh? So you’d like to take over the job of keeping yourself in line, huh?”

“What are you talking about, Radnok? I don’t understand!”

“That’s exactly why I’m doing this, Willa. You don’t under-

stand and you need to. Just lie still and let me handle this. When I'm done, we'll talk."

He didn't wait for a response, but kept on using his hand and then the filamith he had secreted behind the shelf. He covered her whole bottom and thigh area with hot, stinging pain until the skin was rough and incredibly tender.

As hard as it was for her, she took the rest of the spanking quietly. She knew that he wasn't usually like this, so he must have his reasons for spanking her this way, without explanation or scolding. As a strategy, it didn't have much appeal, since her bottom still wound up thoroughly spanked, but at least she hoped that it would be over the sooner for her having given up arguing.

At last, he slowed his spansks, and then finally stopped them all together. She took several moments to sob in his arms while he stroked her back. "Do you want to know what that was for?" he asked her.

"Yes, I do," she retorted, attitude creeping back into her voice.

"Oh, is that sass I hear? Wasn't that enough of a spanking? Do you need more?"

"No, I don't," she answered, more humbly. "I just want to know what I did, so I won't do it again."

"Oh, Willa, Willa, what am I going to do with you?" he sighed. "Do you really think it's okay? The way you have been traipsing around, interfering in other's women's business, plotting and scheming with Shawna, and generally being a brat is okay?"

The words just slipped out before she could call them back. "I wasn't a brat to you!" Gasping, she covered her mouth with her hand, but she knew it was too late.

"That's my Willa," Radnok sighed again. "You think just because I wasn't around to see what you did that I wouldn't care?"

"I know you care all the time," Willa replied. "It's not that. I just don't think it's fair for you to punish me when I haven't done

anything wrong around you. The Peace Initiative is about keeping peace in the minesteads, right? Peace between the people working together. Keeping the Companions safe means making sure we obey right away. Well, I do all those things.”

“Then I’m even more glad that we had this little talk, because there’s something you’ve got to understand. Whether we’re together or apart, I still care about you, I still love you, and what you do is still my business. I can’t control you, but I can make you think twice before you misbehave. You have to get along, not just with me, but also with all the Companions and all the miners, come to that. When we get to Plivit, we’ll be living in closer quarters with more people. That will mean more chances to make trouble, especially when I’m not around. You’ll have to act right or you’ll never make it.”

“So whether you see me yourself or somebody tells on me doesn’t matter? I’ll still get in trouble? For every little thing? I can’t be perfect, you know!”

“I don’t expect you to be perfect. It’s not like I just got off the transport last week and don’t know a bit about human nature. I know dregs from Stalcon when it comes to tale bearing, too. You don’t have to worry about that. But I don’t want you thinking you can treat people any old way and not have to pay the consequences. One way or another, the truth usually comes out. I’ve given you plenty of chances to straighten up, but after today’s little stunt, I’d had enough.” Here, he gave her a look that she couldn’t deny.

“You’re right. I should have told you before I left where I was going and why,” she admitted.

“And I just wasn’t in the mood for excuses today,” he told her. “That’s why I didn’t let you try to talk your way out of the Adjustment. Usually, I think it’s kind of cute.”

“Cute!” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes.

“Beautiful, too,” he assured her, looking her over and smiling. “Too beautiful for an old mine-rat like me.”

She hugged him fiercely. "Don't ever say that. You are the perfect man for me. I may be cute, but I've got good sense enough to know when I've got a good thing going. I didn't just fall off the transport last week either!"

"Speaking of transports," Radnok said, "we'd better get back so I can prep this one to be loaded on the big one for the trip to Plivit."

"You do still want to go, don't you?" she enquired.

"After all the nagging you've been doing, I know better than to change my mind," Radnok joked. They strapped back into their pods and Willa heard Radnok chuckle when she winced as her very sore seat touched the pod's surface. "I hope the big transport has comfortable pods," he added.

"From the look on Vilnek's face when he picked Shawna up, there will be at least two of us who will need extra padding."

"Oh, I'm thinking at least three."

"Who else?"

"Claire, of course. Do you think Choldor was happy his little Claire was out and about with you and Shawna like that when Vilnek and I didn't know it?"

"Why should he mind? Claire told him about the trip, so he knew where she was. What we did shouldn't affect her. And anyway, they aren't coming with us."

"Oh, really?" Radnok cocked an eyebrow at her. "If you believe that, then maybe you didn't fall off the transport last week, but it could have been the week before that."

As soon as they had arrived back at his minestead, Choldor led Claire back into their sleeping quarters and pointed silently to the corner. She sighed resignedly, knowing there was no point trying to talk her way out of it. In fact, knowing the kind of light, sweet Adjustments he usually gave, she didn't see much reason to

try. They would both feel better afterward, so while she was saddened that he was upset with her, she was not unduly upset.

