

Tanderon
Diana Santee - Spaceways Agent
Sharon Green

Chapter 1

"Ringer, I want out of here," I insisted, wrapping my hand around the bed's safety rail. "Two weeks in a hospital bed are enough to drive someone crazy!"

"You have nothing to worry about," Ringer came back with a faint grin from the chair he sat in. "Only sane people are in danger of going crazy."

"That's not funny," I told him, rising up onto my knees. "If you can't talk Val into signing me out then do it yourself, but just get it done! I've had enough of this place."

Ringer's sharp, black-eyed stare moved to me fast, showing how pleased he was with my tone, but he didn't answer immediately. Instead he took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it, exhaled smoke in my direction, then got out of the chair.

"Valdon is not going to be signing you out," he said at last, standing himself right next to the bed. "You've been off the pain killers for less than a week, and if you've forgotten how badly hurt you were, he and I haven't. You don't move out of that bed until a doctor gives his permission, and I don't care how bored you are."

The growl in his voice was flat and final, leaving no room for argument, but I'd known Ringer a long time. It's not always possible to argue with him, but sometimes he's vulnerable to reason.

"Do you really think I've forgotten how bad it was?" I asked, wrapping my arms around myself as my mind touched fleetingly on the memory of the beating I'd gone through. Cause and effect, like the chicken and the egg question, usually comes down to a matter of which brings what about.

Do I always get the problem assignments because I'm a Special Agent, or do my assignments grow complications because a Special Agent is involved? Either way, my last assignment had been purely routine until a painful complication arose, and even years of experience in ducking at the right time hadn't helped. I'd been in a bad way when I was brought to the hospital section of Xanadu Orbital Station, but even

if I would not be forgetting it for a while, I had to separate Ringer from the memory.

"I'm not as irresponsible as you like to picture me," I went on, meeting Ringer's eyes in a quiet, reasonable way. "Having been a Federation agent for twelve years has given me some idea about what I can and can't do. Don't you think I'd stay here if I really needed to?"

Ringer took a drag on his cigarette and shifted his short, pudgy body very slightly, a thoughtful look on his face. Ringer, Chief of Agents for our Federation, looked like he might be a salesman of something unimportant. He was short, stout, conservatively dressed in a dark green four-piece business suit, usually unsmiling and usually annoyed about something.

Possibly, Ringer's brown hair was a trifle too long for your everyday salesman, his black eyes a trifle too hard, his movements too well balanced and coordinated. Even so, few people would have taken him for a Special Agent who had lived to be promoted to Chief of Agents.

Ringer's pudgy look was almost all camouflage, hiding bands of muscle that hadn't been given a chance to go soft, and he hadn't forgotten any of the skills he'd acquired as an agent. I'd worked for Ringer for nine years, ever since he'd been given the job, and I'd never seen him back down from a threat or apologize when giving out assignments.

Ringer's eyes moved over me slowly as he considered my words, and it took an effort to remember what he now saw. My normal self-image is of a thirty-year-old woman, brown hair and eyes, tall, better than average figure, a Special Agent for nine of the twelve years I'd been an agent. But that wasn't what Ringer saw, not after another little mishap I'd had which involved getting sent on a one-way trip to nowhere. The disabled ship I'd been trapped on had been stopped by members of a humanoid race my own people had no idea existed. I'd ended up helping them with a problem they'd had, in order to say a proper thank-you for the rescue.

And since the help had included needing my physical appearance changed, what Ringer now saw was a fifteen-year-old girl who had long, bright red hair, blue eyes, a gorgeous face, and the same good figure. I knelt on the bed I'd been in for so long, the hem of the blue hospital gown not quite touching my knees, my hands on the bed's side rail, undoubtedly oozing innocence, youth, and vulnerability.

I'd once thought that looking teenage, innocent, and very beautiful would be an asset in my job, something that would produce the unbeatable combination of supposed inability hiding deep experience, but things weren't working out as well as I'd planned. Two weeks of chewing at the problem had brought me to the conclusion that I'd be better off going back to the way I'd originally been. The first step on that road, though, was getting out of the hospital section of Xanadu Orbital Station.

Under normal circumstances I'd be able to sign myself out, but looking as I did - not to mention that I registered just as young on a bio-detector - I needed an "adult" to

do the signing. Needless to say, that fact alone was enough to annoy the hell out of me.

"You know," Ringer mused, the thoughtful look having left his face, "I nearly forgot who I was talking to. Do you really think you can con me, Diana?"

"Con you?" I echoed, still sticking with reasonable. "What would I get out of conning you?"

"What do you ever get out of it?" he countered, exhaling another lungful of smoke. "The last time you signed yourself out of a hospital before you were officially released, your wound was bleeding again the very next day. I can't blame you for the way you feel about hospitals, but this time you don't have the excuse of an assignment waiting that can't afford to wait. You'll stay in that bed until you're told you can leave, and that's an order."

I had the very strong urge to tell him what he could do with his orders, but that wouldn't have gotten me very far. He continued to watch me just as closely as he'd been doing all along, waiting for an explosion, so I decided not to disappoint him.

"Damn it, I'm all healed!" I shouted, grabbing the bed rail and shaking it. "The surroskin is completely bound to my back, and these bandages on my wrists are the next thing to decoration! Do I have to take on everyone in this place hand to hand before you'll believe me?"

"Believe you?" He barked out a laugh. "You've got to be kidding. You stretch the truth whenever you feel like it, but I'm all through with listening to you. For once you won't be having everything your own way, and that's an experience you've been needing for years. Scream all you like, but no one will be signing you out."

He poked a finger at me to emphasize his point, turned away, walked to the door, and left without another word. I was so annoyed I could have shaken that damned bed apart, but not because Ringer's attitude was unexpected. It would have been handy having him sign me out of there, but I hadn't thought he would. He had his own reasons for wanting me locked up in a hospital room, and the state of my health was only one small part of it.

I glanced over at the door before stretching out flat on my back on the bed, then held up my bandaged wrists in front of my eyes. Although the bandages were more than the decorations I'd told Ringer they were, my wrists were healed well enough to be no more than an annoyance. If Ringer had had an assignment for me he wouldn't have hesitated long enough even to remember my wrists, let alone pester me about them. But assignments weren't supposed to be coming my way for a while. Ringer and the Federation Council had something else in mind for me, plans I'd had the time to do a lot of thinking about over the past two weeks.

Due to the small mishap I mentioned, I ended up discovering an entire Confederacy of humanoids previously unknown to anyone in my Federation. They had known

about us, though, and I'd helped out with a problem they'd had, acquiring, in the process, the new face I'd thought would do me so much good. They'd then sent me back home with an introduction from their central government to mine, suggesting that our two civilizations begin friendly negotiations.

I'd brought a man of their civilization back with me, but not because Val was their choice of a representative. Valdon - plus a long list of other names - had been my own choice as a candidate for swapping, as he possessed what was called original Absari blood. That means his gene makeup lets him change his features and voice and build to match anyone he's ever seen, a talent worth having in my line of work. I would have been able to make good use of Val while he partnered with me, but his pig-headed stubbornness had wrecked things right from the very start.

Val didn't care much for taking orders from me, and when I'd gotten myself into an unpleasant situation he'd ignored everything I'd told him and had come charging to my rescue. The gesture may have saved me some pain, but he came that close to getting the two of us killed and when the Council heard about it they'd needed emergency first-aid.

Since the Council had already started moving on establishing friendly relations with Val's people, they hadn't been happy about what had nearly happened. They'd pictured themselves having to announce Val's death at the first conference, had nearly had apoplexy over the vision, then had turned around and blamed me for what Val had done.

Everyone was insisting that I hadn't given Val enough information to work with, thereby putting him in danger of nearly losing his life, but I knew Council methods and practices better than that. If any of the Council members had really been after my head they would have sent investigators around to compile data for a closed hearing, then would have hit me with it all at once. The fact that no investigators or hearings were involved meant the Council knew damned well they couldn't make the charges stick, but unimportant facts like that didn't seem to be interrupting their sleep much. They'd gone blithely along with everything Ringer had suggested about keeping me tied down, and had probably grinned while doing it.

A good ten minutes had gone by since Ringer had exited stage right, so I sat up in the bed, pressed the switch that lowered the safety rail, then climbed out onto the floor. Standing up didn't take much effort anymore, but my body still echoed faintly to the memories of the past two weeks. I could have used somewhere quiet and unofficial for another week or so, but cutting myself loose from ties and tails had a higher priority.

Ringer, with the Council's blessing, was sending me back to the training facilities on Tanderon as a cadet, a punishment none of them would have thought of if it hadn't been for my new, young look. I'd also be traveling as a minor for as long as they got a kick out of it, supposedly waiting patiently to get back into their good graces, and that was one of the things that bothered me most. If they'd really thought I was guilty

of what they were charging me with, they would have been within their rights to do anything they pleased, even if I was, in truth, innocent.

What put a bad taste in my mouth was the fact that they knew I was innocent, but were jumping on me anyway. I'd worked for the Council a long time, and although I'd never asked for or expected their thanks, I should have been entitled to more than a fast shuffle.

I crouched down beside the bed in an effort to get some of the stiffness out of my leg muscles, at the same time thinking about the second point that bothered me in that mess. Val, my brand-new partner, the one I'd had such high hopes for, was more than not working out in a simple way. It was bad enough that he refused to take my orders and spent most of his time trying to protect me. What was infinitely worse was the conviction I had that he was after something, a something that amounted to more than the casual bed-sharing we'd been engaged in for the past couple of months.

At first, I'd been sure that he understood there couldn't be more with a Special Agent, not with the string of question marks my life expectancy was composed of. The problem was, that stubborn streak in him tended to ignore what it didn't want to see. Somehow, during the two months traveling time we'd spent alone together coming back to Federation space, he'd gotten to me. I was ... used to being held in his arms, his lips warm and alive on mine, his body giving me more than I'd ever before had from a man...

To me, of course, it was nothing beyond that, nothing but pleasant, casual sex, but Val seemed to be trying to read something more into it. I had to show him he was wrong as fast as I could, and one way of doing that was separating myself from his company. By the time I got back again from the Confederacy outpost where I would be changed back to normal, both he and the Council should have forgotten all about the axes they'd been grinding.

I stood straight again and pulled off the hospital gown, tossed it onto the bed, then lifted the mattress and retrieved the nurse's uniform I'd liberated during the last "night" shift. If Ringer had signed me out I wouldn't have needed the uniform, but it never hurts to be prepared.

The uniform was slightly too big on me, but as far as potential witnesses are concerned, that's better than having it be too small. After the uniform was closed and belted, I got my makeup kit, carried it over to the table and chairs arrangement across from the bed, then got down to the important part of the disguise.

Knowing Ringer, the Station's computer was already alerted to be on the lookout for me, and a Station's computer has too many eyes for someone to be able to avoid them completely. If I'd just tried to walk out of my room, even in a nurse's uniform, I wouldn't have gotten very far. It would have taken all of three steps beyond the hospital area before alarms went off and Station security men were sent running from

their various posts. Security is usually tight with a computer on watch, but having just a little basic information on a subject sometimes gives you what you need to circumvent even the tightest of security systems.

I had a friend whose specialty is computers, and that friend had once told me a bit about how Station computers see. The one point that had stuck in my mind was an odd fact that only a few people know. Ordinary tritium foil tends to disrupt a computer's vision, and the computer is therefore programmed to ignore the disruption in order to protect the balance of its visuals. And since tritium is used almost exclusively inside things rather than outside, the problem wasn't one anyone had searched to find a more permanent answer for.

So I'd had no trouble collecting small amounts of tritium foil from sugar packets and the like, and had shredded it up into the smallest size manageable. Now the shredded material was ready to be mixed with my liquid face makeup, which I quickly proceeded to do. I wasn't sure the dodge would work the way I wanted it to, but there was only one way to find out.

When I was all through applying the mess, the effect was better than I'd thought it would be. The amount of foil was enough to cover most of my face, and mixed in with the makeup it looked as though I had a bad acne condition. Close-up inspection would have shown what the real story was, which meant it was up to me to see that any inspectors stayed at a distance. I packed up the makeup kit and put it away, rinsed the mess off my fingers, then got out the wide headscarf some of the nurses wore. Red hair will attract notice of its own, so I shoved all ends under the scarf for a flat, unkempt look, gave the room one last glance, then got the show on the road.

The area beyond my room was corridor wide, with no more than a cleaning cart with its usual paraphernalia against a wall across the way. There was a nurse's station to the left, with two nurses standing behind the counter and a third standing in front of it. The three were so deep in whispered conversation, though, that they didn't notice me as I turned to the right and walked up the corridor. There were five or six rooms to pass before I got to the door that led out of the area, but most of the rooms were empty. Because of all the emptiness and distraction, no one saw me as I strode into the outside corridor that led to the rest of the Station and then turned left.

Orbital stations are all built along the same lines, so knowing the layout of one means knowing them all. The corridor I entered was carpeted in green, rich carpeting but the sort to withstand foot traffic without fraying too quickly. There was usually plenty of foot traffic along that corridor, caused by the fact that it led from the huge docking areas, past the registration alcoves, past the hospital area, to the Station's eating and amusement areas. A number of people strolled along taking their time, a few others hurried either to or from the docking area, and all in all no more than a glance or two came my way. I moved along with the rest of the walkers, matching their pace, a reserved, almost icy expression on my face as I held myself aloof from all contact and conversation.

The artificial gravity field of a station being what it is, drop chutes are impossible to use. With walking the only alternative to elevators, people used elevators on Stations without any complaints. I pushed the elevator call with impatience, looking up to see what level the car was on, but the action was just part of the role I now played. A young couple stood to the right of the doors, obviously also waiting for the elevator, but just as obviously completely wrapped up in each other.

No one else seemed to be stopping at the elevator, happily making the position a fairly safe one, but I found myself hoping hard that Ringer had gone on to lunch the way he was supposed to. I had some preliminary work to see to before I got down to seriously looking for a way out. Having Ringer show up at the wrong time and place would do more than produce complications.

When the elevator doors opened, three well-dressed people stepped out of it and walked past me toward the dining rooms. I gave the docking area a last, wistful glance before getting into the elevator and pressing Ringer's room level, but the glance was just wishful thinking. As young as I looked and registered right now, stealing a liner ride would have been just about impossible. Too many questions come at youngsters traveling alone, and there's no way to bluff your way past a bio-detector. The only direction left open to me was taking care of the preliminaries and then playing it by ear, watching closely to see what developed.

The young couple got into the elevator with me, but they got out on the very next level. I listened to the soft, relaxing - and boring - music for one more level worth, then got out myself and started to check door numbers. The walls on this level were prettily papered, the doors were of a solid blue to match the blue and white walls, and the carpeting was just a little more plush than the corridor carpeting above.

A station's residential area is always better-furnished than the public areas, but better comes in many grades. Ringer had taken a single room in the medium-priced category, and as I stopped in front of his door I made a mental note of his touching care with departmental funds. Most Special Agents aren't that careful, so nine years of being out of the thick of things had obviously changed him. The slim and rounded pieces of metal I'd had the foresight to bring with me let me into his room, and I immediately began looking around to see if he'd changed in more important ways.

Ringer's clothes were all unpacked and put away in drawers and closets, but he hadn't slipped so far that his credentials were anywhere in easy reach. I took his bag out of the closet and opened it to find nothing, then pressed the sides and top in the correct sequence. The special compartment slid open to show the bulky set of official credentials, letting me nod in satisfaction as I removed it and put the bag back where I'd found it. Ringer hated to carry all those papers in his pockets, so he usually left them where they would be safe but out of the way. I still didn't know precisely what I'd be doing, but having those credentials out of Ringer's hands would make everything a good deal easier.

On the way out I relocked Ringer's door, then called the elevator again. The suite I

shared with Val was one level down, better appointed and therefore more expensive. Val and I had been trying to show a good-sized credit balance when we'd first arrived, and the end of the assignment hadn't prompted him to move to more modest quarters. Of course, Ringer and the Council had let Val stay just as he was to impress him, but the times he'd visited me in the hospital section hadn't shown him particularly impressed. He'd taken to chuckling over the trouble I was having with the Council, and seemed to be looking forward to being senior in rank to me once we reached Tanderon, the planet where the agent training facilities were located.

The Council had decided to honor Val with the rank of Agent First Class, so my being made a cadet again would have left him as senior even though he was scheduled for a procedures course at the facilities. Val kept insisting that the Council was punishing me for the scare they'd had over my nearly being killed, but that was ridiculous. That hadn't been the first time I'd come close to dying, or even the hundredth; I hadn't been able to have Val cover me during the operation, and if anyone had asked me I might have told them why. But no one had bothered asking, just the way most people didn't bother, and I'd long since gotten out of the habit of volunteering what most people couldn't be bothered with listening to.

Walking into my own suite was the riskiest part of the operation, due entirely to the fact that Val's people had somehow attuned him to me when we were working together in his part of space. If Val were in the suite he'd know immediately that I'd come in, but don't ask me how. All I knew was that he could somehow sense me a good distance away, and the number of walls between us apparently made little difference.

I eased the suite door closed behind me just in case noise or the lack of it turned out to make a difference, then began to glance around. The sitting room was gold, cream, white, and empty, and after quickly making sure about the empty part I heard the faint sound of the shower going in Val's bathroom. I'd originally planned to stash Ringer's papers before going after what I needed from Val's room, but the opportunity was too good to miss. I strode straight into Val's room, found his papers on top of a low dresser, took what I needed, then hurried back through the sitting room into my own bedroom.

It took no more than a minute or two to hide my prizes, and then I was able to relax. I washed the makeup off my face, got rid of the uniform, then put on a shirt and shorts outfit. The shower sound from Val's bathroom had stopped about halfway through my dressing, but Val hadn't come bursting into my room with thunder and lightning blazing in his eyes. That meant the next move was mine, so I went back out to the sitting room to see what would develop. I stopped to light a cigarette, then curled up at the end of the white velvet couch.

I hadn't taken more than two or three very satisfying drags on the cigarette before the door to Val's bedroom opened, only it wasn't Val coming through the doorway. A well-stacked blonde appeared instead, her short hair fluffed, her low cut, long-skirted lounging dress crisp and new, her makeup freshly applied. She started to show a

slow, sexy grin, but when she caught sight of me the grin turned to a frown and she stopped where she was.

"What do you think you're doing, waiting in line?" she demanded, annoyance sharp in her tone as her small fists went to her hips. "If so, don't waste the time. In this suite there's no one in line but me, and that's the way I intend to keep it."

I exhaled the smoke in my lungs while letting my eyes move over her fast enough for her to miss it. So Val was going to be waiting for me when I got out of the hospital, was he? From the appearance of the hippy, busty blonde, it looked like he was well enough equipped to stand a wait of months. I didn't begrudge him a little entertainment any more than I would have begrudged myself, but the temptation to add my own touch to the situation was more than I could stand.

"What would I be waiting in line for?" I asked, all young and innocent and wholesome. "I just live here. Isn't Val in?"

"No," the blonde answered with a different frown, looking me over again with a hand to her hair, suspicion creeping into her eyes. "Val was called away a little while ago... I've been coming here regularly for days now. If you live here, why haven't I seen you before?"

"I've been in the hospital," I told her shyly, having put my cigarette into an ashtray so that I might look down at my hands in discomfort. "I was - badly beaten." I raised my gaze slightly to see that she was suddenly looking at my bandaged wrists, and when the strained expression I'd been waiting for crossed her face I added hastily, "But Val had nothing to do with it - honest! He wouldn't hurt me. He likes having me around."

The tone of voice I'd used had more wishful thinking in it than conviction, and it wasn't wasted on the blonde. The odd look on her face grew even more peculiar, but before she could say anything the hall door flew open and I turned to see Val striding in. He paused briefly to stare at me as he ran his hands through his dark black hair, then he began to come toward me again. His black eyes were filled with anger and another emotion I couldn't quite identify, and he ignored the blonde completely.

"You move too damned fast," he growled as he came up to the back of the couch. "I would have been all over this station if I hadn't known where to find you, and now you can get off that couch and get moving again. If you aren't back in that hospital area in five minutes flat, I'll knock your head off!"

I stirred uncomfortably as he stared down at me, recognizing the no-arguments tone of voice he used. I'd had trouble with that tone more than once before, and then I discovered that my reaction wasn't the only one - or the most major. The blonde we'd both forgotten about gasped when she heard Val's threat, not realizing how much it would take for anyone to knock my head off. All the woman saw was a grown man threatening a young girl who had already been badly beaten once, and to

my surprise and her credit she didn't hesitate.

Her gasp had brought Val's attention to her, and he watched her march herself around the couch and over to him. She had a grim, outraged expression on her face, but he didn't seem to have the slightest idea of what was coming. The girl stopped in front of him, feet planted wide and fists on hips as she stared up into his face. Then she hissed, "You dirty creep! I'm reporting this to the station authorities!" and slapped him so hard she almost took his head off. I flinched a little at the enthusiasm she put into it, then watched as she marched herself out of the suite, slamming the door behind her. Val stood with one hand to his cheek, staring after her, a bewildered look on what I could see of his face.

"What's wrong with her?" I wondered aloud, more to keep myself from laughing like a maniac than for any real purpose, but it was the wrong thing to say. Val turned slowly back to look at me, and I could see the entire outline of a hand on his cheek.

"You set me up again, didn't you?" he demanded, the look in his eyes hardening as his anger grew. "What did you say to her?"

"I didn't say anything," I answered with a shrug, holding back a grin. Then I leaned both arms and my chin on the back of the couch and added, "If you have peculiar taste in women it isn't my fault. Aren't you glad to see me back? You haven't even said hello."

The hardness in his gaze increased as he remembered what he'd been about when he first came in, and he moved closer to the couch to lean on it with both hands as he bent down toward me.

"You have no business being here," he stated in that single-minded way of his. "Clinicians have the final word on health matters, and none of them gave you permission to leave that bed."

"Clinicians are called doctors here, and I'm not going back," I told him, sitting up straight to meet that stare. "There's nothing wrong with me, and I'm tired of sitting around doing nothing."

"I don't care how tired you are of it!" he growled, closing those big fingers of his on the couch back. "If I've learned nothing else about you, I've learned how careless you are with your own well-being. That means you're going back even if I have to carry you, just to make sure you go all the way to being as healthy as possible. We have some unfinished business pending between us, and this thing with Marcie will be added to it. As if it needed anything to be added."

He stood straight again, looking down at me with that special look of his. Val had had two weeks to think over the various ways I'd set him up, and it seemed the more he thought about it the angrier he got. He'd apparently made up his mind to teach me not to con him ever again, and refused to see that if he hadn't constantly been in my way there would have been no need to con him.

I was just about to start that particular argument all over again when the 'phone chimed, interrupting before I could do more than open my mouth. Val turned away from me and went to answer it, pausing in front of the screen to impatiently flip the accept switch. Just past his right arm I saw Ringer's face form on the screen.

"Have you found her yet?" Ringer growled to Val, his whole bearing showing just how mad he was.

"You bet I found her," Val answered, glancing over his shoulder to send me another of those looks. "She's here right now, up to her old tricks, and insists she isn't going back. If you want to see how much good that will do her, watch while I carry her to that bed and tie her down."

Ringer's expression turned thoughtful, and his diminutive image held up a hand.

"Since she's found and being watched we can afford to wait a few minutes," he decided. "Just keep an eye on her and I'll be right there."

The screen blanked just before Val flipped the cutoff switch, and I could see from his movements that he wasn't pleased with Ringer's orders. He turned back to stare at me in that dark-eyed way of his, undoubtedly wondering why Ringer hadn't agreed with sending me straight back to bed. I just made myself more comfortable on the couch, retrieved what was left of my cigarette, and waited patiently for what would develop next.

Ringer made it to the suite in a matter of minutes, and when Val let him in Ringer headed straight for the couch I sat on. He sat himself down on the other end, then looked me over with very little approval. He didn't seem to be in much of a hurry to speak, but once Val had gotten himself situated in a gold chair opposite us, Ringer shook his head at me.

"If you ever learn to obey orders, I'll probably pass out from the shock," he said by way of preamble, then narrowed his eyes to demand, "How did you get out of that hospital area? I had the station computer watching for you."

Most accomplishments are worth at least a small smile, so I gave Ringer a small smile and said, "I mugged a nurse then turned invisible. It's part of my job to get in and out of places without getting caught - remember?"

I felt kind of mellow, but Ringer clearly shared nothing of my mood. He growled low in his throat, controlling his temper with difficulty, then he pulled a cigarette out of his jacket, jabbed it into his mouth, and lit it. The first lungful of smoke seemed to calm him down, and he leaned back to look at me with nothing resembling friendliness.

"There's very little about you I care to remember," he rasped, answering my rhetorical question. "Since you refuse to tell me how you got out of the place you're supposed to be, suppose I tell you about the way you're going back to it."

"Don't waste your breath," I returned with a snort, aware of Val's annoyance even though I now looked only at Ringer. Val didn't like to hear me saying no to direct orders - his or anyone else's - but I've never learned to take them. Order-takers have a habit of waiting for orders when they should be making decisions, and in my line of work that's tantamount to suicide.

"Damn it, Diana, I'm tired of arguing with you!" Ringer roared, leaning toward me to emphasize his anger. "You know as well as I do that you belong under medical care!"

"The hell I do!" I snapped back, deciding it was time to lose some pleasantness. "What I do know is that I'm at least as fit as you are, and you know it. And while we're discussing it, would you like me to count the number of times you've pulled me out of a hospital bed because you had an assignment that needed a Special Agent? But now suddenly things have changed! It couldn't be you have some other reason for wanting me under wraps, could it, Ringer?"

Ringer's face darkened at the double jab I'd hit him with, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything. He really had very little idea about how fit I was, but he did know why he wanted me locked up in a small room somewhere. He might also have been thinking about the various times he'd pulled me out of a bed half healed in order to hand me a new headache - for instance, the time he'd referred to earlier when he'd visited me.

It was true I'd signed myself out before I should have, and it was true I was bleeding again the very next day. But it was also true that Ringer had come by before I'd done anything at all, and had told me about the problem he had. He hadn't been hard to find once I was out of that hospital bed, and he hadn't refused to give me the assignment he'd spoken about. I still don't know whether he knew how really bad off I was, but it wouldn't have been hard for him to have checked on it.

But Ringer hadn't checked, because the survival of one agent isn't as important to him as getting the job done. I have no argument with that point of view; I just don't like temporary and personally motivated reversals.

Ringer didn't seem prepared to continue the argument, but that was only half the battle. The other half stirred in his chair with the annoyance he clearly still felt, and then he decided to put in his four bits worth.

"We're not getting anywhere with this back and forth," Val said, leaning forward to put his forearms on his thighs. "None of us can do more than offer opinions, so why don't we get a doctor up here to decide it one way or the other?"

Ringer blinked, obviously liking the idea, but I was all set to turn thumbs down on it before a sneaky thought hit me. A doctor in the suite might be just the key I needed to unlock the door to freedom.

"Diana doesn't seem to agree," Ringer observed, looking me over in a calculating

way. "I, on the other hand, think it's the best idea I've heard yet. If she's as fit as she claims, we'll sign her out and keep her here. But," and his hand holding the cigarette came up to point two fingers at me, "if she still needs looking after, back she goes whether she likes it or not."

"That gives me one hell of a great chance," I complained, putting a suitable amount of bitterness into my voice. "You call in a doctor who remembers what shape I was in when I first got here, and I'm supposed to expect that he'll turn me loose? All he'll be seeing will be the necessary healing time, not whether or not I've already healed. Sorry, Ringer, but I think I'd rather pass on that."

Val opened his mouth, obviously to argue what I'd said, but Ringer held up a hand in his direction.

"Just a minute," Ringer told Val, his tone reasonable as well as thoughtful. "Diana has a valid criticism, so let's see if we can deal with it. Diana, suppose we call for one of the doctors who has never seen you? Whatever gets decided then will be completely unbiased."

It was amazing how Ringer now played right into my hands, but I couldn't afford to appear too eager. I drew my legs up under me with a deliberate look of frustration on my face, then tried to temporize.

"He's bound to know something about me, so how unbiased can he be?" I demurred. "And why should a doctor be necessary in the first place? Why can't we -"

"Forget it," Ringer interrupted very flatly, the look in his eyes growing hard again. "Whatever it was you were going to suggest, just forget it. The only choice you have is between going back right now, and seeing that doctor. Which will it be?"

I made a sound of annoyance at his tone, then got to my feet.

"I'm sure as hell not going back," I told him, having no trouble holding his gaze. "That doctor you bring had better know the sight of a healthy female better than you two do, or you're going to have a fight on your hands."

And then I walked between them toward my bedroom, feeling their eyes in my back until I'd closed the door behind me. Once the door was safely shut I leaned on it and nodded, pleased with the way things were progressing. I should be able to make use of whichever doctor turned up, but it still remained to see just how far I'd be able to take it. Everything depended on the man or woman's sympathy quotient, how much he or she disliked getting involved, and how susceptible he – if it was a he - was to large blue eyes.

My bedroom was well furnished, with an oversized double-double bed, light mock-wood furniture, ice-blue carpeting, ice-blue bed cover, and ice-blue drapes around the vu-cast window. I considered the drapes for a minute, then got a cigarette

lit and carried it to the silver, deep-furred comfort chair the room provided.

A small hand table with an ashtray on it stood next to the chair, so I sat down and hung my legs over the arm after making sure the ashtray was in easy reach. It was time to relax and think about what might be a reasonable approach to an unsuspecting doctor. Putting together a lucid-sounding story wasn't difficult, but my mind kept going back to what was hidden in the folds of the drapes. Ringer and Val would have a fun time if the doctor bought everything I told him or her, and I wondered how Val would react to it.

Ringer, having once been an agent himself, would probably give at least grudging admiration to the way he'd been mouse-trapped, but Val wasn't likely to look at it in the same way. It would probably make him feel completely betrayed, but that was one way of teaching him I wasn't someone to get serious over, wasn't it?

The sort of jokes I'd played on him had always been enough to keep other men from pursuing their mistaken interest, but with someone as stubborn as Val it was obvious that stronger methods were becoming necessary. Once he came to his senses he'd probably thank me, knowing that what I'd done had been for his own good. I wasn't the sort of woman any man should have serious thoughts about, and once Val learned that, things would go a lot better between us.

It took only twenty or twenty-five minutes for a doctor to get there, and by then I was all set. When Val ushered the man into my room, I already sat with feet flat on the floor, hands clasped in my lap, head slightly down, and face expressionless. I didn't look up as the footsteps came closer, but I couldn't have missed the sound of Val's voice.

"There she is, Doctor," Val introduced me to the newcomer. "If she gives you any trouble, just call me. I'll be delighted to take care of it."

The speech was Val's way of warning me to behave myself, but that wasn't the way it came across. I raised my eyes to see the doctor frowning at the remark, and he didn't turn all the way to face me until Val had left and closed the door again. He was a tall, spare, balding man, fortyish with tired brown eyes and sandy hair, and he stared at me quietly for a moment, then put his bag down.

"How are you feeling, young lady?" he asked, his voice gentle. "I'm told you consider yourself well enough to be discharged from our care."

I gave him a pleading look and opened my mouth to speak, then closed it without saying anything. I shook my head and looked away from him again, and the action crystalized the suspicion that had been in his frown.

"Maybe you'd better explain what's going on," he said tightly, then gestured toward the door. "What did that man mean by the remark he made? I thought he was your guardian."

"He is," I said in a hopeless voice. "Please don't ask me about it, Doctor. I can't involve you in my troubles."

The statement was hook number one, and he bit immediately by coming closer to bend down.

"You listen to me," he said, taking my chin in his fingers and turning my head gently toward him. "I became a doctor to help people. If that help lies beyond the realm of medicine, well, I'll just have to see what I can do. Now, tell me what's wrong, and that's an order."

There was no getting out of obeying a direct order, of course, so I sighed deeply and asked, "What did they tell you about me, Doctor?"

He frowned again and said, "As I understand it, you came here with your uncle and went down to tour Xanadu. Somehow, a maniac kidnapped you and beat you badly before the Pleasure Sphere Management got you away from him. Your uncle brought you back up here for treatment, and that other gentleman joined him a few days later. Isn't that what happened?"

I shook my head miserably. "That's almost the way it happened, but a few things are left out."

Truthfully, more than a few things were left out. I'd gone down to the Pleasure Sphere for the sole purpose of executing a death warrant on a slaver named Radman. I'd managed to put him away, but one of the Pleasure Sphere customers had decided I was just what he wanted for his next birthday and got annoyed when I didn't cooperate. He'd cut my back to ribbons with his cane before Val broke in and killed him, and the bandages over the new skin growing on my wrists were due to his tying me to a bedpost with rope.

Since Ringer doesn't believe in advertising the activities of his agents, I'd had to make sure what story he'd put out. It wouldn't do to have my version contradict what "facts" were known.

"What really happened was this," I continued in a dead voice. "When my mother was - gone (my mother was always going one place or another), this man Valdson Carter showed up claiming he was my uncle. He had some sort of papers, and the authorities said I had to go with him.

"Then he brought me here to Xanadu Orbital Station, and arranged for us to go down to the Pleasure Sphere. He was constantly talking to the other men there, telling them how young and innocent I was, and how attractive."

I blushed here, then hurried on.

"He had almost come to some sort of an agreement with one of the men, when another of them grew angry and kidnapped me and beat me. That man was stopped by the Pleasure Sphere Management, and then they insisted that my uncle take me

away. They said something about not wanting competitors, but I don't understand what they meant."

The doctor was becoming more and more grim, but he didn't interrupt.

"When I woke up here on the Station," I continued, "my uncle warned me not to say a word to anyone about what had happened. He's ... punished me before, so I was afraid to try to get any help. Then that man Ringer came, and I think my uncle works for him. They're going to do something horrible to me, I just know it, but what can I do? I ran away from the hospital because I'm frightened, but they found me and brought me here. I insisted I was all right because I can't face going back to that bed, to just lie there and wonder what's to become of me! So you see, Doctor, there's really nothing you can do."

I looked away again, as if I had no more tears left to cry with.

"We'll see what I can and can't do," the doctor growled as he straightened up, quietly furious. "We have excellent security people on this station, and I'm sure they'll be very interested in hearing your story."

"Oh, no," I protested with shy despair. "You can't tell the security people. My uncle still has those papers, and they'll be forced to turn me over to him again. I can't bear to think what he'd do to me then."

That part of it wasn't a lie. If I ever had to face Ringer and Val in front of security people, I'd be lucky to get out of it still alive.

"But I can't just walk away and leave you here!" the doctor returned with seething frustration, running a hand over the top of his head. "There must be something that can be done!"

"If only I could get to Barancelle," I sighed, letting my gaze turn far away. "Mother - I - have relatives there. I'm sure they would protect me, especially if the security force held those two people here for a few days. But I have no way of buying a ticket ... I have no money and I'm a minor, so I might as well forget about it."

I put my face in my hands wearily, but I felt like holding my breath instead. Hook number two was dangling in front of him.

"Don't you worry about the price of the ticket, young lady," the man bit hard, patting my shoulder comfortingly. "You just leave everything to me. Barancelle sounds like just the place for you, and I'm going to see that you get there."

I raised an unbelieving face to him, then let some hope show through.

"Do you really mean that, Doctor?" I asked, wide-eyed. At his smiling nod, I shook my head just a little. "I don't know how I can ever thank you for this."

"You needn't even try," he told me with a smile, patting my hand this time. "If every

cure required of me was as easy to manage as this one, I'd be the most famous doctor in practice. Are you sure you have no leftover aches or pains?"

"None at all," I assured him, discounting the tiredness I felt. Even if I hadn't gotten back to tiptop, peak condition yet, I had no need to be fussed over in a hospital bed. Doctors being doctors, he had to have a look at my wrists, but as bad as they'd been they'd also been the easy part, and were obviously well on the way to being healed. He replaced the old bandages with new ones, repacked his bag, then gazed at me thoughtfully.

"You know," he mused, "it would be easier to get you on the liner if you came back to the hospital area with me now. What do you say? Are you willing to tell them you're not feeling as well as you thought?"

The idea was an attractive one, but that was one thing I couldn't do. I'd made such a stink about not going back, Ringer was sure to get suspicious if I suddenly changed my mind and meekly followed the doctor out. If I calmed Ringer's curiosity and went back under protest, the doctor was sure to start wondering. I let my shoulders sag a bit, and put a pale smile on my face.

"I'd love to go with you," I said wistfully, "but if I did they'd know something was wrong. I suppose it will just be too hard for you to get me to the liner from here. I thank you anyway. I know that you tried."

"Don't you start giving up so quickly, young lady," he ordered gently, picking up his bag. "I'll think of something to get you out of here. You just leave it all to me and don't worry. You'll be on Barancelle before you know it."

I thanked him sincerely and reminded him to tell Val and Ringer I was fine, otherwise those two desperate characters might have me moved to other hospital facilities and I would be lost. He agreed, said a warm goodbye, and left. I heard him speak briefly to Val and Ringer, and then he left the suite.

I went back to my chair and sat, then hung my legs over the chair arm again. According to the information I'd gathered from unsuspecting hospital personnel, the liner to Barancelle was due to dock in about four hours. If my luck held and the doctor was as competent as he seemed, I'd be on that liner when it left. One day's run and I'd be on my way, and Ringer and Val, together with the entire Council, could fold their orders till they were all corners and - augment them. I settled more comfortably into the chair, looking forward to being really alone for a while. I needed to give my mind a chance to forget about everything that had so recently happened, but right now I had to spend some time thinking about what would soon be going on. And, hopefully, going on successfully...

No more than fifteen minutes could have gone by before the door to my room opened again, and Val and Ringer walked in. I'd been mentally listing possible approaches to key Barancelle personnel and locations, but the looks on my visitors' faces jolted me out of the planning and into the present.

Ringer was coldly furious, and Val's anger had nothing cold about it. I didn't say a word and neither did they, but Val closed the door while Ringer walked to a low dresser near where I sat. Ringer then produced the sort of miniature receiver I usually use on the job, and activated the playback part of the wiring section. I listened to just enough of it to be sure he'd gotten the whole conversation I'd had with the doctor, then covered my eyes with one hand. I still had one hope, but it was a slim one. Ringer had been a good agent in his time, but if he was just a little slow I might get away with it yet.

"It's the duty of every prisoner of war to escape," I said with a shrug, looking up again. "What are you going to do, shoot me? I tried and missed. Better luck next time."

Ringer turned off the playback and slowly shook his head. "I know you better than that, Diana," he said. "If that doctor had gone with your story to the security force, all it would have taken to stop any trouble would have been to show my credentials as a representative of the Council. I know it and you know it, so I checked my room. My credentials are gone, Diana. Where did you put them?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ringer," I scoffed, leaning back in my chair. "What would I do with your credentials? You must have just mislaid them. You know how careless you are."

"Don't be cute!" Ringer snapped, taking an angry step toward me. "You were heading for the shipyards on Barancelle. If you'd made it you would have stolen a ship and gone back to Dameron's base. But you never would have had a chance if I had my credentials to cancel out your fairytales, so you must have taken them! I have to get to the security force before that doctor does, so give me those credentials!"

I'd glanced at Val during Ringer's speech, but what I'd seen wasn't very encouraging. Val was big, broad-shouldered, wide-chested, and narrow in the hip - in other words, a fighting man in his prime - and he leaned against the closed door of my room with his arms folded across his chest. His face, that broad, masculine, ridiculously handsome face, was tight in the jaw, the blaze from his dark black eyes coloring the rest of his expression. He hadn't yet had enough time to understand that what I was doing was for his good as well as mine, so all he felt was angry. I almost started to tell him not to feel betrayed when he found out about the rest of it, but that would have been stupid. Betrayed was how I wanted him to feel, even if something went really wrong and I had to watch him feeling that emotion.

"I don't know anything about your credentials," I said to Ringer, sticking to my story as I took my attention away from Val. "If you're so desperate about it, call the Council and have them issue another set."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Ringer growled, slamming the wire recorder-receiver down on the shiny surface of the dresser. "I'd look great when

they found out you'd stolen the original set from under my nose after I'd assured them you were safely in the hospital. No, Diana, you're going to come up with the original set and you're going to do it fast, or you'll be sorrier than you've ever been in your entire life."

Ringer wasn't even trying to hide his rage, but that was no reason to back down. I took my legs off the chair arm and got slowly to my feet, then cocked my head to one side.

"Why don't you try truth drugs?" I suggested in a drawl. "Since you don't like my answers, you might find ones you like better that way. Or have you got your heart set on hot irons?"

"The only truth drugs that would work on you are too far away to help me," Ringer returned, his right fist closed tight and held before him. "Hot irons is closer to what it'll be if you don't start talking. I don't have much time, so I can't afford to waste any. This is your last chance."

I just stood there staring at him so he nodded slightly, understanding I'd said all I was going to, then he moved away from the dresser toward my left.

"Now, Valdon," he said softly, and Val left the door and began to move off to the right. With a 9 rating in hand to hand combat I could have held my own with either one of them, but the two of them being what they were I didn't stand much of a chance against the combination.

Doctrine says that if you're facing two opponents, you attack quickly and viciously and put one out as fast as possible, then give the other your undivided attention. If they'd been a couple of ordinary strong-arm types I wouldn't have had a problem; they both would have been unconscious in no time.

But with these two the question became: which one did I kill? If they'd been after my life I wouldn't have hesitated, but they weren't going to kill me. They just meant to see how close they could come, and unfortunately for me, that made all the difference. I went into standard attack-defense position, and got set to do what I could.

Ringer and Val approached me slowly and warily, both knowing better than to treat me as an easy mark. I hadn't put shoes or boots on when I'd dressed, but that wasn't the disadvantage it might seem. A successful attack or defense depends on the body's movements, knees bent to assure proper balance, arms and hands held to check an opponent's movement or begin one of your own, mind alert to every danger or opening. The carpeting was soft under my feet but didn't promise very stable footing, and I wondered how long the adrenaline in my bloodstream would keep me going.

Ringer suddenly came in from my left, showing how fast he could move, his right leg flashing in a circle toward my ankles, trying to knock me off my feet. I jumped the

leg and kicked out, catching him painfully on the thigh, and he grunted at the blow and staggered off balance, his body automatically shifting his weight to keep him from going down.

Ringer isn't the sort of opponent you can give partial attention to, but I couldn't afford to forget about Val. I swung out of the kick I'd given Ringer just in time to kick a second time at Val, who had moved up much too close and was reaching for me. Val was obviously expecting the kick, though. His hand grabbed for my foot, caught it and twisted, sending me down hard on my right shoulder.

The next move was to roll fast to keep from getting pinned or stomped, but slamming into the floor, even with the carpeting to cushion the impact, caused the memory of agony to flash through my body. The breath was driven from my lungs, leaving them to struggle with vacuum, and a deep, blurry gong boomed for an instant in my ears. The reactions were only split-second, not even lasting long enough to really be felt, but they lasted long enough to throw off my timing. I began to move as soon as it was possible, but it was also too late. Val and Ringer were both already on top of me, holding me down with their weight.

I struggled against being held, trying to fight my way free, but the adrenaline was gone and so was most of my strength. I panted and sweated from the few seconds of exertion, cursing the two weeks of inactivity that had so destroyed my endurance, but the men holding me weren't even breathing hard. Val had his arms wrapped around my arms from behind, his hands clamped to my wrists, and he moved his head closer to put his lips next to my ear.

"You'd better tell him what he wants to hear," he murmured in my ear. "You'll be saving yourself more than you know."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I answered, determined to see my plan through. There were only a limited number of things Ringer could do to make me talk, and if I could hold out long enough that doctor might make an early call on the security people. Ringer knew as well as I did that the worse shape I was in when the security people saw me, the more likely they would be to ignore anything he had to say. The safety of his own neck depended on the safety of mine, and that was the best way to have it.

There were no more words out of either of them after that, just actions. I was forced to my feet between them, held close by their bodies to keep me from being able to move against them at all, and then my steps were directed by them toward the bed. Val still held my arms and wrists and Ringer had me around the waist, and there was no question about whether or not I would go. Val was hurting my wrists through the bandages, but that was only a minor consideration. Ringer knew as many ways of causing pain without leaving marks as I did, and I began to wonder which of them he would use. I could stand the pain of most of them, but there were a few...

I must have been too engrossed in grisly guesswork to pay as much attention as I

should have to what was happening around me. One minute I was being forced toward the bed and the next I was already there, but not down on it. Val was seating himself on a corner, Ringer was letting go of me, and then I was off my feet and face down across Val's lap.

I shouted, "No!" and really began to struggle, but it was already too late. Val had forced my wrists behind me, holding them one-handed, while his other hand kept me from kicking my way free. I could feel his leg against my stomach, his hand warm against my bare thigh, and I cursed at the fates for doing this to me again.

"Do you have it?" Val asked Ringer as soon as he was settled on his corner of the bed.

"Right here," Ringer answered. I turned my head to see what they were talking about, then pulled so hard that Val had to tighten his grip on my wrists to hold onto me. Ringer needed his answers rather badly, so he'd supplied Val with a hard, nasty-looking hairbrush. And that also told me Ringer had considered the matter of how they would look to the security force. Not like two men torturing a woman for information, but two indignant guardians punishing a disobedient little girl.

I'd faced a lot of threats during my time as a Special Agent and most of them had been faced calmly if not insolently. But this time the sweat broke out on my forehead, my mouth turned dry, and my knees would have been weak if I'd been standing on them. Maybe that was because Val was a true believer in not sparing the rod, and had a lot of things to get even for. Maybe it was just that I could remember so clearly the other spankings my partner had found it necessary to give me. Val leaned the cold, hard, back end of the hairbrush against my thigh, and moved his lips close to my ear again.

"Don't say you didn't ask for this," he told me, keeping his voice low so that it didn't carry to Ringer. "You may have forgotten what I told you about learning to behave, but I don't think you'll forget again."

I snarled and struggled against being held, but it still didn't get me anywhere. I could have kicked myself for ever having gotten mixed up with him, but kicking myself wasn't going to be necessary. Val was ready to do a better job on me, and Ringer couldn't have picked a more willing accomplice.

"Change your mind yet?" Ringer asked pleasantly from the chair he'd pulled over closer to the bed. I turned my head to look at him and licked my lips, but didn't answer because I couldn't. Aside from wrecking everything I'd already done, talking now would guarantee that Val would very quickly find out about the detail that involved him so intimately. Then it occurred to me that it might not be so bad if I could make Val back down a little.

"You can't be serious about this, Val," I said, my voice shakier than I wanted it to be. "You know how I feel about getting even."

I'd been trying some oblique threatening of my own, but it went over about as well as the rest of my plans had gone.

"Yes, I do remember that," Val answered in a strange voice, as though he'd just remembered what he'd gone through the first time because of me, and the next minute it began in earnest. I tried to ignore the whole thing, but that brush was hard and Val wasn't taking it particularly easy.

Now, I'd been beaten on Xanadu, strung up by the wrists and beaten by James with his cane till my back was a bloody ruin. But though I still choked with terror over the memory of that beating, I could look back on it and know there was no comparable damage being done to my dignity. I could not, however, look back on the spankings Val had given me and think the same thing.

There's no way to see the kicking and howling produced by his hand swatting my bottom as being in the least dignified no matter how you look at it. This time, with him using the hairbrush, it was a hell of a lot worse. I held out as long as I could then gave in to yelling and struggling, wishing they'd used hot irons after all.

What felt like at least an hour passed before Ringer finally interrupted.

"Hold on a minute, Valdon," he said, leaning forward to put his arm on his knee. "What do you say now, Diana? Have you had enough, or should he continue?"

From the flaming ache in my backside I knew I'd had more than enough, but how could I tell him? I lifted my head to look at him, and let my desperation show through.

"Ringer, please - " I began, but his face was solid granite.

"Might as well get on with it," he told Val as he leaned back again. "We could be here for hours."

"No!" I said as fast as possible, positive I could hear Val's arm lifting into the air. They'd simply keep it up until I told them, so it made no sense to take any more. Even if the security force suddenly appeared in the room, the picture would show nothing but two indignant adults teaching the brat in their charge some manners. I'd lost, and I might as well admit it. But that other thing... "It's pinned to the middle of the drapes in front of the vu-cast window, low down on the left."

Val started to let me go, but Ringer snapped, "Keep her like that until I check. She isn't known for her simon-pure honesty."

Val tightened his grip again while Ringer got out of the chair and went to the drapes to begin the search, leaving me to pray as hard as I could. Maybe he wouldn't find it. If he found it, maybe he wouldn't understand. If he understood, maybe he wouldn't tell Val. If he told Val, maybe Val would be less bothered than I expected... I let my head drop as I ran out of maybes. I didn't have the chance of a weed in Eden.

"Found it!" Ringer exclaimed at the drapes. "But wait a minute - what's this?"

I stared at the carpeting and held my breath while Ringer looked at what he'd found, but shouldn't have wasted the effort. He left the vu-cast window with heavy steps, and walked close to wave a paper in my face.

"That was a nice touch, Diana," he said, all granite again. "I'm proud of you! I've got to admit it passed me right by."

"What is it?" Val asked in a puzzled voice while I closed my eyes.

"Our girl is really good," Ringer growled, almost in a fury. "Even without my credentials I might have managed to talk the security people into letting me call the Council, so she didn't take any chances. This is the origins section of your papers, and would have been one of the first things they checked. When they found it missing they'd have gotten a copy of it from the computer from when you first registered here, and checked it out thoroughly.

"These papers are good because our people made them up carefully for you, but they'd never stand up to the kind of inspection they'd get from suspicious security people. As soon as the report came back that you were unknown at your supposed place of origin, they'd put that and her story together and decide they had slavers or pirates on their hands. At that point we'd really be in for it. They'd sweat us for days, and use every truth drug ever mixed to find out what we were supposedly up to. I don't know about you, but only special drugs work on an agent and I used to be an agent. That would really have added the icing."