Choldor scowled down at her in the way that always warmed Claire's heart. She suspected that he did it to intimidate her, but there was no way she could ever be nervous in the presence of a man whom she knew would gladly give up his life to keep her safe. "You know the rules," was all he needed to say.

Claire did know the rules. She had been through their ritual, which at most times was so precious to her, more times than she could count. Once they discovered how close it brought them, the Peace Initiative was something neither of them wanted to go many days without invoking. Claire walked slowly to her corner with her hands securely placed behind her back. Facing the center of the room, she tucked her tunic up into her belt.

After a pause, she turned with careful deliberation to face the corner, then pulled her leggings down just below her nether cheeks. There she waited without moving until he spoke again.

Choldor waited for a moment, then instructed her, "Now bend over and touch your toes."

She complied, knowing he never kept her in that less than comfortable position for long.

"Stand back up. Hands on your head," he told her. After another pause, he continued. "Hands by your side. Now, turn around and come here." She walked to him with the stilted gait her constricting leggings dictated, then waited quietly while he settled himself on the sleeping pod.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" he demanded.

So he had found out about the fact that Willa and Shawna had left the headquarters area without telling anyone where they were. "No, I figured you would know, but with those two, surely you aren't surprised."

"That's no excuse!" With that he began and it became clear to Claire within the first five minutes that this Adjustment was not going to follow their usual pattern. Light and sweet were not

the words to describe the way he was bringing his large palm down on her tender rump.

Finally, he paused and while she gasped for breath, he scolded her. "Foolish and stubborn! What were you thinking? How did you think it could stay a secret?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "It's not that out of character, is it?" Claire knew her Choldor to be very safety-conscious and strict about honesty, but mainly about her. He had never reacted so strongly to one of Shawna's escapades before.

"It may be in character, but it's still not allowed!" He showed her with his hands just how unacceptable he found it. Smacking left and right with quick hard strokes, he turned her creamy flesh a fiery red. She tried to accept the punishment he was doling out, but found she could not stay still for long.

He paid no attention to her scissoring legs and kicking feet. Swatting all over her backside and upper thighs, he repeated his pattern again and again. On and on he spanked, pausing only to shift her a bit forward when his target wriggled out of place.

"You will never do such a thing again! If you do, this is what you will get, each and every time! There is no way I will take anything like this from you ever again! Do you understand me?" He gave her three final almighty swats as he finished up.

"Yes, yes, I understand," she answered. "It won't come up anyway. With Willa and Shawna gone, I won't be tempted to hang around with them when they are doing something they shouldn't."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean, what am I talking about? I'm talking about being with Shawna and Willa when they were out without Vilnek and Radnok knowing."

"You knew Vilnek and Radnok didn't know? Wait just a minute! I think I need to get a filamith and start over for that."

"Start over? You just spanked me for that, and it was definitely enough, too."

“I didn’t spank you for that. I spanked you for not telling me you wanted to move to Plivit.”

“What? Not telling you I... what?”

“When I came to pick you up, Celdek told me you were sad and upset that we aren’t moving to Plivit with the others. You never told me that! How do you think that made me feel, finding out from that Dodger what my own Companion wants to do? Why could you tell him stuff you couldn’t tell me?”

“I never told him. How could he have known?”

“But it’s still true, right? Whether you told him or not doesn’t matter. He probably just guessed it from overhearing you girls talking. It’s still true, isn’t it? You do want to go?”

“Yes, I really do,” she admitted.

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to pressure you. I thought if you wanted to go, then fine, but if you wanted to stay here, I understood that. We’ve been so happy here. Why leave?”

“So we can try new things, is why. Nothing wrong with that. And you can stay with your friends. I thought you didn’t want to go.”

“You never told me that,” Claire sighed with a shake of her head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you were scared to go. I thought you were worried that I couldn’t handle the L-12. One of these scars is enough for you to deal with.” Here, he hung his head, but she cupped his face in her hands to make him look at her.

“I love your scar, and I love you. I know you can handle any amount of dangerous mine product. You can handle anything you put your mind to and I’ll love you no matter if you have a hundred scars.”

Just then, the Linkset signaled. “That’ll be Talvok. He’s not going to be very happy when I tell him we’re leaving.”

“But we are? Leaving, I mean?”

"Sure thing. The main transport leaves day after tomorrow, doesn't it? We'll be on it, so go pack your stuff."

Several weeks later, Celdek leaned back in the pod, his neck and back cracking loudly, making Candace jump. "Why so tense?" he inquired. "Not nervous, are you? Not staying up too late and working too hard?"

"You know I'm not. It's just that I was concentrating. There's a remote communipad message coming in over the Linkset. It's from Willa and I'm reading every word as it comes in."

"If you would just let me at that Linkset, you'd have your messages twice as fast," he assured her. "Even ones from as far away as Plivit."

"Someday, when I have time to watch you and learn your dirty tricks," she replied with a grin.

"You'll not be learning any dirty tricks from me until you agree to meet Croyden," he groused.

She turned away, not wishing to take up this chronic disagreement. Tiemek's explanation of the life and values of a Dodger had been interesting in the extreme, but for Candace to agree to such an arrangement would take time. "I thought I already met him. It's moving in with him I'm not sure about," she replied.

He had to laugh at her deliberate misuse of Dodger slang. "There's meeting and then there's meeting," he intoned, nonsensically.

"Spoken like a true Dodger. Here, let me read. There's more of the message on the screen."

"How are they doing?"

"Things are much better, she says. The Radplant system is up and running again after that glitch they told us about last week."

"Oh, is it now? How interesting."

Candace swiveled around to look at him suspiciously. “Yes, it is,” she replied. “And you just got back from a long-range transport run that took two extra days. Hm....”

Innocence shone from his face like a halo. “I did indeed. What else does Willa report? Any news about Pippa? I heard Pelchak moved his search base to a moon near Plivit in order to extend his range.”

“Yes, he did, but still no word. No sign of her at all. How strange, for someone to so thoroughly disappear, and from as secure, and well-established a facility as this is, too.”

“Astounding.”

Was that sarcasm she heard in his voice? “You know something,” she accused.

“I know a lot of things, as usual.”

“You know what I mean.”

“That’s one of the things I usually know best.”

The glare she gave him could have melted plexilat. “I’ve been worried sick about that woman for weeks. Pelchak has been no help at all, spending all his time running around the galaxy searching for her. You Dodgers have been running amok without her restraining hand on the reins, and now you tell me you know where she is?”

“I said no such thing,” he asserted, rising from his pod and coming to tower over her. “But what I do know is what happens when a girl uses a certain word.”

Too late, she remembered the tradition. It showed the depth of her feelings that she would forget to avoid using the name. “At a time like this, I wouldn’t think you would—”

“There’s never a time I wouldn’t,” he interrupted smoothly. Leaning in toward her, he placed his arms on either side of her pod, effectively trapping her. The kiss he gave her was long and possessive without being threatening. Then, as easily as a master chef would flip a pancake, he flipped her out of the pod and over his shoulder to spin her around.

"Put me down! I have work to do!" she exclaimed.

He applied several stinging swats to her backside. "Not anymore, you don't. Your work here is finished for the day. And the night too, so don't get any bright ideas. We're going for a little ride."

"I don't understand," Candace exclaimed as she hugged her friend. She let go, leaned back, took another unbelieving look and then hugged her again.

"Ask your man here," Pippa shrugged. "I can't explain it without my blood pressure going through the roof."

"Everything worked out now, didn't it?" Celdek laughed. "No use getting all upset about the details."

"But if I ask him anything, you know the kind of answers I'll get."

"Leave it to me," Pippa offered. "I think I can get him through it without too much trouble. I've learned even more about communicating with... them in the last few weeks. More than I ever wanted to, in fact."

Celdek laughed out loud at that. "Learned better than my little Candy here." He loved annoying Candace with his pet name for her.

"This barbarian—" began Pippa.

"Hey, now, wait just a minute!" he exclaimed.

"Kidnapped me from my cubicle."

"I never laid a hand on her."

"By deceiving me. He told me—"

"Now, is it my fault if you don't check out your information?"

"That Talvok was sending me off world—"

"Which he would have done to protect you from Stallworth if he had known how serious the situation had become."

“To look into the possibility of bringing in another contingent of... Croyden’s folk—”

“Which you would have done if you had known what was good for you.”

Candace shook her head. “Who’s telling this story? Celdek, quit interrupting! You had your chance to tell me.”

Celdek chuckled quietly while Pippa continued.

“It wasn’t until we docked at the staging satellite on Plivit that I knew for sure what was going on. By then it was much too late.”

“Think of it as an enforced vacation,” Celdek commented.

“I wondered why nobody was looking for me, why nobody would Link me back, until I remembered that Celdek had the skills to monitor every communication coming in or out of the Linkset. He let through just what he wanted me to know.”

“After her initial conniption fit, she started to see things my way and just went with it. It’s always best when dealing with Croyden’s folk to go with the flow and not ask questions.” Celdek’s grin was insufferable. Candace swatted him on the shoulder and he gave a mock howl, rubbing and writhing as if she had wounded him.

“Don’t kill the man on my behalf,” Pippa laughed. “It hasn’t been half bad. It’s kind of restful, being confined to the ship or this storage unit with just this monitored Linkset. I’ve been able to help Vilnek through Turek’s administration systems. He doesn’t know it’s me, but I’ve facilitated a lot of little extras around here, both before and after the Trellian contingent arrived.”

“I’m sure she didn’t have a conniption fit, but I do have to admit,” Candace continued, “that it may have turned out for the best. I think you were wise not to fight him, Pippa. Every once in a while, I find things... reports come in, strange sounds at night, unexplained absences and then reappearances, not just among

the—" she caught herself before the word slipped out, pressing her fingers to her lips and smiling. "I mean, Croyden's folk."