"I don't think your drugs would have worked on me either," Val said in a very soft voice. "We're specially prepared for our jobs, too. Are you finished with her yet?"

"I suppose so," Ringer growled, shoving the bulky set of credentials into an inside pocket of his jacket. "You can let her up."

"I ... don't ... think ... so," Val said slowly, and I knew without doubt that he also looked down at me.

"What - are you going to do?" I asked unsteadily, very much afraid that he intended to tell me how disappointed he was before letting me up. Hearing it would be hard, but being held like that gave me no choice at all.

"I'm going to finish the job I started, and this time do it right," he said, shifting where he sat to get a better grip on me. "My way of applauding your effort, you might say."

"No, Val, please!" I blurted, appalled at the way he was reacting. He should have been disillusioned enough to walk away, not interested in punishing me! "I can't take any more of being treated like this!"

"That's the whole idea, Diana," he said in the same soft voice. "It's supposed to

make you so eager to avoid a repetition of the treatment, that the next time you get a bright idea you drop it without a second thought. Let's see if it works."

"All right, I promise not to do it again," I said very quickly, trying to find some way out of that corner. Strangely enough most of the things I tried on Val seemed to backfire, and it was definitely time to make an effort toward cutting my losses. "I'll even promise to be good and listen to everything you say," I added, just to sweeten the deal.

At that point I would have been willing to promise to turn inside out, but I quickly learned that he wasn't equally willing to listen. He started to apply that hairbrush again, only this time with more enthusiasm than he'd been using. I was already sore from the first dose, but it looked like he'd only been warming up.

"Ringer, make him stop!" I screamed, feeling every swat as it reached me. "He's killing me!"

"Sorry, Diana, but nobody listens to me around here," he said with a chuckle as he settled himself back in his chair. "If anyone should know that, it's you. It's just too bad this idea didn't come up nine years ago, when you first started to work for me. It would have saved me a lot of trouble."

I hate to think about how long Val kept it up. When he reached the point of apparent satisfaction and let me up, I couldn't move. I'd been crying really hard for a while without being able to stop, and it was all real tears. Val lifted me off his lap and put me face down on the bed, then the two of them walked out of the bedroom and closed the door behind them. I'd managed to make a few mistakes in my life, but that one had proved to be one of the best. With a fistful of bedspread in each hand I lay as still as I could, dizzily trying to figure out why everything had gone so wrong.

Chapter 2

Three hours later the sharp edge had worn off, but it still wasn't possible to forget what had been done to me. I had my pillows bunched up under my arms and face, and was lying on my stomach trying to figure the current odds of escaping when Val walked in. He swung the door shut behind him, came over to the bed and sat down, then stretched himself out on his back on the far side. Once he was settled he put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes with a sigh.

"You bastard," I breathed, staring at his satisfied expression. "You didn't have to put so much muscle into it."

He turned his head toward me and opened one eye. "Watch it," he warned, his voice soft but not as soft as it had been earlier. "I don't like fresh kids for roommates."

"I am not a kid, and I'd rather have James for a roommate!" I told him through my teeth, talking about the crazy who had beaten me on Xanadu. "You get out of here, or so help me I'll - "

Suddenly Val's features blurred, and then it was James lying on the bed next to me. I still wasn't used to Val's quick-change ability, but that had nothing to do with my reaction. At sight of James's face and eyes the breath caught in my throat and choked me, and I buried my own face in the pillow to try to stop the convulsive shakes that hit me. The terror in the memory of what James had done to me came rolling down like a boulder in an avalanche, making it all I could do to keep from screaming the way I'd screamed then. Val put his arms around me almost instantly, but the attempt to counter what he'd done didn't help. I fought for control and eventually made it, but my heart was pounding as though I'd just run miles.

"I'm the biggest damned fool alive," Val said bitterly, pressing me tightly to him. "Are you all right, Diana?"

I would have loved coming up with a witty answer, but I was too busy shuddering at the ice-cold edge of the last of the chills to be in top form where wit was concerned. Val cradled my head against his chest then lay back down still holding me, undoubtedly encouraged by the way I clutched at him. It wasn't that I particularly wanted to be held by him; it was just that I needed something right now, and Val was the closest something available. The memory of James was one I hadn't yet been able to bury.

After a few minutes, I was finally able to say, "Do me one favor, Val. The next time you get the urge to show off your impression of someone, do somebody else, huh? That particular face tends to make me sick to my stomach."

"That's one I owe you," he said quietly, stroking my hair. "I should have stopped to think first, but in a way you asked for it. You're always so damned smart-alecky, it's hard for me to remember you have to have feelings hidden somewhere." He hesitated for a moment then added, "What did James do to you besides use that cane? You never did say."

"He didn't do anything," I told him, trying to get the sour taste out of my mouth. "I don't even know what he was planning to do, and if it's all the same to you I'd like to keep it that way."

He was very still for a minute, then I heard a sound that suggested he'd turned his head and was trying to look at me where I lay against his chest.

"You're not as tough as you pretend to be, are you?" he asked, his voice filled with slow revelation. "The hard-as-nails Special Agent who isn't quite as hard as the image. If I hadn't been so busy protecting myself from you, I would have seen it a lot sooner."

"So I'm only as tough as I have to be," I admitted with a shrug, wondering if he

really expected me to try to argue the point while I still held to him like that. "The attitude usually takes care of the necessary, so why try to be more? Every once in a while a nightmare may slide in, but that balances out what fun comes my way - which is only fair. How can you argue with a fair trade?"

"The trade would seem a little more fair if you really were as hard as you try to make people believe you are," he came back, not terribly happy with what I'd said. "As it is you're getting shorted all the way around, and I don't like that. I think I'm going to have to teach you how to relax to the inevitable."

"Don't waste your time," I advised him, lifting my head to look at the face already looking at me. "Most things aren't inevitable, not if you really work at turning them around. The only exception I've found to that so far is you."

"Well, at least you're bright enough to have learned that much," he said with something of a nod, those black eyes only faintly satisfied. "Maybe this time you'll remember what playing cute tricks buys you, most especially when it comes to me. If Ringer hadn't planted that listening device on the doctor's bag to find out how you really were, he and I would probably be hanging by our thumbs right now. That's not my idea of what a man normally expects from a partner."

"You're absolutely right," I said with a judicious nod, stirring against the arms holding me. "If we were still partners, you'd certainly have a firm basis for complaint. And I think you can let go of me now. In future I'll remember to keep my teddy bear close by so this doesn't happen again."

"Never mind the smart-aleck comments," he said in annoyance, making no effort to do as I'd asked. "It so happens we are still partners, and if you don't believe me you can ask Ringer. He's the one who makes that sort of decision, remember?"

"Not this time he doesn't," I countered, pushing harder to get myself loose. "He lost that privilege when he made his recommendations to the Council, then got so much fun out of delivering their decision. The next time you see him, you can tell him for me that this hasn't changed anything. I'm not going meekly to 2 to play cadet no matter what anyone does to me."

"No one can say Ringer doesn't know you," Val came back with a wry sound, then turned suddenly to pin me to the bed with his body - which effectively ended my escape attempt. "That's the reason he now has my room, and I'm your new roommate. From now on one or the other of us will have an eye on you every minute of the day or night, to make sure you end up where the Council wants you. It's what you get for playing the lone wolf when you had a partner handy, and nearly getting yourself killed because of it. And it's also something the aforementioned partner happens to think you deserve as much as what he gave you."

"You're really pleased with yourself, aren't you?" I snapped, trying to struggle against the arms wrapped around me - not to mention the weight of a ridiculously oversized carcass. "I wonder how pleased you'll be when I get even, partner. Now

get your hands off me."

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot how you feel about getting even," he drawled, totally unimpressed as he watched my useless struggle. "But at least it's making you call me 'partner' again, which is definitely a step in the right direction. Now if I can just get you to skip the threats, I'll feel as if I've accomplished something."

"Damn you, Val, let me go!" I raged, losing sight of the amusement in his eyes when his head bent and he began to kiss my neck. "I wasn't threatening I was promising, and there are times when I do keep my promises! You'll be sorry you did that to me, and you'll be even sorrier if you don't let me go!"

"And sorriest yet if I do let you go," he murmured, most of his attention on what he was in the midst of. "You asked me earlier if I was glad to see you back, and at the time I didn't answer. Let me answer you now, Diana."

"Val, don't," I moaned, hating myself for the way I immediately reacted to a few stupid kisses. He had gotten me used to being held like that, tight in his arms with his lips caressing my flesh, his giant strength and vitality held back by nothing more than his decision to wait for my agreement.

I was furious with him for the way he'd spanked me, but it had been more than two weeks since the last time he'd held me like that. No matter what I wanted, my body refused to listen to my demands that it wait even longer. From one instant to the next I found it was myself that I struggled against rather than him, and then his lips came to mine and ended the struggle. My arms went around his neck to keep him from pulling away, but I needn't have bothered. He didn't go anywhere for quite some time, not until he had thoroughly answered my question.

I stretched as I awoke, and only then realized I'd fallen asleep as soon as Val had let me go. I'd been exhausted from everything that had been done to me, and if I were forced at knife-point to tell the truth, I might even have admitted thinking about trying that hospital bed again. I was stretched out face down on the bed cover and I rubbed my face against it slowly, trying to see how much strength I'd managed to replace with sleep. It wasn't a whole hell of a lot and I moved around in annoyance, silently cursing Val and "his way of doing things." He'd punished me and then he'd made love to me, and now he probably thought that everything was fine. Well, it wasn't fine, not by a long shot, but he still had learning that ahead of him. He'd laughed at my warning and he'd laughed at me, and laughing was something he wasn't entitled to do.

"That was some nap," Val's voice came from my right, and I twisted my head around to see him where he'd been before, stretched out on the other side of my bed, hands tucked behind his head. He was dressed again even though I wasn't, but I couldn't have cared less. Considering the fact that I'd been raised on a nudist planet, clothes aren't the same all-consuming passion with me that they are with everyone else. I looked at Val with a lot of resentment rolling around inside me, and

he crossed his ankles and chuckled.

"I can't imagine why you're looking at me like that," he said, pretending it wasn't his fault I felt like such a fool. "You did ask for it, you know, all of it, and when you ask for something all you can expect is to get it."

"That sounds fair enough," I replied with a nod, giving him a sober look as I rubbed at my left shoulder. "Getting what you ask for is nothing more than justice."

"I'm glad you see it that way," he answered, satisfied only because he didn't know what I meant. He sat up on the bed, stretched till his muscles cracked, then turned his head to look at me again. "I'm also glad you woke up when you did. Ringer is ready to order dinner in, and I can use it. You'd better get dressed."

He got off the bed then and went toward the sitting room, and I lay there and watched till he'd closed the door behind him. My insides felt hollow enough to do justice to any meal, especially since I hadn't had anything to eat after breakfast that morning, but the coming meal probably wouldn't be pleasant. I would be alert for any openings to freedom I might find, and Ringer was bound to be just as alert to see that I couldn't take advantage of them. I slid out of bed and headed for the bathroom, shrugging off any urge to fret. If an opening came my way I'd go for it, no matter who was or wasn't watching.

Showering was an interesting experience, too interesting to keep up for very long when I found it impossible to wash without getting the wrist bandages wet. I was almost tempted to take the bandages off to see what shape my wrists were in, but the pain had dulled to a bearable throb and I didn't want to wake it up again. Val had obviously believed what I'd said about the bandages being no more than decorations and it hadn't done me any good. When I saw I couldn't keep the bandages out of the water, I turned the shower off and let the blowers dry me.

I dressed slowly and carefully in a clean shorts outfit, brushed briefly at my hair, then went toward the sitting room. The door opened before I reached it and Val started in, but he stopped when he saw me coming and stepped aside to let me through. I looked around carefully as I walked toward the table Ringer already sat at, but Ringer apparently didn't notice. He grinned when he saw me, and then chuckled as he got to his feet.

"Maybe we should have thought to put Diana's plate on the mantle - even though we don't have a mantle," Ringer mused, talking to Val but still looking at me. "I have a feeling she'll be happier standing up for a while."

"No sense in spoiling her," Val disagreed, obviously playing along with Ringer's light mood. "If she's pampered now, she'll lose the effect of having gotten a good whacking."

I stopped short of the table and fought not to clench my fists, but Ringer laughed and nodded.

"You're absolutely right," he told Val, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm still new at this, so I'll take your advice. Come closer to the table, Diana, so you can - if you'll excuse the expression - sit."

I growled low in my throat and whirled to go back where I came from, but Ringer's voice stopped me in mid stride.

"Hold it!" he ordered, the amusement gone from his tone. "You were willing enough to throw Valdron and me to the dogs, but having to pay for your cuteness doesn't sit as well, does it? Well, that's too damned bad about you! You'll come back here and take whatever ribbing we care to give you, or we'll carry you back."

I stood where I was for a minute, then turned slowly back to look at them. The smiles were gone from their faces, and two pairs of black eyes were showing me just how pleased they were with the thought of what I'd almost done to them. I held their gazes for the space of a few heartbeats, then shook my head.

"I only tried to throw you to the dogs," I corrected Ringer. "You and your friend there did considerably more to me. How long do you plan to be offended?"

Ringer had been holding a linen napkin in his hand, and he threw it on the table then leaned both hands on his chair back.

"This isn't a game," he growled, the expression in his eyes still showing anger. "I know how you operate, Diana, and it's fine against an enemy, but ruthlessness has no place when you're among your own! What you set us up for wasn't just a lark, something to be forgotten as soon as it was avenged. You used your abilities against your own people, and you've got to learn not to do it again. I know you have no more conscience than I do, so you've got to be taught some other way. Now, come over here and sit down."

Ringer really seemed set on this lesson kick, but somehow I had the feeling he was more concerned with what Val thought than with his own injured dignity. Agents of all grades tend to play rough - Special Agents naturally playing roughest of all - and Ringer had never been one to climb on a high horse. He'd played enough games in his own time, tending to reply in kind if any of his people turned rougher than he liked, but he'd never gone moral and righteous before...

The two watchers were waiting for me to come back, so I shook my head a second time and retraced my steps. I was in no shape to try fighting them again, and argument would have been futile.

By the time I got back to the table, there was a look of anticipation on Ringer's face. I should have known he had something else up his sleeve, but I suppose I've grown trusting in my old age. He moved closer to the third chair at the table just as I reached it, and then he drew it back from its place.

"This was prepared especially for you," he told me, a faint grin showing again. "Be

smart for once and accept it without a fight. You'll only end up in it anyway."

I looked down to see what he was gesturing at, then immediately stared up at him with a rage I could barely hold in. Aside from the thick pillow someone had put on the seat of the small armchair, a metal chain was arranged all down the left side of it, wrapped around the left arm and leg. Ringer knew how I felt about being chained, and his grin faded when he saw the expression that must have been in my eyes.

"Just take it easy," he said softly, making no move toward me. "You lost all right to any consideration when you made your first play against us. If you don't like what it bought you, there's nobody else to blame. Just sit down and take it quietly."

I tried hard to get that look out of my eyes, but getting the feeling out of my mind was harder. I glanced down at the chain, forced myself to take a deep breath and unclench my fists, then looked back up at Ringer. If all bets were off, then they were off on my side, too.

"I've never taken it quietly," I told Ringer, pushing the chair closer to the table. "Are you sure this is the way you want it?"

"I'm positive," Ringer growled in answer, utter conviction showing in his eyes.

I shrugged very slightly, moved in front of the chair, then lowered myself into it. It was the perfect opportunity for Ringer to start his heckling again, but he didn't waste the time. Instead he opened the thin bracelet-cuff attached to the top of the chain and closed it again around my left wrist, then he crouched down next to the chair. The chain wound around the side of the chair arm, reached down to the leg below it, and hung free in a pile of chain atop a second bracelet-cuff.

Ringer took the pile of chain, wound it around my left leg and the chair leg together, then brought the rest of it back and attached the second bracelet-cuff to the rear left chair leg. I glanced around to see that Val was occupied with a bottle of wine in a chilling bucket. The bucket still stood on the serving cart, about five feet away from the table. When I returned my attention to the man I worked for, I found Ringer's eyes on me. He still hadn't risen out of his crouch by my chair, but his original grin had come back and then some.

"This bracelet was a gift from the station security people," Ringer told me softly, his forearms resting on his thighs. "In case you haven't recognized it, it's the old-fashioned model used just before they brought out single-set static holders. That ring on your wrist won't open until the ring on the back leg of your chair is opened. That ought to tell you not to waste your time trying the lock you can reach."

Ringer grinned wider as my left arm involuntarily lifted as high as the cuff would let it go - about two inches from the chair arm - and then his eyes went to Val where he stood with the wine.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself," he murmured, shaking his

head at Val's back. "Any other man treating a woman the way he did would be apologizing for a month while taking cold showers. But him?" He shook his head again, then brought his gaze and grin back to me. "How does it feel to be put in your place?"

I choked on all the words I wanted to say and reached for him right-handed, but he straightened up fast and moved out of my reach with a laugh. I was so mad I started to pull at the wrist cuff with my left arm, but a stab of pain ended the move before it really got started. It felt as though no matter what move I made it became the wrong one, and I could just see myself showing up at 2, the agent training facilities, with the rank of cadet. Every agent I knew would laugh him or herself sick, and I'd end up with more challenges from newcomers than there are hours in the planetary day.

Agents in training are usually worse than medical students when it comes to wildness, and no matter what anyone said, the new "cadet" would be ridden as hard as possible. Or at least they'd try to ride the new cadet as hard as possible. Bones would be broken, blood would be spilled, but the Council said send little Diana back as a cadet, and that's what Ringer would do. Ringer was a fool, and if I could have gotten my hands on him I would have shoved that dirty laugh right back down his throat where it came from.

While I fought to keep the rage from breaking free of my control, Ringer brought over the food, Val brought the wine, and the meal creaked to a start. I would have bet quite a lot that I wouldn't be tasting the wine Val held, but not only did I get to taste it, I also got to be served first. Ringer distributed the food, and when everyone had full plates and glasses in front of them, the bustle died down to a chewing, swallowing silence. The wine was adequate, the food was good, but all too soon Ringer and Val were back to making snappy comments about my "delicate" condition. They were riding me on purpose, trying to make me regret what I'd done and reluctant to do it a second time, trying to humiliate me as far as humanly possible.

I held onto my temper as long as I could, but when they began to talk about sending me to bed early and taking away my ice cream money, I'd finally had it. Just because I looked like a child didn't mean I was one, and it rapidly became necessary to prove that.

Val was saying something about how healthy it is to spank a woman every time she needs it, and Ringer was hanging on his every word. For that reason it wasn't difficult to scrape off some of the colorless coating from the nail of my left little finger without their noticing it. Each of my fingernails is coated with a different traceless chemical, and Radman the slaver had found out how effective one of them was just before he died.

People always see other people moving around and reaching for things, but very few realize that complete actions are rarely seen. If there's a napkin on the table to someone's right and their right hand moves in a direct line toward that napkin, you

assume you know what's happening. Your mind automatically completes the action before true completion is reached, and dismisses it from your attention. If someone is talking to you during and after this dismissal, you'll probably miss the small, unobtrusive sideways extension of the hand before the napkin is finally reached.

Val's wineglass was to my right, just beyond my napkin, Ringer's wineglass to my left, just beyond my water glass. The chemicals I use have no smell or taste in addition to being colorless, and wine glasses were refilled twice after I'd settled back in my chair to brood.

Ringer and Val were having a great time putting me down, but once my gift to them began to do its work their great time would be over. I can pick the lock on almost anything that has a lock, but as Ringer had pointed out, the wrong lock was closest to me. The way the chain was wound around the chair I'd have to break that chair before I'd be able to reach the right lock. But the chair I sat in was a light synthetic wood that broke about as easily as the hull of the orbital station.

I'd still be sitting there, chained in place, when the effects of my chemical eased up on them, and by that time they'd no longer be rational human beings. I had no idea what they would do to me for drugging them, but whatever it was it would be worth it. I'm willing to pay the price for what I do - and everyone else around me had better be just as willing.

The drug I'd used - chosen carefully for the specific results I'd wanted - took about forty-five minutes to begin showing its presence. If my victims had swallowed it before eating it would have worked sooner, but forty-five minutes on top of a full meal was just about right. I sat curled up on my left hip, right foot folded back in the chair, completely relaxed as I inspected the wine glass in my hand. That was when Ringer pushed a short distance away from the table.

"How did it get so hot in here?" he asked Val, frowning and wiping at his forehead. "It feels as if the temperature's gone up twenty degrees."

"It does feel too warm," Val agreed, pulling at his collar as he watched Ringer fighting open his shir-tie. They had started out sitting in their chairs, but at that point they were more sprawled than sitting, finding it hard to fight the queasy lethargy rolling slowly over them. I sipped at what was left in my wineglass and watched them with solemn interest.

"Something must be wrong with the suite thermostat," Ringer muttered, the high red color beginning to drain from his face. He was turning "green around the gills," and Val wasn't far behind him. Ringer moved around in his chair as though trying to find the initiative to stand up, but Val sat very still, possibly in an attempt to keep the room from revolving around him. I noted their symptoms, checked them off against my mental progression chart, and waited for the rest of it to hit them.

"The oxygen flow's - been affected - too," Ringer gasped, tearing at his shir-tie, his chest heaving. "Valdon, the emergency - inhalators - are behind that - red panel. Do

you think - you can - reach them?"

Val didn't even look in the direction Ringer had tried gesturing toward, but he almost shook his head.

"The room is spinning too fast," he whispered, hands locked tight to his chair arms, voice hoarse with nausea. "Is there anything to strap down with?"

Ringer frowned through his suffering and tried to answer, but the words were beyond him. The two big heroes fought with their heaving insides in silence for another minute or two, then Ringer moaned, clapped a hand to his mouth, and bent double in the chair. Val suddenly began to slide out of his chair to his knees, his face a mask of desperation. Then the two of them, as though on cue, half staggered and half crawled toward what was now Ringer's bedroom and the bathroom it held.

I knew they'd end up fighting to use the facilities, and wondered why at least one of them hadn't tried for my bathroom. It would have been the smarter way of doing it, but obviously they weren't thinking very clearly. I finished the wine in my glass, found that I could just reach the nearly empty bottle, and proceeded to pour myself some more. I had a wait ahead of me, and the wait wasn't calculated to be a short one.

More than an hour passed before there was any sign of life from Ringer's bedroom. At that point there were only two cigarettes left in the table dispenser, and I was really beginning to feel bored. I'd also had to shift in the chair too many times, and so felt stiff from trying to get comfortable.

I was in the midst of putting out the last cigarette I'd lit when there was a sound at the bedroom door - something like foot-dragging - and I looked up to see the apparitions which had materialized out of nothing. Ringer leaned on the right-hand door jamb, Val on the left, and they both looked as though they'd been through shipwreck and stranding. Their clothes were wrinkled and spotted, open at throat and cuffs, and baggy at knees and shoe-tops. Also, their stance was shaky, their skin ashen, and their eyes over-bright. They stared at me in wavering silence for a short time, then Ringer's arm lifted to point a trembling finger at me.

"There," he croaked, obviously proving a point. "If it had been anything else, she wouldn't be sitting there like that."

"But how?" Val demanded weakly, running a hand over his face. His hair was dripping wet, as though he'd put his head under a faucet.

"One of her pet drugs," Ringer growled, his hand closing more tightly on the doorjamb. "Knowing that much, I'll also bet I know which one. I'll kill her."

He began to stagger out of the doorway, but Val pushed away from his side of the door and reached a hand to Ringer's shoulder to stop him.

"No," Val rasped, almost falling with the effort and nearly taking Ringer down with

him. "First we'll ask. If it's true, then she's mine."

Ringer didn't look as though he agreed with that, but he had too little strength left to argue. He and Val staggered their way back to the chairs they'd been using and collapsed into them with muffled grunts. Their clothes had a nasty, sour odor to them, but I just kept my eyes on the two wrecks and didn't say a word.

"Diana, look at me," Val got out, sitting in his chair as though his insides ached. He sat to my right, and I gave him my full attention as he'd asked. When my head was turned completely toward him, he pushed the wet hair out of his eyes with one hand.

"Diana, did you do this to us?" he asked, his voice softer than his condition accounted for. "Did you use some ... hellish something to do this to us?"

His stare, much more lifeless than normal, held to me, and Ringer's gaze was just the same. I looked from one to the other of them, then smiled faintly.

"Who am I?" I asked Val, then moved my head to include Ringer in the question. "Who do you think I am?"

Ringer stared briefly and then frowned, probably understanding what I meant, but Val was too sick to be anything but confused.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, his breath coming more heavily from the exertion of anger. "I asked a question and I'll damned well be answered!"

"You have been answered," I told him, losing the smile. "Think about it for a minute, Val, and then ask yourself who you've been playing with. Are you stupid enough to put me in the same category as your blond playmate, or are you just letting your eyes rule your reason? Ask yourself, who am I?"

Val adopted a frown like Ringer's, but Ringer had already given up on his. The man I worked for sat bent over in his chair, elbows on knees, head bowed to hands, exhaustion and illness clear in every line of him.

"Damn," he whispered, almost talking to himself. "Books and covers. Damn it!"

Val had turned his head to stare at Ringer, but he still didn't understand what was happening. Ringer had seen his mistake, but Val still needed to have it spelled out.

"I'm not a little girl," I said, bringing Val's gaze back to me. "And I'm not a big girl disguised as a little girl. I'm not a spoiled brat and I'm not a cuddly armful. I'm a Special Agent. Do you know what it means to treat a Special Agent the way you've been treating me?"

I gave Val a chance to answer, but he didn't take it. He sat and stared at me, waiting to have the question answered for him.

"It means you're asking for it," I supplied, and saw a flash of memory and sudden understanding in his eyes. "It means you've called accounts in to be squared, it

means you're ready to make a stand. It also means you've decided on the way you want it."

Ringer raised his head at that, undoubtedly remembering that the choice had been his. I'd warned him once and I'd warned Val once, and once was all the warning I usually ever gave. I wondered where his mind could have been, thinking he'd neutralized me by chaining me to a chair.

"Is that what the point to all this was?" Val suddenly croaked. "Being a Special Agent gives you the right to poison people?"

His right arm leaned on the table and his hand was a fist, underlining the outrage in his exhausted gaze. I suddenly felt just as tired, tired and out of arguments. I looked down at my free hand in my lap, and didn't try again.

"Answer me!" Val rasped, his hand coming to wrap itself around my right arm and shake me till I looked at him. "Does being a Special Agent give you the right to poison people?"

His face and the force of his fingers showed how furious he was, but there was nothing left for me to say. He didn't understand, and I couldn't change that.

"She wasn't talking about right," Ringer's voice came, weak still but stronger than it had been. "She was talking about ability."

Val jerked his head around to look at Ringer, his hand still on my arm, and I looked at Ringer too - to see the stare he sent me.

"Remembering is so hard when looking at that face," Ringer murmured, his arms on the chair arms, his body slumped in the chair. "We punished a bad little girl and then laughed at her, but we forgot what we were punishing her for. I'd still like to take the life from her for putting me through that century in hell, but there's something you'd better understand, Valdon: she may have used Glue on us, but it could just as easily have been Eternity."

Ringer knew my drug supply and knew quite a bit about how my mind worked, and he'd finally realized they'd gone too far. There was no friendliness for me in his eyes, but he did understand. Val frowned and turned his head to join in Ringer's stare, and slowly, slowly, his rage eased off as he realized he could just as easily be dead. If I thought in terms of rights I could have talked myself into believing I had the right to take his life, but in terms of ability all I'd wanted to do was make a point. I had enough Eternity to decimate the population of the orbital station, but my using it had never been in question. I had the ability to use it, but not the right.

"You can't mean you forgive her!" Val blazed at Ringer, finally letting my arm go. "Whether or not she could have killed us has nothing to do with it! Look at yourself! You look worse than I feel!"

"No, I don't forgive her," Ringer growled, sitting the least bit straighter in his chair.

"This isn't something you forgive someone for doing to you. But I do understand why she did it - and have to admit that I'd probably have done the same myself. Don't know if I would have had the self-control not to use the Eternity, though..."

The last of what he said was more of a mutter, almost lost behind his hand as he wiped at his face. He'd moved his eyes back to me, the anger low but still there, and then he began to force himself out of the chair to his feet.

"I want her out of my sight," he said, groping in a pocket until he came up with a key. "And I also think I can make further use of this chain."

He came close to my chair before lowering himself to one knee, then the chain tightened around my ankle as he fumbled with the lock on the back chair leg. Opening the lock took longer than closing it had, due mostly to the fact that Ringer's hands weren't all that steady. Val watched the proceedings in silence, but his eyes and attitude said he still hadn't been convinced. He shared the suite with two Special Agents, but he hadn't learned to share their way of thinking.

When Ringer finally had the chain free, he carried it in one hand while using the other to push me ahead of him back toward my bedroom. The push wasn't only a gesture of annoyance as it would be in most men. It was an indication of how far his control over his rage had slipped, how close he was to losing whatever veneer of civilization was left to him. I stumbled into the doorjamb from one of the pushes, bruising my knee and arm, but that didn't stop it. Ringer was long past worrying about what he did to me, and a bruised knee was quite a bit less than what I'd expected from him.

Ringer was generous enough to let me use the bathroom and take my clothes off before chaining me by one ankle to the bed, but he deliberately put the second, most important cuff around my ankle. I frowned as I watched him, wondering if he'd gotten confused, but there was no confusion in his eyes as he stood himself over me.

"The chain doesn't come off unless I take it off," he said, his tone as flat as I'd ever heard it, his face blank of all emotion. "If I ever find it off, for whatever reason, you'll need surgery on whichever knee I aim at. You have my word."

After saying what he had to he turned away from me, circled the bed, then left the room. His walk remained slow and unsteady, his skin still yellow, his voice still weak, but none of that had anything to do with what he'd said. Ringer carried a specially made slug gun, smaller and noisier than standard issue disruptors, but much handier for his purposes.

The slugs were small and came in clips of fifty, all non-exploding, but they could be sent toward a target one at a time or in streams heavy enough to tear a man apart. Ringer could find his target-point ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a statistic which would not be altered to significance by the way he felt. If his shaky hands brought the figure down even as far as seventy-five out of a hundred, the fact that one out of every four slugs coming at you would miss could not be considered

encouraging.

I shifted over onto my left side on the bed, hearing the faint clink of the chain attached to my right ankle. Ringer had given me the same choice I'd given him, and all I had to do to accept his challenge was to open the chain he'd put on me. He'd deliberately made access to the lock easy, doing it that way so we'd both know where we stood. The ring was cold and hard around my ankle, a statement of confinement stronger than it would normally have been. I knew the man I'd worked for so long, knew he wasn't bluffing or simply trying to scare me, and knew too that I'd have to think about whether or not to continue escalating.

It couldn't have been more than five or ten minutes before Val appeared in the doorway, walking as slowly and painfully as Ringer had done. His gaze touched me where I lay on the bed, but the look was nothing like the ones he usually gave me. There was anger in that look but there was illness too, and part of the illness touched and colored what seemed a demand for understanding. Val appeared to be struggling with the strange ideas he'd been introduced to, but he wasn't to the point of talking about them. He closed the door to the bedroom behind him, then began to get out of the creased and smelly clothes he wore. When that was done he came over to the bed and sat, turned off the light with its beside switch, then lay down.

I could hear his labored breathing in the darkness, but it was a minute or two before his dark shape separated itself from the surrounding blackness. Faint moonlight came through the vu-cast window, and I realized I didn't even know what sort of scene it showed. Val and I had had the suite registered to us for about three weeks, but that was only the second night-period I was spending in it.

I felt drained and tired, but I couldn't seem to fall asleep. Val tossed back and forth, moaning faintly every once in a while, but every time I turned, the ankle chain clinked in protest. That made it impossible for me to forget it was there, even if I could have forgotten otherwise. The pillow linen under my face had a faintly sweet odor to it, not enough to bother anyone but enough to make you think of perfumed silk in a palace full of servants and the right kind of people.

I put my arms under the pillow and thought about the man lying next to me, the man who seemed to keep forgetting who and what I was. I poked and pushed at the questions I had, but there wasn't the faintest inkling of an answer, no sudden understanding of what made his wheels go round. Val really did know what I was, and more than that he'd even seen me work. He'd been right there when I'd killed bandits by the handful with a sword on that outpost world, and he hadn't been far away when I'd killed the slaver Radman with nothing but my hands.

But even knowing all that, he'd still had the nerve to spank me just as if I were nothing more than your average girl on a street corner. And as if that weren't enough, he now lay next to me right after losing most of what had been inside him to a drug I'd given him.

Why?

Why did he act the way he did? I did some tossing of my own and filled my fists with handfuls of pillow, but none of that helped bring any answers to light. Most people had a well-justified fear of Special Agents, and most of those knew less than Val did about me. Men were usually nervous around me when they found out what I was, and I'd learned to accept their attitudes and involve myself only with other agents - or else not mention what my line of work happened to be. But Val wasn't like any of the others. He touched me gently, used me fiercely, and punished me anytime he really disapproved of something I'd done. What made him so different?

His breathing had been more or less even for a while, so I reached a hand out slowly and gently to touch my fingers to his arm. The skin was firm and warm, an appropriate wrapping for the muscle underneath, and I remembered how those arms felt when they were around me. So different he was, strange beyond the strangeness of his origins and abilities, and until tonight he'd also been trying to tell himself that something ... extra could develop between us.

That was pure fantasy, of course, nothing but window dressing for the simple fact that he enjoyed sex with me. There was nothing else for him to like in a relationship with me, and after what had happened, he'd finally be able to admit it. I was a Special Agent, not a woman, and didn't even really have the right to touch his arm like that. Realizing that made me take my fingers back, and a long while later sleep finally came.

Chapter 3

We all woke late the next morning, mainly due to the fact that the night hadn't been a quiet one. Val had writhed and groaned almost constantly, but he'd been well off compared to Ringer. I hadn't known it immediately, but the man I work for had taken over the sitting room as a temporary bedroom, leaving it only when he could no longer control what the Glue was continuing to do to him.

Val seemed better able to resist the urgings of the drug, but his sleep hadn't been a restful one, even compared to Ringer's. I'd been awake almost every time they were, well aware of what they were feeling. That made it almost a shock when I finally woke up with my cheek pressed to Val's chest, his arms tight around me even though he was still asleep. I didn't know if I had gone to him or he had come to me, but I didn't want to be in that position when he woke up.

So I tried to squirm slowly out of the grip that was holding me to his body, very aware of the chain fastened around my ankle. I'd once been chained like that on an assignment, and the similarity of the circumstance turned me the least bit uncomfortable.

My assignment had been the retrieval of a stolen sacred object, a small but beautifully carved idol inlaid with three very valuable jewels. The idol was the object of worship of thousands of believers in that particular sect, people called Aralee, and it had been stolen by the man who had conquered half of their part of their world.

The conqueror had taken over a palace in territory adjacent to the country of the Aralee. Either he didn't know or didn't care that the Aralee were praying to their god and arming themselves, waiting for nothing more than a final sign of favor before launching a complete, merciless war of total destruction against the conqueror, his people, and anyone else who happened to get in their way.

The Council couldn't intervene in local planetary matters, so it was decided to send someone to recover the idol for the Aralee in the hopes that the jihad could be avoided. I sometimes wonder about the Council's definition of noninterference, but as the saying goes, mine not to wonder why, mine but to do or -

Yeah. At any rate, I was the one who ended up with the assignment, and Jensar, the conqueror in question, ended up with me. I was sent to him as a supposed gift from one of the provinces he hadn't gotten around to yet, presumably a peace offering which would send him in a different direction once he went on the march again.

Darl is a planet which heartily approves of slavery, one of the reasons they tend to lag behind other Federation planets in almost everything, but at least I'd had a choice of what sort of slave to be. After reading the reports on Jensar, I'd opted for the clothes and supercilious attitudes of a woman of the Darlan nobility, one who had been chosen against her will to serve her country.

I was brought to him in a covered litter, made them force me out of the litter to stand in front of my new owner, then watched as he grinned while looking me over. The rich green silks I wore were as thin and transparent as the assurances of my willingness in the note sent with me, and Jensar was caught by the lure in spite of himself.

Jensar was a man of common beginnings, risen to the rank of conqueror and king through nothing more than his abilities and desires. Because of that background, he had the expected interest in women who had always before been considered too far above him. He came down off his silver throne, a big man, hard-muscled and more than fit, his grin sending the ends of his blond moustache upward as he walked around me. He played the looking but not touching game until he'd seen every inch of me, then he stood himself in front of me, looked me over one last time - and ripped the silk off me and threw it away.

My character was shocked to be treated like that, conforming to the Darlan belief that to be clothed, even in the flimsies I'd had on, was much superior and more dignified than to be stripped naked. My nudist background often comes in handy that way, so the shame and humiliation I projected were as phony as my supposed origins. Jensar laughed at the way I raged and cried, then he called a member of his

personal guard to escort me to a "place of waiting."

The guard, taking a fistful of my hair, pulled me along behind him to the place I'd expected to be taken - Jensar's bedchamber. The room was enormous and so was the bed, and I managed to get a glimpse of the idol I was after when the guard dragged me past it. It stood on a darkwood table with four statues of gold and jewels, probably slated to be thrown away once the three priceless starlight stones were pried out of it.

The guard threw me down on Jensar's bed, locked a golden chain around my ankle, then proceeded to search me. Just because a woman is naked doesn't mean she's out of hiding places, and that was something the guard didn't have to be told. His hands and fingers went everywhere, a wide grin on his face showing how much he enjoyed my screams and struggles, and then he addressed himself to my hairdo.

My hair had been piled high and strung with pearls and other knickknacks. All of it, pearls, pins, everything, ended up thrown behind the guard so he could search between the strands for hidden weapons like poisoned needles or strangling wire. When nothing was found he ran his hands over me one last time, checked the lock on my ankle, then left.

When he was finally out the door I cursed under my breath, felt through my hair myself, then looked frantically around on the floor for the thin, hard, almost invisible lockpick I'd brought with me. Everything depended on my having that lockpick, and the search through my hair had been unexpected. If I'd had even a minute's warning I could have palmed the pick, but the reports on Jensar said he liked his women wild but all dolled up. That was why I hadn't expected my fancy hairdo to be taken apart, but the guard had obviously missed reading the report.

I got off the bed, balanced on my left leg, and tried to peer around farther away from the bed. But the multi-colored pattern of the large rug the bed stood on made searching for the tiny lockpick with my eyes alone almost impossible. Then I heard the sound of feet way out in the corridor, so I jumped back onto the bed and began to pull at the chain around my ankle just in time for the entrance of Jensar.

The conqueror of a good part of Darl came into the room alone, unbuttoning his red tunic as he came, a grin on his face for the way I was trying to escape. He didn't mind what I was doing because he knew I'd never make it, and it gave him a laugh to see me trying. He got rid of his clothes about as fast as he'd gotten rid of mine, and then the real playtime began.

I, of course, started out hating him and everything about him, also managing to goad him into teaching me who was boss. Then slowly, obviously against my will, I came to admire and want him, no longer needing to be forced to the attitude. The man was no fool so it was harder than it sounds, but by the time Jensar left his bed he was convinced he had a hot new slave to serve him. He told me he'd be keeping me a while, described me in terms of a bed slave just to see me blush at my comedown in

life, then he dressed and laughed his way out of the room again.

Once Jensar was gone, I was able to get back to the problem of the lockpick. I put my left foot on the floor to hop back to where I'd been before Jensar had interrupted me, and that was when things started to go right again. The luck that was so necessary a part of every Special Agent's continued well-being immediately showed it was still with me.

My bare foot had come down on a slender something I hadn't seen, and I reached down to fold the lockpick into my hand. I don't think I can describe how relieved I felt without explaining that trapped, helpless feeling that comes over you at being chained to a man's bed, his possession for whatever use he cares to put you to. Most women deal with men who conform to civilized mores and behavioral patterns, but there was nothing civilized about Jensar the conqueror. Until you find yourself in the arms of a man like that, the cold clasp of his metal chaining you to his bed and presence, you'll never really understand the meaning of helpless - or the meaning of relief.

It hadn't taken me long to unchain myself, get the idol, and find my way out of the palace, but I'd had to kill twice to do it. The first time was when I was stealing clothes, and the second was when I had to pass a guarded door. That assignment was long over with, no more than a commendation in my file at headquarters for averting a war. But being held in Val's arms had brought back the memory of it, the helplessness, the trapped feeling, all of it. I squirmed slowly, trying to get free, but Val's eyes opened and his arms tightened their hold.

"The least you can do is lie still," he mumbled, his voice still thick with sleep. "If you do, I might reconsider strangling you."

His eyes closed again and in another minute his breathing had evened out, but he still held me close up against him. I looked at the chest in front of my eyes that was close enough to taste, felt the grasp of the metal around my ankle and heard its rattle, then shuddered as quietly as I could.

He held me to him as if he owned me, just the way Jensar had, but he was nothing like Jensar. Or was he? And why would he want to hold me? None of it made any sense, and my own reactions made the least sense of all. The smartest thing to do would be to get out of there just as fast as I possibly could. That way I just might stay sane.

Getting out of there rapidly proved to be less than a snap. Ringer was already moving around in the sitting room when Val finally woke up all the way, turned me loose, then went to get washed and dressed. I sat up on my hip and looked at the ankle chain, thinking about taking it off and trying my luck again, but Ringer must have been tuned to the wrong wavelength. All I did was lift my ankle and jiggle the chain as I considered it, but that little seemed to be enough.

"Forget it." Ringer's voice came from the doorway, and I looked up to see him

leaning against the doorjamb, his face still pale but looking considerably better than it had. "You've got a lot coming to you for what you did last night," he continued in a growl. "If that chain comes off before I take it off, it'll all begin coming at once."

I stirred in annoyance at his tone and leaned back on my elbow. "How long are you going to keep me like this?" I asked, only some of the annoyance showing in my own tone.

"I'll keep you like that as long as I care to," he answered with a snort, then came over to sit down on the far side of the bed. That much closer I could see the satisfaction in him, and I wondered if it had a source other than my being chained. He took time to stretch out on the bed's edge and get comfortable before bringing his gaze back to me.

"I had some words with the Council this morning," he commented, one finger rubbing at his jaw. "They had just returned to session after their lunch break, so I was put right through. I had a lot of time for thinking last night, and they were very interested in my thoughts. I pointed out that returning you to cadet grade would do us little good if we sent you to 2 where everyone knows you and you know everything about the place. Instead of it being a three month punishment, we'd be lucky if it lasted three days."

Ringer was still gazing at me blandly, everything he said no more than conversation. I didn't know what point he was getting to unless there were other Special Agents at 2. None of the Agents First Class would get in my way, but none of them would try to help me either. Special Agents bend regulations too often, and it wouldn't be fair to involve someone of lower rank in our doings. Special Agents swing a lot of weight, but Agents First Class don't.

"The Council was upset," Ringer continued, "but my suggestion calmed them down. I asked why you just had to be demoted to cadet grade. Why couldn't you really be made a cadet and started off at the Academy all over again? That way there'd be no one around to help you walk off, and you'd be in the middle of a system that was designed to keep you where you were put. You know what? They liked the idea so much they adopted it immediately."

I stared at him openmouthed, having trouble believing what I'd heard. "But they can't do that," I blurted, shaking my head. "The Academy is only for kids. I'm not a kid!"

"Take a look in a mirror," Ringer disagreed with a grin, pleased with how his news had hit me. "The way you look now, most of those kids at the Academy will be older than you. And if three months in Pete's tender care doesn't teach you something, nothing in this universe will."

He laughed at me then, showing how hard he'd worked to even the score between us, and all I wanted to do was kill him. Being sent to the Academy was infinitely worse than just being given cadet grade, and if Ringer didn't know it then no one did. I started to crawl toward him across the too wide bed, mad enough to go all the

way, but the chain on my ankle wasn't long enough. I couldn't get closer than an arm's length away from him, and he lay comfortably in his spot, knowing I couldn't reach him. I lay flat on my stomach, straining toward him, but I just couldn't reach him.

"All you'd get out of that would be personal satisfaction and more trouble than you've had yet," he told me softly, holding my stare. "Damn it, Diana, when will you ever learn not to make things worse?"

He made a sound of anger then and took himself off the bed, but I didn't know what the hell he had to be angry about. I scrambled back across the bed and began to examine the lock at my ankle, then cursed aloud and threw a fist into the footboard. Most locks don't require a special lock-pick - any small piece of metal will do - but if the shape and design of the lock weren't just camouflage, I'd need a magnetized pick to get it open.

I had that kind of lock-pick - in my luggage put away in the closet. I could have asked Val to get me that small piece of luggage the night before and he never would have known what he was getting for me. But I'd let Ringer's upset convince me that waiting a short while would be better. Now Ringer was walking toward that closet, opening it and starting to pull things out, and all I could do was curse again and yank at that damned chain.

"What's going on?" Val asked, standing in the doorway to the bathroom as he looked between Ringer and me. Ringer didn't turn even to glance at Val, and didn't stop what he was doing.

"Help me get this stuff out of here," he grunted over his shoulder, glancing around in the closet to make sure he hadn't missed any of the bags. "I think I remember what I packed in for her, but I don't want to miss any of it."

"I've never seen a woman with so many weapons," Val commented as he went over to give Ringer a hand. "Do you issue that much to all of your agents?"

Ringer straightened up and threw me a glance before answering.

"Valdon, departmental rules state that an agent must achieve expert marksman level or the equivalent before they're authorized to carry any specific weapon," he explained. "Diana is one of seven who have earned blanket authorization, any weapon, any grade or caliber. I'm one of the other six. Let's take these things to my room."

Val paused to glance at me with a strange, bright look in his eyes before he helped Ringer carry my luggage away. I watched them go with a bitterness I didn't even try to hide, then flopped down on my stomach again with my cheek against the cover, having no idea what to do. I couldn't let them send me back to the Academy as a cadet, but right now I couldn't see any way to avoid it. I pounded at the bedcover in frustration, but that didn't help any more than the cursing had done. Ringer and the

Council were determined to go through with their idiocy, and were dragging me right along with them.

Once my weapons were safely out of reach, Ringer came back to tend to his prisoner. He checked the bathroom before letting me use it, then went over my clothes with a microscope before letting me get dressed. His special handgun was in the shoulder holster he usually wore it in, but he'd taken off his coat before unchaining me. Val had been puzzled by the gesture, but I knew Ringer so I also knew what he'd been saying.

Ringer was faster than most at getting that gun out, but any coat will slow you down no matter how fast you are. His taking the coat off was both a compliment and a warning, an acknowledgment of my ability and speed, and an indication of his willingness to do as he'd said he would. I had a clear shot at that gun if I thought I could take it, but I'm not that much of a fool. Hand to hand I could have kept him from doing me too much damage, but I'd seen men die trying to take a weapon away from Ringer. I used the bathroom and then got dressed, and ignored the gun as if it were somewhere else.

When I was chained to the bed again, Ringer had food sent in. He and Val weren't able to eat much, and what they could eat was all I got. A tray was put on the bed next to me, and the two men helped themselves in the next room while I was left to my own devices. As it turned out I wasn't very hungry, so I drank the coffee and left the toast and cereal alone.

After the meal, Ringer and Val went about their own business, leaving me in solitary confinement. They'd even closed the bedroom door to increase the jail-like atmosphere, but I've been locked up before. If I can escape I do it, but if I can't I wait for whatever might turn up. Ringer had supplied a selection of reading matter, so I chose a good murder mystery and got comfortable to wait for what might turn up. I'd only been reading half an hour or so when there was an unexpected knock on the door and then Ringer opened it to stick his head in.

"You've got a visitor," he announced, and I noticed he'd put his coat back on. "Feel free to tell her any story you like."

I frowned at Ringer's comment, but when he stepped aside to let Jane Handley come in, I understood what he'd meant. Jane had been my nurse in the hospital section, and was the main reason I'd had to get out of there before trying a story on anyone. Jane knew I was an agent, and had been watching me constantly to make sure I did things her way.

Jane was a good-looking woman in her forties, brown haired and brown eyed with more energy than had been good for me. We'd disagreed more than a few times, but she'd usually won. She now carried a small medical bag, and closed the door behind herself before starting into the room. When she saw the ankle chain, she stopped short to laugh.

"Now why didn't I think of that?" she asked, one hand on a well-turned hip. "With patients like you, Red, it ought to be standard hospital equipment."

"Very funny," I commented, flipping my book closed. "All I needed was another fan. Why don't you join those other two out there and start a club?"

"I already have," she answered with a broad grin. "It's called the 'Don't Believe a Word She Says' group. I hear Dr. Forrester is the newest member, so you'd better take my advice and stay healthy. If he ever gets his hands on you, it's the end of the line."

"That's where he'll have to get if he wants a crack at me," I told her, stretching some of the tiredness out of my muscles. "There are too many others in front of him."

"That's because of your winning personality," she countered, then pursed her lips. "I might be mistaken, but I thought that that man Ringer looked pale. Is he sick?"

I remembered how strained Ringer still looked, and nodded my head soberly.

"You might say so," I agreed. "He and Val made the mistake of annoying me, so I fed them Glue. It'll be a while before they get over it."

She lost the amusement she'd been showing, and one hand went to her throat in shock.

"You didn't!" she gasped, her eyes wide. "That's a terrible thing to do! Don't you know why they call it Glue?"

"Of course," I answered, distantly amused at her reaction. "It's called Glue because it sticks with you. But don't waste your sympathy on those two. They got exactly what they asked for."