"You think it's Stallworth? Or maybe it's Stallworth getting more fight than he bargained for as he tries to pull his usual tricks."

Celdek crossed his arms and started tapping his foot, whistling a little tune as if he were getting bored.

"If you were there, you might see more than I do," Candace admitted. "And might understand it better, too."

"There are times when people should sit back and relax," Celdek commented. "And I think this is one of those times." He suddenly hoisted Candace up on his shoulder and started off in the direction of the staging satellite's lounge area. "We'll be back in a while." He threw the over his shoulder at an amused and smiling Pippa.

Chapter 7

“Candace, Celdek, how good to see you! What are you doing here? Why didn’t you Link? I could have met you on the satellite?” Shawna enthused over the Linkset connection.

“It was a spur of the moment thing,” Celdek informed her. “I just swept her off her feet. No need for you to go crowding up the satellite. I’ll have her down to you directly. She’ll be staying for a few days, if that would be convenient.”

“I’d like nothing better,” Shawna replied. If she noted the dismay on Candace’s face, she gave no indication.

After he closed the Link, Candace whirled on him, keeping her voice low so as not to attract attention from the few workers who occasionally passed near enough that they might hear, even in the echoing warehouse. The corner roped off for a makeshift lounge held a few privacy booths for Linksets, along with tables, seating pods and catering units for quick breaks and meals. “What? Why? I can’t stay here for days! Talvok will—”

“Talvok will have to survive. And you will have to trust me.” He gave her a significant look, which made her understand he wanted no more arguments from her.

“Not on your life, or mine, for that matter. If you think I’m going to just quietly hide up here like Pippa, you’ve got another think coming.”

“I told you I would take you down to the planet. Pippa’s got little enough room up here by herself without you to bump into.”

“And I’ll tell Vilnek and Shawna everything so they can contact Pelchak on an unmonitored Linkset and let the man know that he’s been worried for nothing!” Candace’s voice rose with every word. “I can’t believe you’ve let him go this long without telling him she’s okay. He’s been frantic!”

“Oh, has he?” was all Celdek asked.

“Of course, he has. So has Talvok.”

“Really?”

His attitude made her so angry that she could no longer contain herself. “I don’t know what’s come over Pippa that she hasn’t brained you long before now, but if she won’t, I intend to.” She suddenly gripped the edge of his seating pod and flipped him over backwards, trapping him under the curved plexilat and heading back toward the ship.

Before she took twenty strides, Celdek caught her up neatly around the waist and clamped her struggling body close against his. “Now, you’ve done it. That wasn’t a very polite thing to do, my sweet Candy.”

He carried her back to the lounge area where he bent her over the shelf that held the Linkset screen and started to work on her rear end with a deceptively innocent looking paddle he drew from one of the many pockets in the vest he wore over his tunic.

“You can’t do that here! We’re not on Trellian!”

“Did you forget that Plivit honors the Peace Initiative? And even if it didn’t, do you think I would let that stop me?”

She pitched and rolled, but it did her no good. Smack after resounding smack scorched her bottom despite her best efforts. He held her hard and spanked her harder until she was gasping and crying for him to stop!

“Please, please, all right! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Please stop. Someone will hear!”

“These are soundproof booths. I delivered them myself,” he answered conversationally. “Pippa ordered them and tweaked the design a little. I think they came out quite well, don’t you?”

“Celdek, please! Stop! Ow! That hurts! Oh, ow!” she squealed.

“Are you going to try to run away again? Are you going to tell Vilnek or Shawna that Pippa is hiding on the staging satellite? Or are you going to cooperate?” He paused, waiting for her answer.

“But you can’t expect me to go along with kidnapping!”

“Pippa is going along with it. That makes it not kidnapping anymore, as far as I can tell. I thought you understood.”

“But still...”

“This is why I never bother explaining anything. People don’t listen anyway. You’ll just have to trust me. Pippa does. And Talvok does. Think about it. Has he really been panicked?”

Candace thought for a moment and realized that Talvok wasn’t really all that worried. “No, but that’s just because he’s feeling guilty and thinks that Pippa left under her own power. If he knew...”

“What? What would he do? I may have gotten her here in an amusing manner, but you have to admit, if she wants to escape, she isn’t trying very hard.”

“But Talvok doesn’t know the truth!”

“Sometimes, people don’t want to know the truth. Or at least, they don’t really need to.”

“And Vilnek and Shawna? He spent all that time trying to find her.”

“He isn’t looking for her anymore. He’s taken Shawna’s view, that she’s in a health center somewhere recovering from some sort of collapse.”

“Which is also wrong!”

“But gets the job done, doesn’t it? Are they worried?”

"Well, no."

"And should they be worried?"

"Well, no."

"So, isn't everything working out?"

"But Pelchak—"

"Is he really worried? Does he look worried?"

"He never looks anything. He never says anything."

"But answer the question. Does he look worried?"

"No, I guess not. We Link all the time and while he is grim, he doesn't look any different than usual."

"Okay, then. I'm done explaining. Are you going to cooperate or not?"

"Explaining? You've done nothing but ask questions! How is it that you get to ask the questions, but I never can?"

"If you have to ask, you can't know." He still had her bent over the shelf, but the fire in her bottom was beginning to cool. She didn't want it re-kindled and she had to admit, he did make a kind of sense.

"All right. I'll cooperate. It's against my better judgment, but I won't blow your cover, at least not yet."

"Among Croyden's folk, there can only be one man in charge of a job, Candace. As Tiemek told you, he's called a point man. And there's a saying among us. If you can't trust your point man, don't join the job." He looked down at her and gave her to understand that he was telling her more than a bit of Dodger trivia. She knew that over the next few days, she had more to think about than just keeping the secret about Pippa.

"First Pippa, then Candace! I'm running them all off, Faith! I don't mean to, but somehow, I do it. What's wrong with me?" Talvok groaned.

Faith had never heard such self-doubt in Talvok before. It

broke her heart to see him so frustrated, especially when it seemed to her that things were going well.

“What exactly did Celdek say when he got back? He didn’t seem upset. She’s his Companion, so if she were mad, you’d think he’d be angry, too.”

“You can’t ever tell with Dodgers. In the short time I’ve had to work with them, I’ve learned that they only reveal what they think you need to know to get the job done. Since I wasn’t the original client, I’m not sure where his loyalties lie, anyway.”

“That’s not the point, Talvok,” she chided in a gentle tone so that he wouldn’t take offense and might for a change start to focus on the ultimate goal rather than his part in it. “Are problems getting solved? Are you closer to your goal?”

“Under all these details and minutiae, sometimes, I don’t even know what the goal is anymore.”

“You have to delegate. Quit trying to do everything yourself.”

“I try, but every time I do, I run off the people I delegated to. Choldor, Pippa, Candace, even Vilnek in a way.”

“You didn’t run Vilnek off. He had to leave. And maybe so did the others, for whatever reasons. All I know is, this is not for you, all this administration and logistical work. If you can’t remember what the goal is, then how are you going to know when you’ve succeeded? And if you don’t know you’ve succeeded, how will you find any joy in your life?”

“Joy in life? Is that the goal? Then what I really want is to get off this lousy planet and get back to the real world.”

“And what is the real world, Talvok? If this isn’t real, what is?” He didn’t answer her, so she went on. “I know what it is for me. It’s my research. I need to get back to the university and process the results of the Serpiac research done here. There are other planets where similar problems are ruining lives. I could make them better. That’s my goal. What’s yours?”

When he still couldn’t answer, she went to him and just held him close. “You think about it,” she sighed. “When you have

your answer, you know where to find me." She pulled away from him and headed to the door.

"Where are you going? Not you, too!" Talvok cried out, fear in his voice.

"Not far. Not leaving you. But I am leaving the main office. Midge is running things just fine and I think she can get more done when I'm not around. She hinted as much, and I want to take the hint. Maybe you should take the hint, too."

Talvok turned back to the window. It had been almost a month since Pippa had disappeared and nothing had been the same. His dreams of carrying on his father's work, of making things right and even improving on them were carrying on, but without Pippa and his other friends around him, he was beginning to realize that it wasn't Trellian that had made life seem so rich and full. The lights in his office burned deep into the night.

Vilnek stood just out of sight, listening to Shawna talk with her friend in the common area of their housing unit. He loved to observe her when she wasn't aware of his presence.

"If you don't stop grinning," Willa scolded, "they're going to know something's up. Even over a Linkset, that grin would set off alarm bells."

"Let it! I can't wait!" Shawna replied.

"All Celdek said was that you should prepare a huge picnic. It's got to be a real record-breaker and may involve some overnight guests. He never said it was to celebrate anything."

"But what else could it be? Here, help me get the salad out of the catering unit. The sandwiches are already on the tables and desert should be out next. If all the other housing units stock the tables in front of their areas, we should have plenty of food for whomever it is Celdek is bringing. I guess Dodgers have their own traditions for Permanent Assignment, don't they?"

“Of course, they do, but the only one I’ve heard of is the whole introduction thing. Candace told me when that happened, but last I heard she was still making up her mind. I thought when they first showed up here, that she had agreed, but then Celdek just abandoned her and went back to Trellian.”

Unable to resist her any longer, Vilnek walked in at that point, a contented smile on his face as he wrapped his arms around a twisting Shawna.

“I don’t have time—” she started to say.

“Yes, you do if I say you do,” he asserted good-naturedly. “Just one kiss and I’ll let you go. I’ll even help.”

She stopped her struggles and turned in his arms to give him a peck on the cheek, but he crooked his elbow behind her neck and held her for a longer, more intimate kiss. Willa cleared her throat finally and Vilnek reluctantly let Shawna go.