"Because of the way they punished you for trying to frame them," she said with a nod, still looking disturbed. "When I first heard about it I laughed at how fitting the punishment was, but then I remembered just who they were doing that to. The thought made me wonder if you would do any retaliating, but apparently they didn't wonder the same..."

She shook her head with a sigh, then seemed to shrug off the somber feeling as she gestured with the bag she carried.

"I meant to come by anyway, but this particular trip doesn't happen to be a social call," she said, beginning to walk toward me again. "I'm here to change the bandages on your wrists, and my coming to you is easier than the other way around. If you showed up in the hospital area again, we'd have to lock up Dr. Forrester. If you'll shift over I'll get started."

By the time she reached my side of the bed she was almost smiling again, and as soon as I'd shifted out of her way she sat down and began to rummage through her

bag.

"So, how did those two manage to get the best of you?" she asked while rummaging. "I've been wondering if they took turns, but they must have if you retaliated against them both. Now I wonder if they still think it was worth it, although they probably do. Some things are worth just about any price."

"They may agree with you eventually, but it's not very likely at the moment," I told her renewed amusement, annoyed by her grin. "And by the way, how about something to drink? It can be anything you like, and I'll hand it to you personally."

Knowing Glue she also knew what I meant, but all she did was make a sound of ridicule.

"I'm not as foolish as those two," she said, gesturing with her head toward the sitting room. "But I have to admit I know how they felt. I must have dreamed about doing the same thing to you myself at least a thousand times during those two weeks you were with me."

"So why didn't you?" I demanded, suddenly in the mood to look for an argument. "Too shy, or what?"

I was more than ready for a sharp comeback from her, but I wasn't ready for the sudden silence and sideways glance I got before she went back to unpacking her bag. I studied the short, brisk motions of her hands as I waited for her to say something, but her newly guarded expression told me the amusement was gone from our conversation again, probably permanently. It was fairly obvious what was bothering her, but even after all the times it had happened to me I still hadn't learned to ignore it the way I should have.

"Thanks a lot," I told the side of her face, all interest in arguing now completely gone. "Did you really think I'd put you away permanently for something like that? I may not have much of what people call conscience, but I'm not ready for ward K yet. I do have some sense of discrimination."

Jane's head was down as she stared at her now motionless hands, having paled when I mentioned ward K. It was possible she hadn't worked in that section during her five years at Blue Skies, but she still had to know about it. The special Federation hospital near the training facilities was known as Blue Skies, and everyone in the place was aware of ward K. It was the ward where good little agents were put when they started to issue and execute death warrants on their own. I'd visited the ward a couple of times, all agents are required to go at least once, but I'd rather have another session with Val and his hairbrush than have to go back again. The place hits too close to home...

Jane blushed over my question, then raised her head to look straight at me again.

"I'm sorry, Jenny, I had no right to think that about you," she apologized. "You're a

rotten patient, but you've never been anything but decent to me."

I had to smile at the name she'd used, remembering the cover identity I'd had for Xanadu. I would have corrected her sooner, but all she'd ever called me was "Red."

"I guess you haven't gotten the word yet," I told her. "My name isn't Jenny, it's Diana. Diana Santee."

She blinked in surprise, then knitted her brows into a frown. "I know that name," she said, putting a finger to her lips. "The time that Pedderson escaped from ward K. Weren't you the one who - "

"Who went after him?" I finished when her words ended rather abruptly, remembering the time so clearly I could almost touch it. "Yes, that was me, but I couldn't bring him back. He was so far gone I had to end it."

I knew Jane was sitting beside me, but all I could see was that day not long enough ago, a Tanderon day filled with running clouds in the sky and blowing dust on the nearly dead ground. I'd caught up to Pedderson in the middle of a wheat field, one which had probably been growing much too long but still wasn't as tall as it should have been.

Pedderson had stopped running and was sitting in the middle of a bald patch in the wheat field, dry brown stalks all around him framing him like a work of art in his aqua blue hospital suit. He was a man of average size, sandy hair going thin over a long, straight nose, slender hands, light eyes.

His last assignment had been a rough one, rougher than anyone had known. He'd spent three months in a hospital bed, and two days after he was discharged he was found standing over the bodies of four self-styled tough guys who had tried to jostle him just for the fun of it. Pedderson had been crying, sobbing out to everyone in earshot that the four had tried to hurt him, but the dead men had been unarmed. Pedderson had finished them with a disruptor, scattering them around like so much garbage.

It had taken him a long time in ward K to stop crying, but he was dry-eyed that day in the wheat field, sitting with his arms around his drawn up legs. He leaned his chin on his knees and looked up at the sky, and didn't move a muscle when I stopped six feet away from him.

"Hello, Diana," he'd said, not even looking in my direction. "I was hoping they'd send someone like you."

"Let's go back, Mark," I'd said, not letting any of the pity show in my voice. "If you give them a chance they can help you."

"They already have helped me," he whispered, closing his eyes and burying his face against his knees. "God, I wish they'd never even tried!"

"Mark, just come back with me," I'd repeated, not knowing what else to say. The blowing dust was all over both of us, and I could see it going down his collar the same way it went down mine.

"Diana, I can't face it any longer," he'd said, the words muffled against his legs. "I can't stand being locked away, but I'll do it again if they turn me loose. I try and I try, but I just can't help it. I'll do it again just the way I did it the first time."

He'd raised his head then and looked at my face, and his eyes were so light against his dirt-darkened skin. He stared at me for a long time, then nodded his head as if I'd spoken.

"You'll do it," he'd whispered, still nodding his head. "You'll take that gun holstered at your hip and you'll end the torment for me. I'll be freed from that ward, from their help, from my fear - and from the memories. Please, Diana, get me out of this. You know I'd do the same for you."

His voice was ragged, unsure, talking himself into something he wanted desperately to believe. I licked dust off my lips, seeing him as he'd been when we'd worked together once, laughing and not giving a damn about what we were walking into. He cared now, though, more than he should, but it was more than his life that he'd lost. He stirred and got to his feet slowly, backing away just a little as though he were afraid of chasing me away. I wanted to laugh at that, the idea was so ludicrous, but the dust was in my mouth and clogging up my throat.

"Diana, please," he'd begged, holding his hands out to me. "You know I'd do the same for you."

I drew the blaster slowly, the grip rough but familiar against my hand, the action even more familiar. Mark had been a Special Agent too, a brother, and I couldn't refuse him.

"Goodbye, Mark," I'd whispered, raising the blaster toward him. "See you in Valhalla."

"I'll save you a seat, doll," he'd answered with a grin, the old Mark back again, and then he'd charged straight toward me with a yell. To this day I don't remember pulling that trigger, but Mark had known what he was doing. He took no more than two steps toward me before he was blown backward by the weapon in my hand, a hole burned through him big enough to see the ground behind him.

His last gesture had been to give me an official reason for shooting him, and that's the way I'd reported it, with a lie, but there wasn't a Special Agent who didn't know the truth. We all know we might need the same help some day, and it's comforting to know it's there.

"That poor man," Jane sighed, filling the place in front of my eyes again. Then she cocked her head to one side and looked at me curiously. "But I somehow had the

impression that you were older."

"I'm getting older every day, just not in the right way," I said, taking a deep breath and then trying a wry smile. "How about making up for your unkind thoughts by helping me break out of here?"

"You're impossible," she replied with a snort, looking me over as if I were something beyond belief. "You're probably still not entirely over what you got for your last try, but that's not keeping you from talking about trying again. Why don't you ask me to do something easier, like assassinating the entire Council."

"I'll take it," I said promptly, pointing a finger at her. "If they weren't so agreeable where Ringer is concerned, I wouldn't be facing a cadet's life now."

"What's so terrible about that?" she asked, glancing at me as she arranged her things on the bed beside her. "I met many cadets there at the hospital, and they didn't seem to be suffering."

"You're thinking of School 2 trainees," I told her, watching her hands put things where they belonged automatically. "Ringer and the Council are talking about School 1. School 1 cadets never get to Blue Skies; they're too busy being roused. I thought you might know about that."

"No," she said with some interest, her hands stopping again. "I never heard anything about it."

"Well, seeing that you're one of the family I guess I can tell you," I decided aloud. "The story is simple and easy and starts from one basic question: How do you find enough agents for jobs like mine? The main answer: School 1.

"Every kid too wild for other schools to handle, every person from every planet who wants to do any kind of governmental work, everyone who wants to do anything public, has to go through a standard year of School 1. After they finish that they're free to go on to whatever else they like, but that year at School 1 is the roughest they'll face because it's designed for one purpose - to flush potential agents."

She raised her brows at that, but for some reason I had the feeling she already knew everything about the situation. She may have decided to listen to it all again just to give me someone other than an opponent to talk to, and if so I wasn't about to argue. Once she left, all friendly conversation would go with her.

So I continued, "It's been found that the sort of mind that can accept extreme regimentation can never make a successful agent - and for 'successful' you can read 'live.' The regimentation-friendly mind isn't flexible enough when the going gets heavy. So they do everything they can to make School 1 the most revolting of military academies, tell everyone who comes that they can't leave before the standard year is up, then watch to see who tries to break out.

"Only the top brass knows about this, and the one who jumps in the right direction is

recruited and immediately transferred to School 2 and a normal life. They don't always make it, but they have a lot better chance than someone who just grits his teeth and takes it. And that's the lovely vacation the Council is trying to send me on, but this time I won't be allowed to cut out. I'll just have to sit there and suffer."

"You said 'this time,'" she mused, a hand to her throat again. "How long did you stay the first time?"

I sighed. "Twelve long, horrible, miserable, stinking days. But I was young and eager then, and had more patience than I do now."

"Ouch!" she said, wincing with the word. "I guess you really are in for it. Would it help if I brought you a file?"

I looked at the chain attached to my ankle and grimaced at it.

"I'm tempted," I muttered, seriously considering the idea. "I really am tempted. Of course, Ringer promised to shoot me in the knee if he finds this chain off. The way he's feeling now he isn't kidding, but if you think you can get a file in here I'll tell you what kind I need. It has to be a - "

"Forget it!" she interrupted sharply, shaking her head hard enough to dislodge the idea. "You people play too rough for me! Let me get at those wrists and go back to the emergency room where it's nice and quiet."

She really did seem more than a little nervous, so I decided not to try convincing her and just offered my right wrist. She took my hand with relief and began to cut away the bandage, but when she finished and saw the wrist she looked up at me with her mouth open. I'd been holding my breath until the bandage was off, but the skin hadn't stuck to it too badly and the pain was at a bearable level. I wiped at the sweat on my upper lip - which was more from anticipation than anything else - and met Jane's now outraged stare.

"Well, you don't think I took it without a struggle, do you?" I demanded. I'd been trying to match her outrage, but the question sounded defensive even to me. So I gave up on the outrage with a shrug and added, "Val's not the gentlest soul I've ever met, and he was mad enough to pull down walls. From the way the wrist felt I thought the damage was a lot worse than it is."

"It's bad enough," she muttered, losing her own outrage as she looked at the wreckage again. "How's the other one?"

"They're a matched set," I admitted. "It's so gauche any other way."

She closed her eyes briefly and shook her head, then opened them again to pin me with another stare.

"I'll bet any amount you name that you never said a word to him," she stated, knowing I'd know who "him" was. "Do we have a bet?"

"Don't be so smart," I grumbled, then saw she was adding up to the wrong conclusions. "And get that look out of your eye. I didn't say anything to begin with because I was too busy screaming, but just give me some time. I love to make Val feel guilty."

She kept her eyes on me for a minute, muttered "Sure," under her breath, then went into her bag for what she obviously hadn't thought she'd need. I had the feeling I ought to pursue her mutterings, but there wasn't much to say in a situation like that. If I told her my relationship with Val consisted of nothing more than work and sex, she'd never believe it.

People always have to inject romance when a male and a female are involved, or the whole fabric of their very existence begins to dissolve. To say that the life of a Special Agent doesn't come equipped with a niche for the niceties would be to tarnish our public image, and never let it be said that I'd tarnish an image. I winced a little at the sting of the spray she used on me, and applied some self-control to my tongue.

When my second wrist had been sprayed and rebandaged, Jane gathered the debris together and put it all back in her bag. She looked around to make sure she had everything, then stood up just as I already had. She looked faintly amused as her gaze moved over me, and I realized she'd never seen me out of bed and standing up before. She wasn't a small woman, but I stood at least a head taller than she did. From the amusement in her expression, I supposed she must have been remembering all the times she'd pushed me around without regretting it.

"Let me give you a friendly tip," she said at last, taking a tighter grip on her bag. "The next time, wear wrist bands. They'll save a lot of wear and tear, not to mention salve and spray."

"There won't be a next time," I assured her, fiddling with the left bandage to make it more comfortable. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

She was at the door when she turned to grin at me. "How much did you have to say about it this time?" she asked. Then she left.

I stood there for a minute, staring glumly at the door. I hated to admit it, but she had a point.

The rest of the day went just the way the early part had gone, with Val and Ringer out in the sitting room doing whatever they were doing, and me closed into the bedroom with my murder mystery. Finding out who the murderer was turned out to be a surprise, but not because the thing was that well written. My mind insisted on wandering around all over the place, and every time I came back to the book I found I'd missed another clue.

When Ringer brought dinner in I tried to explain just how bad an idea he'd had, but he was still in no mood to listen to reason. We'd all missed lunch because of the time

we'd had breakfast, and Ringer was just beginning to get his appetite back. My arguments based on reason ended up bouncing off an uninterested back, and I was so p.o.ed I nearly threw the tray of food after that same back. Ringer wasn't listening to anything he didn't want to hear, and anything coming from me headed that list.

It wasn't until after I was rechained for the night that Val came into the room. He glanced at me where I lay on my back in the bed, hands behind my head, and there was a faint smile on his face as he headed for the bathroom. His smile probably came from the memory of the words Ringer and I had had about ten minutes earlier, right after the chain had been closed around my ankle again. I'd purposely waited till that point, and then had laughed at Ringer for being so afraid of me that he had to keep me under lock and key.

I'd been trying to get him angry enough to do something stupid, but he hadn't even gotten annoyed. Instead he'd just looked at me and shaken his head, and then had murmured, "You don't know how close to right you are." Then he'd turned around and walked out of the room, leaving me to stare after him like an idiot. I knew Ringer wasn't afraid of me, so what the hell had he been talking about? I lay on the bed with my hands tucked behind my head, staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out what I'd missed this time.

"Now, this is what I call a well furnished suite," Val's voice came, and I looked down from the ceiling to see him standing on the other side of the bed. "Every man ought to be entitled to find a beautiful woman chained in his bed. It makes for a very pleasant life."

He stood there grinning at me, but getting mad wasn't worth the effort.

"That sounds like a great slogan for running for public office on," I commented. "Why don't you start running now? And for your information, this is my bed. Ringer is in your bed, but don't let that stop you from using it. I'm sure he's dying for some company."

I moved my eyes back to the ceiling, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel the bed dip from Val's weight as he sat down and then stretched out. I had enough of my own thoughts to occupy me, but Val seemed to be in the mood for conversation. He moved closer, and then his hand came to my face and gently turned it back to him.

"You don't accept compliments very well," he said, the same faint amusement there in his black eyes. He'd gotten down to the buff just as I had, but not for the same reason. I've never been able to sleep in anything without waking up choking, but Val had never practiced the habit until he'd begun to sleep with me. "Don't you like compliments?" he asked. "Or is it just that you've heard them so often they've lost meaning?"

I studied his face as he looked at me, then abruptly decided to ask some questions of my own.

"Why would you want to compliment me?" I countered, feeling nothing of the amusement he continued to show. "And for that matter what are you doing in here? As far as I'm concerned you deserved that dose of Glue, but I doubt if you agree with me. After all that's happened, why are you still here?"

His dark and beautiful gaze sobered, and the hand at my face moved softly over my cheek.

"I've got to learn to know you," he murmured, almost to himself, his stare becoming more penetrating. "You do things I've never seen any other woman do, your abilities extend even beyond my original conceptions of them, you're ruthless and decisive, yet vulnerable, too, in some strange and roundabout way. What sort of codes are you loyal to? Where do you find the rightness in the things you do? And why do you think I ought to be somewhere other than right here?"

He wasn't asking questions he expected me to answer, I could see that in his expression, so I didn't say anything. His eyes were on my face, searching deeply for something other than what his eyesight gave him. At last he smiled gently and said, "Well? You didn't answer me. Is it that you don't like compliments, or have you just heard them too often?"

"The first usually comes about because of the second," I told him, for some reason feeling very uncomfortable. I still didn't understand what he was after, or what he hoped to accomplish. "In my case, both reasons apply independently as well as conjointly."

"I admire your vocabulary," he said with a laugh, still moving his hand on my face. "Or at least this part of it. Portions of the rest leave a lot to be desired."

"I don't recall seeing anyone forcing you to listen," I countered, bringing one arm down to push his hand away from my face. "I've earned the right to use any words or phrases I care to, and if you don't agree you can lump it."

I turned my back on him, lying on my right side, at the same time wondering what was wrong with me. I knew I had a bad feeling about that upcoming stay at the Academy, but I felt upset even beyond that - and most especially where Val was concerned. He claimed he wanted to know about me. What did he want to know about, and for what purpose...?

"I don't agree, but I also won't lump it," Val's voice came from behind me, a faint annoyance tingeing his tone. "What you have or haven't earned doesn't enter into it. A lady doesn't use that kind of language no matter how angry she becomes."

I'd become very aware of the pillow linen against my cheek, and could even see the blueness of it. I tried to bring my knees up higher toward my chest, but the ankle chain refused to allow my right leg to move that far.

"I guess you've hit the nail right on the head," I told the pillowcase, which my left

hand had a fistful of. "A lady doesn't use that kind of language."

There was a moment of silence, during which time I closed my eyes, but then Val spoke again, surprising me.

"Stop it!" he snapped, his hand coming to my left arm to pull me back to the way I'd been lying originally. That way I could see how angry he was, and I didn't understand why.

"You once told me you never make excuses," he growled, his eyes hard. "I thought I knew what you meant, but obviously I didn't. I don't know anyone who considers defending themselves from unjust accusations as making excuses - except you. And I'd better not see it again."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I protested, stirring against the way his fingers pressed into my arm. He saw that he was hurting me and immediately loosened his grip, but his anger didn't lighten up in the least.

"I'm talking about this little habit of yours," he said, gesturing with one hand but keeping his eyes directly on me. "It must have taken you time to decide what you would do when and for what reasons, but if anyone questions you about your actions you make one generalized statement and then stop. If the person you're talking to doesn't understand immediately, he doesn't get any clarifications. All he gets is an unarguing silence that agrees with everything he says, but to you it's a matter of not making excuses. Don't you see that other people don't look at it that way?"

"I have no way of changing other people's outlooks," I said, bothered by that dark black stare. "If you think you can do something about them, feel free to try."

"Damn it, it's you I'm talking about, not other people!" he exploded, sitting up to loom over me. "All I said was that your language was unladylike, I didn't say you weren't a lady. You were the one who immediately assumed that, and all you did was agree. There was no call for that kind of agreement!"

I almost smiled at his opening words, but it seemed more appropriate to laugh shortly at the rest of what he'd said.

"That's the biggest joke I've heard in a long time," I scoffed, putting my hands behind my head again. "Ladies get married and have children and run comfortable, attractive homes for their husbands. They don't become Special Agents. The demands of the job tend to preclude generally accepted ladylike behavior."

I grinned faintly at him, admittedly getting a kick out of throwing in samples of the sort of vocabulary I seldom used. It isn't that I felt uncomfortable using it, it's just that most people aren't tuned in to that sort of palaver. And other considerations aside, my job didn't often end me up in spots where polysyllables would go unnoticed. Val saw the grin I sent up to him, and growled low in his throat.

"I wasn't joking," he said, reaching past me to rest his left hand on the pillow right next to my head. His voice was very soft and dangerous, his stare was hard and uncompromising, and to say he wasn't joking was an understatement. "I don't see any reason why a female can't be considered a lady no matter what she does for a living. If you act like a lady, you'll be treated like one."

"Is that so?" I murmured, beginning to feel annoyed. "Isn't it a little too soon for you to be making deep-seated pronouncements? You haven't been here long enough to see the looks on men's faces when they find out I'm a Special Agent. Whatever they thought of me till then is totally wiped away by their sure knowledge of what a Special Agent is."

"At first they pale a little, wondering if they've said anything I might take offense at. Don't forget I kill for a living, and that sort of thing is hard to turn off. Then, when I don't immediately beat them to the ground or pull a knife, they get bolder, admiring their own courage for continuing to stand next to me."

"The next thing that comes is a hand on the shoulder and a lot of pretty words, a testing to see how far they can go. They've heard about Special Agents, you see, and consider getting a female Special Agent into bed the lay of a lifetime. Then, if they do manage to make it - "

"Stop," Val interrupted, a sickness in his gaze to replace the former anger. He still stared at me, but his head shook back and forth. "Not all men are like that, they can't be. Some of them have to be capable of knowing a lady when they see one."

"Sure," I agreed, too tired to keep the flatness out of my tone. "I don't mean to belabor an already asked question, but if I'm such a lady, what are you doing lying naked in my bed? Waiting for tea and sandwiches, maybe?"

The pain showed in his eyes then, almost as though I'd hit him, and his mouth opened, possibly to refute what I'd said. But there didn't seem to be any words to match the attempt. He closed his mouth then and pulled himself away from me, getting out of bed to stride to the door, open it, then disappear through it. I watched the silent, closed door for a minute, then turned over onto my stomach and buried my arms under the pillow while I closed my eyes.

I don't know what I could have been expecting from Val, but his walking out without a word wasn't it. He seemed to be picturing me as something I wasn't, and I'd been coarse on purpose, trying to overstress the point he was avoiding. Of course there were men who treated me the same way they treated any other woman, but those weren't the ones who caused the deep-down hurt. I'd been trying to find out where Val stood once we got beyond the irrelevant, and it looked like I'd managed to find out.

I sighed as I was forced to accept the fact that he couldn't admit he was near me for nothing but sex, and I suppose it was that lack of honesty which was most disappointing. I had no right to expect anything from him at all, but I was still human

enough to sometimes regret, and foolish enough to sometimes expect. The faint perfume off palaces and princes reached my awareness, but I also felt the metal around my right ankle. I buried my face in the pillow and tried to stop breathing and feeling, but the try turned out to be just as successful as the rest of my tries had been.

No more than ten minutes of peace and quiet could have passed before the door to the sitting room opened again and Val was back, looking determined about something. I groaned to myself and turned my head away on the pillow, but staring at the wall past my bed lamp showed me nothing in the way of miracles that would stop the previous subject from being reopened.

I don't know why I felt so positive that old ashes would be reraked; I just knew I wasn't in the mood for it. I considered pretending to be asleep, but the soft light from the bed lamps was still too bright for Val to have missed seeing me watch him come in. The door closed, the stirring of carpet-muffled footsteps came, and then the bed dipped again.

"Remind me to never debate with you for anything valuable," my partner commented, moving around a little to get comfortable. "We started out discussing the sort of language you use, and ended up with me feeling guilty about being in bed with you. That's a hell of a way to win a debating point."

"Do you want me to apologize for making you feel guilty?" I asked, still not turning my head to him. "Maybe you aren't here looking for tea and sandwiches. Maybe you were heading for the station's gym and just took a wrong turn."

"Cut it out!" he snapped, moving around again. "You decoyed me once, and once is enough. I'm here for a lot of reasons, and most of them you ought to know. I'm here to learn everything I can about you, all the little things you never talk about. I've already learned why you don't like compliments, and I intend to learn a lot more. I'm also here because Ringer wants me here, to make sure you don't exercise those considerable talents of yours and leave us looking like a couple of fools."

Then his hand came to my hair, grabbed a fistful of it, and turned my head to him so I could see his grin.

"And just incidentally," he drawled, "I'm also here because I enjoy having a beautiful, desirable woman chained in my bed. I've sampled the wares of a good lot of women over the years, but I tend to prefer having ladies chained within reach."

He used the word "chained" twice, his fist in my hair could not be described as gentle, and his grin was more irritating than a challenge at the wrong time. I pronounced one word very clearly and reached up toward the hand in my hair, intending to do something painful to make him let go, but I never reached him. His hand left my hair fast to intercept my hand, and then he had pulled me toward him and was holding me tight against his body.

"Now, that's the part of your vocabulary I don't admire," he said, keeping my struggles down to a minimum by holding my left hand behind my back. "If I hear any more of that part of it, I'll get some soap and see if I can wash the lady in you farther into view."

He smiled as he said that, but the smile didn't mean he was fooling around. The steady look in his eyes showed how seriously he meant it, and I felt so shocked I couldn't say a word. I stared at him openmouthed for a minute, not quite able to believe he would dare, and then he lost his smile and lowered his lips to mine to kiss me in that full-attention way that he had. The kiss caught me by surprise at first, but then I remembered I really ought to make some attempt to stop it. He had no right to talk to me the way he did and then expect a warm reception.

"Stop squirming around," he murmured, lifting his head briefly so that he could speak. "The more you struggle, the more likely it is that you'll hurt those wrists again. Just lie still and be quiet."

My jaw dropped open again, this time in outrage, but I still couldn't get a word in. As soon as he said his piece he was back to kissing me, and ignoring one of Val's kisses is about as easy as walking in zero gravity. I hadn't noticed it earlier, but Val hadn't touched my wrists once since Jane's visit, and his comment showed that she'd blabbed about what had happened.

I stirred in annoyance at the thought, wishing she'd minded her own business, but the annoyance faded almost at once. Val's arms were around me, holding me close, his lips were on mine, soft yet demanding. His body was against mine, warm and strong enough to satisfy any woman, and I hadn't lost the sensation of a metal chain around my ankle. Val was nothing like Jensar and yet he was just like the conqueror. Val enjoyed having me there and unable to escape, enjoyed the thought that I belonged to him, no matter how temporarily.

And then I laughed to myself, pleased that he'd admitted to wanting me. There would be no childish fantasies between my partner and me; we would both be able to admit to an adult relationship without having to lace it with infantile romance. I moved my body closer to his and paid attention to returning the kiss, and he released my hands so that he could be held too. The feel of him under my palms and fingers heated my blood even more, so I returned the favor by running my fingernails lightly down his back.

Val moaned at the tingle along his back, and his kiss quickly grew less gentle and more demanding. For my own part I was trying to devour him, trying to swallow him whole. It was a pleasant job but not very easy, at least until he moved me to my back and shifted to a place between my thighs. When he entered me I did swallow him whole, and his was the sweetest taste in the universe. I began to move with him eagerly, demandingly, and he answered the demand with one of his own.

Sex with Val is a never-ending delight, something I couldn't imagine ever getting

enough of. We moved together as though we were made for each other, and my last coherent thought was that I felt glad Val hadn't been in the mood for preliminaries. When just being near Val made me want him, foreplay was almost always a waste of time and effort. And a frustrating waste of time and effort at that. I was always ready for Val... sometimes even when I happened to be angry with him...

It was quite some time before we were ready to sleep, and Val made me chuckle after he turned off the light.

"No two ways about it," he yawned, holding me in his arms with my back up against his chest. "There's another benefit in having a woman chained in your bed that I hadn't seen before."

"What benefit?" I asked, snuggling up to him in a sleepy and satisfied way.

"Compliments," he murmured, his voice growing heavier. "You can compliment a chained woman without finding trouble. She's already in your bed. Go to sleep, luscious armful."

He tightened his hold on me and drifted closer to sleep, but I smiled awhile and listened to his breathing before following suit. He was as crazy as I was but in a totally different way, and it looked like it might be a good thing if I got to know him a little better too.

Chapter 4

The next "morning" Ringer was up first, coming in to wake Val and me with a suspiciously neutral expression on his face. I tried to move away from Val to stretch, expecting to be unchained, but my partner told Ringer to put the key back in his pocket for a while and kept his arms around me. Ringer guffawed and headed out of the bedroom again, but he might as well have stayed. Val was ready to try his usual methods on me, but I convinced him that if he put so much as a single finger on me, he'd be wearing teeth marks for a month.

Val gave up trying with a laugh, knowing it was Ringer's reaction to his comment that had done him out of his jollies, but for some reason he didn't seem to mind. I stayed in bed and punched my pillow around while he went to the bathroom, but he stayed in there longer than usual and then took his time getting dressed. I didn't understand why until he went to call Ringer, and then I nearly exploded.

Ringer walked in with a big grin on his face, convinced that Val had gotten whatever he'd wanted. That, of course, meant it was at least ten minutes before it was safe for Ringer to come close enough to unlock the chain on my ankle. Once free I stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door in Ringer's laughing face without bothering to try to set him straight. He'd believe whatever he wanted to, and nothing I could

have said would have changed that.

Breakfast and lunch surrounded a century of boredom and lousy temper, made twice as bad by the chain which kept me either in bed or very close to it. Just before lunch was brought I spent a few minutes loosening up my muscles, but Ringer walking in with the tray ended it all. He stopped on the far side of the bed, frowned at the light sheen of sweat on my face, then put the tray down on the bed.

"How long have you been doing that?" he growled, his eyes narrowed as he looked me over.

"Not long enough," I answered, rubbing at my left shoulder. I still had the faintest memory of tearing skin there, a carryover from the first days before the surroskin had bound itself to me. I shouldn't have had that pain, no matter how faint it was, and exercising hadn't done much to get rid of it.

"You look almost three shades paler than you did at breakfast," Ringer said, his hands at his hips as he continued to look me over. "Get back in that bed and stay there, or I'll shorten the chain to take care of it."

He stood there staring at me, tan leather shoulder holster strapped over his light blue shirt, slug gun nestled ready at his armpit. A man who had promised to shoot me if I tried to get away from him, and now he had the nerve to -

"Would you like to know what you can do with that chain?" I exploded, moving one step closer to the bed. I was mad as hell that he kept switching back and forth between hate and tender concern, driving me crazy, but that wasn't all that was making me mad. I'd only been at it fifteen or twenty minutes and my arms and legs were already shaky, I was just short of being winded, and a faint dizziness was threatening to make the room spin. I hadn't expected to find myself in such lousy shape, and I didn't need Ringer's observations to add to it. I wiped the sweat off my upper lip and said, "You can take that damned chain and -"

"Shut up!" Ringer snapped, suddenly pointing a finger at me with a hardness in his voice and eyes. "You were told what to do and you'll do it! You won't get another warning!"

He turned then and left the room, and strangely enough he didn't seem to be angry. I sank down onto the bed and sat there, slowly pushing hair out of my eyes as I tried to figure out what was wrong with Ringer. The only time he sounded at all familiar was when he was taking precautions against me, but despite the fact that he still approached me coatless, his attitude wasn't what it had been the day before. It was almost as if -

I cut the thought off and groaned, resisting the urge to bang my head against the wall. Ringer was seeing me as a little girl again, and that was why he kept giving me those ridiculous orders. I looked at the tray of food he'd brought, then stretched out on my side of the bed. I wore a white shorts outfit and was barefoot, and I could

just imagine what Ringer saw when he looked at me. It sure as hell wasn't what Val saw, and I wondered why Val could see me as a woman when Ringer couldn't.

Then I absentmindedly crossed my ankles, and managed to whack my left foot with the chain before remembering that it was there. Suddenly I was up off my back, cursing and pulling at the damned chain for too long a time before I got control of myself again. I hated being chained and I hated being considered a child, and I buried my face in the ice-blue bed cover, right near the foot of the bed, almost to the point of tears. I rarely cried, rarely found the need for tears, but the whole damned thing was so frustrating!

Every time I turned around things got worse instead of better, and I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong! My mind was almost as tired as my body from constantly poking and prodding at the problem of breaking loose from the insanity Ringer and the Council had me pointed toward. But there was no way out, unless I found a way to open that chain and lose Ringer and Val.

I rested my cheek against the cool blue cover, my body curled up at the foot of the bed, my eyes closed in an attempt to gather strength, and I must have fallen asleep for a short while. The next thing I knew Ringer was standing at the foot of the bed, right in front of me, and his hand was pushing the hair out of my eyes and away from my face.

"The food hasn't been touched," he said, taking his hand back when he saw my gaze on him.

"I wasn't very hungry," I answered, closing my eyes once more to block out the sight of him. Ringer was concerned again, and I didn't know how long I could take it without screaming.

There was a minute of silence and then Ringer said, "I'll unlock the chain if you give me your word not to make any more trouble or try a fast fade. Is it a deal?"

I opened my eyes again and bent my head back to get a better look at him, and my thoughts must have been printed in iridescent ink on my face. He flushed under my stare, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Quit looking at me like that," he growled, his whole manner faintly uncomfortable. "I've known you long enough to know how you feel about being chained, and I don't like the way you look. Give me your word and I'll get you out of that."

"I thought I was the one who wasn't known for Simon-pure honesty," I commented, still staring at him. "Now, suddenly, my word is good?"

"Stop being a damned fool," he said with a snort as he met my gaze. "You'll lie about anything under any circumstance, but you'll keep your word if you give it. Don't you think I know that?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," I muttered, then raised my voice. "Ringer, don't go on

with this," I urged, raising up on one elbow. "The more I think about it, the more this whole setup reminds me of Zalento. The Council made up their minds then too, if you'll recall, and you know what happened there."

"This has nothing to do with Zalento!" he denied sharply, momentarily sharing the sickening memory. Then his tone softened again. "And there's nothing I can do to change things now. The Council was ready to skin you alive, and this was the only alternative they were willing to accept. If you're smart you'll accept it too, and make the best of it. It won't be forever."

"Forever tends to show up different places on different scales," I told him, then lay down on my back again. I was doing no more than wasting my breath trying to get Ringer to change his mind. He'd fight the Council for something he believed in, but not to get me out of what he considered a well-earned punishment. I wondered if it would have looked the same to him if he were the one being sent back to the Academy as a cadet, but the question was irrelevant. Ringer wasn't the one being sent back, and my shoes were a bad fit on him.

"Well?" Ringer prompted after another short silence. "Are you ready to give me your word?"

"I'm ready to give you lots of words," I said without looking at him. "You're just not ready to hear them."

"You damned stubborn female," he growled, an echo of my own frustration sounding in his voice. "You could have been rid of that chain, but giving your word would be too easy. Okay, do it your way. I hope Valdon gets so used to having you like that that he does it on his own!"

I twisted around fast to glare at him, but he wasn't looking at me any longer. He walked around to the other side of the bed, picked up the tray, then left with a door slam. I kicked at the footboard to agree with his slam, then just sat there on the bed, trying to think of something to do to fill the time. I had more than two weeks of inactivity crowding me at this point, and I've never been very good at just sitting around.

I finally settled for a short series of sit-ups and neck bridges, ignoring the tearing in my shoulder in favor of knowing how badly I needed to build up my endurance again. When it was all over I pulled myself back to the head of the bed, lit a cigarette, and tried to relax.

About half an hour later, Val walked into the room. He gave me a friendly nod on the way to the closet, and I watched him pull out a light blue and soft gold sports outfit from the stack of clothes Ringer had gotten him. He frowned at it critically, still not used to Federation clothing styles, but apparently it passed whatever inspection he had given it. He threw it onto a chair, went into the bathroom, and started the shower going.

He was in the shower only a few minutes, and when he came out of the bathroom again he was softly whistling a strange tune. I had worked my way through a large number of cigarettes that day, but the sound of his whistling made me reach for another one.

"I think you're forming your own cloud in here," Val observed as he watched me exhale. "How many of those things do you use a day?"

I moved my gaze to him but didn't answer, and he couldn't have missed seeing my mood. He hesitated very briefly, as though trying to decide whether or not to make an issue of it, but then he shrugged and turned his attention to getting dressed. I took a second drag on the cigarette and then a third, and Val finished closing his shirt and tucking it in his pants. He went to a dresser for a pair of socks, chose light blue loafers, then carried it all to a chair where he could sit down. He crossed his legs to get ready for the first sock, then glanced at me again.

"I don't know about you, but I had a busy morning," he commented as he paid attention to getting the sock on right. "I decided it would be a good idea if I sent a few messages back to the Confederacy with your Federation's agreement to the conferences. Your Council didn't mine, so the first message I wrote was to Dameron, telling him I was fine. I also told him that if you show up back at the outpost without me, he's to throw you in the brig until word comes about what to do with you. He won't change your biological reading and he won't change your face, so you might as well give up the idea of trying to get back there. It won't do you any good."

He looked up at me then to see what my reaction would be, but I wasn't showing any reactions. If I ever made it back to Dameron's base, the walls could be papered with messages for all I cared. There are lots of ways to get people to do things your way, and some of them aren't even painful. Val continued to watch me for another minute, then started on his second sock in annoyance.

"I've never met a woman who could match your stubbornness," he muttered, pulling at the sock. "You refuse to listen to anything anyone says to you as long as it doesn't agree with your own ideas. Why won't you give Ringer your word about not escaping?"

I smiled faintly at the question he'd demanded an answer to, but that was one I'd already answered a few days earlier. I'd always be a prisoner who would escape whenever possible and the identity of my captors made no difference at all. Val waited a shorter time than after his first comment, slid his feet into the loafers, then stood up.

"There's a naval cruiser on its way to pick us up," he said, very little patience left in his tone. "It should be here in the next few days, and it will take us directly to the training facilities. Give Ringer what he wants and then get dressed. There are places on this Station I've been waiting to share with you. Once we leave here, there may

not be another opportunity."

He stood staring at me with those dark eyes, waiting for me to do as he'd said. I was willing to bet that more than one woman had dropped her gaze under that particular stare, and maybe even a good number of men. I considered him in silence for a short time, then sent more blue-gray smoke in his direction.

"Just when is this cruiser due in?" I inquired with only a small amount of interest. If I had enough time, I might be able to work myself free before boarding time. He'd picked up the shirt he'd worn the day before, probably with the intention of adding it to the rest of his dirty clothes, but the shirt was obviously not meant to go where it belonged. When he heard my question, he crumpled the shirt and threw it away from him.

"Damn it, there's just no talking to you!" he roared, his eyes blazing. "The only reason I mentioned that cruiser was to show you how little time there was left! Call Ringer in here and give him your word about not making any more trouble!"

He stood with his fists on his hips, his anger almost blazing high enough to set the fire dampers going. I looked at him the way he sometimes looked at me, with memory of the times there had been no clothing between us, smiled faintly, and then said, "No."

The single word fed his anger just the way I thought it would, but he exercised immediate control, held it down, then nodded his head.

"All right," he agreed in a growl. "If that's the way you want it, that's the way you can have it. Sit there chained until it's time to leave. I have another date anyway."

He turned away from me and went to a mirrored dresser to brush his hair, and I put out my cigarette, then studied his back. The mirror image of his eyes saw me watching him, and an amused smile covered his face.

"You look curious about my date," he observed, "but you shouldn't be. Don't you remember Marcie?"

The name meant nothing to me, and his smile widened to a grin at my frown.

"Marcie is anxious to apologize for the way she slapped me," he amplified, finally bringing me memory of the blonde who had been in the suite when I'd first gotten back. "She understands that my 'niece' is the sort of little girl who enjoys making trouble, and wasn't pleased about having been conned. She said to tell you that if you two ever meet again, you can expect a second spanking."

I snorted my opinion of the likelihood of that happening, angry that he'd told her what he'd done to me but not really surprised. Many men feel the need to show off in front of women they want to take to bed, and Val wasn't likely to be an exception. I pushed myself down off the pillows I'd been leaning on and stretched out on the bed, moving slowly on the wrinkled, silky linen, and then stared up at the ceiling.

"She looked like she ought to be fair to middling good at apologizing," I commented, conjuring a picture of her against the ceiling that I could stare at.

"She's very nearly an expert at apologizing," Val said with a chuckle from where he stood. "Even when there's nothing to apologize for. Federation women are proving to be very interesting."

His amusement annoyed me, and I moved on the linen again.

"Enjoy yourself while you can," I advised, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. "Playmates like your Marcie may not mind men who go in for rape, but not all Federation women appreciate it. Like me, for instance."

Suddenly he was there by the bed, staring down at me, and the amusement hadn't left him.

"There isn't a man in this universe who could rape you and you know it," he said, laughing at me with his eyes. "I pity the poor jerk who ever tries it." Then the amusement faded to a ghost of itself, and he bent forward to put his palms on the bed to either side of my arms. "I can call Marcie and reschedule our date," he murmured, his eyes boring into me. "Tell me you want me to stay."

His face was no more than two feet away from mine, and I would have sworn I could feel his body heat even from that distance. My insides stirred to life as I moved uncomfortably between his hands, and then I heard the sound of the chain around my ankle. Val was nothing like the conqueror Jensar but he was just like him, expecting his orders to be obeyed without question, used to having any woman he wanted. I'd been just short of saying what he'd told me to, and that made me mad.

"I wouldn't think of keeping you from your interesting times, partner," I answered, feeling more than ever like a woman chained in a man's bed - and not liking it. "Just remember that I'll be expecting the same courtesy from you."

He didn't say a word to that, didn't make a single sound, but somehow his black eyes grew momentarily darker and I could feel a tension of sorts crackling out of the broad body so close above me. Then, before I could react to it, the feeling was gone and Val was straightening up again to nod slightly.

"Partners," he murmured, almost to himself. "That's right. We are partners, aren't we? See you later, partner."

He gave me a last, untranslatable look, then rounded the bed and left the room. I turned to my side to stare at the door he'd closed, the distance between me and that door seeming to grow immense and almost limitless. Time was running out on me faster than I'd anticipated, but I still had no way to cross that distance. I hugged myself and lay flat again, silently cursing myself for a damned fool.

How the hell did I expect to find a way out of there if I wasted time trying to figure out where Val was coming from? Why had he repeated the word partners so

strangely, and why did he keep looking at me like that? I shook my head hard to dislodge the distractions, then forced myself to spend some time thinking about escape.

Dinner turned out to be a solitary affair that night, with Ringer as alone as I was. After putting my tray on the bed he left the door to the next room open, giving me a view of him sitting at the table a robot waiter had brought. I uncovered the food on the tray dish by dish, then covered it all up again and turned my back on the sight of Ringer digging in. Captivity tends to put a dent in my interest in food, and even though I hadn't had anything for lunch that day I wasn't even faintly hungry. I lay on my side on the bed and listened to the small sounds of Ringer's meal, wondering when that cruiser was due to dock.

In a short while I heard Ringer leaving his table, and then I heard the sound of the other bedroom door. I twisted around and listened hard for a few seconds, and sure enough, there was the very faint sound of his bathroom door closing. He was probably only going to wash up, so I didn't have much time.

I turned the rest of the way toward the tray and lifted one of the plate covers, and what I'd seen earlier was still there. The plate held a shish-ka-bob on a laurite rod, and the central piece of meat was decorated with a tiny cutlass stuck right into the middle of it. Anywhere else that cutlass would have been tin or foil, but Xanadu Orbital Station didn't believe in cheap decorations.

I put my fingers on it and pulled it out of the meat, holding to the fine steel it was made of. Its lines and hilt were authentic, its point and edge were sharp, and if I'd had time to test it, it probably would have balanced properly. I wrapped my fingers around it, moved closer to the end of the bed, and slid the chain around on my ankle.

I'd been assuming all along that the lock of the chain required a magnetic lock pick to open it, but that might not have been so. The least I could do was test the theory, and the cutlass was almost perfect for the testing. The thinness of its point worried me a little, but with no other alternative available it was use it or forget it. I knew what the general insides of the lock looked like - what was located where and what slid which way - so I slid the cutlass through the keyhole and began a delicate, gentle probing for the main slide link.

I found it right where it should be and recognized the feel of it, and then I heard the faint sound of Ringer's bathroom door. He was only seconds away from coming back, but I couldn't stop at that point. I tossed my head to get the hair back over my shoulders and out of my way, and paid attention to what the slide link was doing.

The cutlass point was tickling it into moving very slightly from side to side, but it wasn't rotating the way it should have. I jabbed at it harder as I heard Ringer's bedroom door opening, and the tiny steel cutlass sang between my fingers, vibrating dangerously close to the breaking point. The cutlass was missing that small amount

of magnetism necessary to begin the rotation of the slide link, and I was wasting my time playing with it.

I eased it back out of the keyhole, reached over and stabbed it into the piece of meat it had come from, recovered the plate, and was just curled up on the bed again when Ringer appeared in the doorway. He paused very briefly to look at me, then continued into the room and stopped on the other side of the bed to take the covers off the plates on the tray.

"Pick one," he said, his black eyes calm. "I don't care which, just pick one."

He stood there waiting, his fingers on his hips, and he wasn't prepared to take no for an answer. I made a sound of disgust and looked at the tray, then reached toward the plate of shish-ka-bob. Before my hand could touch it he reached out and removed the tiny cutlass, then gestured me on again with a faint smile. I shrugged very slightly, as though I didn't care what he did, then took the plate of chicken Spelahr and brought it closer to me.

Ringer waited until I'd eaten all of the chicken I could force down along with most of the pot of coffee, then he took the tray to his table and had a robot come and get it all. Once the robot was gone he came back into my bedroom with a deck of cards, sat down on the bed, and began to deal out hands for stab-in-the-back. I hadn't played that game with Ringer since the time he'd gone out on assignment with me, about four years earlier. He didn't say a word and neither did I, but we both picked up the cards he dealt out and settled down to the game.

It was late when Ringer finally put the cards away and unchained me so I could get ready for bed, but Val still hadn't come back. At various times during the card game I'd caught Ringer staring at me oddly, his eyes on my hair, or my face, or my body, and once he'd even shaken his head and muttered something. I didn't catch what he said, but he'd also glanced at the time and snorted in disgust, almost like a father whose daughter was out on her first real date.

I almost laughed ruefully to myself when it occurred to me that Ringer might be wondering when Val would get back. Val was hardly an innocent child out on his first date, and if he didn't get back until station morning it wouldn't be much of a crushing shock. Then Ringer glanced at me and cleared his throat, and I suddenly realized that he was keeping me company and lending moral support. After all, Val had left me for another woman...

I felt odd thinking that, but the oddness immediately changed to more than annoyance. In spite of the fact that Ringer should have known better he had fallen for the same softheadedness that Jane had gone in for, linking me up with Val as though we were more than simply partners. That was mostly Val's fault, of course, for refusing to accept reality and then talking about his fantasies, but Ringer really should have known better. That was what was getting me so bent out of shape, and it was all I could do not to show how I felt.

When I was back in bed with the chain around my ankle again, Ringer waited until I'd turned the light off and then he left and shut the door behind him. I moved around in the bed linen to get comfortable, not feeling particularly tired, but it wasn't long before I fell asleep.

I remember wandering through different dream scenes, most of them peopled by Ringer and Val. Then, after a timeless time of that, I woke to find my cheek against a broad, hairy chest, my arms around a wide, hard-muscled body, my flesh tingling to the touch of strong, demanding hands. I moved in faint protest, momentarily forgetting where I was and with whom, and two lips came to touch my face gently and soothingly.

"About time you woke up, woman," Val's voice came in a murmur, his hands warm against my skin. "It's much too late to be wasting time."

"What time is it?" I asked blurrily, trying to move away from him. There was something I had to do, but I couldn't remember what.

"It's time the waiting was over," he answered in a whisper, holding me tightly against him. "Did you think I could look at you lying on this bed, that gorgeous red hair spread out around you, and not have to have you? What do you think I'm made of?"

"Two parts satyr and one part mink," I slurred in annoyance, struggling to get loose. "How many women do you need in one night?"

He laughed softly at that, and if I could have seen him I probably would have seen a grin.

"Appetizers only whet a man's appetite for the main course," he said with a chuckle, bringing his lips down to my neck. "You taste good enough to eat - and you've got nowhere else to go."

For some reason those words touched me oddly, as though they were painful rather than anger-making. I suppose that's the reason I stopped struggling, in an effort to figure out why I felt like that. Val continued to kiss my neck for a moment, and then he raised his head again.

"You're not responding to me any longer," he said, sounding more shocked than simply surprised. "What's wrong? Did I somehow hurt you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I managed to answer while staring into the darkness of the room. "How could you possibly have hurt me?"

"I don't know," he answered, disturbance flowing in the words. "But you don't seem willing anymore - unless I'm mistaken. Am I mistaken, Diana?"

"No, you're not," I said, the words as flat as any I'd ever used. "The only thing I want to do right now is go back to sleep, on my own side of the bed and all alone."

Please let go of me."

He hesitated for a moment, and then those arms opened and I was free. I lost no time in moving all the way away from him and onto my right side, but his hand followed to touch my shoulder.

"Diana, I'm sorry," he whispered, a different oddness clinging to every syllable. "I was only trying to - I wanted to make you feel - I didn't know you would - Please don't be - "

"If you don't mind, I'd like some quiet," I interrupted the rambling that made no sense whatsoever. "I'm really tired, and I'd like to get back to sleep."

"Of course," he said, and then the hand was gone from my shoulder as he moved around on his own side of the bed. Val tried to talk everyone into sharing his fantasies, but now maybe he'd understand that he hadn't - and wouldn't - be able to do it with me. He and I were nothing but partners, and that's all we'd ever be. And I really did want to get back to sleep, but even he managed it before I did...

Chapter 5

The next Station morning was a late one, but this time Ringer stayed out of the bedroom until Val went out to call him. I stretched lazily as I waited to be unchained, having taken advantage of being the first to wake up. I'd been strangely out of sorts when Val had awakened me in the wee hours, but this morning I hadn't been able to figure out what it was I'd thought I'd felt. What I needed most was out of that strangling situation, and any way I got it would turn out to be the right way.

So I'd taken the opportunity to make professional love to Val, never a hardship under any circumstance, and he'd responded immediately. Sometime during our efforts I'd planted in his mind my desperate need for that magnetized lock pick Ringer had taken from me. Hopefully, the planted seed would mature into a magical beanstalk I could use to climb out of the pit of capture. I'd had to pretend to lose myself to Val's lovemaking, of course, but I'm a professional so it wasn't hard to do. I'd also suggested in a roundabout way that I would meet Val later on Faraway Station, but Faraway had nothing I needed. What I did need was out of that bedroom and into a ship, and it was just possible I might make it.

I came back to the present to see Ringer's grinning face, and realized that the chain had been unlocked a number of moments earlier. I hadn't noticed Ringer coming in, but the grin on his face showed he'd drawn the wrong conclusions about my distraction. I snarled and kicked at him to keep him from rethinking his conclusions, and he stepped out of the way fast with a laugh, reacting just the way I knew he would. I got out of bed and went toward the bathroom muttering under my breath, but the mutter was more prayer than curse. I was almost out of time, and using Val had been a last-ditch effort.

After breakfast the rest of the morning went by slowly, doubly so because Val hadn't come back. At one point I heard the mutter of voices out in the sitting room, but the words were too low to be intelligible. I tossed around on the bed, smoking one cigarette after another, knowing how lousy it was to have to depend on someone else to get you your freedom. I was used to depending on no one but myself, and I much preferred it that way.

I listened to the mutter of voices in the next room, chewed on the end of a strand of my hair, and wondered what the hell was taking so long. I was waiting for the door to the sitting room to open, but when it did it was Ringer standing there rather than Val. He had a bundle of something folded up under one arm, and he closed the door behind him before coming to the foot of the bed on my side.

"You can get into this in a minute," he said, tossing the bundle at me before reaching into a pocket for the chain key. "The cruiser is scheduled to dock soon, and I want to have lunch before it does."

I looked at the bundle he'd tossed at me, and as sure as space and starshine it was a cadet uniform. The midnight black kilt was wrapped around the long-sleeved gold uniform blouse with red blazing star insignia. The rest of it, the black regulation tie and belt, the gold knee socks, and the low-heeled, no-nonsense black shoes were probably hidden in the middle of the bundle, waiting to appear once the outer layer was opened. I looked back at Ringer with the sinking feeling that time had run out, and saw that he'd already unlocked the chain. With that done his fingers went back into his pocket, and he brought out something else that he threw to me.

"There's the lock pick you wanted," he said as my hand closed around it. "I've kept it with me ever since I took it away from you."

He stared down at me from where he stood, the fury showing nowhere other than in his eyes. He knew I'd sent Val after the pick, but I didn't know how he'd found out.

"Knowing you as well as I do," he went on, his voice much too even, "I also know how curious you are about how this knowledge came to me. In a phrase, Valdon isn't as innocent as you seem to think he is."

He put his hands in his pockets and glared at me, and then his voice wasn't even any longer.

"Damn it, Diana, you sent one of my own agents after me!" he shouted, really raw over the idea. "I knew he had something on his mind all during breakfast, but I didn't know what it was until he asked me what you would do if you got away from us. I told him exactly what you would do, and he wasn't surprised in the least. He knew it as well as I did, but he thought he might be wrong. When he found out he wasn't, he growled something in another language and started to pace around. If I were you, I'd start to worry."

I tossed the useless pick onto the bed, then stood up to face Ringer's glare.

"Then I guess it's a good thing you're not me," I said with a shrug, actually quite happy that Val now had a better understanding of the true relationship between us. "I've got better things to do than worry. You don't really expect me to put that uniform on, do you?"

Ringer's glare changed to a frown, he stared hard for a minute, then his hands came out of his pockets to let his arms fold across his chest.

"Why do I keep feeling surprised?" he demanded, talking to me but not expecting an answer. "How long do I have to know you before I get used to your version of *toujours l'audace*? And why the hell do I keep letting it get to me?"

He moved his eyes to the ceiling, working hard to control himself, finally made it, then took a deep breath and brought his gaze back to me.

"Yes," he said with a forced calm. "Yes, I really do expect you to put the uniform on. What's more, if you don't put it on I'll do it for you, and I won't be neat about it. You have less than an hour to get yourself ready, and if you don't use the time you won't have another chance. Now it's up to you."

He backed off a step then turned and walked out, slamming the door closed with more force than was necessary. I stood where I was for a minute, drumming my fingernails on the bed's footboard, but no matter which way I looked at it my chances were zero.

With the ankle chain off I could walk to the door and try to get past Ringer, but he wasn't likely to be asleep out there. I wasn't quite as unarmed as Ringer thought and the temptation to show him what he'd missed was strong, but doing that wouldn't have accomplished anything. I couldn't see myself putting Ringer away for keeps, and that was the only way I'd ever get past him. I shook my head for a decision long ago made, tapped the footboard in a final way, then headed for the bathroom. Maybe I'd get a break once I was out of that room.

I took the bandages off my wrists before showering, then didn't bother to put them back on again. Jane had come by on a regular basis to work on my wrists, but she'd never stayed long or gotten into another detailed conversation with me. She'd obviously decided to distance herself from the entire situation, and probably didn't know just how wise she was being.

The long sleeves of the uniform blouse did a good job of covering the reminders of my last assignment, and that was really all I needed. Once I was completely dressed I took a hairbrush over to the room's full-length mirror and spent some time brushing my hair and glooming at my reflection. Even without make-up the face I wore was beautiful, but it somehow went too well with the uniform of an Academy cadet.

The kilt was mid-thigh length, short enough not to be a complete nuisance, but the red of the Federation's blazing star insignia was echoed and reinforced by my bright red hair. I stared at myself as I brushed, trying to pinpoint exactly why the picture seemed wrong, but the answer didn't come immediately. I continued to stare for a minute or two, and then the knowledge came so fast that I threw the brush away and went to get a cigarette.

I looked like a very young girl in that uniform, just as young as I'd looked in that white shorts outfit, and I couldn't stand it. I took my cigarette to a chair and collapsed into it, drew in a lungful of smoke, then rubbed at my forehead. Looking young and innocent might be an asset among enemies, but among friends it was killing me. I was a woman, a grown woman, and I wanted to look like one!

The thought was so obsessive I nearly went for my make-up kit, but instead forced myself to sit still until the urge went away. Covering myself with make-up wouldn't solve the problem, only getting back to Dameron's base would do that. I sat and smoked the cigarette slowly, getting myself calmed down, and by the time Ringer came in again I was nearly back to normal.

"You might have mentioned you were ready," Ringer observed irritably from the doorway, giving me a fast but critical up-and-down. "Well, don't just sit there! If you're all set, let's move!"

I didn't know what his hurry was, but for obvious reasons I didn't feel like sharing it. I ground out my cigarette slowly, got to my feet, then took my time walking to the door. Needless to say, Ringer didn't appreciate any of it, and as I passed him his expression was rising in Brinell and lowering in Celsius. Aside from noting the fact that his coat was back on, I ignored him completely and swept my gaze around the sitting room to see if it held any possibilities.

There was really nothing there to serve my purposes, but the one thing the room did hold was Val. He sat completely relaxed in an armchair, his arms on the chair arms, but his gaze as he looked at me was a deep, deep black. He waited until I reached the center of the room, then uncrossed his legs and rose to face me.

"How nice we look," he commented, folding his arms as he inspected me. "That uniform really does suit you, doesn't it? I'll be looking forward to seeing you in it over the next three months."

His tone was full of satisfaction, mostly because of what he'd nearly been tricked into doing, I think, but at that point I couldn't have cared less about his motives.

"Your three months will be filled with learning," I countered, folding my own arms. "How would you like to start with a lesson on how many bones the human body can have broken and still continue to live?"

My own tone wasn't very friendly, and it showed clearly that I wouldn't have minded finding a fight. Val stiffened and began to unfold his arms, his expression darker than it had been, but Ringer stepped between us before any critical moves could be made.

"That's enough, you two," he growled, sending his eyes to each of us in turn. "Even if we had time for this, you're both old enough to know better. Come on, lunch is waiting."

Ringer urged Val to walk away with him and I watched them moving toward the door to the corridor, feeling the frown I'd suddenly developed. When Ringer had first mentioned lunch I'd been sure we would be eating in the suite, but nothing in the way of edibles had been brought and Ringer was obviously going somewhere. I couldn't believe he was foolish enough to walk around the station with me, but if that was the choice he'd made I wasn't about to argue it.

I followed behind after the two broad backs in front of me, waited for Ringer to open the corridor door - and only then saw the four big uniformed men waiting outside in the corridor. They came alert when they saw us, and each of four pairs of eyes focussed on Val. Their bodies were tense and ready beneath the yellow of station security men, their hands hovering close to the butts of the stunners they wore at their hips. Ringer blinked in surprise at their reaction to the sight of Val, then he shook his head and took one step toward them.

"Not him," he grumbled to the security men, gesturing impatiently. "The girl's the one you have to keep your eyes on. If she disappears I'll have your hearts."

The four security men shifted their gazes to me, stared very briefly, then looked back at Ringer.

"You've got to be kidding," the one with sergeant's stripes protested, the other three men obviously agreeing with him. "She's pretty big for a girl, but what reason could there possibly be for needing four of us to watch her?"

The security man's question was a fair one, especially since I stood quietly where I'd stopped, oozing youth and innocence and helplessness. Val was suddenly amused by the confusion I added to, but Ringer was about as far from amused as you can get. He knew as well as I did that the four guards would be useless unless he found it possible to convince them that they had a real job in hand. He glanced at me angrily, almost in accusation, then gave the sergeant his attention.

"Listen to me carefully," he told the man, pulling his credentials out of his pocket. "My name is Ringer, and I'm Chief of Agents for the Federation Council. Do you believe me?"

He held up his credentials for all the men to see, and the four took turns nodding.

"We know that," the sergeant assured him, beginning to look skeptical - probably about Ringer's intelligence or sanity. "The captain checked carefully when you first spoke to him."

"Good," Ringer said, his nod encouraging. "Now that you know who I am, let me introduce you to the young woman standing behind me. Her name is Diana Santee, and she's one of the best Special Agents I have. I would not need armed guards to watch a little girl, but four of you are barely enough for a Special Agent. She intends to go in a direction I don't want her to go in, and if you don't believe she's a Special Agent then you're worse than useless to me. You can either convince me you believe what I'm saying, or I'll call your captain and have you replaced."

Ringer shoved his credentials back in his pocket, took one step back from the security men, and just waited. The four security guards had their eyes on me again, but this time their expressions were thoughtful as they weighed Ringer's words. The sergeant studied me carefully, his gaze moving all over me, and then he purposely locked gazes with me.

Now, I'm not used to backing down under a stare, and being off assignment tends to make me sloppy in professional matters. That's why it was a good ten seconds before I realized I shouldn't have met the sergeant's stare, but it was too late. Ten seconds is a relatively short period of time, but it turned out to be more than long enough for the man to make up his mind. He pulled his gaze away from mine, and glanced at his men.

"There's no doubt about it," he told them, nodding his head at me. "Those curves of hers are distracting, but the muscle tone underneath is obvious enough once you look for it. And look at the way she stands... Sexy as all hell, but with a fighter's balance. And those eyes. I met a Special Agent once, a few years ago, and he had the same look in his eyes. I'll bet she could take out two or three of us without half trying."

His men had agreed with him until he got to his final conclusion, but he obviously knew more about Special Agents than they did. One of them snorted in disbelief over the contention that a girl could take two or three men their size, and the sergeant turned to regard the man thoughtfully.

"Mr. Ringer," he said, not taking his eyes from the doubting Thomas. "I wonder if you would tell us the young lady's rating in unarmed combat."

Ringer had been leaning against the doorjamb with folded arms, watching the proceedings, and he smiled faintly.

"Her rating is nine, Sergeant," he supplied in the mildest of tones. The sergeant nodded his thanks, all the while studying his man and seeing the surprise appear when my rating was mentioned.

"How about you, Gedner?" he pursued, rubbing at his chin with one hand. "What was the rating you just qualified for?"

The man named Gedner hesitated, moved his eyes to me, then shook his head.

"I just got my three, Sergeant," he admitted, a faint worry showing in his eyes. "You think we ought to go back for disruptor rifles?"

Ringer and Val laughed out loud at that, the sergeant grinned and shook his head, and I turned away in disgust while muttering nasty things under my breath. The sergeant's three men were now looking at me the way they'd looked at Val earlier, and the change in attitude wasn't even good for the ego.

"Now that that's settled, I think we can get back on schedule," Ringer drawled in satisfaction. "Let's go, Diana."

I looked at the doorway again to see Ringer and Val already out in the corridor. My escort was waiting warily for me to join the group, and playing stubborn wouldn't have been worth the trouble it would bring. The Council wanted me on Tanderon and Ringer wanted me on Tanderon, and neither of them would have minded if I arrived there unconscious from a stunner dose.

Stunners are considered humane weapons when compared to disruptors, but that opinion was not shared by anyone who had ever been stunned. At least with a disruptor you didn't wake up with frazzled nerve endings that took a while to quiet down. I shrugged to myself in temporary resignation, walked to the door and through it, and took my place in the parade.

The hall corridor was deserted, and we headed for the elevator with Ringer and Val leading the way, two of the guards following them, then me, then the last two guards. After a very short wait the elevator doors opened and we all moved into the car.

The elevator doors opened again up on the Station's main level and Ringer led the way again, this time to the left, away from the docking area and toward the dining room and amusement areas. There were a lot of people around, some moving through the area, some going in and out of shops. Some were using the various gambling and skill machines lining the entire right wall of the corridor, and most of all those people either stopped or turned around to stare at our parade. It wasn't hard to see who the guards were for, and it isn't every day you see someone being escorted around a station - most especially not a harmless-looking girl. The security men were very aware of the stares, something that wouldn't have bothered them with another prisoner, and that helped me decide to see how my luck was running.

We moved down the center of the corridor, other pedestrians shifting to left or right to get out of our way. Just ahead and to the left, between two richly decorated shop windows, was a modestly plain door with a sign that read "Private. Please do not enter." The sign was specifically worded so as not to be a challenge to anyone looking for an argument, but I happened to know what the door was for. It led to the

restricted area beneath the station's main level, and even had a branching that exited in the docking area.

I waited until we were a few steps past my target door, then pretended to stumble slightly. The natural reaction of a person stumbling over something unseen is to look back and down at whatever caused the misstep. When I did just that, I found the two security men behind me looking in the same place.

I hadn't hoped they'd be inexperienced enough to follow the pointing finger, so to speak, but you learn to take whatever residual luck you happen to run into. Without the least hesitation I kicked the one on the left in the stomach, then immediately gave the one on the right a fist in his solar plexus. They both folded up with groans and I was off and running toward that door we'd passed, people jumping in all directions to get out of my way amid gasps and screams of shock.

I was across the corridor in five strides, almost to the door, when I heard a shout of "Halt!" behind me. That meant I had a good three to five seconds before any shots were fired, so I put them to use. I made it to the door, grabbed the knob, then twisted it right-left as I threw a shoulder into it. The damned door took no notice of any of it, showing that it was locked tight, and there was nothing left to do but spin away from the door and try for the docking area by way of the corridor.

I turned fast, took one step, then froze in place when I found myself looking down the barrel of a stunner. The sergeant had put himself between me and the docking area, three paces out of reach, his body braced, his arm and weapon pointed straight at me. His face held no expression, but his eyes showed he was more than ready to do what had to be done. I'd never get past him unless I went over him, his stance making that perfectly clear. For a brief instant I was bitten by the "why not?" bug, remembering all the times I'd done exactly that, but then I was forced to remember I wasn't on assignment. I took a deep breath to regain control, straightened up, then looked around.

A second security man stood to my left, weapon held in both hands, a grim look pasted on his face. He wasn't nervous enough to pull the trigger by reflex, but he backed away half a step when I looked at him, the movement turning his expression peculiar. Just behind the second guard was Ringer, his hand relaxing away from his jacket, an odd relief on his face. Somehow I felt sure he'd seen me debating whether or not to take out the sergeant permanently, and I knew he'd been prepared to neutralize me if I slipped that far from reality. I shivered slightly, fleetingly thinking of ward K, and knew I'd rather have it that way, from Ringer, than be allowed to go on if I slipped over the edge.

Crowd noises in shouts and demands were rising all around us, and I saw Val over by the two guards I'd dumped, checking them over and then helping them to their feet. Additional security guards were filling the area, and it took a few minutes before the wounded were helped away and fresh security men had replaced them. I stood leaning against the door I'd tried for, my arms folded and my ankles crossed, but the

people all around were still pointing at me and staring as though I had two heads. It was nothing I wasn't used to, so when Ringer approached me it wasn't hard to ignore the stares. He passed the two security men who still had me covered, and stopped right in front of me.

"Not a bad try," he admitted, folding his arms as he examined me thoughtfully. "If the door hadn't been locked you would have made it."

"There's an old saying about 'if,'" I commented, returning his thoughtful stare. "If I'd been on assignment, it wouldn't have made that much of a difference. Would you like to tell me the purpose of this tour around the station? If you've changed your mind about Tanderon, all you have to do is say so."

Ringer snorted faintly, but he wasn't amused.

"I haven't changed my mind," he assured me. "What I've done is set my heart on something, and I'm going to have that something even if I have to go back for that shackle. You and I are going to share a last meal before we part company, one that you'll remember almost as well as I remember the last one we shared."

So that was it. His sharp black stare bored into me, undoubtedly seeing the small frown I'd developed, knowing satisfaction that I was finally getting it. Not only hadn't he accepted what I'd done to him with the Glue, he'd decided on a means of evening the score a little, implementing it in spite of the risk of losing me. Guards or no guards, he knew how chancy walking me around the station was, but he must have reached the point of not caring.

When he saw I had nothing further to say, he backed off a step then turned and walked away to find the security guard captain. I watched his back moving away from me, thought about how close to irrational his actions were, and only then realized I'd gone too far with him. If there's one trait all Special Agents share, aside from luck, that trait is pride. And I'd managed to hit Ringer in his pride.

The crowds were still trying to mill around and stare, but the security people were beginning to send them on their way. I knew it wouldn't be long before our parade was formed again, so I gave up thinking about pros and cons and admitted I owed Ringer one. He'd pulled my chestnuts out of the fire often enough over the years, so the least I owed him was a little satisfaction. If he wanted our last meal together to be as embarrassing for me as the one before had been for him I'd let it happen, but only because Ringer was Ringer. There are damned few people in this universe I'd do that for, but Ringer did happen to be one of them. I glanced again at Ringer's back, looked away from him with a small sigh, and waited for the rest of the excitement to die down.

Five minutes later we were on our way again, but this time the order of march was different. Ringer and Val still led the way, but the two replacement guards walked right next to me, one on either side, their eyes on me rather than where we were going. The sergeant and his other man followed along behind, close enough to be

effective, far enough away to be out of easy reach.

All four of them were alert and edgy, and although they'd holstered their weapons it wasn't likely I'd find another easy opening. I slouched along in the middle of my escort, projecting a faint impression of defeat, but the four guards didn't fall for it. They didn't relax and they didn't take their eyes off me, and then we were leaving the amusement area for the softly lit dining area.

When we walked into the dining room the conversational hum died for a minute, then came back up to its previous level. Most of the well-dressed travelers in their softly padded armchairs knew nothing about what had happened just a few minutes earlier. That was why they chuckled at the sight of a young girl in cadet uniform being escorted by six large males, then went back to their meals.

But the maitre d' who approached Ringer while sending several nervous glances in my direction obviously knew exactly what had happened. So it was with a good deal of relief that he hurried back to his post when Ringer waved him away. Ringer knew what sort of table he wanted, and he led the way right to it with no more than a brief, preliminary glance around the room. I would have bet that he'd take a table right next to a wall to put my back to, but boxing me in wasn't in his game plan.

The table we stopped at stood right in the middle of the large room, and the other tables around us were all occupied - with distinctly amused diners. One of the room's many crystal chandeliers was directly above the table, the gleam of it setting up an echoing gleam in the Illian lace of the top tablecloth. Ringer and Val each chose an armchair and sat and, after a very brief hesitation, so did I. The security men, however, stayed on their feet, ranging themselves two behind me and two behind Val and Ringer. The four men, of course, had their eyes directly on me, just as they obviously thought they should.

I moved around in my armchair to get comfortable while watching Ringer gesture to a robot waiter. Val had his eyes on me in a thoughtful way, and there was no sign of the anger he'd shown earlier in the suite. He seemed to be thinking about what I'd done, and knowing he was pawing through my actions looking for motivations bothered me for some reason. I shifted in the chair again, met his eyes briefly, then decided to look away and not look back. There was something about the way he studied me that once again seemed to have nothing to do with a business relationship, but that was stupid. He couldn't possibly have missed learning his lesson...

"We'll order now," Ringer was saying to the robot that had glided over. "Two true steaks, medium rare, for the other gentleman and myself, and two bottles of Aneran beer. The young lady will have a large plate of mixed vegetables and a cup of tea."

"Vegetables and tea?" I echoed as the robot left to pick up the order it had already transmitted to the kitchens. "Come on, Ringer, you don't seriously expect me to eat that?"

"You'll eat it or I'll feed it to you," Ringer growled in answer, his head down a little, his eyes looking up at me. "Someone who gets as involved in physical exercise as you do needs a good, healthy meal to keep them going. Consider it a bonus for your recent short distance run and shut up."

He kept his eyes on me, so I slumped down in the chair with a disgusted expression on my face. It was punishment time again, and Ringer was saying that if not for my attempted break I would have gotten steak too. The security men showed appreciation of the gesture by the grins on their faces, and I thought fleetingly of how pleasant it would be to walk over all of them.

We sat and waited in silence, and it didn't take very long before the food arrived. The steaks put in front of Ringer and Val had been grilled to drooling perfection, the beer poured into their glasses tall, cold, golden life-blood. Ringer knew well enough how I appreciated good food, and he smiled a little when the buttered yams and soft, hot rolls were added to the table near the steaks. I gazed lovingly at the best food I was likely to see in a long time, then closed my eyes when the plate of plain vegetables was set in front of me.

"Pick up your fork, Diana," Ringer directed, and I opened my eyes to see him watching me with amused attention. I had a very strong urge to forget about any satisfaction due him and give him indigestion even before he tasted that grilled glory, but I like to think I have more self-control than that. I sighed silently in resignation, and stuck with my original resolve.

"Ringer, you can't do this to me!" I said desperately, leaning forward toward him. "How do you expect me to eat nothing but vegetables with something like that steak staring me in the face? And that beer! Do you know how long it's been since - "

"Start eating," Ringer interrupted, a hard look now in his eyes. "I'll enjoy my own meal more once I see that you've started yours. If I have to say it again, I'll sit you on my lap and shovel it in with a spoon."

I let my gaze flicker back and forth to the people at the tables around us, some of whom were paying close, grinning attention, glanced again at Ringer, then lowered my eyes and reluctantly picked up the fork. Ringer grunted in satisfaction and turned to his own meal, and we ate in silence. In point of fact I love vegetables and Xanadu O.S.'s kitchens had done a marvelous job on them, but I ate them as though they were the last thing in the world that I wanted. Actually I wasn't much in the mood for anything - including one of those steaks - but Ringer didn't have to know that. At least when I left over most of what had been given me, no one would wonder why or try to argue.

When the food was all gone, Ringer was in a good mood again. I could tell that by the higher key growl in his voice when he ordered me to my feet. I sent him a cold glare, but let myself be herded out of the dining room anyway. The security men had had a good chuckle over what Ringer had done, but once we were moving through

the amusement area again their lightheartedness left them. They watched me just as though I were their own personal fortune, and before I knew it we had passed the entrance to the hospital area and were crossing the threshold into the docking area.

Station docking areas are so big that they take your breath away even when you're used to them. People are constantly arriving and leaving, and there's always a knot of perpetual waiters, people whose liner shuttles haven't reached the station yet. Bright lights indicate the various liner shuttle bays spaced out around the perimeter of the area. When a shuttle is on its way to the pre-assigned bay or already in it, the light begins to blink and doesn't stop until the shuttle is gone.

Three of the bays on the right had blinking lights and most of the crowds were concentrated in that direction, leaving only a trickle of traffic for the left. On the left was where the private ships were berthed, and the docking bays were slightly farther apart from one another. The seven of us moved down the center of the vast area, drawing stares and puzzled attention. But this time the stares weren't bothering the security men. They all had their hands on their weapons and were looking even more nervous than they had earlier, and Ringer walked to our left and slightly behind rather than in front of us.

Ringer knew my best bet for making a break would be to the left, toward the private ships, and he wasn't worrying about the crowds the way the security men were. The spread of the guards' stunners would render them just about useless if I managed to put myself in the middle of a group of innocent bystanders, but Ringer's slug gun didn't have that shortcoming.

The crowds to the right were tempting but useless, the ships to the left useful but out of reach. I kept my eyes moving in case a miracle happened, but aside from that I just walked along as though completely unconcerned. Val walked with Ringer and to his left, but that did me less than no good at all. I sure as hell couldn't expect Val to cover a break by taking Ringer out, and as eager as he'd been to see me at the Academy he'd probably help out by tripping me if I ran past him.

About two thirds of the way to the far end of the shuttle area, also on the left, were three bays marked off in yellow and red. These bays were perpetually reserved for the use of visiting bigwigs, special emergency arrivals, or the Federation Navy whenever they had to dock a dinghy. One of the bays had its lights blinking, with four Shore Patrolmen standing in front of the opened hatch, lounging against the metal wall in appreciation of the quiet as sailors are fond of doing.

Their uniforms were gold with red and black trim, differentiating them from the army who wore black and gold with red trim and the marines who wore red and black with gold. Explorers wore all white with just a trace of red and gold, landing teams wore black with white, red, and gold armbands, and agents, First Class or otherwise, wore no uniforms whatsoever on any occasion. At various times supporters of Federation agents have insisted that we've earned a uniform just like the other branches of service, but happily that particular helpful hand has so far been pocketed.

The Shore Patrolmen straightened up when they saw us approaching, then stood aside to let Ringer hustle me through the hatch by one arm. The security men had looked indecently relieved to have me out of their custody, but I missed a final view of their relief. Val walked into the shuttle behind Ringer and me, the four Shore Patrolmen followed him, and the last of them turned to the controls to close the double doors of the airlock.

The lock slid closed with a click, an amber light glowed on the control panel beside the door, and Ringer finally let go of my arm to find himself a seat in the unornamented black and gold shuttle. The airlock was now sealed from the pilot's compartment, so I found a seat of my own and stretched out in it. Val sat down next to me without a word as the shuttle engines began to hum, but I kept my attention on the seat back in front of me and paid none of it to him. The bad feeling I'd had all along about the wisdom of the venture hadn't disappeared, and I was in no mood for conversation.

The hop over to the cruiser took no more than four minutes, most of the time being used up by pulling away from the orbital station and docking in the cruiser bay. We left the shuttle to the swarm of navy files moving around the bay and were led to an uncarpeted gray metal corridor, which took us to officer's country and the captain's office. Val and I, with the SP's for company, waited outside while Ringer went in alone, but we didn't have much of a wait. In no more than ten minutes Ringer was back out in the corridor, closing the door behind him before coming over to stop in front of me.

"I've just officially turned you over to Captain Lowell," he said, examining me in a final sort of way. "Now you're his headache, and I'm going on a short vacation. Enjoy your own vacation. You've got a lot of it ahead of you."

"You're sweet, Ringer," I told him with an innocent smile. "I'm going to miss you. With you gone, I'll have to go to the head all by myself."

I purposely hadn't kept my voice down, and the attention of all four of the SP's was suddenly riveted on us. They looked at me, then looked at Ringer with barely concealed leers. Ringer flushed and started to glance around, then realized how guilty that particular reaction would look. He gave it up and brought his gaze back to me, and the expression in his eyes was hard all over again.

"Diana, the next time anyone uses a hairbrush on you, it's going to be me!" he growled. Then he turned and stomped off without a backward look.

I almost felt like grinning at Ringer's departing back, but my attention was taken by a very young junior officer who came up to the captain's door, knocked, then entered. He was out again immediately to tell Val and me that the captain was ready to see us, so we left the gray metal corridor to the SP's and went on in.

Captain Lowell sat behind a desk in the small room, leaning back and looking at us with mild blue eyes. He was a man in his late forties with a smooth, unlined face and

brown hair, and those mild blue eyes seemed entirely at home in his square face. The office held three file cabinets, the captain's desk and chair, and two plain metal chairs in front of the desk. When Lowell gestured to the chairs, Val and I walked over and sat in them.

"I'm Captain Lowell," the officer introduced himself in an easy voice once we were settled. "I'd like to welcome you aboard the Swamp Fox. My officers and I will try to make the trip pleasant for you, and I hope you plan to do the same for us."

He looked straight at me as he said that, and I smiled but didn't answer him. Unless I wanted to try reaching Dameron's base in a shuttle, I didn't have many options open to me. No sense in making trouble if it couldn't be turned to my advantage.

"This is Ensign Harris," Lowell continued, gesturing toward the junior officer who stood to his left. "He'll see to it that your needs are taken care of. These are Federation agents Carter and Santee, Mr. Harris. Try to keep them as happy as possible, since it isn't every ship that has the honor of transporting a hyper-A."

"A what, sir?" Harris asked, his young face blank with lack of understanding. Most people would have failed to understand that particular term, so his confusion wasn't surprising. Lowell, having been in the Service a good deal longer, knew exactly what it meant.

"A hyper-A," Lowell repeated, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers across his stomach. "That's short for 'high percentage-risk agent.' When jobs come up that are computer rated 95% or more against success of any sort, hyper-A's are given those jobs. They're the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs imaginable, and we're all lucky the hyper-A's are around to do them."

"I see, sir!" Harris answered, sounding impressed and looking at Val with awe.

Val grinned into his hand, enjoying himself, and Lowell said mildly, "You're looking the wrong way, Mr. Harris. Agent Santee is the hyper-A."

Harris turned his confusion in my direction, his cheeks red, but I couldn't fault him for his reaction. I've always found it an asset that people have difficulty believing I'm a Special Agent and the doubt usually helps me on whatever assignment I get. The ensign's eyes moved over me in shock, and it was impossible to keep from showing the same grin Val had. Considering the way I now looked, I was very obviously not Harris's picture of a fearless, capable Special Agent.

"I - I'm sorry," Harris stammered, probably seeing his career going down the drain. "I didn't realize - "

"Don't let it worry you, Mr. Harris," I interrupted, trying to reassure him but unable to keep the dryness out of my tone. "I'm in disguise."

Despite my reassurance the young ensign looked even more confused, and Captain Lowell had to swallow a grin of his own before he moved on to his next topic of

discussion.

"I dislike asking you this," Lowell said, shifting in his chair, "but I have transported agents before and regulations are very clear on the point. Is either of you armed?"

"I'm not," Val said, and then they both turned their heads to look at me.

"Why, Captain!" I exclaimed, all wide-eyed and terribly innocent. "Do you think I'd come aboard a Federation cruiser armed? I know regulations as well as you do."

"I'm sure you do," Lowell said in an amused tone, his steepled fingers at his lips. "However, you haven't answered my question."

I sat there and studied him for a minute, trying to make up my mind. There was no guarantee that he had a metal detector built into his desk, but it wasn't worth the chance. Right now he felt friendly toward me, and it might be possible to do something with that. I sighed and shook my head, and then stood up.

"You've got me, Captain," I admitted, handing over the knife from my thigh sheath. "But take good care of it. I'd rather be chained than go without a knife."

"It will receive the very best of care," Lowell assured me dryly, taking the knife and putting it in one of his desk drawers. "Are you sure that's all?"

"That's it," I said with a small laugh, tickled by his skepticism, but Val wasn't tickled. He now sat straight in his chair, and stared at me as though I'd just produced a core bomb.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, pointing in the direction of the desk drawer where my knife now lay. "I watched Ringer confiscate your arsenal myself!"

It suddenly came to me why Val was so upset, and the reason showed he hadn't gotten very far with understanding me. Val had seen me facing the security sergeant and his stunner, but he hadn't realized at the time that I was armed. My hesitation now had a completely different meaning for him, and he had to take into consideration the fact that I'd been tempted to use the knife on the sergeant. I smiled into his outrage, pleased that he was finally getting a better picture of what a Special Agent is all about.

"I'm a good Girl Scout," I told Val, sitting down in my chair again. I'd had the knife and sheath hidden in the emergency breathing equipment locker in my room. Ringer and Val had had no idea that it was there, of course. Agents develop various survival habits over the years, and the only way to keep them effective is to keep them to yourself. "Yes, a good Girl Scout," I said comfortably. "'Be prepared' is the motto ... or is that Boy Scouts?"

An annoyed expression crossed Val's face, but before he could pursue his annoyance Captain Lowell interrupted.

"I'm sure it doesn't matter," Lowell put in smoothly, trying to keep a fight from starting. "I happen to have a bottle of high proof medicinal alcohol, Mr. Carter, and I wonder if you would care to sample it with me. I check on it every once in a while to make sure it hasn't gone bad."

Val chuckled over the way Lowell had offered his illegal high-proof, and then nodded agreement as he settled back in his chair again. Lowell grinned, brought out two glasses and a bottle marked "For medicinal use only" from somewhere in his desk, poured into the two glasses, then moved one of them toward Val. He took the second glass himself and raised it in salute as Val lifted his own glass, and I decided it was time to remind him I was there.

"What about me?" I asked, annoyed over being ignored. "Am I an orphan or something?"

Lowell had been just about to drink, but instead of lowering the glass he hesitated briefly, downed the shot fast, and only then brought his gaze back to me.

"I'm sorry," he said in something like discomfort, setting the glass down in front of him. "Mr. Ringer stressed the fact that although you're a Special Agent you're to be considered a minor in every way possible, and to be perfectly frank I'm glad he did. I have daughters your age, and I'd no more offer them a glass of this than I'd offer it to you. If you'd like a soft drink, Mr. Harris will be pleased to fetch it."

His blue eyes weren't quite as mild as they had been, and I sat very still for a minute to make sure I had a good grip on my temper. Male chauvinism I could understand, but I wasn't used to the father syndrome.

"Just forget it," I said at last, getting to my feet. I knew if I stayed there any longer, I'd explode for sure. "I'll settle for a cup of coffee in my cabin. Mr. Harris, are you up to playing guide?"

The young officer nodded so eagerly that his head almost fell off, then he practically tripped over his own feet getting the cabin door open. I made it to the door in two strides and was about to step through, when Val's voice stopped me. He spoke in his own language, what I considered trade or base language, since that was what was spoken in Dameron's base.

"You're lucky he doesn't insist on making it milk," he called after me, laughter in his tone. "In case you're interested, this is the best I've had to drink since we arrived here. If I find some time later, I'll come by to console you over your loss."

He was deliberately trying to provoke me, and I didn't know why - or care; all I knew was that he made it. I put my hand on the edge of the airtight door and looked back at him over my shoulder. He'd turned in his chair to follow me with his eyes, and his amusement was all too obvious.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate the taster's verdict," I said in the same

language he'd used. "As for the rest of it, allow me to point out that Ringer's not here now to help you. You walk into my cabin, and you'll walk out again singing soprano. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I'm sure he knew I wasn't in a joking mood, but that didn't keep the amusement out of his eyes or stop his quiet laughter. There weren't many men around stupid enough to laugh at a Special Agent, and I could see that he hadn't yet learned his lesson. He was asking for it again, but that wasn't the place to oblige him. The navy tends to be regulation happy, and rarely appreciates an agent's efforts toward making the universe a more enjoyable place to live in.

I continued on through the door into the now deserted corridor, and waited until Harris had stepped out as well and had closed the door behind himself. I must have been muttering under my breath, because Harris picked up on part of it and turned large brown eyes to me as we walked up the corridor.

"You mustn't mind about all those regulations," he comforted, looking as if he were dying to put his arm around my shoulders. "They're all there for a good purpose, even if we don't always understand what that purpose is. And you certainly don't need a knife to protect yourself here. We'll all keep you safe."

The last thing I needed now, on top of Val's needling, was to be told that a wet-behind-the-ears ensign was going to keep me safe. I'm normally not quite that touchy, but Harris's "protective" expression had heated up some and was beginning to look aggressive.

"Thanks for the offer," I told him as I glanced around the corridor, "but you don't use a knife to protect yourself. You use it to get to someone who isn't within arm's reach, or to find out what you want to know from someone who doesn't feel like talking, or you use it for two dozen other reasons. Not to protect yourself."

There was a deep well of silence in reaction to that, and I glanced at Harris to see that he'd gone pale. The heat and aggressive look were gone like last year's income, and he actually looked shaky. We still walked shoulder to shoulder down the corridor, but there was now a three inch gap between us that hadn't been there earlier.

Considering my mood I should have been pleased with Harris's reaction, but perverse can sometimes come out compounded. I discovered I was disgusted with myself for stooping to scaring children, and concentrated on the bulkheads and cabin doors we passed. I was more than willing not to say another word, but Harris was determined to show that he was Navy through and through: all guts and no regrets. Or at least that's what some people like to believe.

"Uh, what language was that you and Agent Carter were speaking?" he asked, trying not to sound hesitant. "I don't think I ever heard it before."

I stopped short and closed my eyes in pain, knowing that it had been bound to

happen sometime. Val had to open his big, flapping mouth, and I'd end up getting blamed for that, too. Then I turned and gave Harris an "official" stare.

"What language are you talking about?" I asked, no expression on my face or in my voice, and at least he wasn't as innocent as he looked. He immediately went red, then began to stammer again.

"I - I didn't mean to pry, of course," he apologized, rolling his hands into fists at his sides. "I realize that agents do have their secrets."

"They sure do," I agreed, then began to walk again. "At the moment, the biggest secret to me is what I'm doing here in the first place. How much farther do we have to go?"

"Not far," Harris said, almost in relief. "Just a few doors down on your left." In another moment we'd reached the proper door, and Harris sidled past me to open it. "If you'll make yourself comfortable," he said, "I'll be back in a jiffy with your coffee."

I thanked him and went on in. The cabin was small, but an officer must have had to give it up even though there was nothing but a compact, built-in bunk, one straight-backed chair bolted to the deck, and a desk. On the floor near the bunk was a footlocker, which turned out to have more cadet uniforms. Leave it to Ringer. I dropped the lid of the footlocker again, then went to the bunk to stretch out. When Harris came back with my coffee, I sent him off again for a carton of cigarettes. Considering the way things had been going, it looked like a good bet I'd be chain smoking before this thing was over.

Captain Lowell himself came by to escort me to the evening meal, and walking into the officer's mess was something of a surprise. Every face that turned in my direction was male, showing that the Swamp Fox had an all-male crew. Mixed crews were the norm in the Federation Navy, and as I took my seat to Lowell's right I wondered what they'd been up to that an all-male crew had been necessary.

But I didn't get to consider the question long because Lowell's men were wolves in officer's clothing, leaning across the table and one another just to get my attention for a minute. Lowell sat back and watched their antics with mild amusement, but Val, at the other end of the table with Harris for company, didn't share his amusement. My partner wasn't even close enough to me for needling purposes, and he didn't seem to care for the seating arrangements.

Just to take my mind off the typical navy food I decided to play Lady Butterfly to all those interesting men, laughing, and chatting, and sharing winks and smiles. It turned the meal into an absolute delight, the officers responding as though programmed, Val scowling at what he shoveled into his mouth ... just beautiful.

When the dishes had been cleared away, we shifted location to the Officer's Lounge. Without a table in the way the navy really began maneuvers, but Lowell kept things in

hand by suggesting it might be nice if they opened their wire library. Wires meant music and music meant dancing, so the suggestion brought more enthusiasm than groans.

The music was turned on, and as soon as I heard it I knew it proved that the navy wasn't as far behind the rest of the Federation as many people thought. The music was a revival from Sol III's past, a thing called rocknroll, and was the current rage all over the Federation. The words of the songs had been made to match modern language, but the translators swore the original meanings and phrases hadn't been changed.

The music itself had been left exactly the same, and it really was something else. A reviewer had once quoted somebody from the time the music had originally been popular as saying that dancing to it could almost be called vertical sex. I wasn't sure what the original steps had been like, but I knew what the modern ones were and couldn't think of a better description.

The wolves took turns dancing with me, using a system of seniority that didn't match their rank - and one I couldn't crack - and even Captain Lowell took a turn. The Captain's system was to walk over and announce that the next dance was his, a system everyone understood at once. The only ones I didn't dance with were Val and Ensign Harris, they being engaged in sitting in a corner of the room out of the way.

Harris had tried to coax Val into conversation, but Val wasn't even paying token attention to him. He sat sprawled in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, his face expressionless, his eyes constantly on me. I was curious as to what was going through his mind, but not curious enough to go over and ask him.

I happened to be very fond of rocknroll, and after two weeks in a hospital bed where I'd listened to it over and over again, I knew the selections fairly well. When I heard the opening bars to one song in particular, I looked over toward Val and gave him a wolfish grin. What he heard then was, "Got along without you before I met you, Gonna get along without you now," and the message had no trouble making itself understood.

I laughed at the way Val's expression darkened, and my current dancing partner joined in the amusement. He didn't really know what the joke was, but he was obviously more than willing to laugh at the room's only wallflower. A few minutes later Val caught my attention when he heard the words, "Hey, little devil, I'm gonna make an angel out of you!" and returned the wolfish grin. But it was his bad luck that the very next selection was, "That'll Be The Day." I laughed hard at that, then continued to enjoy the music.

Chapter 6

Five standard days later we were off Tanderon, the planet which held the training facilities. I must have tried half a dozen dodges on Captain Lowell during the trip to

get him to let me off on the way, but nothing had worked. He stayed his same pleasant self, and saw to it that I had no access to any of his officers but Ensign Harris unless it was mealtime.

And every time Val showed up at my cabin when I was alone, Ensign Harris showed up a minute later with a message from the captain for one of us. Harris was always diffident, nervous, awkward - and impossible to get rid of - but Val didn't stop trying until we'd reached our destination.

Lowell appeared in the docking bay to return my knife when Val and I were ready to board the shuttle. The captain had shown up to make sure I understood that the shuttle was taking us directly down to the planet instead of to the orbital station. Unlike Ringer, Lowell wasn't taking any chances.

When the shuttle grounded the hatch was opened on the shuttle port of School 1, a not altogether inspiring sight. The same four SP's escorted me to the permal at the foot of the exit ramp, then they turned and went back into the shuttle. On their way they passed Val, who was trying to look around as he made his way down the ramp. The day was partly sunny and faintly cool, but the pleasant weather was ruined by the clouds of dust blowing all over the permal, coating everything and getting in everyone's throat and clothing.

Even as I watched, robot trucks were moving slowly over the permal, spraying the dust clouds with a chemical that made them too heavy to blow around. The dust had to be resprayed every time a shuttle took off or landed, and the port perimeter had to be sprayed continuously to keep new dust from moving in on top of the old. I hadn't been to Tanderon in a couple or three years, and I hadn't completely remembered how unmissable it really was.

"So this is Tanderon," Val mused, still looking around as he stopped beside me. "Our university sites tend to be more hospitable."

"It all depends on what you want to study," I commented, then nodded toward a knot of four men making their way across the permal. "Here comes your welcoming committee from 2. They'll see that your suffering is minimal."

He turned away from the grayish skies to glance at the administrators from 2, then brought his gaze back to my face.

"I've decided that I want you coming with me," he announced, pinning me with that deep black stare. "I'll tell Ringer it was my decision, and he can let the Council know."

I returned his stare with a frown, not really believing what I'd heard. Just like that the decision had become his, and to hell with everyone else involved? The wind ruffled my kilt and blew some strands of hair in my face, and I didn't know whether to laugh or scream.

"You have no say in this one way or the other," I told him harshly, pulling the windblown hair out of my mouth. "When I asked for your help you were too busy philosophizing to make the effort, so now you can shove it! When I get out of here it'll be through my own efforts, just the way it always is."

I felt tempted to add something more, but there's a saying about words spoken in anger. Val tried to grab my arm to keep the discussion going, but I pulled away from him and strode off across the permal, passing the four from 2 without even looking at them. There was a brief flurry of greasy greetings behind me, showing that Val had been snared, but I didn't slow down until they were all a good distance behind me.

I was mad as hell at what Val had tried to pull, offering me help only because it had suddenly become his decision. I'd been about to assure him he would not be suffering in bed if that's what was bothering him, but somehow I hadn't been able to make the words come out. A stray wisp of dust swirled aimlessly around my feet as I walked, and I honestly didn't know whether I'd held the words back because I was afraid he'd agree - or whether I was afraid he'd disagree.

I'd nearly reached the port perimeter before I became aware of the fact that I was being watched. There were a lot of cadets walking around the port due to it being third session registration time, but the proctors stationed around the area had more to do that time than direct new arrivals. The proctors were mostly male and all were armed. Their eyes watched me carefully as I moved past them, and their hands rested casually on the butts of their stunners. No one had said a word to me or made a move in my direction, but that didn't matter. There was no doubt in my mind that all those beady eyes were there to make sure I went only where I was supposed to go.

Just to test the theory I detached myself from the group of cadets I'd been walking among and started back toward the grounded liner shuttles, but the first steps showed I wasn't suffering from paranoia. The proctors I'd passed earlier had been slowly closing the gap behind me, and five of them stood like a wall between me and the nearest shuttles. They'd stopped moving as soon as I'd turned back toward them, and one of them drew his stunner and gestured with his free hand. I wouldn't be bothered as long as I continued on in the direction they wanted me to go in; if I failed to cooperate, their stunners would do the thing for me.

I turned around again and headed back toward the port perimeter, not even bothering to match stares with the busies behind me. Chances were they didn't know who they were dealing with and would have been easy to take out, but I'd already made that decision on Xanadu Orbital Station. If any blood was spilled during that particular three month period, it would not be my doing.

The small town that was the Academy wasn't far from the port, but transportation had been provided for the new cadets. I boarded one of a fleet of ancient buses along with everyone else going to the Academy, and endured the short, bouncy trip in silence. The silence was on my part, though, since my seatmate began to demand

my life history as soon as she sat down next to me.

I ignored the flood of words and looked out the sealed window at my right arm, watching the proctors standing around the bus line as they watched me. Two proctors just happened to board the bus I sat in seconds before it moved off in line to follow the bus ahead of it. I blew a kiss to the proctors left behind, then stretched out in my seat and comfortably closed my eyes. My seatmate finally got the message then and moved to another seat, but it made no real difference. Purgatory doesn't change with company.

Ten minutes later the slow speed of the bus slowed even more, and I opened my eyes to see that we were already among the buildings of the Academy. The town was built on the basis of a square, with new buildings or necessary practice areas having been added one street behind the core square. We had entered on South Street, passing the mess hall, armory, officers' quarters, and general offices on the left. At the end of South Street we turned right onto West Street, passing the women's barracks on the left. Then we crossed North Street to pass the classrooms buildings on the right, and finally we stopped on West Street past the classrooms buildings at the registration center.

The only thing we hadn't passed were the men's barracks on East Street and the infirmary one street behind South Street, cleverly named White Sheet Lane. Beyond the registration center were the exercise fields and target areas, but we didn't get to see those either. The buses slowly disgorged their contents, and I sat and waited until the last of the kids on my bus had passed me before getting out of the seat and ambling after them. I'd gotten a good number of curious stares from my fellow students, but no one had tried to join me.

The proctors who had ridden the bus were standing right next to it as I disembarked. They didn't say anything, so neither did I. Instead, I continued my amble toward the wide double doors of the entry, and ended up getting there after the last of the new horde had pushed its way through. A P.A. system added to the din of a thousand voices by announcing, "New registrants! Go to the line with the first initial of your last name first. Repeat, the line with the first initial of your last name first. You will be told where to proceed from there." The message clicked on at regular intervals, but I could still see kids hurrying in all directions in confusion, the uniforms making them look like Pete and Repeat.

I'd paused in front of the doors to look around before walking in, but there was really no sense in putting things off. I started moving again, passed across the threshold, and was no more than two or three steps into the building when alarm bells went off all around me, bringing proctors out of their bored slouches and right to my side.

There had to be at least half a dozen of them, all male, and their expressions were nowhere near as curious as those on the faces of cadets who had noticed the goings-on and had stopped to watch. The proctors around me were serious to the

point of grim, but I didn't find out what was happening until a chief proctor pushed his way through the onlookers to join the circle of starers. He looked at me, glanced down at a flat photo in his hand, then nodded his head in satisfaction.

"I thought it might be you, Santee," he said in a well-practiced rasp. "I wondered why we were told to be on the lookout for you, and now I know."

Well, I was glad he knew. I stood in the middle of another curious crowd, but the only reason for it seemed to be the presence of a photograph in the chief's hand. The photo had probably been supplied by Ringer, but I had no memory of any time it might have been taken.

"How nice of you to come and greet me personally," I beamed at the chief just to be saying something. "Now I feel completely at home. Do I get a special tour of the place too?"

There were a few nervous chuckles from the watching cadets, but the chief didn't share their amusement. He stood as tall as I did, his brown hair cut short and bristly, his brown eyes seemingly perpetually outraged. He squared his thick shoulders in response to my comments, and the photo in his hand was forgotten.

"Don't get smart, Santee," he growled, looking me up and down in disapproval. "You're nobody who has to be greeted. The detectors say you're carrying a weapon and I want it."

A few gasps and murmurs came from our audience, underscoring my frown and the chief's glare. I hadn't known new cadets were being checked for weapons, and finding out the hard way hadn't done much for the peacefulness of my image. If I'd known earlier I could have stashed the knife, but at that point it was much too late. I stood there trying to think of some other way out of it, and the chief lost what little patience Mother Nature had given him.