Shawna stepped back to let Willa hand Vilnek a big bowl. “What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s something you’re supposed to take out to the tables and not eat any of along the way,” she informed his retreating back.

“I said I would help. I never said I wouldn’t help myself while I help you!” He stepped through the open archway one second ahead of the dishtowel Shawna tossed at him.

A chime sounded from the Linkset, letting them know that a transport had docked. “That’ll be Celdek. Let’s go see who all he’s got with him.”

They ran out to the transport docks behind the housing units. Several men were already unloading carryalls and crates. Then Shawna stopped in her tracks, before starting to run. “Pippa! Vilnek, Vilnek look! It’s Pippa!” Shawna hugged her friend tightly to her. “Where have you been? We’ve been so worried! Celdek, why didn’t you tell us when you first found her?”

Vilnek, Willa, and Claire were next in line for hugs and exclamations of surprise. Candace, Radnok, and Choldor hurried over and joined the wave of celebration.

"Give the woman a chance to breathe," Vilnek instructed his wife and her friends when they continued to crowd around Pippa. "Let's go inside and she can tell us the whole tale."

They had not quite settled in their pods when Shawna impatiently started in on Pippa again. "Tell us everything. Where did you go? Why did you leave like that? We were so worried until we figured it out."

"Figured what out?" Pippa sounded confused.

"That you went to a health center for treatment of exhaustion, of course," Shawna explained.

Pippa gave Celdek a chagrined look, but he only shrugged. "He told you that?"

"No, we figured it out for ourselves," Willa put in, sounding very proud of herself.

"And he let you think it." She shook her head in dismay. "I didn't need treatment for exhaustion."

"Says you," mumbled Celdek.

"In fact, you'll never believe—"

The chime from the transport dock interrupted her and Celdek stood up. "There'll be time for explanations later. Right now, I think we'd better go out and get this shindig started."

"What shindig?" Shawna asked injudiciously. "And if you say I can't know, I'll bop you one!"

"Watch it, little miss," Vilnek warned with a grin.

"Come see for yourself," Celdek replied, but the crowd was slow in getting up. Only the men were on their feet when the door slid open and in walked Pelchak.

There descended a silence so thick, a drill bit wouldn't have scratched it. Vilnek moved to stand in front of Pelchak while Radnok took up a defensive position in front of Celdek. Choldor seemed to think Celdek deserved whatever Pelchak might dish out and steadied himself to remove any barriers.

Celdek however sat back down and cocked the pod back in an indolent manner. "About time you got here."

Pelchak ignored him and tried to walk straight through Vilnek.

“Hold up there,” Vilnek said.

Pelchak looked at him as if he hadn’t seen him there before. He gave Vilnek a questioning look, to which Vilnek responded as if he understood quite clearly. “I don’t want any violence in the house, especially not in front of the Companions.”

“I don’t like him any better than you do,” Choldor put in, “but you got to admit, the man has a right to...”

Celdek’s laugh made Vilnek want to turn Pelchak loose on the idiot and pick up the pieces later.

“Violence?” Pelchak pointed a finger at Pippa, who was now on her feet, her hands covering her mouth in apprehension. His grin, as rare as it was genuine, reminded Vilnek that when a Dodger was involved, sometimes it was best to just relax and go with the flow. He stepped aside and let Pelchak enfold Pippa in his arms.

Celdek later referred to the next few minutes as a kind of stewpot with bits of fractured explanations and quiet exclamations of both joy and bewilderment floating around in a broth of female emotion. Pelchak said little as he sat with Pippa in his lap. She had tried, though with little determination, to take her own seat, but when she moved to a new pod, he just politely waited until she had chosen, then came over, scooped her up, deposited himself in her place and replaced her where he wanted her.

“You’ve been here the whole time?” Shawna asked, incredulous. “I can barely believe it!”

“How did he keep you out of sight? Why didn’t you escape?” Willa enquired tactlessly.

Pippa tried to turn and look at Pelchak, but he just held her more tightly. “He had me in a storage unit when he was away,

which was most of the time, but there were also two disused transports in need of repair. No one was going to bother them, so I had a bit of room to move around when no one was working. During working hours, I worked at the Linkset in the storage unit. It wasn't exactly spacious, but I didn't mind."

"And as for escape, it would have been dangerous to try," Claire added. "Pippa knew she wasn't in any danger from Celdek, didn't you, Pippa? That's why you didn't do anything as foolish as, say, stowing away in a cargo hold or anything like that."

Shawna considered this for a moment. "And it might have gotten Celdek in trouble. You wouldn't want that, would you? Especially with all that Stallworth business going on."

"That's over now, isn't it?" Willa asked. "I got a Link about his being arrested for shipping undocumented cargo. Of course, nobody believes his claims about not knowing where those sanitation units came from. That's his business, isn't it? The unregistered weapons inside the coiling had to be his. They didn't just appear out of thin air."