"Come on, come on," he snapped, holding out a hand toward me. "Cough up whatever you've got and do it fast."

Anyone listening to these wire recordings may or may not understand why I felt reluctant to hand the knife over. So for the sake of unemotional reasons let me add that it wasn't part of an agent's training to casually lose track of whatever weapons he or she may have had. With this in view, I cocked my head to one side and temporized.

"Why, Chief!" I scolded with an appropriate amount of shocked modesty. "In front of all these people? We've hardly known each other long enough for that!"

The cadets came up with a lot of dirty laughs and even the watching proctors guffawed, but the chief turned out not to be the sort of man who appreciates being teased. His skin darkened in rage and the look in his brown eyes went flat, and the hand being held out toward me closed into a fist.

"You wiseass kids are all alike," he rasped, his voice low and uneven. "You walk in here acting as if you own the place, but you find out fast enough who does the pushing and who does the getting pushed. I know you're carrying a weapon, and you'll hand it over or have it taken away from you. And one more wisecrack and you'll start picking up demerits even before you're officially registered."

The deep silence around us was emphasized by the gleam in his eyes, a gleam that said he loved to do whatever came by in the way of pushing. The chief was a man who enjoyed lording it over a bunch of helpless kids, but I was hardly what might be called a helpless kid. I clearly had no choice about handing over the knife, so I decided to give the man exactly what he'd asked for.

I brought the knife out fast, causing the light to flash from its tempered blade, six inches of graceful, razor-edged mirroring plus hilt, deadly in the hand and balanced for throwing. The short-haired man in front of me paled and jumped back, scratching frantically for his sidearm, but before he could get it free of the holster I reversed the knife and held it out toward him hilt first.

"Now, how can I refuse such a gracious request," I drawled, keeping the mockery out of my eyes. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The man straightened out of the semi-crouch he'd adopted and wiped the palms of his hands off on his pants, all the while being very aware of the stares of the cadets and proctors around us. His eyes were furious over the way he'd reacted to me, and I noticed that none of the proctors was laughing at him even behind a hand. I would have bet a bundle that the lack of laughter stemmed from the sort of man the chief was. For that reason I wasn't very surprised when he pulled the knife out of my hand so viciously, he almost took off a couple of my fingers.

"Yeah, you can do something else for me," he snarled, wrapping his fist tightly around the knife hilt. "You can consider yourself on report! Now get over on the line you're supposed to be on! You've wasted enough of our time!"

I felt tempted to tell him my estimation of how much his time was worth, but I'd already had more of him than I'd wanted in the first place. I gave him an up-and-down tinged with disgust, then turned away to move through the proctors and cadets still around us. My arrival at the Academy had been just as successful as I'd known it would be.

It took only a minute or two to find the end of the S line, so I added myself to it then glanced idly around at the rest of the room. As large as it was it still seemed crowded with all the people who filled it, leaving very little to see aside from lines and lines of uniformed bodies, males in trousers, females in kilts. None of the lines moved very fast leaving us nothing to do but stand and wait, but not everyone there had the patience to do nothing. Some of them had been searching eagerly for a distraction, a fact I discovered when I looked away from the rest of the room to find myself semi-surrounded again.

A bunch of boys from the R and T lines to either side and the S line I stood on were clumped together, looking me over and grinning. They were mostly eighteen and nineteen, and not one of them could have been over twenty. I moved my attention away from them in total disinterest, but that didn't do anything in the way of discouraging them.

"And I thought it was going to be dull around here," one of them said, leading the others closer. "What's your name, pretty doll? I want to write it down so I don't forget it."

I looked back at them with no trace of enthusiasm, and briefly shook my head.

"Forget it before you ask it," I advised, glancing from one grinning face to the next. "I don't go in for cradle robbing."

I began to turn away from them to end the conversation, but the second of them moved directly in my way to show how attractive a grin he had.

"Is that a nice thing to say?" he asked with a laugh, obviously not believing my disinterest. "We're the best around here, and you're in luck because we're going to choose you."

I studied him in silence for a moment, then nodded my head to concede the point.

"Yeah, that's just about the way my luck's been running lately," I admitted, looking him up and down. "Why don't you do us both a favor and take off? You haven't got anything I'd be interested in."

His grin turned briefly to a leer, and then he and the first one laughed as a third joined them and leaned an arm on the second one's shoulder.

"Don't play hard to get, doll," the newcomer scolded, his grin as wide as the ones his friends showed. "We don't discourage that easily. Why make things tough when you can have all of us?"

The other two added their agreement and so did a few more of the same sort who had joined them, everyone having a grand old time - except for me. I just looked from one face to the next, feeling my annoyance grow, wondering how many demerits I'd pick up if I flattened two or three of them. They were working hard at trying to crowd me, all of them coming on strong enough to show what big men they were. Normally I might have laughed it off, but right now I was in no mood for that sort of nonsense.

A number of them were talking at once, the sort of banter to be expected from a bunch of young males on the hunt, but above it all I suddenly heard my name being called. I turned to look out toward the center of the room and saw someone familiar fighting his way through the crowds, someone I hadn't seen in much too long.

Jeff Kellner was a hyper-A like me, and we'd worked together often enough over the

years to make our relationship more than simply that of coworkers. We'd spilled a lot of blood together and lost a lot of blood together, and the sight of the grin on his face brought a similar one to mine.

Jeff usually had a grin on his face, his way of telling people to relax in his presence, I guess, and it always made his dark-skinned good looks even better. Women usually looked at him with interest and men usually looked with envy, and his broad-shouldered build would have made Ensign Harris a good deal happier than I'd made him. Jeff looked the part of a Special Agent, something of a handicap for him, but that day I would have been happy to see him even if he'd been as ugly as proverbial sin. I laughed softly as I moved away from the horde of now-frowning kiddies, and walked a short way away from the line to wait until he reached me.

"Diana! I was afraid I'd miss you," he said breathlessly as he came up. "I only heard that you were coming a couple of hours ago."

"It's great seeing you, Jeff," I answered with a smile, letting him take my hand. "But how did you know it was me? The last time we met I looked a small bit different."

"That's easy," he said, amusement dancing in his eyes. "I saw the new photo in your file in Pete's office. He was called out for a few minutes, so I looked around to keep from getting bored. All I can say is, wow! Whatever you paid for that, it was a bargain."

His gaze was moving over me in appreciation, but that was only because he didn't have any of the details. I would have enjoyed telling him just what sort of bargain I'd gotten, but knowing the Council and their secrecy fetish it would have been simpler just cutting my throat. Which would have accomplished the same end as divulging classified information without prior Council approval.

"I'm still paying for it," I told him with a sigh, "and I'm beginning to believe it was the worst mistake of my life."

"What is going on with you?" he asked, grin fading behind the itch of curiosity. "Why are you here decked out like a cadet? You look a lot younger now, but do you really have to go back to school? Pete came back before I had a chance to do more than see when you were due and what you now looked like, so fill me in."

I took my hand back as I shook my head. "Don't ask," I advised, the disgust I felt tingeing my tone. "You could end up being my roommate."

"That wouldn't be too hard to take," he said with the grin back, reaching over to tug at a strand of my hair.

"As a cadet?" I countered, meeting his eyes to show it was no joke. Once the message really got through, his fingers opened and he carefully withdrew his hand.

"Now that you mention it, I find my interest fading," he murmured, and then he smiled. "I wish I had more time, but I was handed an assignment a little while ago

and I'll have to get cracking soon. Anything I can tell you about what's doing around here? I was handling a course over at 2, so I'm not too far out of it."

"There's one thing you can tell me about," I said, lowering my voice a little. "After the last week or so, I'm just in the mood for it. How's the hunting?"

"You'll never change no matter what you look like," he returned with a laugh, shaking his head. "And the hunting's better than ever. The locals are really pushing hard, and we've been getting a lot of action. We lost two recruits last week, but bagged a dozen locals in return. Pete almost flipped out when he heard and tried to close up every exit, but we both know that that's impossible. But how do you expect to go hunting from here?"

"I don't know," I grumbled, looking around at all the uniformed innocence. "But I'll find a way. All work and no play, you know."

He laughed and started to say something, but we were interrupted by my group of admirers who had been hovering around the edges of our conversation, waiting to break in. They hadn't been happy about my walking away from them, and they were anxious to make their displeasure known. They were being led by the one who had spoken to me first, and he and the other kids came close enough to give Jeff the scowl of unfair competition.

"Talk about cradle robbing!" their leader complained to me, covered head to toe with indignation as he jerked a thumb at Jeff. "That guy's old enough to be your father! He'd probably fag out trying to keep up with you!"

Jeff's amusement disappeared abruptly, and there was no way I could keep from breaking up. I threw my head back and laughed in delight, causing the kids who were watching me to frown in confusion. Jeff was not much older than I am normally, but at that point he probably felt older than Methuselah. He nodded at my laughter, showing he knew what had set me off, then folded his arms across his chest.

"Very funny," he commented, his tone dry as he watched me struggling to control myself. "Anything to entertain the troops."

I put my hand to his folded arms and shook my head, trying to get him to admit that it was funny, and the positioning of my hand seemed to bring one of the boys' attention to Jeff's I.D. The boy stepped forward past the spokesman of the group to peer closer, paled slightly, then hastily nudged the others while pointing to the I.D. They stared at the words "Special Agent" under Jeff's name, and the facial pallor spread to include all of them - especially the one who had put his foot in it by opening his mouth.

"Hey, man, I didn't mean anything!" the boy quavered, his stricken gaze on Jeff's face. He seemed to want to turn and run, but was too scared to move a muscle. "If you want her, she's all yours! I mean, I wouldn't try to move in on you! I just didn't know!"

My amusement was faintly revived at that, but Jeff realized he'd made a mistake pretending to be angry at what the boy had said. He glanced at me as he unfolded his arms, and then put a calming hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Relax," Jeff soothed him, showing no amusement of his own. "She and I are just friends, but you can do me a favor if you will. I have to leave now, so I'd like you guys to keep an eye on her for me. This can be a rough place, and I wouldn't want her to get hurt."

The boy under Jeff's hand immediately swelled with pride, his fear totally forgotten in the face of having been asked to do a favor for a Special Agent. The others grew their grins back, stirring briefly in relief before moving even closer, and I was not only back to where I'd been with them, but was now in an even worse position. All thanks to my good pal Jeff. I moved my eyes to his grinning face, and sent him a look he'd have no trouble interpreting.

"Thanks, friend," I murmured, brushing at his shirt near the I.D. badge. "Next time you can watch your own back."

Jeff laughed at my expression, put his hand to my face to stroke it gently with the back of his fingers, then he turned and moved off into the crowd. He waved once before he was swallowed up, but then it was as if he'd never even been there. I stood there a minute longer, watching the place he'd disappeared, silently wishing him survival in whatever he was about to begin.

It doesn't pay to dwell on things like that very long, so I sighed in disappointment that I wasn't going with him, then turned and reclaimed my place on the S line. Unfortunately, though, my newly appointed bodyguards came trailing along after me. The boys were talking excitedly among themselves, high over having been as close as they'd stood to a real Special Agent. That made me sigh again, since I suddenly realized how monastic the next few months were going to be for me. I have never been attracted to little boys no matter how good-looking they are, and the attitude extends to grown up little boys as well.

I was able to move forward a pace or two, wrapped in my own thoughts, before the blessed silence was once again rent asunder. The spokesman of my bodyguards was still flying high, and he came up behind me to put a possessive arm around my shoulders.

"Man, what a guy!" he enthused, obviously having become Jeff's newest and greatest fan. Then he sent me a questioning look, and made a circling motion with his free hand. "But there was something I didn't understand. What did you mean when you said that next time he'd have to watch his own back?"

I hadn't known the boy had heard my remark to Jeff, but it really didn't matter much. I reached my hand back and took his arm just above the elbow at the pressure point, removed it gently from my shoulders, then patted his gasp quiet.

"Jeff has a peculiar habit," I explained in a reasonable, sincere way, watching the hotshot rub at his arm where I'd squeezed so gently. "Every once in a while he gets the urge to have his back watched, just to see if the muscles are moving properly. If he doesn't have anyone to help him he has to use two mirrors, and that gets to be complicated."

"Oh," the boy commented, giving me a very strange look. I felt sure he had no idea what to make of my explanation, but he wasn't about to argue the point. I turned back to face the front of the line and moved up with it slowly, wondering just how many more things I'd find amusing around there. When I got to the head of the line, I found out.

"Santee, Diana," the female clerk behind the counter repeated. "We've been given a special schedule for you. Just a minute and I'll get it."

She ducked out of sight for a minute but was back almost immediately, a formal schedule in her hand that had my name on it. I glanced at it with very little interest, did a doubletake, then raised unbelieving eyes to the woman who still stood behind the counter.

"Don't blame me," she shrugged, not at all discomfited by my expression. "It came straight from the Commandant's office. I never saw a schedule that crowded before, but there must be a reason for it."

There sure was - Ringer and the Council! Tanderon was a planet that fit in perfectly with standard Federation time units. It had a sixty minute hour, twenty-four hour day, and a seven day week. My new schedule called for up at 0500 for an hour of calisthenics, twenty minutes to shower and dress, and forty minutes for morning parade and breakfast. My first class started at 0700, when most everyone else had an hour free for personal chores.

Classes lasted till 1200 hours, then forty minutes for lunch, except thirty for me because extra duty had been penciled in from 1230 hours till 1300, then back to classes until 1700 hours. I only had twenty minutes again to change for evening parade, because extra study had been handed me from 1700 hours until 1740. Dinner promptly at 1830, and punishment details set for an hour and a half, beginning at 1910, when everybody else would be getting tutoring and doing assignments or just relaxing. Another whole twenty minutes to myself before lights out at 2100. I started to crumple the schedule in both hands, and the clerk suddenly got over her nonconcern.

"Don't do that!" she yelled, nearly shattered to see a file card about to be destroyed. "They have to be able to read it when you go for your class cards! If it's messed up you'll get a whole slew of demerits!"

"Wouldn't that be a shame," I muttered, seeing the relief on her face when she thought her threat had worked. I stopped crumpling the card, but knew damned well it would never work out. It wouldn't take half the time it did before, and I'd be

clawing at the walls to get out. I was already feeling suffocated, so I moved out of the line toward where class cards and billet assignments were handed out and tried to loosen my blouse tie.

"Uniform in disarray," a passing proctor noted, flicking a finger under my tie. "Two demerits." He got my name from the schedule I held and moved off, writing in his little notebook. I watched his back disappear into the crowd, remembering how I'd hated those notebooks when I'd been here the first time. I moved on to the place where I was supposed to be and got on line again, the crowd noises surrounding everything melting into a nerve-throbbing roar.

"Diana," a voice broke in from behind me, grating through the crowd noise. "I like that. Diana."

I turned part way around to see that same boy standing behind me, his eyes on my schedule. He was about two inches taller than me, with well developed shoulders and chest, the slim waist of an athlete, straight brown hair, and moist brown eyes. His face was young and handsome, usually seemed to be wearing a practiced grin that told everyone he was God's gift to womankind, and his presence went beyond unbearable annoyance. Being pestered like that was the last thing I needed right now, but he didn't even notice the look on my face.

"Let's see what classes you've got," he pushed after giving my name his approval. "Maybe we're together in some of them."

He also seemed to have a bad memory, because his arm went around my shoulders again as he reached for my schedule. If he hadn't touched me I might have been able to control myself, but as it was he didn't stand a chance. I was mad as hell at everything around me, and his normal way of cozying up to girls put the finishing touches on my temper.

I showed my mood by driving an elbow back into his middle before his fingers closed on my schedule. Then I quickly stepped away from him as he choked and crumpled to the floor while fighting to get the air back into his lungs. I nearly moved forward again to finish him off, but stopped myself before things went too far. He was only a small, faint symbol of everything that was closing me in, and he wasn't the one I really wanted to strike back at.

Aside from a gasp brown-eyes hadn't made a sound when I hit him, but that didn't mean there were no sounds around us. There were too many people in the area for everyone to have missed the goings on, and aside from the shocked noises of innocent bystanders, we also managed to draw the shouts of roving proctors. That last group began to close in at a run, ready and willing to do the job they'd been hired for.

I knew just how things would be going for me by then, so it was no surprise when I saw the hurrying proctors being led by the same chief proctor who had greeted me so warmly at the door. The familiar narrow-eyed proctor circle closed in all around,

and the chief planted himself two feet in front of my face.

"I knew it would be you, Santee," he said in cold satisfaction, his fists on his hips. "They told me you were a troublemaker, and you'll be picking up another five demerits for this. You two stick with her until she gets to her quarters. You and you take that kid to the infirmary."

Two of the men he'd pointed to helped brown-eyes to his feet and into the crowds, and the other two took up positions right near me. The chief had begun to look me over as if what I'd done had been a personal insult to him, and then he spoke to his men without moving his gaze to them.

"You two stay right on top of her," he ordered, trying to stare me down with flat brownness. "If she so much as looks the wrong way, I want you to paper her with demerits. She'll start learning discipline, or I'll find a new job!"

Even if I'd been in a good mood, I wouldn't have stood for being talked to like that. As it was, there was nothing to convince me to hold back the words.

"I suggest swineherd for that new job," I told him, meeting his eyes. "It fits your personality."

"Cute," he said with a rage he could barely contain. "Three more. Let's see how much cuter you can be."

"I can be downright adorable," I answered, measuring his average but well muscled body with my eyes. "Especially in the dirty fighting gym. Want to ask me for a date?"

"And another three," he choked out, resenting the appraisal all the way to his short-cut hairline. "Any more? I've got plenty of time and strict orders not to give you an inch! This is one time I'm going to love obeying orders."

"What's happening, Langley?" a deep voice said before I could add my own fuel to the fire, and we both turned to see Freddy Drummond coming up. I should say, Major Frederick Drummond III, Colonel Rodriguez's aide. The colonel, as Commandant, handed out the orders and Freddy was around to see to it that those orders were carried out. Freddy and I knew each other pretty well, but I was in no mood to give him the big hello.

"Relax, Langley, reinforcements have arrived," I said, turning back to the still burning chief. "And just when we were getting on so well."

"Cut it out, Diana!" Freddy said sharply as he reached us, then he moderated his tone a bit as he turned to my adversary. "You can go now, Langley, and so can your men. I'll take over and keep the lady company."

"Lady," Langley growled, his eyes not moving from me. "Major, this is a bad one. Give her to me for just a week, and she'll never be a problem again."

"One of us wouldn't be," I murmured, but before Langley could pick up on the comment Freddy grabbed my arm and pulled me off to one side.

"What the hell are you trying to do, make this your permanent home?" he demanded in a hiss. "The colonel has orders from the Council to keep a strict count on the demerits you pick up, and add time on for every group of fifty. How far on the way are you, do you have any idea?"

"No," I growled, glaring around at the groups of cadets who had gathered to watch the excitement. They were being sent on their way by the proctors by that time, but I was still spoiling for a fight. "What's the matter, Freddy, didn't Pete think Langley could handle it? Did he send you here to baby-sit with me, or to protect everyone else?"

"Langley doesn't know anything about you," Freddy answered, moving me around hard by one arm so that I faced him. "He was just told to watch out for you and to keep the trouble down to a minimum. Pete hasn't liked this idea from the start, and he got nervous. From the way things looked when I got here, he has every right to be nervous. I've never seen you so much on the prod. Take it easy, will you?"

"How the hell can I take it easy?" I demanded, pulling my arm out of his grip. "Did you see that schedule I've got, or did the little fairies arrange for it? And every time I turn around there's another proctor there, handing me demerits! For two kicks you could take this lousy job and everything that goes with it, and drop it into the nearest collapsar!"

Freddy just stared at me, not saying a word, and slowly, slowly, the tension eased off to the point where I could think again. After a minute I was able to put a hand to the back of my neck and rub at the place where the muscles were all bunched up.

"They say that when you start to get old, the first thing that goes is the legs," I told Freddy, my gaze on his brightly polished shoes. "With me it's the sense of humor. If you look at it right, this whole thing is very funny. Maybe I ought to put in for retirement."

Freddy used one finger to lift my face up to his again, and then he showed me a wry grin.

"You'd better hang onto your sense of humor, because you're going to need it," he advised, sympathy clear in his expression. "Every part of this program was laid out for us, and we've been ordered not to change it. What did you do to make the Council so mad?"

"I spit on the sidewalk," I answered, knowing I sounded tired. "It wouldn't have been so bad, I guess, but it was Sanitation Week... Look, Freddy, isn't there anything you can do? They've handed me every blah course in the curriculum without five spare minutes to breathe. The first time I walk into a classroom I'll go straight through the roof."

"You'd better not," Freddy warned, the sympathy strengthening. "If you do you won't find touching things with your left hand very pleasant. Demerits handed out on registration day are only for extra duty. You know what happens once you get into a classroom."

"Don't remind me," I said with a groan, seriously wondering how long my no-blood-spilled oath would stand unbroken. "Is there somewhere we can go for a drink? I'm so desperate I'm even willing to buy."

"You're a cadet, Diana," he replied gently, the sympathy changing to pity. "No drinking allowed, remember?"

I must have looked as miserable as I felt, because he put his arm around my shoulders.

"Come on, cheer up," he urged with a gentle squeeze. "As soon as we finish getting you registered, I'll take you over to Pete's office. Maybe we can pry a drink out of him."

"Sure," I said with a nod. "And maybe Ringer will quit to become a dancing girl. Let's get this over with. I feel like the guest of honor at a funeral."

I walked over and picked up my schedule from where it had landed on the floor, and then got back on line. Freddy stood on line next to me, telling me all sorts of improbable stories about people we both knew. Freddy was almost as tall and well muscled as Val, and was just as good looking in his own way. Val was dark with steel in his eyes, and Freddy was fair with a twinkle in his. He made his uniform look like something, and he was smart, and brave, and knew how to get things done. But he was also missing that little something extra that would have made him agent caliber...

I eventually reached the front of the line, and was able to pick up my class cards, billet assignment, bedding, and additional clothing allotment. Once I had everything, Freddy and I left the registration center. We walked back up West Street past the classrooms building, then found which of the women's barracks was mine.

My room turned out to be on the ground floor, and when I walked into the twelve by fifteen spaciousness the bunk arrangement told me I had two roommates. Happily no one was in sight right now, so I dumped everything on the last unclaimed bunk and went back out to join Freddy. Men weren't allowed in the women's barracks, not even men who were officers, and Freddy must have been worrying about whether or not I'd show up again.

I can't say I wasn't tempted to do a fast fade, but I'm not in the habit of setting up friends to have their lives ruined. At the moment he was in charge of me, and if I disappeared into the wild blue it would be his neck that got chopped. Not by Pete, of course, but directly by the Council. I found Freddy leaning against the red brick of the building, dragging slowly on a cigarette, and he almost jumped when I walked

out.

"That was fast," he said, looking at me in surprise. "Have you been taking lessons in speed bunk making?"

"I'll do it later when I get back," I told him, starting off up the street. "I'm not in the mood right now."

A hand reached out and grabbed me by the collar, and then I was back to standing in front of him.

"You'd better get in the mood, cadet!" he ordered after turning me loose. "You pick up extra demerits for an unmade bunk, and Pete'll skin me alive. Now, march!"

His bearing was pure military commander, used to giving orders and even more used to being obeyed - but somehow it came off differently than Val's manner. If it had been Val standing there in front of me like that I wouldn't have budged an inch, but with Freddy it didn't seem to make much of a difference.

So I shrugged and held up my hands in surrender, then went back inside and made the bunk before putting away the rest of the junk I'd been given. For some reason looking at Freddy brought thoughts of Val to mind, but I let them slip away without even considering them. Val was a subject I'd have to give more thought to than I had time for right now.

Freddy had given up on building leaning when I came out the second time, and I was willing to bet it was because of the increased foot traffic going by on the street. Officers have an image to maintain, and the female cadets moving by on the street might have laughed to see him lounging around against a building like an ordinary mortal.

He now stood a short distance away from the building entrance, his body at parade rest, his attention on the male cadets who were policing up the big grassed area that composed the central square of the Academy. When I came up beside him, he turned his head with a smile and asked, "All set now?"

"Yes, sir, Major, sir," I answered promptly, coming up with the sort of salute that was never used at the Academy. "All shipshape and straight as regulations."

"Let's go then," he said, taking my arm as he gave me an uninterpretable glance. "And you'd better watch that wisecracking. Pete was chewing his paperweight when I left, and he probably has a report on you by now. If you even breathe funny he'll hand you your head."

"Still as sweet and quiet as ever, hm?" I asked as we walked along the street. "When's he going to retire?"

"Are you kidding?" Freddy responded with a snort. "He's got more left than both of us put together, and when he goes this whole project goes with him. I can't see

anybody else running it."

"I know what you mean," I agreed with a faint smile of memory. "I think he was here before the buildings went up."

He nodded his agreement, and we continued along West Street to its end, turned left onto South Street, and walked the five hundred feet that brought us to the small, two story building that was the Commandant's office. Opening the door showed a sergeant, who looked up from the reception desk he sat at.

"It's a good thing you're back, Major," he said quietly with a glance toward the closed door in the wall behind him. "In another five minutes he would have sent a squad out after you. I think you'd better arm yourself before you go in there."

Freddy and I exchanged looks. Obviously Pete had heard about my victorious homecoming, and was waiting to congratulate me.

"You go first," Freddy said to me, stepping back to close the door behind us. "I'm too young to die."

"That's the gallant officer and gentleman we all know and love," I answered with a nod. "Women and children first always has been a typical male reaction."

Suddenly the door to the inner office flew open, and Colonel Peter Rodriguez, Commandant of the Federation training facilities came striding through. He was a tall, straight man, completely gray-haired, with the coldest green eyes I'd ever seen anywhere. It was rumored that he ran fifty miles every morning then killed a dragon and ate it for breakfast, but that was silly. Nobody can run fifty miles in the morning. The sergeant and Freddy jumped to attention as if they'd been quick-starched, but he didn't even glance at them. He only had eyes for me, as they say, and those eyes were freezing.

"So!" he breathed, stalking toward me. "You're finally here! I can't tell you how much I've been looking forward to it!"

"Now, Pete - " I began, but he exploded in my face.

"That's 'Colonel Rodriguez' to you!" he roared from not two feet away, making the walls shake. "And you'd better learn to snap to attention when you see me, or you'll be the sorriest cadet that ever came through here! Now, let's see how tight you can hold it!"

I sighed and got to attention. Pete had never been easy to handle, but right now he was impossible.

"The Council dumps this idiocy on me, and that's not bad enough!" he shouted, hanging over me like the promise of doom. "Then you arrive, and what do you do? You walk into my facilities armed, you threaten a chief proctor with a knife, you assault another cadet, and mount up thirteen demerits even before you're completely

registered! And that doesn't even count the fact that you're on report for insubordination! Were you trying to set some sort of record, or were you just afraid I wouldn't notice you? What do you think I'm running here, an amusement park? I don't care how good an agent you are! As long as you're at these facilities you'll behave in the proper cadet manner or I'll know the reason why!"

He stood with his fists on his hips, outrage clear in the green of his eyes, uniform neat and precise in spite of all the shouting and raving he'd done. I think he would have gone on for another hour if the private 'phone in his office hadn't chimed. He gave me another glare to keep his points set in place, then turned around and stomped back to the other room to answer his call.

"Why in the name of reason did you attack a chief proctor with a knife?" Freddy whispered with a stricken look as soon as Pete's attention was elsewhere.

"Because he reminded me of you," I came back, folding my arms as I turned my head to look him over. "Thanks for all that help back there. I hope you didn't strain yourself."

I turned away from him again as he went red at my comment, then saw that the sergeant was staring at us with undisguised confusion. It was highly unlikely that he knew what was going on, and he was just about to say something when we all heard Pete slam off the switch on the 'phone. Considering how silent that action usually is my two brave companions were starched again, but Pete didn't come back out.

"In here, Santee, and on the double!" he roared instead. I glanced at Freddy, then went on in to Pete's office.

"Close the door," Pete said in a more normal tone, those eyes slightly less frigid. "We've got some things to talk about."

I closed the door and walked over to his desk, ignoring his guest chair after glancing at it.

"Smart," he said with a nod toward the chair, a gleam now in his eye. "Maybe there's some hope for you after all. But nobody said 'at ease,' so tighten it up."

I shifted back to full attention, and he leaned back in his chair to look at me calculatingly.

"This is the biggest screwball mess I've ever seen," he said, his voice having turned colder again. "I always knew you were a hotshot, Santee, but you must have really come up with a good one to get this handed to you. What's it all about?"

"Sir, I'm not at liberty to discuss it," I answered with my eyes straight ahead.

"Bullshit!" he countered with a snort. "Would you be at liberty to discuss it if I added some extra duty to your schedule?"

"Sir, you'll have to take it up with the Council," I maintained, refusing to budge an inch. "I have no intentions of getting myself put out an airlock without a pressure suit."

He considered that for a minute. "That hush-hush, hm?" he mused, rubbing at his face with one hand as he made up his mind. "Okay, we'll leave the subject for now. But the question still remains: what am I going to do with you? You're almost a third of the way to the first fifty demerit mark, and when you hit that I'm supposed to cordially extend your visit."

"The Colonel can always have his proctors turn their backs for a few minutes," I suggested without losing the neutral tone I used. "Then both our problems will be solved. Sir."

He clasped his hands on the desk, and leaned forward.

"No way, Santee," he growled. "If I catch you even thinking about the shuttle ports I'll clap you in leg irons! Ringer told me all about what you tried to pull on him on Xanadu O.S." Suddenly, he grinned an evil grin. "He also told me what you got for it. I liked the idea so much I'm thinking about putting it in here."

"The Colonel had better not be thinking of trying it himself," I said coldly, bringing my eyes over to meet his. "If memory serves, the last time we had a go-around in the gym the Colonel picked up a few bruises he wasn't expecting. Sir."

The reminder was enough to take care of the amusement he'd been showing, but Pete wasn't the sort of man to feel resentment over a thing like that. He leaned back in the chair again, ran an annoyed hand through his short gray hair, then fixed me with a baleful stare.

"You've put me on a hell of a spot, Diana," he complained as if finally remembering that we knew each other. "How am I supposed to turn you loose among all those innocent kids? You look younger than most of them, and there's bound to be trouble even if you don't start it."

"Don't look to me for the answers, Pete," I returned with a shrug, relaxing a little now that I was no longer "Santee." "Coming here wasn't my idea."

"Well, it wasn't mine either, but I think I'm going to take advantage of the situation to solve another problem I have," he answered with an odd distraction. "How many times have you taught that infiltration course at 2?"

Infiltration was a course usually taught only by Special Agents, but I didn't see the connection.

"Four or five times," I said, suddenly not liking the way he'd begun to look at me. "Why do you ask?"

"I ask because Jeff Kelner has been teaching it, but they just pulled him out on me,"

he muttered, now checking through his desk drawers for something. "I'm about to assign you an extra little chore, but don't worry about it. It's only ten hours a week."

I felt my jaw hit the floor. "Ten -! Pete, you've got to be kidding! I don't have ten minutes a day!"

"That's okay," he told me with a grin and a glance. "I'm rescheduling the class for 2100. You'll get there in plenty of time. Freddy can take you over every night in a hopper. It's only a fifteen minute flight."

"When am I supposed to sleep?" I asked in annoyance, leaning one hand on his desk. "I'll be running from morning till night as it is."

"A rough, tough hyper-A like you doesn't need any sleep," he said, the gleam back in his stare. "Maybe if you can't keep your eyes open you won't be so quick with a knife or your hands."

"That wasn't any part of this deal," I pointed out, putting my free hand flat on the piece of paper he'd set in front of him. "What if I refuse?"

"You refuse, and I'll start to count demerits," he grated, lifting my hand to free the paper. "As long as you keep me happy, I'll forget any arithmetic I know. And if I know you, I'd need a computer to keep track."

"How about classroom demerits?" I asked after I straightened and thought about it for a moment. "What are you willing to do about those?"

"Absolutely nothing," he said, shaking his head. "In the classroom you're on your own. Try being a normal cadet."

"Tried it once, didn't like it," I quoted, matching his headshake. "This is not going to work out."

"It had better work out," he disagreed with a growl. "I can't reach the Council with my displeasure, but I sure as hell can reach you."

Good old Pete. He'd started to give me those eyes full blast again, just to be sure I got the point. Somehow, I had no trouble getting it.

"All right, have it your own way," I gruded. "I teach the course and you close your eyes."

"I usually do have it my way," he said, a look of satisfaction finally spreading across his face. "Don't forget it."

"I plan to forget everything about this place as soon as possible," I told him, turning slightly to eye the plain, light gold walls of his office. The only things hanging on them were his official appointment as Commandant, and a copy of the Council order that had established the Academy. If anyone ever wondered what was important to Pete, a look at his office walls would tell them.

"Can I get back to my quarters now?" I added once I'd had my look around. "I've been standing in lines for hours, and you haven't helped any."

"Not so fast," he said, and I looked back at him to see him rubbing his palms on the ends of his chair arms while staring at me. "There's still the matter of thirteen demerits and somebody's name on report."

"Come on, Pete, give it a rest!" I protested, noticing in annoyance that that gleam was back. "You've had your fun, so let it go, will you?"

"I'm not letting anything go, cadet," he growled, those eyes of his totally uncompromising. "I'd need power tools to cram anything else into your schedule, but you've got some free time now. You look so much like a school kid, I've thought of the perfect punishment for you. Here's some paper and a pen, and you can use Freddy's desk over there. You'll write 'I will be a good little girl' 5,000 times, and don't plan on taking all afternoon. I intend to see you at evening parade."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of," I stated, wondering why he didn't look as if he were joking. "I'm not a school kid no matter what I look like, and I won't do it."

He moved his hand deliberately to the 'phone, and put one finger right against the switch.

"You'll do it, or I'll put Ringer's idea to work right now," he growled, his expression leaving no doubt about how serious he was. "Even if I can't manage it myself, I've got plenty of help to call on. I don't run this place for nothing."

His green-ice eyes told me he meant every word. Silently chanting the litany of "No spilled blood, no spilled blood," I leaned forward to grab the paper and pen, then went over to Freddy's desk. But on the way, just to show how I felt about things, I kicked the guest chair hard enough to send it skidding toward the wall.

"Make that six thousand times," he called after me. "Cadets have no business throwing temper tantrums."

"If you want to see a temper tantrum, wait until the next time I get you into the gym," I snarled, glaring at him as I sat down. "My temper won't be the only thing that's thrown."

"Funny, but my schedule's full up for the next three months," he said with a grin, having picked up a letter opener to toy with. "Start writing."

I started writing. It took four and a half hours.

When I finally got out of Pete's office, I had to keep flexing my fingers to get rid of the writer's cramp. Freddy was waiting in the outer office with the sergeant when I walked out and quietly closed the door behind me. I would have slammed the door, but I know Pete. He was just waiting for the slam to hit me with another thousand sentences, but I wasn't about to give him any more souvenirs. He'd taken the finished pages I'd handed him, carefully put them in his desk, and grinningly refused to tell me what he planned to do with them.

Freddy had been in once or twice during those four and a half hours, had glanced over to see what I was writing, and had grinned his way out again. After a while, I knew that Freddy must have passed the word on to the sergeant. When that same sergeant came in once with papers for Pete, the man was clearly holding back amusement and pointedly kept himself from looking at me.

"I'm glad you two got so much amusement out of that," I said, watching them fight to keep neutral expressions. "You should have been with me on my last assignment. I got two weeks in the hospital out of it, and you would have positively roared."

"Come on, Diana, it was funny and you know it," Freddy said with a grin after finally losing the battle. "How long has it been since the last time you had to do that?"

"I never did it, Freddy, because I never got caught," I explained, then rubbed at my eyes. "But things haven't been going too well for me lately... I'm getting out of here before Attila the Hun thinks up any more entertaining exercises. I'll see you around."

"Wait a minute and I'll take you back to your quarters," Freddy said, stopping me by catching my arm. "You might not remember the way."

I stopped and gave him the most sarcastic look I was capable of, and at least he had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Sorry," he apologized with a wry grin. "I guess I forgot that infiltration techniques include automatic memorizing of routes covered."

"Yes, they certainly do," I agreed. "And it looks like it's a good thing you'll be auditing my course at 2 every night. I think you need a refresher. Pete said to tell you we start tomorrow night."

"Fine," he acknowledged with a nod. "I'll pick you up at your quarters at 2045 hours, right after - ah - "

He knew damned well I was scheduled for punishment before the meeting time he'd specified, but the pink in his cheeks showed he thought it impolitic to mention it.

"You've got it," I told him sweetly, patting his cheek. "2045, right after ah. Don't be late or I'll leave without you."

I unhooked my arm from his grip and left the building, making sure to close the door firmly behind me. Normally I wouldn't have minded Freddy's company, but I had a

couple of stops to make on the way back to quarters. It had been a while since I'd last visited the Academy, but the locations of my stops weren't difficult to remember.

One was just a short way up South Street and the other was just beyond South Street at the far end of White Sheet Lane, not too far from the women's barracks. Both spots were guarded by human beings rather than electronic equipment, and if I hadn't been there on private business of my own I probably would have called Pete and described their sloppiness. No human being, man or woman, can be alert all the time, but guards walking posts are usually expected to make some effort toward that end. One day it wouldn't be me trying to get past them, and that somebody else might not mind leaving no living witnesses behind.

I stood in a quiet and shadowed corner for a moment, toying with the idea of reporting them to save their lives at a future time, then shrugged and left them to their destiny. None of the guards was a child and they all knew better, and none of them would be grateful for being called on their sloppiness. I had enough problems of my own just now, and slipping away quietly was one way of not adding to them.

When I got back to my quarters, I discovered that my two roommates were back. They looked up from their bunks when I opened the door, and gave me the sort of inspection only one woman can give another. They were both about eighteen, both had dark hair, but there the similarity ended.

One was plain looking - the shy, mousy type - and she smiled when I looked at her. I returned the smile, then looked at the other one again. This second girl was a real beauty with clear, translucent skin, peaches and cream complexion, and deep, limpid eyes. She lay stretched out in long comfort on her bunk, and her expression said she hated me at first sight. This was the sort of trouble Pete had been thinking about when he'd said I didn't even have to start it. With some people, you start trouble just by being there.

"Hi," the mousy one greeted me, shifting around on her bunk. "You must be the third of our party. I'm Elaine Reynolds, and this is Linda Simmons. What's your name?"

"Diana Santee," I told her with a nod. "Nice to meet you, Elaine, Linda. Care for a smoke?"

I held up the carton of cigarettes I'd filched from the stores warehouse on White Sheet Lane. I could have tried to buy them from the PX, of course, but I didn't feel like taking any chances. If one more person told me I was too young to do something, I'd scream. Or worse.

"Where did you get that?" Linda demanded with instant suspicion, turning her head a little to see the carton better. "I didn't think cadets were allowed to smoke."

"Regulations say that cadets can smoke in their quarters when they're off duty," I

explained to her while closing the door behind me, then stepping farther into the room. "The PX carries tons of these cartons. Anybody interested?"

"I am," Elaine said, sitting up in a cross-legged position. "I've been dying all day, but I was afraid to ask. Are you sure it's all right?"

"Positive," I assured her. "Knowing what is and isn't contra regs is my hobby. Normally this time of day would not be off duty, but today it is."

"You might as well give me a pack too," Linda said sourly, not moving from the languorous position she'd taken. "If you two are going to smoke, I'm not going to just lie here and watch you."

I tossed them each a pack, then lit up myself and stretched out on my own bunk. I was beat from running around all day and starving from having missed lunch, but I'd have to get dressed for parade in a little more than an hour. What a life! And some people made careers out of it!

A minute later there was a knock at the door, followed immediately by the entrance of two female proctors. The two newcomers came over to my bunk and stood staring down at me as if I were some interesting specimen they'd finally netted, their dress gold-and-blacks emphasizing the official aspect of their visit. The first one was a tall, surprisingly pretty blond with brown eyes, and the second was a brunette with a perennially pinched expression. Needless to say, the sight of them did not fill my heart with feelings of sisterhood.

"I see you finally made it, Santee," the first one said, leaning a hand on the wall. "We've been looking for you on Chief Langley's orders, since you should have been here hours ago. You're going to pick up more demerits for this than you can carry."

"You'd better check on it first," I said without moving. "I wasn't out just wandering around."

The two proctors glanced at each other. "Just where do you claim you were?" the second one with the pinched expression asked.

"I was holding hands with the colonel," I told her, staring her straight in the eye. "If you don't believe me, ask Major Drummond. He was there too."

They looked at each other again, then the second one backed off and went out.

"You'd better not be lying about this, Santee," the first one said, measuring me with her eyes. "If you are, you won't crawl out from under for a month."

I took a drag on the cigarette and didn't bother to answer her. It was too much trouble to think up something nasty enough, and in about five minutes the second one was back with her report.

"She was there, all right," she told the first proctor. "Special punishment, over four

hours worth."

"You've got funny ideas about holding hands," the blond proctor said with a grin as she looked down at me. "Now that the colonel knows about you, we'll see how long you stay comical."

They both gave me a last, brief inspection then turned and went out, closing the door behind them.

"Are you in trouble, Diana?" Elaine asked anxiously, staring at me with large, concerned eyes. "I don't know how you can treat those proctors that way. I shiver every time I see one."

"You've had punishment already?" Linda asked in delight, sitting up to hug her knees. "I didn't think anyone could do anything this soon."

"I have special talents," I said dryly to Linda. "If you like, I'll give you lessons. And no, Elaine, I'm not in trouble."

Not yet, anyway, I said to myself.

When the time came to line up for parade, my two roommates and I made our way outside amid the flurry of excited female conversation coming from the other girls tenanted our barracks building. We were all herded out front to be shown the proper way to line up, every girl in our building being a newcomer and badly in need of instruction.

The dust blew around us as we lined up according to height, half the girls wondering how the proctors kept from coughing, the other half too busy coughing themselves to care. The proctors wandering among us were all female, doing the job there weren't enough noncoms to do, the name tags they wore helping to separate them into individuals.

Our "Company" was small compared to the new men's group across the square, but that didn't mean the proctors had less to do. Most of the girls seemed to be having trouble telling their right foot from their left. When the line we'd made was formed into a square, the distance between one standee and the next was invariably either more or less than one arm's length.

It wasn't that the girls in the group were simpleminded or incapable of following instructions. The problem was that they were trying too hard and were flinching at the barked orders from the proctors, finding themselves completely unused to being herded and ordered around. Treating cadets like clumsy, half-witted imbeciles was part of a proctor's job, but I'd never been too crazy about proctors to begin with. Being jumped on along with everyone else didn't help to change my mind.

I ended up in the last row of the square, with Elaine two rows in front of me and Linda three rows in front of her. I'd decided to stand in one spot and mind my own business, or at least to look as if that was what I was doing. If I knew Pete he was

having me watched, trying to anticipate the time I'd make my move. I wasn't about to sit around and get dumped on for the next three months, not even to save Pete some embarrassment, and he had to know it.

The Council was hardly likely to be pleased if I turned up missing, and Pete wasn't anxious to face their anger in that all too possible event. When it came to access to the shuttle ports he'd have me covered like an atmosphere covers a planet, constantly and with no gaps in the coverage. I looked around as if admiring the scenery, ignoring the wind and the way it blew my hair around, trying to spot at least one corner of the coverage. The more subtle they tried to keep it, the better my chances would be to break through.

"This isn't the time for sightseeing!" a voice snapped, bringing me back to closer happenings. "You're supposed to be paying attention to orders, not daydreaming!"

Without my noticing it, two of the wandering proctors had made it to the back row, ending up right in front of me. It may have been a coincidence, but they happened to be the same two who had come to my room earlier. The tall blonde's name tag said she was Morrison, the short, pinch-faced brunette being Olveri, and from their outraged expressions it was probably safe to assume I'd made a couple of new friends.

"Stand straighter!" Morrison barked, her fists on her hips. "And dress up that line! You stand out like a sore thumb, Santee, and I don't want any sore thumbs messing up my company! Move it and move it fast!"

So Morrison was the equivalent of Company Commander, was she? The girls around me were stiff and straight in the spots they'd finally settled into, practically quivering from the whiplash tone Morrison had used. I glanced from side to side, wondering how far out of line I could be, and found that the girls in the rest of the line had apparently toed the mark from the position I'd chosen. The line could have been used as a ruler if anybody'd needed one so Morrison was on a leaning expedition, trying to see what she could break. Olveri had a smirk in her eyes as she anticipated the collapse, but she was destined to be disappointed.

"Dr. Bartholomew," I said in Morrison's direction, letting my eyes continue to slide around the outskirts of our line-up position. Two male proctors were directing a dozen male cadets in policing up the central square, making sure the punishment detail didn't turn out to be too easy. But I'd caught one of the proctors showing more interest in what was happening in front of my barracks than in the cadets he was supposedly supervising. I couldn't see his face very clearly from that distance, but I'd undoubtedly get another chance at a later time.

"What?" Morrison demanded, confusion exchanging her scowl for a frown. "What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Bartholomew," I repeated, finally looking away from the male proctor in the square to meet her gaze. "He's the best eye doctor I know."

Telling Morrison straight out that I considered her blind wouldn't have been anywhere near as effective as dangling the hook had been. Knowing that she'd bitten really got through to the tall blonde, turning her eyes hard and furious with embarrassment, her body stiff with rage. I suppose I expected her to explode on the spot, but she didn't even look around to see if anyone was laughing at her.

"That was very funny," she growled after a minute of working to control her temper. She was still angry, her fists held clenched at her sides, but she wasn't about to explode and add to the loss column. "I had a call from the colonel a short while ago, telling me that he intended to take a personal interest in you. I'm to keep track of whatever demerits you earn and report the total to him right after parade. You can add another five to what you already have. Any more jokes?"

She stood there with her head up, her eyes telling me I'd be a fool to open my mouth again now that I knew Pete was ready to put his foot in it. I doubted if she was inventing things just to get the upper hand, but it didn't really matter. Pete was bound to be unhappy with me no matter what I did, especially if I happened to get caught trying to escape. Compared to that, the piling up of extra demerits wasn't enough to keep me from saying anything I normally would have.

"Telling jokes to proctors is a waste of time," I returned with a shrug, seeing disbelief come to Olveri's eyes. She'd expected me to back down after what Morrison had said - the way she would have done. "It isn't that proctors lack a sense of humor," I explained. "They simply tend to miss the punchlines."

Olveri stiffened and drew herself up, close to total outrage, but for some reason Morrison seemed to have been expecting something like my comeback. She nodded her head and pursed her lips, and calmly returned the casual gaze I'd been sending.

"Make that ten demerits," she said, her own gaze now moving over me in appraisal. "I have a feeling the colonel's got something special in mind for you, something really fitting. We'll see how funny you are once he gets through with you. If I were in your shoes, I'd worry."

She locked eyes with me one last time before moving off down the line, no longer interested in wasting her time. Proctors have no real authority over cadets, something most cadets don't know - and most proctors tend to forget. If a proctor bellows and a cadet jumps, all well and good. If the proctor bellows and the cadet doesn't jump, the matter is then passed on to Pete or one of his staff to take care of. Punishments are often overseen by proctors and sometimes come about because of reports by proctors, but proctors rarely hand them out on their own.

Morrison had seen that I knew the facts of life, and that's why she'd given up on the pushing. Time enough to continue once Pete pinned my ears back. It was his authority she'd be using, but first I had to learn how real it was. I shook my head as I watched her move from victim to victim, wondering what she'd do if she knew who I was. A Special Agent's authority is higher than an army colonel's, higher even than a

general's. Too bad I was in no position to exercise it.

Another fifteen minutes dragged by before the proctors got tired of shouting at and insulting us. By then the companies of older cadets were also lined up outside their barracks. Once everyone was set the march to the parade ground began, ending us up on the grassy central square in formation. I managed to get through parade without adding to my demerit collection, and once we were dismissed I headed toward the mess hall with everyone else.

Somehow Elaine managed to find me in the confusion, and there was no reason not to walk with her. She was hardly likely to be considered a troublemaker just from being seen in my company, not when her eyes widened in fright at the very mention of proctors. Elaine was slight and pleasant and inoffensive, a plain but friendly girl who needed the company of someone she knew. When she asked what had happened earlier with Morrison and I said it was nothing, she didn't pursue the matter.

We couldn't have moved more than fifteen or twenty feet toward the mess hall before I heard my name being called. The voice was too young to be Freddy's or Pete's, so I looked around wondering whose it could be. When I found out, I felt my jaw dropping right straight to the ground.

There, not three yards away and getting closer as he fought his way through the droves of cadets was that brown-haired boy I'd had trouble with in the registration building. His handsome face was eager and interested, and he flashed me a grin as he trotted up to where Elaine and I stood.

"I'm glad you waited," he said as he straightened his tie and ran combing fingers through his hair. "Now we can walk together."

After hearing that I just stood there staring at him, wondering how anyone so unreal could look so solid. The kid was harder to get rid of than Harbin's plague! Well, there had to be something that would get through to him, and maybe embarrassment was the key. If I embarrassed him badly enough, he might leave me alone.

"When did you get out of the infirmary?" I asked, trying to raise ghosts of our last encounter. It didn't seem possible, but he might have simply forgotten.

"Oh, hours ago," he replied, shrugging off the reminder as he continued to look at me in a proprietary way. "You didn't really hurt me."

"Would you like me to try again?" I suggested, folding my arms as I returned his inspection. "You know, 'If at first you don't succeed...'"

"Quit kidding," he answered with a grin, reaching out slowly and carefully to brush a strand of hair off my shoulder. "You know you don't really want to get rid of me."

I closed my eyes in intense pain, but opened them again almost immediately to glare at him.

"How can you pretend to still be interested in me after what I did to you?" I demanded, really needing to know. "It doesn't make any sense!"

"Sure it does," he disagreed, his grin widening at my anger. "I happen to like wild women - especially when they look like you."

His eyes began to examine me again, and I just couldn't stand it. Being at the Academy wasn't bad enough; now I had to have an infant chasing after me.

"You've got five seconds flat to move away from me," I growled, making sure he knew I meant it. "If you aren't gone in those five seconds, I'm going to break both of your arms and legs no matter how many demerits it costs me! Do you understand that, or do I have to use words of one syllable?"

"Okay, okay, calm down," he soothed, gesturing with both palms toward me. "I can see you're upset so I'll leave - but only to keep you from getting into any more trouble. Just remember: when the dance on day 6 comes around, you're going with me. I'll see you then."

He started off in the direction everyone else was going, but after no more than a couple of steps he stopped to look back at me again. "You're so cute when you're angry," he announced with a laugh, then sprinted away still laughing when I took an uncontrollable step in his direction. I felt like beating my head against a wall, but it would have been a waste of good frustration. Talking to that boy had already accomplished the same end.

I didn't continue to stand in the same place very long, but it wasn't until I started to move again that I remembered Elaine was still with me. She hadn't said a word during my conversation with the brown-eyed idiot, and she didn't comment now that we'd resumed walking. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, then turned my head to look at her.

"I still don't think I believe that," I said, wondering why she didn't seem to be reacting at all. "Have you ever seen one like him?"

"Sure," she responded with a listless nod, staring down at the grass we walked on. "I've seen lots like him, but they were always after somebody else."

So that's it, I thought, finally understanding. Elaine had never been pursued and the lack hurt.

"Count your blessings," I advised, trying to cheer her up. "If it was necessary I'd give him to you on a platter, but you'll manage to find your own pests."

"Oh, right," she agreed, the bitterness in her voice matched by the bitterness in the glance she sent me. "Between you and Linda, who's ever going to notice me?"

"Nobody, if you hang onto that attitude," I told her, eliminating all kindness from my tone. "The thought for the day is 'I'm worth knowing, and if you don't want to know

me it's your loss.' It can work wonders, so you might try it."

"How would you know?" she suddenly demanded, anger flashing out of her plain, soft eyes. "No one who looks like you could ever know how I feel!"

She'd stopped walking to lash out at me with her pain, but she wasn't the sort to keep it up very long.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized at once, the anger disappearing as abruptly as it had flared. "I didn't really mean to say that. I know you're just trying to help."

"Giving help is usually easier than taking it," I observed with a sigh, touching her arm to start us walking again. "But when you get down to the final line, you often discover that no one can help you but yourself. And looking like me isn't worth what you think it is." Then I added in a mutter, "It isn't even worth what I thought it was."

"What did you say?" she asked, her expression still thoughtful as she considered the part she'd heard.

"Nothing," I returned with a smile, shaking my head to dismiss futile thoughts. "Nothing at all. Let's get on to the food."

The mess hall was a wide, one-story building at the end of South Street, with table assignments posted on a board hanging outside the front door. When Elaine and I got to our assigned table almost everyone else was already there, including our roommate Linda - who glanced at me as I took a chair near her.

"I see you really don't waste any time, do you?" she said in the icky-sweet tones that seemed to be natural to her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, paying only partial attention to her as I settled myself.

"I saw you talking to someone on the parade ground," she said, making graceful prints of her forefinger on the smooth surface of the table. "He's not bad, but I bet I can do better."

"Anybody could do better," I assured her with a snort, then looked around the hall. "Where's the food? I'm starving."

A sergeant had climbed to a small stage at the front of the large room, and he'd been watching the door. Suddenly he stepped forward and proceeded to prove he had no need whatsoever for a loudspeaker.

"Atten-shut!" he bellowed, and everyone in the room sprang to their feet with me following along the least little bit slower. Pete came in, honoring us with his presence, and went over to a small private table in the corner where Freddy already waited. When he sat down, the sergeant bellowed "As you were!" and chairs scraped all over the hall.

I had just gotten the chair under me again when a hand tapped my shoulder, and I turned to see Morrison with a grin on her face.

"The colonel would like to have a word with you," she said with quiet amusement. "Right this way."

I got up again with a small sigh and followed her over to Pete's table, where Pete was reading some papers and not looking up. I stood at attention and waited, taking the opportunity to study Freddy. He sat with one hand almost covering his eyes, refusing to look at me.

Suddenly, Pete's ice-green stare was on me.

"I thought I made it clear to you that I would not tolerate insubordination," he growled, letting me know that Morrison had Told All.

"Sir, proctors aren't in the T.O.," I pointed out with none of the monotone my voice was supposed to have had. "For that reason they're not entitled to the courtesy due officers. Regulations are clear on the point."

If I hadn't known Pete so well, I might have also pointed out that regulations clearly showed that he had no authority over me either. Saying that would have been satisfying, but not very smart. Pete being Pete, I would have immediately found myself locked in the guardhouse, teams of efficient, alert guards making sure I stayed there.

Now, I've gotten out of similar situations without any trouble in the past, but not when circumstances required that I refrain from putting those guards away in some permanent manner. It would be a hell of a lot easier to do a fade if I were on the loose, so I kept my addenda to myself. Not that it did any good, as Pete had enough to occupy him with what I had said. His eyes blazed up and his hand hit the table so hard that the table almost went over, causing everyone in hearing range to jump.

"The last thing I need right now is a barracksroom lawyer!" he roared. "From this moment on you will consider every proctor you see an officer, and treat them accordingly! And you I will see in my office at 1930 hours! I think we'll be able to find something to teach you the error of your ways. Dismissed!"

He glared at me an extra few seconds to get rid of part of the charge he carried, then he picked up the papers he'd been looking at and gave them his complete attention again. I hesitated so briefly I doubt if anyone noticed, then I backed off and walked away. I'd been tempted to get a few things said then and there, but the appointment we had for later on in the evening would do very nicely.

There were a number of things we had to get straight between us, Pete and I, but privacy would be a better backdrop for them. Morrison had been grinning openly as I'd walked away, and most of the eyes in the not-so-immediate vicinity were on me. Pete, like his sergeant, didn't often need the help of a loudspeaker either.

When I got back to my table I sat down again, then reached for the food that had been served during the small confrontation I'd attended. Muted whispers and half-hidden stares surrounded me, thanks to Pete and his pronouncements. Even the people at my table joined in, or maybe I should say especially the people at my table. Elaine gave me one wide-eyed stare of dismay before pasting her attention to what was on her plate, but Linda would have had to have been struck dumb to pass on the chance she'd been handed. She laughed openly until I was settled next to her again, then she leaned toward me.

"Oo, sounds like pappa's gonna spank," she cooed, delighted with the prospect. "Think it'll be worth it?"

I doubted if she knew what the flap had been about. Possibly she thought I was making trouble just to have something to do, but come to think of it she might not have been all that wrong. I turned my head to look straight at her, and matched the evil grin she'd been sending me.

"If you don't know, asking won't help," I purred, enjoying the way her face went instantly furious. "Pass the vegetables, please."

She tossed her head and went back to her food with a sniff, ignoring me as if I were beneath her notice. I got the vegetables myself, pretending not to see Elaine's half-swallowed grin and began to eat quietly, trying not to get indigestion from the wonderful cooking. I had a date to look forward to, and I intended to be in top form.

Pete left the mess hall first, bringing everyone to their feet a second time. Not long after that Freddy took his turn, walking out as though he had something on his mind. I took my time the way everyone else was doing, enjoying the one free evening before classes started. I'd had the foresight to tuck a couple of cigarettes into my belt before leaving the room earlier, so I smoked one before standing up and heading for the outside.

That one cigarette caused more whispered comment around me than even old-time cigarettes could have, during the time when smoking alone was considered bad for you. Most of the kids in my vicinity must have thought that smoking in the mess hall was against regulations, and were surprised when none of the proctors or officers came over to nail me. The more experienced cadets knew better, of course, but the more experienced cadets weren't the ones sitting around me.

When I walked out of the mess hall I found Freddy standing about ten feet to the left of the doors, obviously waiting for me. I hadn't expected him to be waiting, but he happened to be standing in the direction I had to go in so I walked up to him despite the look he had on his face. Freddy wasn't pleased with me, and he wasn't bothering to hide the fact.

"You don't do things half way, do you?" he asked as soon as I reached him, looking down at me in annoyance. "When you set out to commit suicide, you go all the way."

I waited for you because I didn't want to leave you in doubt. You made it."

The wind had died down a little, slowing the dust clouds swirling around and thinning them, leaving the air clearer and more breathable. I met Freddy's light, angry eyes and shrugged my indifference.

"An accomplishment is an accomplishment," I said. "What's the matter, Freddy, have you gotten that used to yellow flags? Check your medical coverage, and see if there's anything in there about backbone transplants."

"That's not funny," he growled, his voice hardening as his head went up. "I'm not the one whose big mouth put her tail in a sling. If knowing when to keep quiet means I'm a coward, then you ought to try a little cowardice. It comes highly recommended for continued good health."

"My health is fine, thanks," I murmured, brushing some imaginary lint from his uniform blouse. "You going my way?"

"Only in passing," he said, then took my arm the way he always did. "You're heading for a place all your own, and we'd better get moving. Pete's wild enough already. If you show up late on top of it, he'll break out the flogging post - Diana, what's wrong?"

I'd stopped short, and it was all I could do to keep the snarl off my face. Cadets were strolling with us and past us on the street, happy that the day's rushing and hurrying was over, faintly curious about the cadet walking with Major Drummond.

I stood there with my fists clenched, suddenly seeing nothing but the image the words "flogging post" had conjured. I saw the room James had had me tied in, felt the ropes that had bitten into my flesh as his cane tore my back open, heard the insanity of his laughter, experienced the terror of my screams. I shuddered as I drove the picture away from me, reached over to rub at my left shoulder, then shook my head in response to his question.

"Nothing's the matter," I told the concern in his stare, making him know it wasn't something I was prepared to discuss. "Let's go."

We began to walk again, becoming part of the movement again, and after a long moment I was able to force the tension out of me. It isn't smart to let memories like that cling to you, but it was still too soon for me to expect them to be submerged and forgotten like the rest. Freddy didn't ask any more questions but his hold on my arm was strong and calm, the touch letting me know he was there.

When we got to Pete's office building and walked in the door, the same sergeant was seated behind the reception desk. He raised his head and watched me walk closer to his post, and his face wore the expression of someone who was pleased with what was going to happen. He must have heard about what had gone on in the mess hall between Pete and me, and he obviously couldn't wait for me to get my

come-uppance.

"The Colonel will be with you in a few minutes, cadet," he drawled, just short of a grin of pleasure. "I suggest you get to attention right where you are, and see how long you can hold it without breathing."

He leaned his forearms on the old, dark brown wood of his desk and let more of the satisfaction come through in his eyes, but that was the wrong attitude to take with me just now. I heard Freddy's footsteps coming closer and had the impression he was about to say something, but I had no interest in what anyone else had to say.

"That sounds like a good idea," I commented to the sergeant, keeping my tone light as I held his gaze. "But I have a better one."

There was a chair standing to the left of the sergeant's desk, toward Pete's office. I reached a hand out to it, moved it a short distance away from the desk, walked around it, sat down, and propped my feet up on the edge of the desk. The sergeant watched my actions with his mouth half open, just as though he knew there was something he should be saying. His only trouble seemed to be that he couldn't think of what that something should be composed of.

The man's gaze was locked to mine with a sort of helplessness, at the same time flinching away from the expression I tend to project when I'm all through playing games. He tried to recapture his former mood and calm from when he'd been looking at me as no more than another cadet, but didn't make it. Finally he just tore his gaze away, then busied himself with paperwork.

There was no comment that needed to be made on such a sensible course of action, so I just turned my head over my shoulder to look back at Freddy, who hadn't made a sound. He stood not far away from the sergeant's desk and watched me with no expression on his face, but when my eyes came to rest on him he shrugged.

"Only the sight of my own blood being spilled bothers me," he commented. "You can do whatever you like with yours."

He walked over to a chair on the other side of the room, sat down, then folded his arms. We waited in dead silence, but we didn't have to wait long. The door to Pete's office opened and Pete started through, but he stopped almost immediately when he saw me.

The other two weren't taking any chances and had gone to full attention at the first sound of the door opening, but I stayed where I was. I had never realized before that it was possible for a man to register such intense rage without ever changing his expression, but Pete managed it. You would have thought he'd caught me killing his mother.

"I see," he said in a flat voice. "You've decided to claim insanity to get out of here. Well, it won't work." Then his voice rose to a roar. "Get on your feet!"

"No," I said, my tone as flat as his had been. "I've had enough of playing soldier, and I have just one question for you. You're real gung-ho on this military bit. How good a cadet would you make?"

"A hell-of-a-lot better one than you're making," he grated, taking another step forward. "I know how to follow orders!"

"Now you're seeing the real point," I pounced, putting my feet down and standing up. "Remember me, Pete? I'm one of those undisciplined characters whose orders don't come any more detailed than 'Do it!' If I needed a blueprint before I could do my job, I wouldn't have that job even if I lived through it. I'm thirty years old, and I've spent the last twelve of them in some pretty peculiar places. You'll forgive me if I tell you to be glad you weren't in some of them. The next time Jeff comes by, ask him. He knows what I mean."

For some reason my heated lecture had turned Pete calm again, his ice-eyes staring at me.

"You're talking about that Zalento operation, aren't you?" he asked quietly. "I remember when you and Jeff were brought to Blue Skies afterward. How many hyper-A's went in on that?"

"Six," I answered. Zalento wasn't the only assignment I'd been thinking about, but it might have been the best example possible. I could still remember the day we landed on Zalento, a cold, wind-driven rain the only thing around to greet us. The Council had been disturbed over rumors coming out of Zalento, rumors that whispered about planned attacks on key Federation planets. With Hidemite, our capitol, being the first name on the list, the Council was understandably nervous.

If it had been any other planet than Zalento everyone would have laughed at the idea, but Zalento had been a trouble spot for more than a century. The planet housed malcontents and discontents, retired pirates and active pirates, flourishing slavers and slavers hiding from death warrants. Anyone who had a grudge against the Federation Council found a welcome on Zalento, but lord help anyone who couldn't account for gaps in his or her past. Spies faced a messy execution, but a few agents had managed to slip in through their cordon of questions and suspicions and that's how word had gotten back to the Council. The natives of Zalento were growing more and more restless, and the Council halls of Hidemite would be their number one target.

Council members panicked in droves, but some of them got mad instead of shaky and began to make counterplans. Since no overt move had been made by the Zalentons Federation troops couldn't be sent in, but that didn't mean a lesson couldn't be taught the upstarts. Six thousand volunteers were recruited from the ranks of the army - mainly by the "you, you, and you," method - and six Special Agents were chosen to lead them.

A punitive guerilla expedition was envisioned by the Council members who made the

plans. The fact that excepting the Special Agents none of the troops being sent to Zalento knew anything about guerilla warfare was a mere detail to be ironed out in the field. Jeff and I and the other four hyper-A's shouted ourselves hoarse, but the Council had decided to punish Zalento and nothing would change their minds.

The cold rain greeting us on the planet turned out to be the best of it after all. Once we six split up to go our own separate ways, we discovered the size of the Zalenton army waiting to pick a fight with us. Spying has always been a two-way street, and the officials of Zalento had taken the trouble to make the trip. The unsuspecting populace we had come to harass and punish had already been stuffed into uniforms, taught to march and fire a gun, and was more than willing to practice their new arts on us.

Guerilla warfare takes a certain talent and experience, and very few of the thousand men and women I had with me showed any traces of either. At that point I did what I found out later had been done with the other five units, and turned my thousand back into uniformed foot-sloggers. We used military procedures familiar to the whole force, fought when we outnumbered the enemy or could ambush one part of a larger contingent, ran when we were outnumbered or were in danger of being surrounded.

That may sound like guerilla warfare to you after all, but believe me, it wasn't. I had no time to train my force on how to disappear into the landscape, so we were constantly on the run. Putting a decent intelligence network together was impossible, so we stumbled around not knowing where we were going or what was worth going after. The populace hated us as invaders and oppressors, so we had to avoid both civilians and the military.

A thousand people are too many to hide easily and too few to make their presence really felt, but the thousand didn't last long enough to make the problem a problem. In spite of the toll we ourselves took, our numbers melted away into the rain and mud until we were a shadow of our former strength. Since everyone fought, a large number of my survivors were wounded more or less seriously and no one had come away without a scratch. I'd been hit a couple of times myself, a condition which was compounded by the time I got my stragglers to the prearranged rendezvous point for pickup.

We were ferried right up to the waiting transports and medical attention, but the ferries never made even half the trips they thought were going to be necessary. Three of the six companies were wiped out completely, they and the three hyper-A's leading them. Walt Evington, the fourth Special Agent, got his survivors to the rendezvous before letting himself bleed to death, and that left Jeff and me.

"Six going out, two coming back," Pete muttered, his hand rubbing his face in anger at such waste. "If I remember correctly, it was quite some time before they decided it wouldn't be six out and six lost."

"Jeff and I have never been ones to sit safely back out of the fighting and danger," I allowed with a shrug. "But the Council wanted a job done and it got done. The Zalentions destroyed us, but they didn't come out totally untouched. Then their citizen army began to desert in droves, and the attack on Hidemite never came off."

Pete was nodding, remembering the time nearly as well as I did, but I wasn't there to toss the ball of nostalgia.

"Pete, do you understand what I'm talking about?" I pursued. "I know you and respect you, so if it makes you happy to have me stand at attention and call you 'sir' I don't really mind. I'm willing to go along with the gag because nobody gets hurt and it's good clean fun. But when you tell me to give the same treatment to those half-baked proctors of yours, the fun's over. I've never had to watch what I said unless it was business, and I'm not about to start watching it now. As I said before, this isn't going to work. You'd better call the Council and tell them to forget it."

"I can't call the Council," he said, the expression in his eyes now disturbed. "Come into my office. We've got to talk about this."

He turned and walked stiffly back into his office, and after a brief hesitation I followed. When I stopped to close the door, I saw Freddy and the sergeant staring at me with the most peculiar expression on their faces. It must have been a long time since anyone had gotten away with saying "no" to Pete.

This time I took the guest chair and got no argument. Pete was seated behind his desk, and was playing with something that cadets called a "tickler." It's a thin piece of wood about fifteen inches long and two inches wide, a strip that's more flexible than some might think. It was carried by classroom instructors - usually officers - and had a very interesting use.

If a cadet messed up an assignment or in some other way displeased his or her instructor, the cadet was ordered to the front of the room and told to put out the hand that wasn't used for writing. The instructor then proceeded to apply the tickler to the palm of the cadet's hand, one stroke for each demerit earned. It didn't hurt that much to begin with, but if you kept messing up you could find yourself with a very sore hand. The tickler had played a big part in my leaving the first time around... I'd had no trouble with the work, but my instructors kept getting me for "attitude."

Once I was seated, Pete tossed the tickler back onto his desk with a growl.

"I can't call the Council," he repeated, "because I've already tried. They refused to listen to anything I had to say, and ordered me not to bother them again. They're in the middle of some big, involved thing that's got their whole attention." He narrowed his eyes at me. "I get the feeling that you know what's going on over there. Am I wrong?"

"No," I admitted. "Just remember the airlock."

He looked annoyed for a moment, then got back to the point.

"I can't let you out and I can't let you get yourself out," he stated after puffing out his breath in vexation. "I'd be back to cadet grade myself if I did. But there's something about this whole thing that you're missing, and it makes all the difference. Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

He now stared at me in an intense sort of way, but I didn't see what he was getting at.

"I may not shave every morning, but I do comb my hair occasionally," I offered. "Don't tell me I've turned blue without noticing it."

"It would be better if you had," he said, his voice and expression grim. "Sitting here and studying you right now, I would be willing to swear that your next birthday cake would not hold more than fifteen candles, and truthfully that's stretching it. You gave me a long lecture about how you're thirty years old and have been an agent for twelve of those years. Do you have any idea what a jolt that gave me? We've known each other for seven or eight years now, but every time I look at you all I can see is a fresh teenager. What you can get away with as a woman of thirty, you can't get away with as a fifteen year old kid. My proctors don't see a survivor of Zalento, they see a spoiled brat who asks for it with everything she says. And while we're talking about age, why was I ordered not to allow a bio-detector to be turned on you? I don't like mysteries, and you seem to be full of them these days."

"I can't tell you that either," I said, feeling the annoyance beginning to build again. Did everyone in the universe judge other people on nothing but externals? "But I'm not fifteen no matter what I look like."

"Tell that to my sergeant out there," he countered, leaning forward as he spoke. "Did you get a look at his face when you were reminding me about who you are? And Freddy. He's known you as long as I have, so why is it that suddenly he's all protective about you? I had to threaten to gag him to get him to stop bothering me! He's all for letting you do anything you like, even if it makes me look like a fool."

The vehemence in his voice was unsettling, doubly so because I hadn't noticed what he had. Pete's sergeant had looked shaken, but I'd attributed it to the argument Pete and I had had. And as well as I'd known Freddy, I'd never known him to hover as much as he'd been doing lately. If everyone saw me the way Pete did - and I'd had enough maddening experiences to prove the contention beyond any possible doubt - then it was no wonder I was having so many problems with the proctors.

"You could tell your proctors who I am," I suggested, moving uncomfortably in the chair. I didn't much care for the idea of announcing myself as a Special Agent, but it was better than being constantly treated like a child. "At least that would get them off my back," I added in a mutter.

"Would it!" he came back hotly, his hands clasped tightly on the desk. "There are at

least as many damned fools among proctors as there are anywhere else. How many of them would decide that the story was just so much bull and try you for themselves? And if it spread to the cadet population, which it surely would? How long would it stay 'fun' if you had to keep fighting off people who would like to say they'd taken a Special Agent? If you were built like Freddy there'd be no problem, but how many of them are going to believe that I had to work at it to get two falls out of three with you? And that only because you were playing? I've never seen you work, and I don't want to. I've heard stories."

His eyes were directly on me as he said that, his leathery face as expressionless as his voice was cold. I felt my back stiffening as my head came up, and a funny flutter got itself started in my middle.

"I don't think I like the way that sounds," I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. "I've never killed by accident, and I watch myself closely when I'm not working. You make me sound like the next thing to a mass murderer."

"Aren't you?" he asked harshly, his cold gaze not moving from me. "How many people died on Zalento? And how many of those did you account for yourself?"

I stared at him silently for a moment, then tore my gaze away as I found it impossible to look at him any longer. We'd been friends for years, and I don't make friends of people I care nothing for. Sure there were stories about the sort of things Special Agents did for a living, and my name wasn't unknown among the people who were at times involved with agents. I just hadn't expected a friend to listen to those stories.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" I asked in as toneless a voice as I could manage, staring down at my hands. "I can't forget everything I've learned. I'm the same person I've always been."

"No, you're not!" he denied forcefully, and I could hear his chair creak as he shifted his weight. "You're a swamp viper dressed up as a sweet snake, and the difference between the two doesn't matter until you're bitten! You don't hand arbitrary orders to a hyper-A if you want to stay whole, but you do try to straighten out a brat in your charge. Thinking you've got the second when you really have the first can be fatal if you push it too hard. I've just had a staff reduction; I can't afford to lose any more personnel."

The fluttering in my middle became a sudden stab, and I couldn't take anymore.

"I'll settle the whole thing," I said, standing up and still not looking at him. "I'm going over to 2, and I'll stay there. If the Council asks, I'm here and doing fine. I won't show up anywhere else and embarrass you."

I started for the door, all thoughts of taking off totally gone from my mind. There were enough places at 2 that were good for holing up in, and that was what I really needed right now. What Pete had said had hurt me, more than if he'd simply slapped me in the face. I felt betrayed and rejected, the sort of things I'd gotten used to

feeling among strangers. Getting the same feeling because of someone who was supposed to be a friend was more than I could handle.

"You are not going to 2," Pete growled before my hand could touch the doorknob. "You're going to come back to that chair and listen to me."

As upset as I was, the calm in his voice rasped right along my nerves. I turned fast to face him again and demanded, "Damn it, Pete, what do you expect of me? I can't stay here because you're afraid I'll kill everyone in sight. I can't go to 2 because the idea doesn't appeal to you. Would you like me to go up in a puff of smoke? Right now I wish I could oblige you!"

"I would like you to be here where you're supposed to be," he grated, gaze locked hard to mine. My voice hadn't been exactly even, but he didn't seem to have noticed. "No matter what I said I know you're not about to go on a killing spree, but what happens the next time a proctor leans on you and you try a fresh comeback? If it's the wrong proctor, you could find yourself in too much of a hurry to watch what you're doing! Can't you even try to remember what you were like at fifteen?"

"I do remember," I muttered, looking down at the floor to counter the whirling in my mind. "At fifteen I was just the same as I am now. What wrong with my going to 2?"

"You were assigned here and you'll stay here," he insisted. "I wasn't trying to tell you just now that I'm afraid to turn my back on you. I was trying to point out the biggest part of this whole mess. Do you see it now?"

I wasn't looking at the same thing he was, but there was no reason to go into the difference.

"I see it," I answered, pushing aside all traces of how I felt. "I just don't see what can be done about it."

"I do," he returned in a hard voice. "Come back here and sit down."

I took a deep breath, then went reluctantly back to the chair. When I sat down, I saw those eyes on me again.

"I don't know why I didn't think of this before, but the answer's obvious," he said, rubbing his face with one hand. "You gave it to me yourself when you said you never watch what you say unless it's business. Very well, this is now business. You're under my command, and I'm assigning you the job of acting like a normal fifteen-year-old girl. One who doesn't know anything at all about self defense or offense - especially offense."

I stared at him in shock, not believing I'd heard him say what he had.

"You don't know what you're asking," I protested after a moment. "When I'm in a role I have to stick with it. That would make this whole thing ten times worse than it

is."

"That wasn't a request, it was an order," he growled, still having no trouble meeting my gaze. "I don't know what you did to get yourself sent here, but it doesn't matter. You're here, and this is the only way I can be sure everyone will be safe."

"Everyone but me," I countered, then gestured slightly behind me. "Do you know what those proctors would do to me under those particular circumstances?"

"Nothing you don't deserve," he said, pointing a finger at me. "And if what you said was true, you've been deserving it since you were fifteen the first time. Personally, if any daughter of mine acted the way you've been acting, she would regret it with her whole being. Your father looked at it differently?"

His eyes were glittering in a way I'd never seen before, but I recognized the attitude from my time with Captain Lowell aboard the Swamp Fox. Captain Lowell had been constantly comparing me to his own daughters, remembering my hyper-A status only with a great deal of effort. It had never occurred to me before, but men were also susceptible to being "in a family way." Only it wasn't their bodies that swelled, it was their heads. Pete was still waiting for an answer, so I shrugged.

"Personally, I see nothing wrong with being independent. Pop might have agreed with your outlook if he'd been there, but I get my itchy foot from him. That's why my mother refused to marry him after she chose him as the father of her child. He would have been as impossible to live with as most Explorers are. As it was he came home every year or two, stayed for a few weeks, and promised to settle down if Laura would marry him. She and I both knew better, so she always refused and off he went again." I smiled a little at the memory. "I haven't seen him for some time now. I wonder how he's doing."

"Get that roving look out of your eye!" Pete ordered. "You're not going anywhere! If you missed having a father to show you the way the first time, you won't be missing it again. And you can practice that part right now. The required response to my orders is 'Yes, sir.'"

"Oh, yes, sir!" I flared, jumping to my feet and snapping to attention. "Any other orders, sir? Maybe an hour on the rack if I sneeze without permission?"

"Don't you use that tone with me!" he roared, his hands flat on the arms of the chair. "Are you or are you not going to consider yourself on assignment?"

I glared at him for a moment, then turned my back and folded my arms. Pete had no authority over me and technically I outranked him, but as head of a Federation facility he had the right to offer me an assignment. I wasn't required to accept that assignment, not when the Council hadn't added their stamp of approval, but in twelve years as an agent I'd never refused an assignment no matter what it was like.

"I have no choice whatsoever," I finally admitted, hating the trapped feeling suddenly

filling me. "Tell me you thought I'd refuse."

"No," he said with grim satisfaction. "No, I didn't think you'd refuse. You refuse orders, not assignments. I haven't known you all these years without learning something about you. Now, let's see what a normal fifteen year old looks like."

I couldn't let him get away with that. I swung around to face him and raged, "If you call me abnormal one more time, I'll -"

"You'll what?" he demanded, looking up at me without moving - and with no expression on his face.

"I'll cry," I finished miserably, turning slightly away from him. "Isn't that what normal teenage girls do? But then, how would I know? I've never been a normal anything."

"Diana," he said in a more gentle tone than I'd ever heard him use before. "If you were normal in the everyday sense of the word, you couldn't do the sort of job you're so good at. Right now it's the situation that's abnormal - and dangerous. I don't want to see you getting hurt either."

He got up and came around to my side of the desk to stand behind me, and suddenly his voice was hard again.

"But if you think you've made me feel guilty for what I said, forget it! I happen to know hyper-A's take pride in the fact that they're abnormal. The bunch of you think of yourselves as better than normal people, and you were trying to con me."

Damn it, he had no business knowing that. I looked up at him over my shoulder, and the green ice was colder than ever.

"Don't normal girls ever try to con their fathers?" I asked in an innocent way, then turned to face him. "You did say you were going to be my father this time around? I'm just practicing on you."

"And I'm going to practice on you," he growled in answer. "I've never been a father, but I know how the part goes. Then he reached for the tickler on his desk. "Now show me what a girl looks like when she knows she's about to be punished. But don't hold out your hand. That's not the part of you I'll be aiming at."

He seemed to be half expecting something physical from me, but I didn't move. Instead I put a solemn expression on my face, and let a hint of tears start in my eyes.

"Are you going to hurt me just because I tried to make you feel sorry for me?" I asked quietly, meeting his gaze but not defiantly. "Everybody needs that sometimes, even me. If you think I was being unreasonable, go ahead and do whatever you like. I won't even try to stop you."

He stared at me for a long minute without moving, trying to keep the anger going, but

finally he threw the tickler back on his desk.

"You are good," he said gruffly, his gaze softer than it had been. "If you can keep that up, neither one of us will have a problem. Now get back to your quarters. It's almost lights out."

"Not so fast, daddy," I countered, relaxing back to normal and folding my arms. "What do I tell those proctors about my sudden change of heart? They're not pliable males like you."

He started to get mad again, hot over being conned a second time, but then he suddenly lost the stiffness and grinned.

"I've never seen anybody able to turn it on and off like that," he said, really seeming to be amused. "I was wrong before, I do want to see you work - so I'll be watching you every step of the way. That means the next time you try to put anything over on me you won't sit down for a week! Tell the proctors anything but the truth. Get going!"

I threw up my hands in complete resignation and started for the door, but an unpleasant thought made me stop and turn back to him.

"Pete, since when have there been dances on day 6?" I asked. "I don't remember ever hearing about them."

He was looking at something on his desk, but raised his head to grimace at me.

"We got hit with a Council inspection a little over a year ago," he explained in disgust. "Some fool in the bunch noticed that we had little boys and little girls, but no social mixing. I tried to point out that this isn't a boarding school, but the fool pulled more weight than I did. That's why we now have dances on day 6. If you're looking for a date, ask Freddy. I never go."

"I've already got a date," I said with my own disgust. "I've got an admirer." Then I brightened. "Isn't it too bad that between extra duty and the course at 2, I won't be able to make it."

"Guess again," he said with a nasty grin. "All the other normal little girls will be there, so you will too. Or at least you'd better be there. No more trouble, remember?"

"Tell me something," I said, looking him over in a pleasant way. "Are you a born sadist, or did you have to practice?"

"It's all native talent," he commented with something of a grin, giving his attention to the paperwork again. "Beat it."

This time I made it through the door, but after pulling it shut behind me I took only one more step before almost tripping over Freddy. He checked me out with his eyes as if he were trying to guess my weight, and when he seemed satisfied that I was still

in one piece he grinned.

"For a while there we thought we'd have to call in a referee," he said, leaning one hand against the wall near me. "The problem was no one was willing to get between you two. How did it go?"

"Doesn't he ever miss getting his own way?" I asked, glancing back toward the closed door. "I'd hate to work for him as a regular thing."

"That's our C.O.," Freddy agreed with a laugh. "Do you need a shoulder to cry on?"

"At least one," I answered with a smile. "Will you walk me home?"

"Sure," he said, showing a matching smile as he took my arm. We left the building and walked slowly down the darkened street without talking, and I used the opportunity to consider my problem. I had a ready-made solution for the proctors, and Pete couldn't say he hadn't asked for it. Telling me to tell them "anything but the truth" was a mistake Ringer never would have made, but then Ringer knew how I operated. Maybe I could still have some fun even if I did have to be a good little cadet from now on. Then I sighed and turned to Freddy.

"Why didn't Pete ever make general?" I asked. "It couldn't be that he isn't qualified."

"It couldn't be and isn't," Freddy confirmed with a nod. "He's turned down the promotion more times than other people have it offered to them because if he makes general they'll pull him out of here. Since he has no intention of going, he stays a colonel."

I hesitated a minute, then looked directly at him.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd spoken to Pete about me? It might have kept my big mouth closed earlier outside the mess hall."

"You're not the easiest gal to tell things to," he responded with a shrug, rubbing briefly at my cheek with the side of his finger. "And besides that, it wasn't worth talking about. I like to report success, not failure."

"Success?" I echoed, giving him a vague look. "What's that? I haven't run across it in so long, I don't even think I can spell it anymore. Thanks for keeping me company, Freddy. I needed it."

We were outside my barracks building, but Freddy didn't seem to want the stroll to end.

"Do you want me to come in and speak to the proctors?" he asked quietly, taking one of my hands in both of his. "They're bound to be waiting for you."

I shook my head slowly, smiling a little. "It's something I have to handle now," I told

him gently. "You'd better be getting on back."

He hesitated again, still holding my hand, then reluctantly let it go and straightened my tie.

"If you need anything, don't forget where I am. I'll see you tomorrow night."

He walked away then, turning once to wave while I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Pete had been right about Freddy, since it looked like it was all he could do to keep himself from locking me in his protecting arms. And that from a man who knew more of the grislier details of my work than Pete did. I shook my head to get rid of that picture before walking into the dimly lit hall that led to my quarters, and sure enough, Morrison and Olveri were there waiting for me.

"You just made it, Santee," Morrison said, standing up from the edge of the OD's desk where she'd been sitting. "How did the colonel's lesson go? I'll bet you aren't as anxious as you were to pick up more demerits."

"It wasn't anything much," I replied with a shrug, making sure my voice sounded distracted. "I hardly got to see the colonel. His sergeant lectured me for a while, then he came out and told me to remember his orders. Then he dismissed me, and I came back here."

"You sound disappointed," Olveri said with a frown. "What were you expecting?"

"I don't know," I said with another shrug. "More time with him, maybe. When he was punishing me this afternoon, I got to spend four whole hours with him."

I had my eyes partially unfocussed, but I could still see them glance at each other.

"Morrison," I said in a musing tone, "what sort of a family does he have? Is he married?"

"You can't be serious!" Morrison blurted, she and Olveri both looking shocked.

"The colonel is married to his job! And even if he weren't, he wouldn't be interested in a kid!"

She'd said what I'd hoped she would, and that made it my turn to be shocked.

"I'm not interested in him that way," I quickly assured her. "It's just that - "

"It's just what?" Olveri pursued sharply when I cut the sentence short.

"You spoke to him about me," I said to Morrison, ignoring the other woman. "What does he think of me?"

"What do you think he thinks of you?" Morrison demanded, her fists on her hips.

"You haven't even been here a full day, and you've made more trouble than all the rest of the cadets put together!"

"I just wanted him to know that I was tough too," I said miserably, hanging my head. "But he doesn't seem to care! He told me that the next time I got into trouble I'd be spanked. I wouldn't mind if he did it himself, but he'd probably have someone else do it. Now I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean, 'tough too'?" Olveri persisted. "And what do you have to do? What does any other cadet do?"

"I'm not any other cadet," I told her, adding bitterness to my voice and the eyes I raised to her. "I'm his daughter, but he won't admit it. I don't know much about him, but I want him to want me! I want to be near him, and feel that he's proud of me!"

"Are you sure you're his daughter?" Morrison asked in disbelief, looking shaken. "You don't look like him."

"I have his red hair, don't I?" I countered. I knew that Pete had been a redhead in his youth, and every bit of truth makes a story sounder. "And Mom said there was no doubt. She never wanted to talk about him, but she would smile when she remembered. There's a picture Mom has of the two of them, and he's looking at her so - so - approvingly! I just want him to look at me that way."

There was deep silence for a full minute, then Morrison took over.

"Olveri, why don't you take the rest of the rounds," she said while keeping her attention on me. "I'll catch up to you later."

Olveri glanced at each of us then left without a word, and Morrison took my arm and led me back to the OD's desk. She perched on the edge of it as she had earlier, and folded her arms.

"For someone who wants the colonel's approval, you've been acting awfully strange," she said. "Did you think he'd pat you on the head for quoting regulations at him? Or for earning more demerits than any other five cadets?"

"But he's like that!" I protested. "I wanted him to see that I was like him."

"He's a full colonel and the boss around here, not a cadet on her first day," she countered. "If you want him to start thinking about how nice it would be if you were related to him, you've got to be the best cadet around, not the worst. Every demerit you get pushes you farther away from him."

"But what if I can't be the best cadet?" I asked, pretending I was trying to keep the misery out of my voice. "He won't ever want to know me then."

"You - have - to - try!" she said, emphasizing each of the words. "I'll give you all the help I can, but you have to do it yourself. No more wisecracks, no more ignoring orders, no more anything out of the way. Are you willing to do it?"

"I think I'm too much like him," I muttered, shaking my head before meeting her gaze

again. "All I can do is try." Then I hesitated before adding, "Why are you being so nice to me after the way I spoke to you? Most other people wouldn't bother."

"I'm not most other people," she responded with a shrug, her voice dry. "And anything I can do to make my job easier is to my own benefit. You'd better get to bed now. Morning comes early around here."

"Okay... and thanks," I said before walking to the door of my room. Then I turned and added, "I really will try."

"Then you should make it," she answered evenly with a nod. "Good night."

I went on into the room and closed the door behind me, seeing that Elaine and Linda were already in bed but not asleep.

"It certainly took you long enough," Linda said with acid dripping as I walked over to my bunk, then she grinned. "Did it hurt much?"

"Of course not," I responded with a yawn as I stretched. "I haven't been a virgin in a long while."

Linda glared and turned away, so I gave her my back and started to undress. There was no way for me to change my character with these two, but it wasn't necessary. A proctor might come at me faster than was safe, but Elaine wasn't the fighting type and Linda was too concerned over her manicure to stoop to baseness like that.

I'd just have to see to it that I soft-pedaled it with any other cadets I met. Some of them were bound to be the way I was first time around, and I didn't need any challenges to ruin the work I'd done. Since it had been Morrison's idea for me to behave, she'd be nothing but approving when I did. And even if she kept quiet, Olveri looked like the type to spread the word of my parentage far and wide.

Being the colonel's daughter would have a few drawbacks, but not many proctors would try to push me too hard. The colonel could conceivably develop sudden fatherly interest in me, and military interest in anyone who gave me too hard a time. I had some pretty strong doubts about how smart I was being in going along with Pete's idea, but he'd caught me in a weak moment and now I was committed. If things continued to go as well as they'd been going, that's probably how the venture would end up - with me committed.

I threw my worn uniform onto my footlocker, then lit a cigarette and got into bed. The sheets were cold, bringing up the thought of how nice it would be to find Val there waiting for me. Then I firmly put that thought aside for consideration at another time. If Val ever understood and accepted the fact that there could never be anything more between us than sex, it might be possible to work things out with him. Until then... I finished the cigarette and put it out, then turned over to get some sleep.

Chapter 8

When the proctors came banging on our doors at 0500 on the dot, I almost turned out for calisthenics naked. I sleep in the raw because I can't stand having anything choke me, and I barely remembered to grab a set of fatigues in time. After that I got shoes and socks on fast, and was one of the first out to the back of the barracks to line up. I was "trying."

By the time everyone else made it, the proctors were walking up and down checking on the spacing. Just like the day before, Morrison and Olveri came through the muted dust and stopped in front of me.

"Dress up that line, Santee!" Morrison ordered, looking me over in disapproval. "I want to see you put a ruler to shame!"

I opened my mouth, glanced at her, then moved slightly even though I was just as well lined up as anyone else.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded after I finished.

She stared at me for a moment with a slight smile on her lips, then she nodded. "That's just the way I want it to be," she said. "See that you remember how it's done."

She and Olveri moved on, and I followed them with my eyes. If I'd been too good at taking orders even Morrison would have wondered, but I'd get lots better as the time passed. As long as it didn't look like a miracle, no one should notice a thing.

They started the calisthenics, and anyone who was cold to begin with warmed up fast. I seemed to be in better shape than any of the other girls there, even if I hadn't been out of a hospital bed for much more than a week. Even so, when 0600 rolled around I was happy to go back to shower and dress. The pain in my left shoulder was nearly gone, but my body had protested the exercise by producing a large number of aches that took turns coming and going. I didn't like it, but also didn't see much that could be done about it.

Since my chores had to be done and my bunk made before I left for morning parade, I went from exercising to rushing around. Thanks to that wonderful schedule I'd been blessed with, I would not be back to quarters until it was time to dress for evening parade. I made it with a couple of minutes to spare, then double-timed with everyone else to parade.

Elaine tried to join me on the way to the mess hall, but I told her gently that I had to hustle. I only had ten minutes to eat, and part of those ten minutes had to be used to get to my first class. As soon as I left her I shifted to overland travel mode, which really let me move.

I blew into the mess hall, found to my surprise that my breakfast was already waiting, then wasted no time swallowing it. I was just about finished by the time Pete got there, and was able to leave after he sat down. He stared at me on my way out, and I gave him a cow-eyed look. Let him wonder what it meant.

I still ended up being late to class, due to the trouble I had convincing a guard that I was supposed to be in the classrooms building at that early hour. When I walked into the room I'd been assigned to, it was empty except for a short, broad, male proctor.

"You're three minutes late," he said, tapping his wrist. "Two demerits. Up front and put your hand out." I walked to him slowly, and put out my left hand without commenting. "That isn't the hand you use to write with, is it?" he asked.

"No, sir," I answered, paying careful attention to the expression that reached my eyes. He took his tickler and gave me two sharp raps with it, then gestured to the side of his desk.

"Pick up a notebook and pen and grab a seat," he directed, throwing the tickler back on his desk. "You have a series of tapes to watch, and you're required to take notes. Move it."

I got the book and pen and then went to sit down. Wire recorders were never used for taking notes since they would have made things too easy. He started the tape, and I was overjoyed to see that it was titled, "The Benefits of Discipline." I could hardly wait for the rest of the series.

The day continued the way it had started. I rushed from place to place, but I wasn't late again and didn't pick up any more demerits than anyone else. When I reported for extra study at 1700 hours, they had to dig to find something as I still had no trouble with class work. I finally got back to quarters at 1745, feeling more strung out than I had in a long time.

"Hi, Diana," Elaine said as I walked in. "I missed seeing you all day. Hey, what happened to your hands?"

I looked down at my reddened hands and shrugged.

"I got hit with some dishwashing after lunch, and that water was a little hotter than I'm used to." What I didn't add was that that job had to be somebody's idea of being cute. They'd had to turn on one of the dishwashers only half full. "We can talk after I shower, Elaine. I really need it this time."

She nodded sympathetically, so I grabbed a towel and headed straight for the showers. The long rows of stalls were deserted, and it didn't take long before I was out of my clothes and under the hot water. At least that was one good thing about the Academy: no matter how short on the rest of the amenities it was, it never ran out of hot water.

I had all of five minutes to luxuriate, but I spent most of it remembering the one class I hadn't minded that day. It was called "Federation Progress," and I hadn't appreciated it the first time I'd been at the Academy. I'd assumed then that it was nothing more than an attempt at propaganda spreading and had dismissed it from consideration. But the officer who taught it this time was a surprise in his own right as well as in the way he taught the course. His name was Captain Ellis, and he was short, thin, and balding, with the sort of narrow face that usually means a waspish temper.

I'd turned in my class card when I'd been motioned to, and took the seat I was assigned with the thought that a lecture on the glories of the Federation's forward steps was likely to put me to sleep. I yawned behind my hand until everyone had been seated, then Captain Ellis moved to the front of his desk and leaned back against it.

"Although this course is formulated to consider Federation progress," he'd said in an unexpectedly mild and mellow voice, "I propose that we begin from the other side of the coin, so to speak. The Federation has many beautiful, fully developed planets to its credit, but what about failures? Are there any dismal, better-hidden backwaters to consider, or is the Federation perfect?"

Most of us smiled at the thought of the Federation being perfect, but no one volunteered an answer.

"Come, come," Captain Ellis urged genially. "Surely there is someone among you who is valiant enough to speak against the dreaded Federation?"

That time we all laughed aloud. Criticizing the Federation and how it was run was the one universal way in which all Federation member planets were alike. No matter what your own home government was like, you were fully within your rights, wherever you were, to jump on the Council and its policies with both nit-picking feet. We'd all enjoyed the captain's comment, but there were still no volunteers.

Captain Ellis had looked around the room then, but most of the kids there had been in school recently enough to remember how to avoid the teacher's eye. It had been a lot longer for me, though, and I never have been really good at avoiding people's eyes. When his gaze fell on me, I knew immediately that I'd been selected.

"Cadet Santee," he'd said with a smile, folding his arms gently in front of him. "Would you be so kind as to enlighten us with an example?"

I hadn't intended to mix in, but I'd had little choice at that point. In spite of being surprised that he remembered my name, I got to my feet and to attention and said, "Sir, my example would be Tanderon."

The kids in the class roared with laughter, obviously thinking that I'd meant the Academy was a failure, but Captain Ellis had stared at me thoughtfully, ignoring the laughter and letting it play itself out. When the room had returned to quiet, he

nodded his head and smiled at me again.

"Excellent," he'd applauded in his mild, unexcited way. "Tanderon happens to be the example I, myself, had been thinking of. You may tell your classmates why this particular planet is such a good example."

The class had been absolutely silent then, suffering, I'd thought, from shock. They had probably never thought about Tanderon except as the place where the Federation had its training facilities, but I knew it a little better than they did.

"Sir, Tanderon is an early failure of the Federation," I said slowly, trying to get my thoughts in order. "What happened here affected the Council so strongly that an amendment was made in the Planets' Charter."

Captain Ellis nodded encouragingly, so I continued.

"When Tanderon was first settled, its people had high hopes for it. It was a pleasant world, and it had much more than its share of natural resources. The settlers weren't immediately in a position to exploit Tanderon's riches but they knew it wouldn't be long before they would be, so they were content to wait. The rest of the Federation's planets, though, weren't quite as content.

"They demanded that mining and exporting be begun immediately, so that the results would be immediately available to supplement their own planets' requirements. Too many of them were short on natural resources, and they needed imports to balance the demand. The Council wavered, then they stood back and told the member planets to work it out with the people on Tanderon. They had decided not to get involved."

Captain Ellis stared down at the floor, but I knew he was still listening. I took a short breath, then shifted position a little.

"The people on Tanderon were overwhelmed by the offer made them by the other planets. They were told that full mining, drilling, and exporting facilities would be established free of cost, and that all proceeds from the sale of the exports would go only to them. They looked around at the cabins they were living in, pictured mansions instead, and quickly signed the agreements. If one or two people thought to ask themselves what would happen when they needed those natural resources themselves, the answer must have been drowned out by the sound of hard cash being deposited in a bank. No one protested, and the operation was begun."

Captain Ellis's head was still down, but his eyes were up and studying me. I saw a faint glint in them, but I was too deep in the reconstruction to pay much attention to it.

"Surprisingly, it took almost a century before Tanderon was stripped," I continued. "It had really been a remarkable find, but four generations after the first settlers got here, the planet was an empty shell with almost nothing left for its own use. The

other planets abandoned the facilities they'd been only too glad to donate, and Tanderon's people found themselves all alone on a planet which had been raped in its youthful promise. It was dead and dry under their feet now, and there was no way to buy back what had been sold. Most of the profits they'd realized had gone to import what they themselves needed and wanted, and there was nothing left to attract further investors or settlers.

"The Federation Council finally saw the mistake that had been made so many years earlier, but it was impossible for them to undo it. They changed the Charter to forbid other planets from ever again trying to move in on an unprotected settlement, then relocated those of Tanderon's people who wanted to move. But there were still too many people who considered Tanderon their home and therefore not to be abandoned. That's why the Federation training facilities were built here, to guarantee that Tanderon would still be able to stay in touch with the rest of the Federation. It didn't give the people their planet back, but it was better than leaving them to be swept under the limitless rug of interstellar distances. For better or for worse, Tanderon is still very much with us."

Captain Ellis had joined in the deep silence for a moment, but then he'd smiled again.

"Thank you," he'd said quietly. "That was most graphically put. I think we can all see now what the Council saw. Do you all approve of their decision, or would you have done things differently?"

After a moment hands began to go up, and I was able to sit down and return to the anonymity I preferred. Captain Ellis had chaired the following discussions quietly, allowing the kids to give him their opinions before he gave them his. No one took many notes, but by the time the class was over it was clear that everyone knew they'd gotten more out of that hour than if they'd wired another class word for word. I'd started to leave with everyone else when we were dismissed, but Captain Ellis had surprised me again by gesturing me over to him. He'd waited until the room was empty, then he'd looked at me with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm fortunate that you were assigned to my class, Cadet Santee," he'd said, sitting, for the first time, in the chair behind his desk. "I usually have to tell that story myself, but this time I was rescued by a special agency, so to speak. As a matter of fact, one might even call you a - ah - special agent of that agency."