Pippa looked thoughtful. "I'm sure they didn't. I'm just glad Stallworth is out of our hair."

"Our hair? Does that mean you are going back to Trellian? We could really use your expertise here on Plivit," Shawna stated.

Pippa looked back at Pelchak and this time he allowed her enough distance to do so. "Yes, I think it would be better for everyone if I did, at least for a while."

Pelchak nodded, and then gave her a questioning look, which she quickly and correctly interpreted. "Right after we take our three week holiday, after celebrating our Permanent Assignment."

"Four." Pelchak intoned his response as if it were a correction rather than a change.

"But we agreed on three."

Here, Pelchak got help from an unlikely source. Candace leaned forward and gave Pippa a steady gaze. “You just proved that Talvok could get along fine without you for four weeks. There’s no excuse now. Take the four before he insists on the usual six.”

“Six weeks!” Pippa sounded as if they were asking her to cozy up to a diseased fensel.

Pelchak laughed and hugged her tightly as his only comment.

“All right, four! Four!” She shook her head as if not able to believe that anyone could live without work for six whole weeks.

Pelchak stood and placed Pippa’s feet on the ground, then motioned for the other Companions to follow them. When Shawna asked where he wanted them to go, he slid a document roll out of his vest pocket and waved it in the air.

“That must be his Permanent Assignment documents,” Willa guessed. “We’d better get out there before he makes her sign all by herself!”

They dragged the men out with them, then Celdek called to all the Dodgers who were milling around the compound. The crowd gathered quickly when they heard what was happening.

After the documents had been duly signed and witnessed, and the picnic had been sumptuously set and appreciatively devoured, Shawna and her friends found themselves once again in the main living area of her housing unit.

“So after the four weeks, you’ll go back to Trellian,” Shawna said sadly. “Then what? Put up with Talvok? Go on forever cleaning up his messes?”

“He’s not a bad sort,” Pippa defended him, while Pelchak scowled. “And the Stallworth mess is cleaned up, thanks to certain people.” Here, she aimed a significant look at Celdek who

suddenly found the ceiling intensely interesting. "I'll bet Talvok has learned his lesson."

"There's something I don't understand," Claire put in. "Pippa, did you know Pelchak was going to be here? The look on your face when he came in told me you didn't, but now I'm wondering, if it wasn't to sign Permanent Assignment docs with Pelchak, why did you come back today? And why did Celdek order this picnic?"

Shawna blurted out, "To celebrate Candace's Permanent Assignment with Celdek?"

It was Celdek's turn to look shocked. He couldn't admit that Pelchak had been in on the supposed kidnapping from the beginning, and in fact had asked Celdek to arrange it. He couldn't explain that a lot of the supposed searching for Pippa had been a cover-up for building a case against Stallworth on the sly, since there was no official reason for it.

How could he get out of this one? It was in the open now, thanks to Shawna's sweet, unconscious tactlessness, and with this most convenient untruth just hanging in front of him like ripe fruit, he would have to ignore it, resist temptation and think of another likely excuse, all in the space of time it took to give them one of his famous, patented, guaranteed to annoy a brick grins.

"That's right, Shawna. How did you guess?"

Celdek dropped his drink. It was Candace who had answered.

The girls were up and gathered around Candace before the men could recover from their shock. Vilnek retrieved the dish-towel that Shawna had thrown at him earlier and mopped up the mess while the other men shook Celdek by the hand and slapped his back, some with noticeably more enthusiasm than others.

"I can't believe it," Choldor admitted, shaking his head. "A Dodger, settling down?"

"I'll admit it must be quite a surprise," Celdek agreed. *A surprise to me, too*, he added mentally.

“You’re one lucky guy,” Radnok grinned. “And as one lucky guy to another, let me give you some advice. Don’t ever take her for granted. You never know what might happen.”

You don’t know how right you are, he thought. *Like she might change her mind and not go through with her impulse.* “True enough,” Celdek agreed. “Maybe we’d better get things settled before those friends of hers talk some sense into her.”

So back out into the courtyard they went, while Vilnek made and then approved a quick application and got the documents back from the registry server. Since he was the top executive on site and in charge of personnel matters, it would be legal for him to grant the request, even on such short notice.

As they waited for Vilnek to bring the documents, Candace kept up a cheery stream of chatter with her friends. “Of course, we do want to stay on Trellian. I like Plivit well enough, but it’s not as... uh, convenient for Celdek’s kind of work.”

“Not that he’ll stay a Dodger, now that he’ll have you to look after full-time,” Shawna announced. “He’ll have to quit that!”

“I’ll be sure to tell Vilnek you said that,” Celdek grinned. Shawna realized she had used the word and covered her mouth sheepishly.

“Of course, he’ll retire from all that. There’s plenty of work on Trellian to keep him more than busy,” Candace replied. “I’m just thinking that, in view of all the years he has been... active, shall we say, I think a bit of anonymity in an out of the way, established old mining world like Trellian would be a good thing.”