I'd studied his thin, innocent face for a moment, then had smiled slightly and said, "Sir, I really have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course not, of course not," he'd agreed hastily and somewhat soberly. "There are times when my mind tends to wander, but I'd thought to mention a hobby of mine to you. I have a great fascination for the many brave souls who risk their all so that our Federation might be protected. I've long since discovered the names of the hardest of these souls, and I recite them to myself on occasion to remind myself

that there are those about who really do care for the Federation and its people."

He'd paused to scratch at his ear, then had turned his head to the side to look at me.

"Should I ever come across one of those names somewhere I would not be so forward as to mention it," he murmured. "But I would make an attempt to find out if the person involved was indeed the one I'd been thinking of. Should that be the case, I would then take very great pleasure in quietly professing my admiration. One so rarely finds such an opportunity."

His gaze had been directly on my face, and I hadn't been able to keep from smiling more widely.

"Captain Ellis," I'd said slowly, "I still don't know what you're talking about, but I somehow feel that if you ever get the opportunity you're looking for, the individual involved will feel very honored by your admiration. I'm sure it doesn't happen to any of them very often."

"More's the pity," he'd murmured, looking sad for a minute, but then he'd brightened again and had reached toward his desk. "I think I'd best supply you with a pass for your next class. It would never do to see you punished for having had to listen to my ramblings."

He'd quickly made out the pass and had handed it to me, and I'd taken it and gone on my way. The time had been a bright spot in an otherwise dark day, and I knew as I stepped out of the shower and toweled myself dry that it would be quite some time before I forgot it. When I was mostly dry I wrapped the towel around me, picked up my dirty uniform, and went back to my room - only to discover that I had another pleasant surprise waiting. Elaine had laid out a clean uniform for me on my bunk, and I stared at it for a second before turning to look at her.

"Elaine," I mused, "did anyone ever tell you that you're one of the galaxy's greatest people?"

"Cut it out," she protested, grinning shyly. "It's nothing that anyone else wouldn't have been glad to do."

"Oh, no?" I countered, putting my well-worn uniform in the laundry bag. "Then where are all the people breaking down our door for the privilege? And speaking of breakers, where's Linda?"

"Linda dressed early and went to meet someone," she answered, frowning at a piece of lint on her kilt. "I think it's a boy she met in one of her classes."

"Congratulations," I said, throwing away the towel and starting to get into the uniform. "Now maybe she'll be a little easier to live with. But how about you? Are you set for the big bash tomorrow night?"

"It's funny, but I think I may be," she answered with a blush. "A bunch of us were

introducing ourselves around, and one of the girls tried to cut me off when I was saying my name. I don't know where I got the nerve, but I raised my voice and told her what you told me last night. You know, that I'm worth knowing and if she didn't want to know me it was her loss. She couldn't have cared less, but a couple of the boys came over to me and asked me to repeat my name. Before they left, they said they'd see me tomorrow night at the dance."

"There you go," I said with a grin of my own as I finished straightening my tie. "Didn't I tell you it would work wonders? I'm just about ready, so shall we go?"

She got up from her bunk, and I let her go through the door first to give myself time to check my right wrist. Being in slightly worse shape, it had healed more slowly than the left one and that hot dishwater hadn't done it any good. When I looked down I could see that the sleeve of the blouse covered it, so I forgot about it. I could do anything that had to be done to it later.

At 1900, I was about to leave the dining hall to report for punishment detail, when Morrison came up to me and stood herself in my way.

"How many demerits did you pick up today, not counting classroom demerits?" she demanded without preamble.

"I didn't get any," I told her honestly. "Why?"

"Because the colonel wants to see you in his office," she said, a thoughtful look about her. "You're supposed to go there now and wait for him. I wonder why he wants to see you."

"Who cares?" I asked, flashing a grin. "I hope he keeps me there for hours. It makes me feel good just to look at him."

"There's no accounting for taste, I suppose," she commented, folding her arms. "I get a different feeling when I look at him." I gave her a blank stare, but knew exactly what she meant. Pete could be very frustrating for a woman, especially if she worked for him. "You'd better get over there," she added. "No sense in making him mad."

I thanked her and left on the run, but slowed down once I got outside. I had too many more hours in front of me to waste whatever strength I had left. When I got to Pete's building, I went in to the reception area to see my old friend the sergeant again. Talk about observant. For the first time I noticed that his name was Cambet. He looked up when I opened the door, and this time found a broad grin for me.

"The colonel said for you to wait in his office," he told me. "He'll be here in a few minutes." I thanked him and was headed for Pete's office when the sergeant spoke to me again. "You know, I couldn't figure out how you kept butting heads with him and still came out as well as you did, but now I know. Like father, like daughter."

I stopped where I was and looked back at him over my shoulder. "Does he know you know?" I asked, swallowing a grin.

"Of course not!" Cambet said, looking and sounding shocked. "Do you think I want to walk a guard post? Uh, you won't tell him, will you?"

"Your secret is safe with me," I assured him, then continued on into Pete's office. I hadn't expected the word to get around that fast, but military bases actually have very few secrets. As long as the gossip is juicy in any way at all, it's guaranteed to spread faster than C.

I checked Pete's desk, and found what I thought I would: Jeff's notes on his class, which covered who was in it and how far they'd gotten with the work. I lit one of Pete's cigarettes then sat down to study Jeff's notes, but hadn't gotten very far when the door opened and Pete came in. He swung the door closed behind him, and came over to the desk.

"Get your tail out of my chair," he growled, gesturing with a thumb. "Sit on the other side where you belong."

I tsked and moved to the guest chair while he reclaimed his own, but before I could get back to the notes he showed he had more to say.

"I have just one question for you," he said, mimicking me. "How many of my proctors did you have to kill to finish the day with no out-of-class demerits?"

"Hardly any at all," I answered in a sober, bland way. "To look at me, you would almost think I was a professional."

"I know you're a professional," he said as he leaned back. "I just won't say a professional what. What story did you give the proctors?"

"What difference does it make?" I asked, arranging the notes in front of me again without looking up at him. "They seem to have bought it, and that's the main concern."

"I would agree with that except for one thing," he said, the growl beginning to come back. "All day today they kept staring at me when they thought I wasn't watching, and I've never seen such a variety of expressions. There's only one thing that could have caused that, and it's your story. Now spill it! I want to know what you told them."

"Trade secret," I said with my head down to hide my grin. "You'd better let me get on with these notes, or I won't be ready for 2100."

"To hell with 2100!" he roared, moving forward again to put his hands flat on the desk. "I want to know what you said!"

I was in the midst of trying to decide how much longer it would be safe to bait him, when Freddy knocked and walked in.

"You said you would handle it and you sure did," he enthused with a grin as soon as

he saw me. "I wish I could have been there when you told them."

He swung the door closed the way Pete had, then came over to stand by Pete's desk.

"I'm glad somebody around here appreciates my genius," I said, examining and buffing my fingernails. "We artists like that."

I found the situation amusing, but Freddy's comment had finally done it for Pete. He sat very straight in his chair and laced his fingers tightly together in the middle of the desktop.

"And we colonels get very nasty when everybody knows what's going on but us," he said too softly, giving me those eyes. "You have thirty seconds to fill me in before I start handing out extra duty that will account for your sack time for the next month!"

The roar he'd ended on was a lot more familiar than the soft tone, and I barely flinched at all.

"Be calm, daddy," I soothed, curious to see how quick he'd be. "You've given your daughter enough trouble already."

He was about to roar at me again, when he chopped it off and stared hard.

"You wouldn't have dared," he muttered in disbelief. "Freddy, tell me she didn't."

"She told the proctors she was the daughter you refused to admit to," Freddy said, looking confused. "Wasn't that what you two had agreed on?"

"Agreed?" Pete exploded. "Since when does she need anyone to agree with her? Ringer warned me to watch out for her, and I thought he'd been working too hard!"

"What are you getting so excited about?" I asked, calm in the face of the storm. "It was the perfect answer to the problem."

"Perfect!" he echoed, back to staring at me. "We'll see how perfect you think it is when this is all over."

"Why?" I asked with a grin, exhaling smoke in his direction. "Were you thinking about adopting me before this came up?"

"I'll adopt you," he growled, shifting in his chair to get comfortable again. "But right now I don't have to. What I don't have the authority to do as your C.O., I have the authority as your 'father.' I'm going to wait until the first time you step out of line, and then I'm really going to give it to you. If you learn nothing else during your time here, you'll learn not to mess with me."

I laughed and picked up the notes again, knowing Pete would get over his upset as soon as he got used to the idea. Freddy went to his own desk, and Pete finally settled down with work of his own. I was deep in the notes when I half-noticed that

the cigarette was about to burn my fingers, so I reached to Pete's ashtray to put it out without really watching what I did. I was trying to figure out what Jeff had and hadn't included in his classes.

"What's that?" Pete demanded out of the blue, startling me.

"What's what?" I asked blankly, looking up to see his frown.

"What's that on your wrist?" he repeated, grabbing my hand. The sleeve had moved back a little when I'd reached to the ashtray, and now he moved it back farther.

"How the hell did you do that?" he demanded, staring at what the sleeve had covered.

"It's just blistered a little," I said, feeling annoyed. "Anybody listening to you would think it was half severed. Let go of my hand."

"The hell you say!" he told me with a glare, still hanging on tight. "Why didn't you go to the infirmary with it? Are you looking for something serious?"

"I was a little busy, and you can't get anything serious from it," I snapped in answer. "You'd better make up your mind whether you want me to do a job or to pamper myself. You can't have it both ways."

"How did it get so blistered?" he demanded, moving the sleeve again to get a better view. "And what are those scars from?"

"It's blistered because the new skin can't take hot water yet," I explained after getting a better grip on my temper. "The scars are from memory lane, and I haven't had the time to have them removed yet. Can I get back to what I was doing, or do you want to check my pulse too?"

"Freddy, get that first-aid kit over here," Pete ordered, then returned his attention to his original victim. "Diana, you need a keeper! The way that wrist looks, it has to hurt. Doesn't the pain bother you even a little?"

"Pete, try to listen to what I'm saying," I told him with a sigh, finally understanding that his disturbance would not go away without some effort on my part. "I know you don't understand how I work, but I'll try to explain it to you. No matter what my feelings are the job comes first, and I've learned to ignore things a lot worse than that wrist to get a job done. If I make it through in a reasonable number of pieces I can always have whatever's wrong taken care of later, but the prime objective is to get through and get out. Bandages are too bulky to fit easily in a field pack, and squeamishness doesn't fit anywhere at all. Now, will you please cool the paternal outrage and let me handle it?"

"No," he denied in a flat voice, finally letting my hand go. "While you're under my command you'll take care of yourself the same way everyone else does. This isn't a hostile planet with everyone against you. You won't be shot for showing up on sick call."

"That's funny," I commented, glad to be able to lean back again. "I hadn't noticed the difference. Why are you making such a big deal out of this?"

"Because it explains a note I got this morning," he said, giving me a narrow-eyed inspection. "When are you scheduled for your physical?"

"I'm not," I answered. "Someone must have decided I look too healthy to need one, and frankly I couldn't be happier. I've had enough of doctors and hospitals for a while."

"You'll show up at the infirmary at 0700 tomorrow," he said with a renewed growl, reaching over to make a note on his desk pad. "I thought this Valdon Carter was a nut when he sent me a message telling me to have the doctors check you over at regular intervals, but I can see he knows you better than I do. Who is he?"

"He's a well known congenital idiot!" I snarled. Even from a hundred and fifty miles away, he was still giving me a hard time! "If you're smart you won't listen to a thing he says. He's touched in the head, but you have to get to know him to realize it. It isn't worth the trouble."

"Give me that wrist!" Freddy said sharply from next to me. He'd gotten the first-aid kit, and he put it on Pete's desk to open it.

"Will you two quit acting as if I'm at death's door?" I said in exasperation. "It's only blistered a little!"

"Let him take care of it," Pete ordered ominously.

I looked from one grim face to the other, then gave Freddy my wrist. Men! If they aren't beating on you, they're doctoring you. Freddy smeared some glop on, then added a neat little bandage. All he left out was a pink ribbon. When he finished, I went back to the notes without saying a word. If I ever got a headache around there, they'd call in the specialists.

I finished the notes at about 2040 and Freddy wanted to go directly to the hopper, but I told him I had to make a stop at my quarters first. When I got to the room, I told Elaine and Linda that I had extra duty and wouldn't be back for a while. Without letting them see what I was doing I got the second souvenir I'd picked up the day before, then grabbed a jacket. On the way out, I also left a copy of my pass on the OD's desk. I didn't need proctors searching the hills for me.

We got to the hopper field and on our way right on time. Freddy set the course after we were airborne and let the automatic pilot take over, then he leaned back.

"You know, I never realized before how casual you are about getting hurt," he said. "You can't be that used to it."

"I'm not used to it," I returned with a laugh. "No one has that kind of cool. You just have to learn not to let it bother you when you can't do anything about it."

"Well, you can do plenty about it here," he came back with a frown. "If I ever catch you letting something like that go again, I'll spank you till the tears come."

I stared at him in the faint light of the control console, close to being open-mouthed.

"Freddy, you're not for real," I finally managed to say. "Do you remember the last time I was here at 2, about two and a half years ago? You got mad about that innocent little gag I pulled on you, and decided to do something to get even. That something was handing me a challenge for a fight with padded kenji sticks. We both got away lucky because your longer reach made up for my greater speed, but it did get kind of brisk. If I recall correctly you weren't too concerned about my getting hurt then, and you never, ever threatened to spank me. What makes things so different now?"

He was quiet for a minute, thinking about it. "I don't know," he said at last. "I can't see myself handing you a challenge now, but spanking you seems so ... natural."

"Natural," I repeated, giving in to the urge to close my eyes. "I've got to get rid of this face before it's the last thing I do."

"What are you talking about?" he asked in confusion, causing me to look at him again. It would have been interesting to go into details, but I decided I needed a short rest from the interesting.

"I'm not talking about anything," I answered with a headshake. "Just a slight matter of sanity. But don't you worry about it. Raving lunacy doesn't hurt much after they put you in a rubber room."

"Diana, don't you ever get dizzy thinking thoughts like that?" he asked, an odd curiosity showing in his light eyes. "I get dizzy just listening to them."

"I guess I'm built of sterner stuff," I answered with a sigh, then crossed my legs. "So let's change the subject. I hear that the hunting from 2 is better than ever. What are the chances of our getting a little action one of these nights?"

"Are you crazy?" he suddenly shouted, twisting around to put his hand on the back of his seat. "If Pete ever heard you ask a question like that, nothing on this world or any other would save you! He's been working like mad to get the people in Flowerville talked out of a concerted attack on 2! Those lunatic agents and would-be agents there have been sneaking out and killing locals every time the mood strikes them, and now you want to go too?"

"I notice that you're not counting the agents and would-be agents the harmless villagers of Flowerville have accounted for first!" I countered hotly, twisting around the way he had. "They're the ones who first decided a few ambushes would nicely fill a long and dreary night. It's their game and we play by their rules. Any decent people left a long time ago, when the mines played out. All that's left now is the dregs who are too lazy or too stupid to move on to a better planet. Are you really so

softhearted that you cry when they get what they ask for?"

He made an effort to get control of his anger, then ran a weary hand through his light hair.

"Look, Diana," he muttered, glancing down at his palms. "I can't deny that what you say is true. But Pete is trying to put a stop to this trouble, and as far as I'm concerned what he wants, I want. I've worked for him too long for it to be any other way."

I calmed down too, and studied him for a minute.

"You really are fond of that stubborn old man, aren't you?" I asked. "You should have told me, brother, then I never would have tempted you. Let's both call him 'daddy' when we get back."

"Don't you 'brother' me," he said with a grin, poking a finger at me. "I've been trying to get you into a dark corner since the first time we met, and I have no intention of dropping the idea just because you changed your looks. How about stopping off for a drink in my quarters when we get back? I'll close my eyes and pretend you're not a cadet."

"Freddy, love, you don't have quarters, you have a parlor," I told him with a laugh. "But you're set up for flies, not black widows. And besides that, I never drink when I'm working - but don't stop trying. It's good for my ego."

"It's not doing much for mine, but surrender is not the military way," he responded, a sigh clear in the words before his tone suddenly changed. "Hey, take a look down there. They must be busy tonight."

I looked out the hopper window to where he pointed, and then looked away again. Even in the dark the looming bulk of Blue Skies was much too familiar, the activity going on meaning a lot of unpleasantness had happened to somebody. Being rushed to Blue Skies was never something an agent looked forward to, even if they were in any condition to look forward to things...

"We should be at 2 in another minute," I commented in a very casual way, brushing at a crease in Freddy's uniform blouse. "I hope you've been practicing your landings. The last time I was black and blue all over."

"One more crack about my landings and you'll be black and blue all over again," he countered, pushing my hand away. "Before the landing."

I grinned but didn't say anything else, and sure enough, he messed up the landing again. Normally he had no more trouble with landings than with any other part of the flight, but my commenting on it made him think about it and that was a sure-fire guarantee that something would go wrong.

It was a short walk from the hopper field to the large, well-lit building that housed the

quarters and classrooms of the people at 2. We passed the guards, then found our way to the room the class was being held in. Freddy said he hoped there wouldn't be too many apples on the desk, and we both laughed as we walked in. You don't find many apple polishers at 2.

I took off my jacket and threw it on the desk, then looked around at the audience. There were about twenty of them, men and women, and there wasn't a servile face in the bunch. When I checked the back of the room my eyebrows rose in surprise, but when I stopped to think about the matter it was obvious that Val would be there. He hadn't been on Jeff's class list because Jeff had left the same day Val and I had arrived. Val was staring at me as if he hadn't seen me for a month, and his gaze kept shifting to Freddy.

"Hey!" somebody said in a loud voice. "I thought this class was for grownups. Isn't it time for little kiddies to be home in bed?"

I found the big-mouth, a young, dark-haired, freedom-loving kind of squirt, and looked him over.

"You must be something else in diplomacy class," I observed. "Meet the new teacher."

Somebody else might have thought about it, but he was the brash sort who knew all the answers.

"Come on!" he snorted. "This class is handled only by Special Agents. If you're a Special Agent, why are you dressed up like a cadet? And why aren't you carrying any of the newest weapons?"

Knowing Jeff, I'd known I'd run into the weapons question. Jeff had a weakness for every new toy the research department came up with, and he liked to show them off. Happily he dropped the weakness when he got down to business, but infiltration class didn't qualify.

"What I wear is my business," I answered without anger, "and I'm an old-fashioned girl." I brought the knife out of my thigh sheath fast, and flipped it into the wooden desk. It was a good class ... only half of them jumped. "I happen to like old-fashioned weapons."

"Where did you get that?" Freddy demanded, coming away from the wall he'd been leaning on. "Pete still has the original you were carrying."

"It's funny you should mention that," I said, turning my head to look at him.

"Somehow, coming home from Pete's office yesterday afternoon, I must have lost my way. I found myself in this big place with thousands of these things, and since there were so many I decided no one would miss just one so I borrowed it."

"You broke into the armory!" he accused as a light ripple of laughter went through the room. "Wait until Pete finds out about this!"

"You can't break into a place that has no locks," I told him primly. "All you can do is stay away from the guards. And Freddy, I want to ask you something privately." I wiggled a finger at him, and he came close. "Did Pete ever find out what happened to that box of Leverian cigars that disappeared on him?" I put very softly.

Freddy flushed and stared at me. "Ruining them was an accident, but how did you find out about it?" he demanded in a hiss. "You weren't even here!"

"I've got friends," I replied with a grin, keeping my voice low. "Those friends usually find out whatever there is to find out. If Pete hears about my knife, you can be sure he'll hear about those cigars."

"That's blackmail," he growled, putting his fists on his hips.

"Is that what it's called?" I asked in the mildest of tones. "I've always looked on it as swapping favors. Does Pete still foam at the mouth at the thought of those cigars?"

"You win," he conceded, not looking at all pleased. "But there's got to be something in that story about you being related to Pete. You're too much like him for it to be an accident."

I laughed and turned back to the class as Freddy returned to his piece of wall. The class members hadn't heard much of what had gone on between Freddy and me, but they had seen him back down. It had satisfied most of them, but not loudmouth.

"You can't tell me a knife comes anywhere near a disruptor," he insisted, waving a hand at me. "You can't do anything with a knife."

"I'll bet your name is Nalvidi," I said as I looked him up and down, and the rest of the class chuckled.

Loudmouth frowned. "Sure my name is Nalvidi," he returned belligerently. "What about it?"

"This about it," I said with patience, pulling the knife out of the hardwood desktop. "If you're so foolish as to go on with this course of training, you will one day find yourself in a place where you have to get by a very alert guard. But the place will also be one where the first vibration of a disruptor will set off about six hundred different alarms. You will then have two choices: either go back where you came from without completing your assignment, or doing this."

There was a sectioned figure of a man on a chart hanging on the wall to my left. It had the cardinal death points marked out in red and was obviously a visual aid for another class, but that didn't mean I couldn't make use of it. I threw the knife hard, and it buried itself in the heart section of the chart and went part way into the wall.

"I know Jeff likes to play with all of the newest weapons, but he can do that too," I continued into a pleasing silence. "So can most of us. I usually carry a nonmetallic knife as well, but I'm traveling light these days."

I'd spoken dryly and had glanced at Val. He sat there showing faint amusement as he enjoyed the show, but that was only because he didn't know it was soon to be his turn.

"But what happens if the guy is in armor and there are no alarms to set off?" Nalvidi insisted again.

"Then you use a disruptor, if you've learned which end of it to point," I came back, finally losing patience. "I'm not saying a knife is the only weapon you should concern yourself with, because I've learned to handle most of the conventional ones around. I'm trying to tell you that flexibility is the key. Don't ever fall so in love with a plan or weapon that you stick to it no matter what new information you come across. That's the fastest way to a cheap funeral."

I was wasting my breath with Nalvidi, who sat there with a stubborn, disbelieving look on his face, and I knew that as well as Jeff had known, but I said it anyway. Nalvidi wasn't the only one in the class; if what I said made some of the others think, it was worth it.

"I know just about where Jeff left off, and we'll get on with it in a minute," I continued. "Right now I'd like to tell you something about how I run a class. You'll never find me taking attendance, and if half of you don't show up from now on I won't even notice. I don't give exams because they're a waste of time; either you learn this stuff or you don't. I already know it, and that's one of the reasons why I'm still alive. If you think you can do without it, go ahead and try. It's not my neck.

"You will, however, be expected to pass a final exam in this course, but don't start making up gyp sheets. The final is a field test, and wherever you get sent, don't think for a minute that the ammunition isn't live. And don't try to pump me for locations, because I have nothing to do with that part of it.

"That's just about it except for one last thing that doesn't really belong in this course, but I'll throw it in anyway." I turned to Val and purred, "Agent Carter, when you're out on business, what's the only thing that should be concerning you?"

Val's amusement strengthened, and he opted for the game of "bait the teacher."

"The blue-eyed redhead you've got your arms around?" he asked with full innocence. The class broke up, so I smilingly waited for them to run down. Val had played right into my hands, but then nothing he could have said would have saved him.

"That's not as funny as it sounds," I said when they were finally quiet. "Agent Carter's my partner, and that's why we're both here now. It was what was concerning him the last time we were out together, and we were almost killed because of it." Then I gave Val a significant look. "That sort of thing makes your partner think about finding someone else to team with."

The class wasn't laughing any longer, and most of them had turned to stare at Val. He, on the other hand, was staring at me, and there was no expression on his face. He had to have been feeling the stupidity of what he'd almost done on Xanadu, but in a way the situation also paid him back for the needling he'd done over the last couple of weeks. He could have tried to protest the interpretation I'd put on his actions, but if he had he would have sounded as if he were making excuses. He had no choice but to sit there and take it, and that was fine with me.

"Let's get on with the work," I continued, ignoring Val and his displeasure. "Jeff had you memorize infiltration info on a particular target. Who's supposed to lead the way?"

A girl signaled casually with her hand, and I was surprised to see that she was a blue-eyed redhead too. She must have had fun with Val's comment.

"I have that pleasure and privilege," she said with a grin. "My name is Hughes."

Jeff had had some interesting things to say about Hughes, and I was curious to see if he was right. "Okay, Hughes," I agreed. "Take it away."

The girl leaned back in her chair and began to explain the infiltration problem, but I didn't need her commentary to recall the time in detail. Margaret Renistow had been appointed ambassador to the planet Dagristol with a good deal of nervousness on the part of the Council, but not because Margaret was unqualified. Madam Renistow was an excellent ambassador with a brilliant career record behind her, but Dagristol is a planet of nonhumans with a long track record of making trouble.

Someone decided that Margaret would have the best chance to calm the Dagrists with her charm and wit. Before the thing was thought all the way through, the new ambassador had already taken up residence in the Federation's embassy on Dagristol. If anyone had bothered to check, they would have discovered that the Dagrists had an exaggerated sense of protection toward their own rather delicate females. But if anyone had bothered to check, they probably would have come up with the wrong conclusions.

When the Dagrists laid eyes on Margaret, they immediately attached the wrong sort of importance to the deference shown her and promptly kidnapped her. Their letter of demands ran about five-and-a-half pages, listing everything they could think of to ask for and then some, but the ambassador's place of detention was included in the letter of announcement they sent. The Council requested a short time to consider the demands, all the time counting on the Special Agent who had been sent to get Margaret back where she belonged.

Hughes described the building where the ambassador had been held, then went into the details of the infiltration itself. She went along step by step, and I didn't say a word until she was more than half way through.

"I go gracefully down the central hall until I come to a series of arches," Hughes

said, pointing with her right hand, her eyes up toward the ceiling in memory. "I decide that the third arch holds the most appeal for me, so I tiptoe through - "

"And then gracefully fall down dead," I interrupted with a pleasant smile. "The third arch is boobytrapped. It's the fourth arch that's clearable."

She studied me for a moment then asked quietly, "How do you know? You're not even following the master."

"Jeff needed the master but I don't," I said, shifting on the edge of the desk where I'd been sitting. "This was my operation and you don't forget things like that."

She flipped up some papers, and checked her copy of the master. "D. Santee," she mused.

"D. for Diana," I supplied. "I know you think this exercise is B for boring and I can't really blame you, but this is one subject in which on the job training gets a bit hazardous. You have to have some idea of what to expect when it's your turn at the real thing. Getting used to memorizing data properly can drive you up the wall, but you'll find it comes in handy."

She thought about it with her head part way down, then raised her eyes again. "Would you mind if I started over?" she asked.

"Go right ahead," I agreed with a smile, gesturing to her. "And you can be as graceful as you like."

She grinned and started again, and this time went all the way through without a mistake. I would not normally have allowed a second chance - after all, you so rarely get them in real life - but she didn't need the point belabored. And I suppose my mellowness of mood was added to by the memory of how indignantly funny Margaret had been when I'd found her.

She'd been ready to take on the whole planet in personal combat, nearly crowning me with a stool before realizing I was there to get her out. It had taken more than a little diplomacy on my part to get her calmed down enough to follow me without going off on her own. If she had she would have tripped every alarm and boobytrap in the place, but once we'd started back she'd followed my orders precisely and without question.

She was a big woman, nearly bigger than me, and had taken great pleasure in giving me a hand when we ran into a small Dagri patrol. Once all the dust had cleared, she'd insisted on my joining her on her private yacht for a small celebration. It turned out that she knew my mother, and between drinks and courses of food we uncovered a number of other mutual acquaintances. Not every assignment ends as pleasantly as that one had, and it was nice to have a memory like that to look back on.

Things went well after that, and I was relieved to find that there was only one Nalvidi. Some of the women and fewer of the men would not make it unless a miracle

happened, but that was about average. At 2300 I wrapped it up, telling them I'd see them again on day 1 of the following week. I was over near the chart, trying to get my knife out of the wall, when Val came up behind me.

"I want to talk to you," he growled, hovering threateningly over my head. "I think you need some adjustments made in your sense of humor."

I got the knife free, replaced it in the thigh sheath, then turned to smile pleasantly at him.

"Not while I'm the teacher," I informed him gently. "If you get a bad evaluation in this course the Council will have to find something else for you to do, because they won't dare turn you loose as an agent. Was there anything else you wanted?"

"You can bet on it," he answered, giving me that old look. "We're still going to have that private talk, and I'll take my chances with the Council."

He wrapped his hand around my arm, but suddenly Freddy was there right next to us.

"Are you ready to leave, Diana?" he asked in a calm and quiet way. "Your pass won't be good beyond 2330."

Val let go of me, and he and Freddy looked at each other. Women examine other women with an eye out for possible competition, but men tend to have a stallion-of-the-herd complex. If they're anything alike physically, they measure each other wondering who would win if it got down to fists and feet.

"Freddy Drummond, meet Val Carter," I put in, wondering if either one of them would hear me. "I'm set now, Freddy. All I need is my jacket."

I went to get the jacket from the desk and came back with it, and Val and Freddy still hadn't said a word to each other. So I walked to the door and waited, and a long moment later Freddy tore himself away and joined me.

"You didn't have to do that," I said as we left the classroom and made our way down the hall. "He's always threatening me ... I think it's his persecution complex."

"Is it really his fault that you're stuck here as a cadet?" Freddy asked, his voice tight and his eyes looking straight ahead.

"Partly," I responded, glancing over at Freddy. "But only partly. I thought you knew me better than that."

"You can't mean you were lying?" he demanded in unexplained outrage, stopping short to turn and stare down at me. "Don't you know what everyone in that room thinks of him now? They think he can't keep his mind out of a bed long enough to do a job right! That's a hell of a thing to do to somebody!"

"Well, I beg your pardon," I said, looking him up and down. "If I'd known he was

your father I would have restrained myself."

Freddy reddened and scowled at me. "I ought to break your neck," he rasped, and then strode away.

"Hey!" I yelled after him, knowing none of that made any sense. "What is the matter with you?"

He stopped short again, then turned back to me.

"I was going to hit him for you," he growled, his fists tightly clenched, his face a mask of fury. "What does that make me?"

"Somebody with a lousy memory," I answered, suddenly regretting his pain as I moved up to where he stood. "Can't you remember I can take care of myself?"
Freddy - "

"No!" he snapped, refusing to hear anything more from me. "Let's go."

He strode off down the hall again, leaving me to follow after him to the landing field. I tried everything I could think of to jolly him out of it, but we got back to the Academy's hopper field and he was still answering in monosyllables. The one thing that bothered me most was the fact that his landing was perfect.

Chapter 9

0500 came too early the next morning. I groaned out of bed and managed to get out quickly by ignoring the fact that my heart wasn't beating yet. Morrison and Olveri came by with the same routine, and I responded perfectly if somewhat blurrily. The calisthenics woke me up enough so that I was able to get in to breakfast at the same time as the day before. After Pete got there I started out for my first class, but Morrison stopped me at the door.

"Where are you headed?" she asked, leaning one shoulder against the doorjamb.

"To my first class," I answered, surprised at the question.

"Wrong," she said. "You were ordered to be somewhere else at 0700, remember? I'm here to see that you don't lose your way."

"Where am I supposed to be?" I put with a frown. "I don't remember any orders about - oh."

All at once the memory came back. Pete and his hysterics of the night before.

"'Oh' is right," Morrison said, opening the door so that the two of us could go through. When we were out on the street she added, "It looks like your campaign

might be working on the colonel after all. He told me to make sure you got over to the infirmary. Sounds like he's getting concerned about you."

"I don't want him to be concerned that way," I grumbled, kicking at a pebble. "He's treating me like a baby. I don't know how he found out I'd hurt myself, but you should have heard him! He went on for hours! But at least he was talking to me."

"Was that all he did?" she asked, glancing sideways at me. "You were over there an awfully long time."

She was talking about the time I'd spent at 2. She must have been checking up on me, so it was time to do a bit of inventing.

"No, that's not all he did," I answered in a low voice, looking down at my feet. "He did something else too."

"What?" she asked with fairly well hidden amusement.

I glanced at her and then sighed. "He was so mad I hadn't said anything about being hurt that he had me stand in a corner for more than two hours," I grugged. "See? He thinks I'm a baby, and I couldn't even see him from there."

"Believe me, that's progress," she said with a gentle laugh. "He has to start out treating you like a baby to get himself used to the fact that you're his daughter. Once he's used to it, he'll be able to treat you like a young woman."

"How long will that take?" I asked, adding another sigh. "I don't know how long I can stand it."

"Don't complain," she advised. "There are worse things than standing in a corner."

We had reached the infirmary, so we dropped the discussion and went on in to the narrow, antiseptic-smelling reception area. There was a corpsman on duty behind the counter, and when he looked up I gave him my name.

"Oh, yes," he said, checking a paper. "There's a doctor waiting for you in room eight. You can go right in."

I gave Morrison a wry look, then followed the arrow signs down a corridor to the left to room eight. I opened the door, took one look at the doctor, then got inside fast and closed the door behind me.

"Hi, Diana," the doctor said with a grin. "You're looking different these days."

"What the hell are you doing here, Ralph?" I demanded, barely seeing the plain, light green examining room. "Are you trying to blow this whole thing for me?"

"Wasn't my idea," he responded with a shrug, leaning one arm on the high, padded table. Ralph is a tall man in his forties who has never had the least doubt that being a doctor means you're responsible for the entire human race. He was looking me over

carefully but only as a possible patient, and I had often wondered if he had ever noticed that I was a woman.

"Pete called me last night after 2100," Ralph continued, "and told me that if I wasn't here by 0700 he'd arrange my own private firing squad."

"What is wrong with that man?" I fumed, seeing Pete's face in my mind's eye and wishing he was within throttling distance. "Doesn't he have any doctors around here? Did he have to go all the way to Blue Skies to find someone to bandage my wrist?"

"He mentioned something about a physical too," Ralph said in his driest tone, not in the least upset by my mood. "The way he spoke, I almost believe he's had you as a patient too."

I put my hands on my hips to stare at him for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"All right," I conceded, but not very graciously. "Let's get it over with. Does anyone around here know you're from Blue Skies?"

"Sorry, but they do," he apologized, his mild gaze serious. "Does it make that much of a difference?"

"It might if anyone starts to wonder why I need a doctor from the special hospital to take my temperature," I said, starting to peel off the uniform. "If that happens I'll play dumb, but I'll also take the first opportunity to give Pete a king-sized headache. Then he can call you back to treat him."

Ralph chuckled, but the conversation had no chance to distract him from business. I stretched out on the padded table, and he went to work without a word. The physical was fast but really thorough, as he'd gotten a lot of practice working at Blue Skies. When he had finished, he put aside the last of his instruments to study me.

"You're still working, I see," he observed. "Why did you need the surroskin?"

"I took too long a bath and my own skin shrank," I answered, putting my hands behind my head. "Are you thinking of starting a new career in asking silly questions?"

"You're a lot more tense than I like to see," he said quietly. "And whatever it is that you ran into, you're not all the way back yet. How tired do you feel these days?"

"No worse than usual when I don't get a solid fourteen hours," I said, stretching a little. "Are you trying to tell me I should be off on a beach somewhere, I hope?"

"It's not that bad," he returned with a small laugh, then watched as I sat up, got off the table, and started to get dressed again. "Just take it as easy as you can for a while. No sense in looking for trouble. And no more hot water on that wrist. If you can't get the grime off with warm, leave it there."

"Clever, doctor, very clever," I said with a grudging grin as I retied my tie. "Can I

get out of here now?"

"Go ahead," he said, gesturing toward the door with one hand. "But if you run into any problems, call me. I don't mind making house calls for old customers."

"Ex-customers," I corrected with a last glance at him, and then I left.

Morrison was gone, but she had left word that I could go back to schedule as soon as I was through. I walked into my first class thirty-five minutes late, only to find that the proctor in charge hadn't heard about any special orders. I almost told him where I'd been before I remembered what he might hear if he called the infirmary to check. I opted for "No excuse, sir," took the five demerits, then spent the remaining time there telling myself that if something horrible happened to Pete it would make more problems, not fewer.

By the time I got to the next class, I almost had myself convinced. The only change from the day before was being ordered to an empty room to spend the time between 1230 and 1300, and 1700 and 1740. Pete knew I needed time to put together evaluations and progress reports for the class at 2, so he'd arranged for some privacy. When the time was up I found a good place in the room for the almost finished reports, and left them there. I went back at 1910, but had to cut it short. I was due at the dance at 1930, and probably would have been arrested if I'd turned up late.

The dance was being held in the mess hall, and when I got there I looked around at all the shining young faces. In spite of the size of the crowd I spotted Elaine talking to a boy who looked interested in her. I smiled faintly, then tried to lose myself among all the uniforms. If brown-eyes couldn't find me he couldn't pester me, but my luck hadn't changed poles yet. I was squeezing between the tightly packed bodies the sidelines of a dance always have, when my arm was grabbed from the left. I turned my head, and the boy's grinning face was right there.

"For a while I thought I'd never find you, then I remembered to look for that red hair," he said, still holding onto my arm. "I'm sure glad you're not a brunette."

"You really know how to hurt a girl, don't you?" I commented. "Isn't there anyone else in this whole place for you to annoy?"

"Nope," he returned with a grin. "You're the one and only love of my life. Why didn't you tell me you're the Commandant's daughter? That makes it even better."

"How did you hear about that?" I asked with a frown.

"It's all over the place," he answered in surprise. "Was it supposed to be a secret?"

"Not exactly," I muttered. I'd hoped the story would spread through the proctor ranks, but I hadn't expected it to get to the cadets this quickly.

"Let's dance," he said, then pushed me ahead of him toward the center of the floor. I

gave up and went along quietly, wondering how long these dances lasted. If it took too long, I'd probably end up in a straight jacket.

We danced for about half an hour, and I might have enjoyed it in spite of everything if the running around I'd done for the last couple of days hadn't started to catch up with me. I felt tired from the inside out, and that kind of tiredness isn't easy to ignore.

"How about taking a break, brown-eyes?" I suggested after we'd finished flying to something called "Good Golly, Miss Molly." "I'd hate to have to be carried off the floor."

"Sure," he agreed pleasantly, "but my name's Doug, Doug Sammerin. Didn't I tell you?"

"No," I said positively. "If I'd ever heard your name I know I wouldn't have forgotten."

"That proves it," he said, chucking me under the chin. "You really do like me, don't you?"

There was just nothing to say to that. We got some unknown poison disguised as fruit punch and sipped it, then went back to the dance floor. A low, dreamy number had started, and Doug had just put his arms around me when a hand and arm reached from behind me to tap him on the shoulder.

"Cutting in," said a much too familiar voice, and I turned to see Val standing there with a faint smile on his face. I glanced at Doug, but he was staring at the Agent First Class I.D. Val wore.

"How many of these guys do you know?" Doug asked plaintively, his eyes glued to the I.D.

"At least one too many," I responded dryly, then looked at Doug sideways. "You're not going to let him cut in, are you?"

"Are you kidding?" Doug asked in a squeaky voice, turning a bit pale as he stared up at Val. "I think I need some more of that fruit punch."

He backed off quickly then turned and disappeared into the crowd, so I looked back at Val.

"Hail the conquering hero," I said, sweeping my arm out to one side.

"And don't you forget it," he replied with a nod, then reached over and put his arms around me. He held me to him and started to move to the music, guiding my steps as if he'd been doing it all his life. I wasn't sure how I felt about his being there and wasn't about to stop and ask myself, but the tiredness I'd felt had somehow increased quite a lot.

"Where did you learn to dance?" I finally asked as we moved smoothly over the floor. "You're not the same wallflower I knew just a short while ago."

"Oh, I picked it up here and there," he answered, holding me a little closer. "I've always been a quick study."

"Then when are you going to learn to stay where you belong?" I asked, ignoring how good his arms felt around me. "You have no business being here."

"Don't tell me you're going to have trouble explaining me away," he asked with what was probably supposed to be shock. "I find that hard to believe."

"There's nothing to explain," I replied with a shrug. "We got to know each other on the liner coming here, remember? I guess you just decided to renew the acquaintanceship."

"That sounds reasonable," he agreed in a murmur, and I moved my head back to get a better look at him.

"What are you up to?" I asked with suddenly awakening suspicion. "When you agree with me, I must be saying something wrong."

"I'm not up to anything," he said with his own shrug. "I just came to dance with Colonel Rodriguez's daughter. And such a young daughter she is, too. I'll be that if she did anything out of the way, the colonel would make her regret the day she was born."

"Val," I began with a frown. "You wouldn't - "

"Explain this away," he said, his tone as dry as his gaze was hard. He stopped dancing, held me so tight I couldn't breathe, then kissed me as though we were alone together in bed. I pounded at him with my fists, but I might as well have been waving them in the air. Normally I could have gouged his eyes with my thumbs, dug my fingernails in his ear lobes, gone for the pain spots under his jaw - anything! But I wasn't supposed to know about things like that. I struggled and managed to knee him while pretending to kick his shins, and when he folded a little with the pain I pulled loose.

We were standing in almost the exact center of the hall, and in all that crowd there wasn't a single sound to be heard or a single eye that wasn't on us. Then there were a lot of sharp, rustling noises that started behind me and spread quickly to the rest of the hall. When I saw everyone in view standing at attention I turned slowly - to see Pete standing ramrod straight watching everything that was happening. With a silent groan, I also got to attention.

"What's going on here?" Pete growled, coming closer to stare at Val.

"Sir, he - " I began, but Pete cut me off.

"Not you," he ordered, keeping his eyes directly on Val. "You."

"It's all my fault, Colonel," Val said, looking really and truly ashamed of himself. "I shouldn't have come here, but we did get to know each other on the liner coming out, and I thought that seeing her one more time wouldn't hurt anything. I know she's really too young to completely understand what she's doing, but I'm old enough to understand and should have controlled myself no matter what she said or did. I'd like to apologize for what happened, and assure you that it will never happen again."

Hearing all that, I wanted to close my eyes with the pain. No fifteen-year-old girl is too young to understand about sex, no matter where she comes from. Pete moved his green-ice eyes to me, then looked somewhat past me.

"Major Drummond," he said. "Have you been here long enough to see the beginning of this?"

I hadn't known that Freddy was in the hall until he came out of the crowd to stand beside me.

"Yes, sir," he told Pete. "I saw the whole thing. I beg your pardon, Colonel, but it did seem as if she was - ah - encouraging him."

Pete turned back to Val, and that was when Freddy leaned toward me and whispered, "I remembered this time. Go ahead and protect yourself."

"I think you'd better leave now," Pete was saying to Val while I told myself I was being an idiot for feeling odd. So what if they'd ganged up on me at a time when I wasn't free to fight back? Wasn't that the way the universe usually handled things? I just hadn't thought they would ... foolish of me...

"I think you'd better leave now," Pete said to Val. "I'll see that this is straightened out, but you'd better understand that it won't be smart if you come back."

"I do understand," Val said in a quiet, serious way. "Good night, Colonel, and I hope you accept my apology."

Pete watched Val leave, then he turned back to me and his green eyes were frozen solid.

"As for you," he growled, "you come with me."

He grabbed my left wrist then took off for the kitchen, dragging me along behind him. He moved so fast that I almost couldn't keep up, forcing me to half run just to stay on my feet. He blasted through the swinging doors, stopped about ten feet inside, then pulled me around in a half circle to face him.

"Sir, he's lying," I said quickly, knowing the war was lost but still needing to try. "I didn't - "

"Is Freddy lying too?" he rapped in a fury, still holding tight to my wrist. "If I hadn't

taken his suggestion and come here to check on you tonight, you probably would have gotten away with it! Whoever that agent is, I doubt if he would have reported you!"

I realized then that Val's name hadn't been clearly visible on his I.D. If Pete had seen the name he might have suspected I was being framed. I wanted to tell him who Val was, but there were dozens of faces pressed close to the glass in the kitchen doors and double dozens of ears opened wide.

"Sir, please listen to me," I tried again, trying to pull myself out of the weariness that had joined the tiredness. Weariness isn't the same feeling, but I might as well have saved my breath. Pete was still too mad to listen to anything.

"If you came here with the express purpose of embarrassing me, you've achieved your goal," he rasped. "You'll forgive me if I return the favor."

He dropped to one knee, pushed me over the other one, and started to return the favor in the way he'd once said he would. He was really furious, but after only a very short while he seemed to get it out of his system. He pushed me back to my feet and stood, then he stalked over to the kitchen doors. The faces disappeared as if by magic, and he opened one of the doors.

"Morrison!" he roared. "In here!" When Morrison came rushing up, he growled, "Take her back to her quarters and see that she stays there until further notice."

Morrison crooked a finger at me, so I went to her without comment. Pete was surely still glaring at me, but he'd gotten his own back so there was no reason to look at him. Instead I followed Morrison through the unnatural quiet of the mess hall and outside, where she stopped and turned to me.

"I told you there were worse things than standing in a corner," she said with an annoyance that was almost personal. "If you were trying to show him you're not a baby, you couldn't have picked a worse way."

"I guess you're right," I agreed, still working to stay in character. "But at least he did get it out of his system."

"I wouldn't count on that," she warned, starting us walking again. "Tonight you brought out the father in him, but tomorrow I'm willing to bet that the colonel will be back in charge."

I realized she was probably right, but there was nothing I could do about that either. We walked back to my quarters, and once I was inside she closed the door and left me alone. I stripped and lit a cigarette before getting into bed, but refused to let myself think about what had happened. I still had a job to do, and thinking personal thoughts while working isn't a very good idea.

Linda and Elaine got back together, and Elaine blushed and refused to look at me. Linda, though, surprised me by not gloating. She stopped near my bunk and looked

down at me, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger.

"I have to admit that he was worth it," she grudged. "Where did you find him?"

I turned away from the deep interest she showed without answering. Any answer I could have given just would have proved how gullible I really am.

Chapter 10

I missed calisthenics the next morning, but I missed breakfast too. Day 7 is usually a day off, devoted to whatever you'd like to use it for, and I'd been looking forward to it to catch up on some sleep. But when Morrison called for me at 0800, I could tell from her face that sleep was the last thing I'd be getting.

"Let's go," she said with a sigh. "The colonel is back in charge." I left my bunk without a word, and when we got outside she headed directly for the exercise fields. "You've got a full day ahead of you," she added, "and I don't think he considers you a baby anymore."

She glanced at me as if expecting me to comment, but there wasn't really much to be said. I walked along in silence, trying to resign myself to what was coming, but it didn't work very well. There was a male proctor waiting at the exercise fields, and he looked like the patient but humorless sort.

"There's a set of fatigues inside the equipment shed," he said in a flat voice. "Get in them fast and come back out. We have a lot to cover."

I changed out of my uniform in the equipment shed, and came back out to find Morrison already gone. The male proctor, though, was still very much there.

"The colonel would like you to begin with a brisk trot around the track," the man said, pointing toward the large dirt oval that we stood near. "In fact, he'd like you to go a number of times around it."

When he didn't add anything I asked, "How many times, sir?"

"You'll find out when you're finished," the man said with the hint of a smile, and then it vanished. "Get started."

There was no way to argue so I trotted around the track until I'd almost worn a rut in it, but the proctor just stood and watched. I was starting what seemed like the four hundredth lap when I tripped and almost fell, and that seemed to wake him up.

"That's enough for now," he called out. "You can finish the rest later. Right now I have another job for you."

I was sweating and short of breath as he led me through the dust to the back of the equipment shed and pointed to a stack of boxes.

"Those just came in, but they're in the wrong place," he said. "Move them around to the front of the shed."

I barely glanced at him before grabbing the first box. It wasn't too heavy, not when it felt like it was only half full of lead, but the interesting part of the exercise was yet to come. That would be when the man decided he didn't want the boxes around the front of the shed after all, and I'd have to move them back. I wore a rut around the shed to the left bringing them out and a matching one to the right taking them back, and when I had finally finished there wasn't enough oxygen left in the air.

"It's after 1200 hours," the proctor mused, looking at his wrist. "I think I'll get some lunch. You can rest while I'm gone, but don't worry. I won't be long."

I watched him leave before I collapsed where I was. I stretched out flat on the ground, the dull glare of a dust-covered noon baking down on me, fighting not to think how much better a job Eternity would have done that time instead of the Glue.

The proctor came back in about twenty-five minutes, and after he'd given me a drink of water we started all over again. I spent the first two hundred laps around the track wondering where the bread was.

It was late in the afternoon and I'd been standing at attention for more than an hour when Freddy showed up. The proctor glanced at him, then moved far enough away so that he was out of hearing range. I kept my eyes straight ahead and didn't move, and Freddy stared at me as if he were trying to figure out where to start.

"Diana, I'm sorry!" he said at last, his voice rough and uneven, his eyes filled with hurt as he looked at me. "I didn't mean for it to go this far! I thought Pete would be satisfied with spanking you... I tried to tell him I'd helped to set you up, but he won't listen to me. He thinks I'm trying to protect you."

Talking would have taken too much strength, so I didn't answer him. He waited a moment, then grabbed my arms and shouted, "Say something, damn it!"

I moved my eyes slowly until I looked straight at him, then acceded to his request.

"Don't ever be sorry," I told him in as loud a whisper as I could manage. He stared at me again with an unreadable expression, then let me go and walked away without looking back even once.

The proctor let me go in time to get ready for evening parade. I managed to shower and dress with more trouble than I thought I'd have, then lined up quickly enough to avoid any demerits. Morrison showed up, and stopped in front of me to stare hard.