“We could use his help getting ready for the charter finalization later this year,” Willa put in.

“Yes, but with the charter finalization comes charter inspections,” Pippa noted.

“Oh, I see,” Shawna agreed. Nobody liked the idea of Celdek meeting official inspectors, least of all Celdek. Trellian was obviously the place for him.

The Permanent Assignment ceremony was soon over. Celdek looked forward to the day when he could take her through the rest of the beautiful traditions Croyden's folk held to, but they could wait. She was his now, and he intended to make the most of that fact, from the first minute on.

Outside Talvok's office in the main headquarters building back on Trellian, Candace and Celdek sat waiting to see why Talvok had summoned them, and passing the time by reliving the last few days.

"We didn't have to leave so fast," Candace complained. "I was having fun, getting to see all my friends together again."

"Pelchak and Pippa left first. How would it have looked if we had stuck around too long after?" Celdek grinned at her unrepentantly. "As it was, the trip back took way too long."

"You were just too impatient," she teased. "What was your hurry?"

"If you have to ask, you can't know," he intoned the correct Dodger reply, then added with a leer, "so I'll have to show you again tonight. I'm still feeling a bit impatient, as you put it."

Talvok came out at that moment, waving them in. Faith was already there, seated next to a touchscreen table where several documents were open in various panels. Vilnek and Shawna smiled out from a Linkset screen on the wall.

"Good to see you again," Candace greeted the pair. "I didn't know the interplanetary Link Talvok wanted Celdek to set up was going to bring you two in on this meeting!"

"We wouldn't miss it," Shawna replied. "Sit down so we can get started." Her face showed intense curiosity, but Vilnek tried for a calmer note.

"That's my Shawna. Always impatient."

Candace and Celdek exchanged secret smiles.

“I wanted to bring you all together to talk about a plan I have for the future of Trellian. Actually, Faith and I have been talking about it for some time. With Pippa and Pelchak taking another four weeks off, I didn’t want to wait for their return.”

“The future of Trellian? Is everything all right?” Shawna queried.

“It’s better than all right,” Faith reported. “Look at these docs and you’ll see what we mean.” She waved several panels to the side of the table, sending them through the Link to Vilnek, who focused on his Linkset doc panel to read them as they came in.

“Because everything is back up and running smoothly,” Talvok began.

“Relatively smoothly,” Faith corrected.

“Right. We think it’s time to get back to our real work. Faith is going back to the university and I will be opening up a new branch of my mining equipment company in conjunction with a new research wing they’ve had endowed.”

Candace happened to know that Talvok had himself given the endowment, but she knew he wouldn’t want anyone to find out about that. It seemed to Candace that Shawna opened her mouth to say something, but then shut it again when she saw the stern look from Vilnek. If what passed between them wasn’t a Peace Initiative signal, she didn’t know what one was.

In answer to Shawna’s unasked question, Faith continued with a grin. “Yes, we have signed Permanent Assignment docs, so that’s settled too. Now the only thing left to settle is, who’s going to run Trellian for Talvok. He won’t have time to manage both a mining equipment company and a mining world, especially one as complicated as Trellian.”

Talvok took up the explanation. “There’s nobody else I’d trust, old pal. Vilnek, will you think about it? I’d need you just as soon as you get the Plivit charter finalized.”

"No, he won't think about it. We don't need to. We'll agree right now!" Shawna cried.

Vilnek gave her another quelling look and she subsided into her pod with an apologetic grimace. "I'd need free rein. Personnel. Logistics. Technical issues, the works."

"No problem. I'll have to have oversight and some input, to make sure you don't drill a hold right through my planet," Talvok joked back. "Otherwise, I guess I'll just have to put Trellian at your mercy."

"What about Pippa? She does have the experience."

"But not the expertise," Talvok said. "And she's the first to point that out. Administrator, yes. Miner, no. She's the one who informed me that the head of operations has to have direct mining experience," Talvok grinned. "You're not getting out of it that easily."

"But she'll stay on? Along with the Candace, Celdek, and the other Dodgers?" Vilnek wanted to know.

"That's what I brought you here for," Talvok addressed Celdek. "Ready to stay on under new management?"

"Can't think of anything I'd like better," he replied.

"See, he can even answer a question now," Candace crowed. "He really has gotten out of Croyden's crowd! The others will probably stay, but there will be one less Dodger!" She pretended not to see the almost imperceptible wink Celdek gave Vilnek as he nodded his agreement.

"And we'll be coming home," Shawna sighed. "I've really missed Trellian! So many memories. So many friends. And now the chance for you to run things! Isn't there any way we can speed up Plivit's charter process? I'm getting impatient already!"

Chula Stone

Chula Stone has been writing romance fiction with Domestic Discipline themes since 2004. The day she won that first short-story contest is one of her favorite memories. "The best thing about writing," Chula says, "is when the characters take over the story and make it their own. All I have to do is listen in and write down what I see and hear."

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