"Sick call is after evening mess," she said, looking more than a little disturbed. When I shook my head she stared another minute, then moved on without saying anything

else. I made it through parade, but couldn't eat much afterward. My hand shook too much, and I didn't have the sort of appetite I thought I would. I'd already pushed my plate away when Morrison came over to my table.

"He wants to see you," she said in the same quiet way she had earlier.

I moved away from my place, got to my feet, and followed her over to Pete's table. When I stopped at attention in front of him he looked up, and for a moment I thought he was going to say something to me. But then he changed his mind and turned to Morrison instead.

"Get her back to her quarters," he said, then returned his attention to his food. Morrison tapped my arm and we went out, neither of us saying anything, and when I got to my room I took the uniform off and lay down. I felt wearier than I had in a very long time, but for some reason I couldn't seem to sleep. I lay there with my eyes wide open and tried to listen to my thoughts, but my mind refused to show me any. Eventually, sleep managed to find me.

Day 1 started it all over again, with one exception. When I reached my class in military regulations, Captain Bennison wasn't there. We all waited, wondering what had made him late, then the door opened and chief proctor Langley walked in. He strode over to the desk, dropped some books and a tickler on it, then turned to look us over.

"Captain Bennison won't be back," he announced without preamble. "My name is Langley, and you'll treat me the same as you did the captain. You'd better know I have the same power to punish mistakes. Tardiness won't be tolerated, and you'll all leave this class knowing regulations as well as you know your own handwriting. We'll start now."

He'd been glancing around the class as if he were searching for someone, and he was. When he spotted me he stopped searching, and a faint smile showed on his face.

"Santee," he said. "Up!"

I stood up and got to attention as was required in the classroom, and Langley measured me with his eyes.

"Give me section B, articles one through five," he said at last, which was typical of him. The class had hardly begun on section A, and I was sure he knew it. That meant he still remembered the fun time we'd had on registration day.

"Sir, section B, articles one through five are as follows," I responded, then began to reel them off. Agents of all grades start out hating regulations, but still end up knowing them cold. When you do something, it helps to also know whether or not you have to cover up. Langley waited until I'd gone through all of it, and then he smiled.

"Wrong," he said in an ugly voice. "You forgot the punctuation. Five demerits. Up front."

I stared at him for a second, then walked up to the front of the room and put out my left hand. He took his tickler from the desk then looked me straight in the eye.

"Count!" he ordered, nearly quivering with anticipated pleasure. I counted slowly to five while he put everything he had into the strokes, but he didn't get the sort of reaction he'd obviously expected. At five, still feeling the slashing edge of the tickler on my hand, I simply stopped and waited.

"Get back to your seat!" he snarled, the knuckles of his hand white around the tickler. "I'll be trying you again later!"

I turned in the deep, charged silence of the room and went back to my seat without saying anything, primarily because there wasn't anything I wanted to say. Langley grabbed some papers and returned to section A with the rest of the class, but he came back to me two more times that hour. Each time the result was the same: "Wrong. Five demerits. Up front."

I continued to give him the same lack of reaction I had the first time, and when the hour ended he was gray with rage. His eyes burned into me as I filed out with everyone else, but he didn't say a word and didn't notice the looks he got from the rest of the class. They all knew a private vendetta when they saw one, and had all been trying very hard not to get caught up in it. They didn't know how wise they were.

The rest of the day passed without my noticing it. At 1910 I went back to my private room and finished up on the notes on the class at 2, not having gotten very far with them during the day. At 2035 I went back to my quarters to pick up the knife and a jacket, and was waiting outside when 2045 came. I expected to see Freddy, but Sergeant Cambet showed up instead.

"I'll be piloting you to 2," Cambet said as he came up. "Major Drummond is ... otherwise occupied."

Cambet wasn't a very good liar, not when he'd had such a sincere look on his face as he'd said his piece. But I still left it like that and took the pass he handed me, put a copy on the OD's desk as I had before, and we went to 2.

The class was all there, including Val, and I got right down to work because I wasn't in the mood to play. Val fidgeted the entire time and looked as though he was trying to decide whether or not to say something to me, but he had the decision taken away from him. I walked out of the room on the dot of 2300, and Cambet took me back. I stripped off the uniform when I got to my quarters, and was about to get into bed when Olveri walked in.

"I thought so," she said quietly to keep from waking my roommates, her pinched

face wearing a look of satisfaction. "Regulations state that pajamas are to be worn by all cadets, so get with it, Santee. I think you've found that being the colonel's daughter doesn't exempt you from following orders." She waited until I'd gotten the pajamas out and was wearing them before she nodded and said, "And keep them on because I'm leaving word for you to be checked on during the night."

She went out again and closed the door, and I lit a cigarette and lay down in the dark. I thought about the smoke curling up to the ceiling and happily nothing else.

The rest of the week floated by in a dark fog that got deeper as the time passed. I began to think about nothing but Langley's class, the only reality in a universe of shadows. Every day it was the same, three times up in front of him, five demerits each time. His face hung in front of my eyes even when he wasn't there, and I dreamed about him when I slept - although I wasn't sleeping much. I would fall into an exhausted sleep after the class at 2, but would wake up choking a few hours later. I'd begun to chain smoke, and whatever food I managed to force down my throat tasted like straw.

Captain Ellis had begun to stare at me with a worried look, but hadn't gone so far as to ask me about what was happening. Morrison asked point blank, but I was able to put her off. I lost myself in crowds of cadets to avoid Pete and Freddy, knowing I'd never be able to stand the distraction of their questioning. And I'd taken to wearing the knife all the time.

Langley's class became a pit from the depths of hell, Langley himself a Hadean disciple. I had a role I couldn't break, but he knew nothing about that and wouldn't have cared even if he'd known. He struck at me each time with all the strength of his body, no longer minding that I refused to cry out with the pain. He could see the pain in my eyes as it reached me, and his pleasure came from knowing he was the one who caused my agony.

What he didn't know about was the knife only inches from my hand when he hit me, but in the end it didn't really matter. The discipline of a job to do held my hand back from the knife, keeping Langley safer than he would have been with a real cadet. Langley looked forward to seeing me every day, never knowing how close he was to the sharpened edge of the end of pain.

On day 5 I was at 2 listening to someone's work when I realized that he'd stopped speaking some time before. The class had been very quiet the last couple of days, and even Nalvidi hadn't acted up. Cambet had tried to make conversation when the trips first began, but he'd given it up quickly and simply stood at the side of the room every night without commenting. Now I tried to remember the last words I'd heard but nothing came through, so I took a breath and stood up.

"Let's save it for next week," I told them, then took my jacket and started for the door. But suddenly Val was there, standing in my way, the first time he'd come near me all week. I tried to step around him but he put up his arm, barring the way, then

took my left wrist and turned it. With my hand palm up he could see that it was black and blue from wrist to fingertips, and it must have been obvious that I hadn't been able to use it in a while because of the swelling. Val raised his eyes to mine, and he looked almost unfamiliar.

"Give it up!" he ordered harshly, some unnamed emotion writhing in his stare. "Talk to the colonel and give it up!"

Val's face kept shifting in and out of focus, sometimes appearing as his face, sometimes as Langley's, sometimes a combination of the two. I stared at him until the face in front of me was his alone, then I told it "No."

That single word from me had always gotten him angry, I recalled, but that time the flash of fury in his eyes was so strong it almost crackled. Possibly his anger was intensified by the way my attention kept turning inward, toward things he couldn't see. But whatever it was his hand suddenly came out of nowhere, slapping me so hard that I nearly went down sideways.

My cheek flamed with the slap, causing something inside me to flare in response, and when I jerked straight and faced him again the knife was in my hand and moving toward its target. I wanted so much to touch Langley with that blade, to see him fall to the ground at my feet and empty of lifeblood. I wanted it with everything inside me, and it almost took too long to understand that it wasn't Langley standing in front of me, it was Val!

The breath caught in my throat when I realized what I was doing and I forced the knife down again, but Val hadn't even moved! He stood there with no expression on his face and there wasn't a sound around us, just as though everyone in the class was holding their breath. Cambet had started over to us when Val slapped me but he stood frozen in place now, his shocked gaze on the gleaming knife in my hand. I stared at it myself as though seeing it for the first time, resheathed it slowly, then looked up at Val again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, feeling a shudder pass through me. It wasn't Langley in front of me it was Val, and I'd come so close! Val's face contorted in a look of agony and he tried to stop me, but I tore my arm from his grip and started for the door. Chopping at him blindly kept him from getting in my way again and let me just keep going. My run through the halls is no more than a blur in my memory, but Cambet was just catching up when I reached the hopper field. That time we flew back to the Academy in a deeper silence than ever before.

I didn't sleep at all that night, doing no more than lie there staring into the dark. Langley's face hung in front of my eyes as usual, but then Val's came to block it out. I saw the look of agony again and again, saw the knife so close to his body, and I turned over onto my stomach and moaned out the pain. I'd been holding the pain away from me, trying to finish the job, but it had come at me from a different direction and I couldn't hold it off any longer. The constant stabbing ache in my left

hand was nothing compared to the new pain, and I didn't know how to cope with it.

I shuddered a while in the silence and dark, then pushed everything far away from me where I didn't have to cope with it. There was still a job to do, still a god-forsaken job to see out to the final scene, and everything else could be forgotten until that was done. After that... after that everything whirled and blended, and I couldn't see anything at all. Maybe I'd get lucky and the future would actually turn out to be that empty and dead.

I walked into Langley's class the next day feeling very lightheaded. As usual, the conversational buzz from the hall died out as soon as people passed through the doorway, but that day there was more than the usual uneasiness in the air. Kids glanced at my face then leaned over to whisper to one another, and as I sat down in my seat I wondered distantly if any of them could tell what I was feeling. Something had shifted inside my mind, had been shifting the entire morning, and now I finally knew what direction the shift was taking.

That morning at calisthenics I'd been very careful not to let Morrison see my hand, more careful than I'd been since the thing with Langley first started. Now I rested my left hand on the writing ledge in front of me, palm up, staring at the bruised and puffy flesh as the fingers of my right hand rubbed at my forehead. There was a tightness behind where my fingers rubbed, one that had been growing for days even though I hadn't noticed it.

The pain in my hand underscored the tightness past my eyes, and somewhere deep inside part of me was crying. I'd sworn no one would die during my stay at the Academy, but Langley had ruined my resolve and turned it to nothing with the viciousness of his actions. I'd taken all I could from the man and now the basic me refused to take anymore. In other words, if he tried to hurt me again I would kill him.

The deeply buried crying seemed to be protesting that decision, protesting that I hadn't been hurt so badly that I needed to kill. In a sense that was true, but in another sense it made no difference at all. Langley had managed to cross a line of some sort, and beyond the line I had no control over my actions.

A wordless stir went through the people in the room, and I raised my head to see that Langley had arrived. He dropped his books on the desk to the accompaniment of the class bell ringing, then got down to the assignment he'd given everyone the day before.

My eyes clung to his face, seeing nothing of the neat uniform beneath it, completely unable to look away. Whatever was going to happen would happen very shortly, and the crying inside found no sympathetic echo in my face or outward manner. It wasn't my place to kill in a situation like that when killing hadn't been made part of the job, but I'd lost all choice in the matter even though I didn't know why. Confusion whirled around my head, demands for explanations rang inside me, breath-light

tremors ran up and down my skin. My reactions seemed abnormal even to me, but I didn't struggle to understand them. I did no more than accept those reactions, and wait for Langley to choose the time of his ending.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes into the class before Langley grew bored with the frightened, stumbling children he so loved to browbeat. The answers they'd given his questions hovered on the fringes of my awareness, but my full attention hadn't moved from Langley's face. He turned his head to look in my direction, grinned as he misinterpreted my stare, then he moved closer to his desk to lean back against it.

"Santee," he said in a voice full of pleased anticipation. "Get up."

I got slowly to my feet in the thick silence around me, feeling the tightness behind my eyes grow stronger and more demanding. Then I became aware of another thing inside my mind, a fierce opposition to the tightening that would take Langley's life. The new thing clawed at the tightening, trying to loosen it, trying to force it back from wherever it had come, but Langley's actual presence defeated the effort before it had gotten more than the barest clawhold. There was a tension in the air as though everyone in the room knew about the battle I fought, but Langley wasn't one to notice things like that.

"Section C," he said through the faint ringing in my ears, his arms folded and his body relaxed. "Articles six through seventeen, and you have ninety seconds in which to finish, starting now."

He looked down at his watch, but I couldn't speak. The struggle in my mind made speech impossible, and I knew that if I even tried to speak I'd pass across the line that I'd never be able to cross back from. In the shadowed corners within me something dark red waited to flow free, a presence that would never again accept captivity once it found release.

Sweat broke out on my forehead and my breathing grew ragged, but all Langley could see was that he was being disobeyed. His expression grew ugly as he straightened away from the desk, but before he could say anything the door opened and two men walked in. Langley's attention went to them, and when I forced mine to follow I felt a shock coursing through me.

The two men were Pete and Ringer, and Ringer stared at me white-faced. Langley started over to Pete, but a gesture from Pete stopped him in mid stride about two feet in front of the board wall. Ringer, standing alone by the door, hadn't stopped staring at me.

"Diana," Ringer said very gently and softly, putting his hand out. "I have something I have to talk to you about. Come with me so we can talk privately."

I was still filled with confusion and battle, but the shock of seeing Ringer had done something to me. I still wasn't sure which side would win the battle, but I knew

instantly that there was something that had to be done no matter which way it went. Ringer's stare was very intense while he waited for an answer, so I shook my head very slightly.

"I can't come with you," I told him dreamily, really feeling the unreality of the scene. "It isn't three months yet. I can't talk to you before three months are up."

Ringer paled even more as he came one step closer, then he stopped.

"This can't wait three months," he said, just as gently as before. "I need you now for a very important job. There's no one else to do it, so you have to."

"Yes," Pete put in gruffly, his face more haggard than I'd ever seen it. "And you've completed my assignment, so you're free to take Ringer's."

I moved my eyes to Pete for a moment, then slid them the rest of the way to Langley. He was also white-faced, but confusion dominated the composition.

I knew I couldn't just leave it like that, and the decision was already made. Flatly I said, "Permission requested to leave the room, sir!" and threw the knife with the last word.

There were screams and shouts from all over the room as the knife went into the wall less than an inch from Langley's head, and a small red line appeared on his ear. My target stood rooted to the floor in shock, but Ringer and Pete both fought their way through the panicked cadets in a desperate effort to reach me before I did anything else. They weren't careful about who they pushed out of their way, but they needn't have moved that fast.

When they reached me I wasn't doing anything but standing there watching Langley dab at his bleeding ear, feeling nothing one way or the other about how the battle had come out. I could have put that knife between Langley's eyes or in his heart as easily as I'd put it next to his head. But I'd known that at the time of my throw and knowing it had made doing it unnecessary.

Ringer stopped in front of me, blocking my view of Langley, then he reached over to raise my left hand and look down at it. His face twisted in a way I'd rarely seen before and his head came up as he began to turn back toward Langley, but Pete's hand reached across from my left to touch Ringer's shoulder and stop him. Pete had been staring down at my hand too, and he was the one who turned to face Langley. The chief proctor stood with a handkerchief pressed to his ear, his body at attention out of sheer habit, his eyes covertly on Pete. When their eyes met, Langley blanched all over again, and he took one involuntary step back.

"You're under arrest," Pete growled, an edge to his voice I'd never heard before. "Do me a favor and try to run."

Langley shivered and turned his face away, and a stir of relief went through the kids at the sides of the room. My problem with Langley had been taken care of, but if

he'd been left in charge of the class theirs would have first begun.

Ringer put his hand on my arm and started to lead me out of the room, but Pete had a different idea. He looked at my face then pushed Ringer's hand away, and a moment later he'd lifted me in his arms. I hadn't realized how drained I felt till then, and I put my head against his shoulder because it had become impossible to hold it up any longer. As he carried me out of the room I knew it was the wrong shoulder, but I was too tired to pursue the thought.

Chapter 11

Pete's quarters were bachelor comfortable and a bit larger than I might have expected. He carried me all the way there, then put me down in a black leather armchair. Ringer went to the small bar and poured something, then came over with it while Pete stood near the chair and stared down at me without expression.

"Drink this," Ringer ordered, holding out the glass. "All of it."

I looked up at him and shook my head. "If I do I'll throw up. I'm all right now."

He started to push the glass at me, but a knock at the door stopped him while Pete went over to open it.

"It's about time," Pete growled when he saw who it was. "We almost didn't need you except for the certification."

"I came as soon as you called and you know it," a brisk voice countered. "What are you feeling guilty about now?"

The owner of the brisk voice had pushed her way into the room and had come over to stand directly in front of me. I looked up at her for a minute, and then smiled faintly.

"It's been a long time, Dr. Jo," I said by way of greeting. "Do you know me?"

"I know you, Diana," she said, narrowing her eyes. "You look as though you could use some sleep."

I rubbed my forehead with my right hand and didn't answer her. Dr. Joanne Perona was a short woman in her fifties with streaked, unruly gray hair and no waistline. She was also chief psychiatrist at Blue Skies.

"Pete," she said without taking her eyes off me. "I want Diana to lie down in your bedroom for a while. Which way is it?"

"Right here," Pete said, crossing the room to open a door.

I got out of the chair and walked somewhat unsteadily toward the door Pete had opened. Dr. Jo followed me into the bedroom, and when I stretched out on the bed, she dug out a pressure hypo from her shoulder bag and came over with it.

"This is just a mild sedative to help you relax," she explained, her voice calm. "It won't put you out."

She knew, of course, how agents feel about being out of things, but it didn't seem important enough to comment on. She hesitated briefly, seemingly expecting an answer, then rolled up my blouse sleeve and emptied the hypo into my arm.

It was no more than a matter of seconds before I felt it, and it was like being slowly filled with warm water. A soft, comfortable feeling spread all over my body, and my muscles finally gave up their death grip. She watched me for another moment before turning to go out, but when she closed the door behind her it didn't catch and opened itself again an inch or so.

"All right," Dr. Jo said in a low, bitter voice, obviously speaking to the two men in the next room. "Tell me what happened."

I stared at the neat, light gold walls of the bedroom and listened as Ringer and Pete took turns giving a fairly accurate description of what had happened, and when they had finished Dr. Jo quietly exploded.

"You fools!" she rasped. "Why wasn't I consulted before you tried this? And you, Colonel Rodriguez! Didn't you have the brains to at least check on her after you'd tied her hand and foot?"

"I didn't know about Langley and the knife she was carrying until this morning, when my idiot sergeant finally decided to tell me," Pete growled. "Bennison's accident left me shorthanded, but I would have taken the class myself if I'd known Langley would go after her. Why didn't she come to me, or even break him up a little?"

"Because you gave her a job!" Dr. Jo snapped, sounding furious. "Obviously you don't understand what that means! In her line of work you don't go running for instructions or protection, and you don't break a role. But the worst part about this is that it was a job without a reason! Didn't you even wonder about what was happening when she avoided you?"

Pete was quiet a minute, then, "I thought she was avoiding me because of - something I did to her," he said in an embarrassed tone. "There was a little misunderstanding."

"There was a big misunderstanding," Dr. Jo corrected grimly. "And how could you go along with this, Ringer? You were an agent yourself once."

"I still don't see why it happened," Ringer said in annoyance. "She's taken a lot more pressure than this over the years and never folded before."

"She still hasn't folded!" Dr. Jo snapped. "If she had, Langley would be cold by now instead of nursing a slightly cut ear. I have the feeling there's more involved here than we know, but the major point is enough all by itself. Don't you see the difference between this and a regular assignment?"

"No," Ringer denied flatly. "When I was working I had to play slave once to someone who was slated to be hit with a death warrant. It took better than four months and he did every dirty thing to me he could think of, but I held out and executed the warrant anyway. Living through that was a hell of a lot harder than what Diana just went through."

"Is that so?" Dr. Jo said silkily, then her voice went dreamy and almost hypnotic. "Think back to that time, Ringer, and put yourself back in that situation and feel the anger and shame you felt then. Your mind seethed with fury, but you couldn't show it or do anything about it. All you could do was continue to take what was done to you, hating it every minute of the day and night, but still needing to take it without reacting. Do you feel it, Ringer, the closeness and confinement, the wild need to put an end to it? Are you back there? Now tell yourself that there is no death warrant, and never will be!"

There was silence for a brief time, then something hit the wall hard enough to make the pictures on my side jump.

"No need to bruise your knuckles," Dr. Jo said dryly. "I take it you can understand now. You were able to stand up to the treatment because you knew that your job was important, and that you would eventually have the emotional release of executing the warrant. Diana had no real reason for having to put up with that inescapable torture, and no emotional release ahead of her. All she had to look forward to was more of the same, with no way to protect herself or strike back. I hope you two are proud of a good job well done."

There was no answer to that, although I listened for one. I listened so long that in spite of the collar and tie choking me, I fell asleep.

I woke up with a feeling of absolute freedom, and for a few minutes couldn't understand it. Then I noticed that the uniform was gone, but that was only part of it. Langley was still faintly in my mind, but not the way he had been. I still hated him just as strongly, but the all-consuming passion of the hatred had faded to where it was manageable.

I sat up and was surprised to see Dr. Jo sprawled in an easy chair not far from the bed, sound asleep. I smiled faintly over the fact of her presence, then rummaged in the night table drawer next to the bed to find that there was a pack of cigarettes in it as I'd been hoping there would be. I took one out and lit it, then leaned back to watch Dr. Jo sleep. In no time at all her nose twitched and she frowned, then she coughed. Her eyes opened part way, and she straightened up in the chair to glare at me.

"Do you have to burn that filthy thing when I'm in the same room?" she demanded. "Can't you control yourself and wait until later?"

"Nope," I answered, flicking some ashes into the ashtray. "The control disappears when I'm out of a job. Couldn't you talk Pete into coming up with another bed?"

"I wanted to be in here in case you needed someone, and I wanted to watch you," she said in irritation, trying to straighten her skirt. "You ought to be grateful, as I don't waste my valuable time on everyone."

"Are you wasting your time?" I asked very softly, bringing one knee up and resting my arm on it. That made her look directly at me, and the irritation disappeared.

"You didn't kill him, Diana," she said, her voice and eyes serious. "You were able to hold out against it, and you have to remember that."

"I do remember it, and you have no idea how close I came," I answered bleakly, taking another drag on the cigarette. "I was so close to the edge I could see the rocks below, and could even see my name painted on a door in ward K."

"There's no reservation waiting for you in ward K!" she snapped. "We have enough residents there already, and your defenses are good enough to do you if you remember not to be stupid next time. If Pete ever comes up with another job for you, tell him what to do with it. If you don't know the proper phrases, I'll write them out for you."

"I think I can manage on my own with that," I said, amused in spite of myself at her high level of sarcastic outrage. "But let's not include Ringer in on that. I'm feeling very mellow toward him right now."

"Why?" she demanded, back to staring at me. "He's the one who started this whole thing."

"But he finished it too, and right now that means more to me," I said, moving a little to get more comfortable. "Ringer is many things to many people, but to me he's just one thing: the end of a job. I don't always see him when I get assignments, but I always report to him in person. When I saw him in that room everything ended and the edge moved away."

"Then what was that business of 'I can't talk to you' all about?" she asked, now looking confused. "That scene will be giving Pete and Ringer nightmares for quite some time."

"Good, because I had enough of them myself," I said, hearing my tone go grim. "I just wanted to make sure they never even think about doing something like this to anyone else, no matter what. But I'd prefer if you didn't tell them, otherwise they'll both come after me."

"I think I would myself, but there's no denying they deserve it," she agreed with a

headshake, then began to lever herself out of the chair. "But why don't you get dressed now while I see what Pete has to eat around here. Ringer brought your things, and they're right over there."

I looked in the direction she'd gestured, and saw the luggage I'd left on Xanadu O.S. For some reason it felt like months ago.

"Ringer's lucky he brought them," I said, putting out the cigarette and joining her in standing. "It annoys him when I go natural, but nothing short of knockout drops would get me back into that uniform."

"It isn't annoyance," she said, pausing at the door. "I thought you knew Ringer better than that."

Now that she mentioned it I did, so I nodded to acknowledge the point. That let her continue on out of the room, leaving me to walk over to the luggage. I pulled out a jumpsuit and boots, then began to get into them. It felt strange to handle normal clothing again, and then I noticed that I was handling it, with both hands.

I looked at my left palm and saw that it was still black and blue, but the swelling was down and only a small echo of pain was left. Either Dr. Jo still remembered something from her days in medical school, or Ralph had been there without my knowing it. It really made no difference, of course, so I finished dressing and then went looking for company.

Dr. Jo and Ringer were in the next room, and they looked around when I came out. Ringer stood and studied me closely without saying anything, so I nodded to him.

"I could use that drink now," I suggested, guessing that he needed to hear something ... ordinary. "Care to play bartender again?"

He smiled faintly and went to the bar just as Pete came out of another room. The sleeves of Pete's uniform blouse were rolled up to his elbows, and he stopped to stare at me for a moment before clearing his throat.

"It isn't fancy but it's hot," he said gruffly, avoiding my gaze as he made his announcement. "Anybody interested?"

His discomfort was so thickly obvious that I couldn't stand it. He'd been caught up just as helplessly as I'd been, and what had happened because of it wasn't truly his fault. That meant I needed something special to say to him, and it wasn't difficult figuring out what.

"I'm feeling hungry, not suicidal," I answered with no more than a second or two of hesitation. "If you cooked it, I think I'll go to the mess hall."

"Don't get smart, or I'll - " he began to growl, and then he seemed to remember something. The words cut off, and he looked directly at me. "I understand I owe you an apology," he said more quietly. "I didn't know he was your partner."

"Don't let it bother you," I returned dryly, already having refused to think about Val two or three times since I'd awakened. "You know, I think I'm getting used to it. If it happens any more often I'll have to fit it into my permanent schedule."

"You're being smart again," Pete said warningly, then he pointed toward the door he'd come out of. "Get in there and eat before you have to do it standing up. I only just got used to the idea of being your father, so I'm going to wait a while before I try to change back again. Now, march."

"Yes, sir, Colonel," I surrendered quickly with one palm out toward him. "You have too heavy a hand for me to argue with you. Can I get my drink first?"

Ringer stood not two feet away to my right with a glass in his hand, and when I turned to take the drink his brows were high as he said, "Not him, too?"

"What can you do when you're popular?" I asked with a shrug, taking my drink and then sipping from it. "Maybe I ought to hire a bodyguard."

"Don't do it," Ringer advised with a grin and a headshake. "You'd probably end up across his knee too."

I made a face at him, then turned to ask Dr. Jo, "What does it mean when every man you run into tips his hat, then spansks you till you can't walk?"

"It means it's time for you to start investing your money in pillows," she suggested, glancing at Pete and Ringer. "But how do they get away with it?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out," I returned vaguely, at the same time giving Dr. Jo a bland and neutral glance. She knew well enough that it wasn't possible to catch me that easily, and her faint smile said she was glad of it. But then she picked up her shoulder bag and headed for the door, and I actually felt an instant of panic.

"Hey, you're not going to leave me to take my life in my hands all alone, are you?" I said at once. "I thought you were going to join me in having something to eat."

"There are people at Blue Skies who really need me," she said from where she'd paused near the door to check through her bag, a glance showing she knew exactly what I now felt. "Come to see me the next time you're not working, and we can talk about your pillow investment."

Once again her glance was more covert than open, and then she was gone. Pushing away feelings of abandonment, I turned to look the question next to Pete and Ringer.

"I have to get back to work, but I won't be that far away," Pete said as he lowered the sleeves he had rolled up. "If Ringer tells me you didn't eat everything on your plate, you're in trouble."

He nodded once to showing he wasn't joking, and then he was also gone. That left

only Ringer, who seemed to be badly confused.

"What's wrong with him?" Ringer demanded, staring at the door Pete had used. "I've never before seen him talk or act like that."

"Fathers are like that," I replied with a shrug, glad I could relax to some extent now. "Or at least he thinks they are. Are you going to desert me too?"

"Not when we have an assignment to discuss," he returned, looking me over as though he hadn't already done it three or four times. "I didn't come all the way out here because I knew you were auditioning for ward K."

"An assignment," I said flatly, returning his stare. "I thought that was just a put-on, but I guess I should have known better. After everything the Council did to me, they still expect me to jump to it without a word of complaint. You had a lot of fun making suggestions about all this, Ringer, so now you can have just as much when you tell them what they can do with themselves. I'm through."

I began to turn away from him, but his hand came to my arm and stopped me.

"I've already told them you'd probably say that," he responded, having flinched only a little at what my tone had been like. "Most of them went shrill at the idea of losing you, and none of that was indignation. You know they'll never admit out loud to making a mistake, but this time they can't even deny it to themselves. They owe you, and you can get your satisfaction from making them pay up."

"Not interested," I said at once, really meaning it. "They have nothing I want, so they can shove it all. I have other plans for the rest of my life."

"Like what?" Ringer demanded, his gaze hard and direct. "I'm sure you'll find a way to get your original features back, but what happens then? Do you take a job in an office somewhere, or just join some of those friends of yours in full-time partying? You'll probably be able to grit your teeth and stick with your choice for a little while, but what happens when you get bored? And what will happen when you need to work off some frustrations, but don't have a legal means of doing it? Will you just let it all keep mounting up - or will you take that one small step across the line?"

He'd asked that last question without hesitation, but something in his eyes said he had personal knowledge about that line. The thought of it still terrified me, but even more disturbing was the realization that he was right. I'd forgotten for a moment that it was my own nature that had me trapped, my own needs that kept me chained more tightly than that leg shackle. Talk about quitting was futile as well as stupid, and I had no choice but to acknowledge that.

"All right, all right, you've made your point," I said tiredly, then looked at him more directly. "But I still don't understand why you're here. Is mine the only name on your list?"

"You're the only one right on the scene," he returned, walking over to pick up some

papers from a small table near the bar. "Here's the report."

I accepted the papers and took them into Pete's tiny kitchen, then sat at the small table and began to look them over while Ringer dished up a plateful of Pete's idea of haute cuisine. I'd already put aside the drink I hadn't really wanted, and Ringer quickly replaced it with a much more welcome cup of coffee.

After a few minutes of reading, I realized I could have saved a lot of complications if I'd known sooner about what was going on. The friendly folks of Flowerville, those innocent natives Freddy had been so concerned about, had apparently decided to branch out from simple ambushing. They had somehow broken into Blue Skies, and had gotten away with a vial of something highly secret and highly dangerous from the experimental labs there. The date the report gave showed that the break-in had happened the first night Freddy and I had flown to 2, and the activity we'd seen from the air must have been part of it.

"Why did you wait so long to get started on this?" I finally asked Ringer before taking a taste of Pete's version of food. My first reaction was to spit it out again, which proved that I'd been right and was taking my life in my hands by eating it.

"No one could find out where the vial had been taken," Ringer answered from where he'd sat down opposite me with his own cup of coffee. "The people in the labs finally worked out a detector for it, and it registers somewhere in Flowerville. They've checked on it twice, and it's obvious that the ones who have it are moving it around. We can't go into the town in force, because we don't want to push them into trying to use the chemical. The lab people turn green and shaky at the idea."

"This isn't hyper-A stuff," I pointed out, having already decided to ignore the food. "There are other agents at 2, so I'll ask the question again: why me?"

Ringer leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette before answering.

"It's you because the computers say that if that vial is used, it will become hyper-A stuff so fast we won't have time to blink," he finally replied, calmly looking over at me. "Do you want me to wait, and only send you in afterward?"

"How soon can we get started?" I countered, giving him his answer with my own question as I stood. In my line of work, you don't often get the chance to make your job easier before it gets fatally hard.

"We'll get started as soon as that plate's empty," he said, gesturing toward the food I'd already abandoned. "You'll be missing enough meals once this gets rolling."

"Is this business catching?" I demanded, putting my fists to my hips. "When was the last time you forced Jeff to clean his plate before he started an assignment?"

"Jeff has enough sense to do it on his own," Ringer came back wryly. "And you can decide what you'll need while you're eating."

"I already know what I'll need," I said, sitting back down and tasting the food again to find it hadn't changed. "Do we still have an undercover agent in Wheatley?"

"Yeah, but Wheatley's 1200 miles away from Flowerville," Ringer countered. "Do you think your arms will be long enough?"

"Wheatley will be the jumping off point," I said, ignoring his sarcasm. "That is, unless you'd rather I walk out of 2 or Blue Skies in full daylight to start work. I'll also need a very small version of that detector, and local clothing for two."

His eyes narrowed when he heard that last, but he didn't say anything.

"I'll need some help on this," I told him, doing nothing to avoid his stare. "I can't be everywhere at once, and there's a trainee in my class at 2 who should be able to handle it. Her name is Hughes."

"Hughes?" he blurted, obviously having expected to hear something else entirely. "What about - "

"Nothing about him," I interrupted with a gesture of my hand, still refusing to think in that direction. "He can't do any good here, and Hughes will be easier to work in. I know the signs, so I know she's been out hunting. You arrange for us to pick Hughes up, and make sure he's busy somewhere else. If this thing blows up I won't be around for the Council to blame when they find out something's happened to him, but you will be. But don't let me influence your decision."

"Hughes it is," he agreed, his voice heavy. "I'll call 2."

He got up and went out, and I didn't waste any time dumping the mess on my plate. I found a couple of eggs and scrambled them, then washed them down with another cup of coffee. Pete was smart and used throw-away dishes and pots, and I was just putting them in the disposer when Ringer came back.

"We can pick up the detector and clothes at Blue Skies, then go on to 2 for Hughes," he said, gathering up the report I'd left on the table. "Lammerly will be expecting you two when you get to Wheatley."

"That's good, but I've been trying to figure something out," I said as I watched him. "How were those people from Flowerville able to get into Blue Skies in the first place, not to mention all the way to the labs? And how did they know what to take?"

"They had help," he said, folding the report so that it could be carried more easily. "As a matter of fact, they had the same help Radman did when you found him waiting for you. Selling information can be a profitable business if you have the right information to sell, and Masterson couldn't resist it."

"Who?" I asked blankly, never having heard the name.

"That's what I said," Ringer agreed with a grimace. "He was a clerk at central

headquarters whose job wasn't very important - except for the fact that he had access to every piece of business that went through there. A team from there went over everybody who could have gotten the security plans on Blue Skies, and they found that Masterson had had an unusual interest in the place lately. They picked him up along with some of his records, but he suicided on them before they could stop him. He was so colorless, they never even searched him."

"Did they get any idea of who he was dealing with?" I asked. Considering all the trouble the man had made for me, I would have enjoyed ... meeting him.

"They got no idea, so you start from scratch," Ringer answered. "You know, you still look a little tired. Do you want to hold off another day or two before you get going? One night's sleep isn't all that much, and another day or so would still put it well within the computer's safety margin."

"I am going to get more sleep, but not here," I responded after finishing the last of my coffee and throwing away the cup. "Hughes can spend the time learning Wheatley while I spend the time sleeping, since she might have to know something about the place when we get to Flowerville." At that point I started to lead the way out, but stopped short to mutter "Damn," when I remembered something.

"What's wrong?" Ringer asked, and I turned to see that he was obviously trying to decide whether or not to be worried.

"I forgot about those stupid progress reports on my class at 2," I said in annoyance, watching the worry quickly disappear from Ringer's attitude. "I'd better get them and hand deliver them to Pete. If I try to tell anyone where I left them, they'll have to half dismantle the room."

"Hold on a minute," Ringer said as I began to turn toward the door again. "You can't go walking around the school like that when everyone thinks you're a cadet. You'd better wear this I.D."

He reached into his pocket, then tossed me a pin-on that had my name and "Special Agent" on it. I studied it for a minute, then brushed at the "Special Agent" part.

"Are you sure?" I asked, finding it impossible not to put the needle to him just a little. "I'd hate to see you make any hasty decisions. You could always come with me and keep a sharp eye out for danger."

"Put it on," he growled, not very happy with what I'd said but refusing to let it reach him. "But even with it, I'm coming along anyway. I can't afford to age ten years waiting for you at the hopper field."

"With that attitude I'm surprised you can force yourself to give me assignments," I said as I pinned on the I.D. "When I'm working I occasionally have to cross streets alone."

"It's not you I'm worried about," Ringer said with a snort of ridicule. "This is a

friendly facility, and I'd like to keep it that way. I don't much care what happens to people we get jobs against."

"Another admirer," I said with a beaming smile. "The numbers keep growing and growing."

"And will never stop," he muttered, pinning on his own I.D. with a frown. Ringer's I.D. read "Chief of Agents," and he hated it. He always claimed that it made him feel like a target, but that wasn't what really bothered him. He never hesitated when it came to taking the blame for something, but bowing gave him a pain in the back. Sometimes his attitude gave me a pain lower down.

We reached the empty room I'd been using without any trouble, retrieved the reports, and had started back out with them when I noticed the time. It was 1220 and Pete would probably be at the mess hall, so it was a good thing I hadn't wasted my time going to his office. The sooner I got out of that place the happier I'd be.

When we got to the mess hall Ringer walked in with me, but waited at the door while I made my way over to Pete's table. Pete looked up at me with a grin, but Freddy was there too and he just stared at me.

"Hand this to your next victim of writer's cramp," I told Pete, tossing the reports to him. "Play time is over, and I have to get back to the grind. I think you can guess how broken up I am about it." I gave him something of a smile, then transferred it to Freddy. "Keep your parlor dusted, Freddy. Maybe one of these days I'll decide to inspect it."

"I'm not going to count on it," he responded, obviously not finding it possible to return my smile. "I know you were trying to tell me something, but I can't help it. I'm still sorry."

"Maybe you're better off that way in the long run," I said, speaking as quietly as he had. "It's a hell of a feeling to run into for the first time. But if you think you're sorry now, just wait until the next time I'm out this way. You can bet that the challenge I hand you won't be for padded kenji sticks. Quarterstaves maybe, but not padded."

"Then you'd better be looking like your old self," he came back, this time showing that "something" of a smile as he pointed a spoon at me. "If you're not, it'll be the alternative."

"You can always try," I offered, pulling the spoon away from him. "But don't you ever believe you can't be killed for trying."

I started to turn back to Pete, but Freddy stopped me.

"I think this is yours," he said, and produced my original knife from his uniform blouse.

"How did you know I'd be by here?" I asked, getting rid of the spoon and taking the

knife. Putting my foot on a chair let me reach my boot more easily, and a moment later the knife was safely put away.

"I didn't know you'd be by here," he answered as his skin turned faintly darker. "I've been carrying that knife since the last time we talked ... I thought having it might changes things in some way, but all it did was ruin two of my uniform blouses."

"It'll happen every time," I said, showing nothing of the pity - or envy - I felt for his failure. "You should see what one of these can do to a pair of skintights. If you decide to try it again, use a sheath."

He nodded with even more wry amusement while Pete looked at us as though we were crazy, but Pete's expression was blank compared to Morrison's. I'd spotted the woman earlier, sitting at a table of struck-dumb proctors just past Pete's table. Her stare was glued to my I.D., so I walked over to her and tried that smile again.

"It was fun for a while, but I can't honestly say I'd like to do it again," I told her mildly. "I thought I'd come over and warn you to watch yourself. You were downright human there a few times."

My comment seemed to bring her out of the trance she'd been in, and she quickly found a grin.

"Well, you weren't, and now I know why," she said as she leaned back. "Some day I'll be able to tell my grandchildren that I ordered around a Special Agent and got away with it. Ah - I did get away with it, didn't I?"

"Free and clear," I said with the laugh I couldn't hold back on at seeing her expression. "But when I remember the enjoyment you got out of some of my suffering, I think about coming back for a while after I've cleared up my work."

"And I've been thinking about taking a leave of absence," she said, giving me a wry look. "Let me know when you plan on coming back. It'll help me set up my own timetable."

Her gaze didn't waver, but her fingers drummed slightly on the table. She wasn't sure whether or not I was kidding, but she wasn't fool enough to want to try taking a Special Agent. People have gotten hurt that way.

"With the kind of work I do, there's no telling when I'll be free," I said with a shrug. "Whenever it is, though, it's a good bet it'll be too long for me to bother with remembering about suffering. On the other hand, help is something I never forget."

I put my hand out, and she stood before taking it. A bond of sorts had developed between us - or certainly could have under other circumstances. As we looked at each other over our clasped hands, it was clear we both regretted that the time hadn't allowed us to form a true friendship. When Morrison sat down again I returned to Pete, having noticed with dry amusement that Olveri had been too busy eating to look up the entire time I'd stood there.

Pete waited for me to reach him, then he leaned back in his chair.

"I have a feeling that if you hadn't had these reports to bring, you would have forgotten to say goodbye," he said in a tone that approached a growl. "I wasn't your father long enough to teach you better."

"I prefer to say hello, and you can be my father any time I'm here," I offered with a better smile than the first. "When I'm not working, I like the way you care."

"In that case you'd better take care of yourself when I'm not around," he said poking a finger in my direction. "I want plenty of chances to work on you."

"I don't think you watched your choice of words," I said, feeling a small amount of confusion. "Don't you mean work with me?"

He shook his head slowly, and his green eyes showed a hint of something new. Just what that was I didn't really know, and I suddenly discovered I wasn't terribly anxious to find out either.

"Well, hold the thought," I told him rather faintly. "I should be back in about five or six years."

"You'd better make it sooner than that," he growled, moving forward to put his arms on the table. "Or I'll come looking for you."

"You know, I believe you would," I said, discovering with surprise that I didn't mind his idea in the least. "But right now I have to leave, since Ringer gets slightly put out when I take my time getting started on a new assignment. I know it's unreasonable of him, but there it is. It's my fate to associate with slavedrivers."

Pete smiled and actually stood up to hug me, a gesture I returned with as much true feeling as he showed. After that I blew a kiss to Freddy and headed for the door, but just as I reached Ringer I remembered something. So I turned around to look for my old table assignment, where Elaine and Linda were sitting. When Elaine saw me looking at her she smiled and waved, but Linda just stared with a confused expression. I hadn't seen much of them during the last week, and hadn't really spoken to them when I had seen them.

"Do me one more favor, Elaine," I called after returning her wave. "Take all those uniforms I left and burn them!"

Then I got out of there fast. Amid all the laughter of the cadets Pete had gotten half of his chair, and I didn't want anything to spoil that goodbye we'd shared.

Ringer and I picked up a hopper at the field, and set our course for Blue Skies.

Chapter 12

Anyone seeing Blue Skies for the first time is in for a shock. The name of the hospital leads you to picture sharp, clean, modern lines rising up to the heavens and softly landscaped grounds. The picture is of a dream of ease that will encourage you to heal and grow well again, a haven for the unlucky. In point of fact Blue Skies is a high, wide, dismal pile of stones, something that looks like it's been taken from some planet's dark ages. There are no windows in it at all and Federation troops walk guard posts all around it, including the relatively small landing field at the rear of the building. Blue Skies is a hard place to get into and a hard place to get out of, the former condition being encouraging for agents on the sick list, the latter being encouraging for anyone who knows about ward K.

Ringer and I left our hopper on the landing field and were passed through the guard posts into the building. The guards had looked at us closely, and I could tell from their grim, humorless expressions that they were still feeling raw over the break-in the Flowerville people had pulled. Their disruptors were loose in their holsters, and anyone who was foolish enough to try anything else would be lucky if they were in a position to need Blue Skies afterward.

The inside of the Federation's most active special hospital was a cold combination of colorless tan and chromelike metal, neat and clean and full of the feeling of efficiency. I had often wondered how its staff could stand living there, month after month, year after year, seeing only with artificial lights, breathing nothing but filtered air. It was very much like being in a ship of deep space, but I had never minded being aboard a ship. I always minded being at Blue Skies.

Ringer and I had decided to rearrange our schedule, so we separated when we got inside. The first stop I made was at Ralph's office, to see what he could do about my left hand. Being redheaded was bad enough, and I didn't need any other distinguishing marks - not to mention the fact that the pain had started to come back. Ralph looked at the hand and frowned at me, and I solemnly assured him I'd spilled ink on it. In spite of his disapproval he managed to dye the skin enough to hide most of the bruising and give me something for the pain, so I was able to go on to the lab that had been broken into. Ringer spent the time calling 2 and arranging for Hughes to meet us at Blue Skies. We didn't know how far away Val could sense me, and it was better not to take any chances.

The lab people flatly refused to give me any idea of what was in the stolen vial. I pointed out that the Flowerville people knew, but the techs just sneered. The Flowerville people must have taken the vial with ideas of ransom, they told me. They couldn't really know what was in it, just that it was important. The techs had a miniature detector set into a wide but cheap and ugly looking bracelet, and I put it on my right wrist. Even if the detector itself turned out to be useless, at least the bracelet covered up the scars.

I finally left the labs, and went to a previously assigned visitor's sleeping room on the

ground floor to wait for Ringer and Hughes. The local clothing I'd specified had been delivered, but I wasn't sure they'd gotten the sizes right. I had only just begun going through it when Ringer showed up with Hughes in tow.

"If this turns out the way I think it will, I'm putting in for retirement," Ringer growled as he shut the door behind the two of them. "I couldn't take another agent like you."

"That means he approves of you," I told Hughes with a smile. "You'll get used to his form of enthusiasm, but first I need to ask: how do you feel about going along on this?"

"It's got to be better than sitting in a classroom," she responded with an answering smile. "Does this count as my field test?"

"Only if you live through it," I qualified with a pleasant nod. "Let's go through this stuff together so we can get acquainted. Want to help with hooks and stay-tabs, Ringer?"

"I'll see you two later," Ringer said, shaking his head a little as he left.

I paused to study Hughes again, and could see that I hadn't been mistaken. She and I would have looked like sisters even if we hadn't had the same color hair and eyes. She wasn't as tall as I was, but she looked a little older. I knew she was nineteen, but she didn't come off at any more than seventeen. If two teenage girls couldn't get close to the people who had that vial, no one could.

Hughes had gone over to the pile of clothes that was heaped on the room's bed, so I turned back to them myself and asked, "What do people call you besides Hughes?"

"I take it you mean in mixed company," she said, holding one of the blouses up to her. "I usually answer to Thea, but if you don't like language like that, you can call me Teddy."

"What's wrong with Thea?" I asked, feeling amused.

"It's short for Theodora," she returned with a grimace, tossing the blouse back onto the pile. "I've hated that name as long as I can remember. It's so... cute-little-girlish."

"And you don't like being a cute little girl," I summed up, studying her again.

"Do you?" she countered, turning to stare at me.

"I take every bit of help I can get," I replied with a shrug, then sat down on the bed near the clothes. "But I know the feeling you're talking about. It's when every two-bit male around looks at you and sneers even when you can outthink him and outfight him any day of the week. He pats you on the head and feels superior just because he's male and you're female.

"But being female is the greatest edge you can have if you're serious about becoming

an agent. You can walk right up to a target and put him away before anyone knows what's happening, and that in a situation where a male agent would have to fight his way in from a mile off. But you'd better learn to be comfortable being female, or you won't be able to stand the loneliness."

"Do you think sex is that important?" she asked with a frown. "I'd rather have my self respect, and you can have both if you patronize joy houses."

"I'm not talking about sex," I answered seriously, looking up at her. "I'm talking about someone to talk to... Take my situation, for example. I just finished playing a little game with the commandant at the Academy. I've known Pete for a lot of years, but this time around he's decided to father me because of what I look like. I encouraged him in it because I made a bad mistake earlier on: I reminded him about who I am and what I do for a living."

I sighed a little, and lay back on the bed.

"Pete knows what my job is and a good deal of what's involved, but he only knows it intellectually, not emotionally. When he looks at me I want him to see a cute little girl, not the string of dead bodies I've left behind me. When I look at him I'd rather see a hint of the hard time he's going to give me, not fear at the possibility of my coming close to him.

"The next time I show up there, if I'm still looking like this, I'll be fresh enough to get him good and mad at me. It might mean a hard spanking, but even if it comes to that, all I'll do is cry and complain and then call him 'sir.' I could kill him ten different ways before he took the first step toward me, but I won't even think about it let alone start it. Until you've seen naked fear in the eyes of someone you care about, you won't understand what I'm getting at. After that you'll spare yourself the pain and loneliness and be glad to be nothing but a cute little girl."

She stood staring down at the floor and didn't answer immediately, then she looked up again.

"Isn't there anyone I can be myself with?" she asked in a choked whisper. "Do I have to go through life pretending to be something I'm not?"

"You don't have to do it for everyone, just the people you want for friends," I soothed her. "And you can be yourself with other agents like you, but just the ones like you. There won't be many, but there will be enough."

I took a deep breath and then forced a grin. "But I haven't yet mentioned the best part about being female. You can get away with things that no male agent would even think of trying. A few years ago another female agent - Kate Newman - and I got bored and decided to liven things up a little. We broke into the Council building on Hidemite and reprogrammed their diplomatic negotiations computer so that 40% of the diplomatic notes put together by it came out using what was considered the foulest insults on the planet getting the note.

"There was no danger of starting anything serious because all notes are checked before being sent out, but the flap it caused in the sacred Council halls was a joy to behold. Kate and I hadn't taken any special precautions to cover our trail, so they found out pretty quickly who had done it.

"If we'd been male they would have ordered out a firing squad, but instead they stormed and raged and ended up doing nothing more than citing us for three months. It lasted a week for me and a week and a half for Kate, because there's too much work and not enough agents to handle it. So cheer up, sister. Life is what you make it, and I plan to make it fun until I'm ninety."

"I think I like the way you do it," she decided aloud while growing a grin. "And I wish I could have seen their faces."

"Stick around," I said, putting my hands behind my head. "A job doesn't last forever, and when it's over all bets are off. There's nothing to limit you but your imagination."

"And speaking of imagination," I changed the subject abruptly, "start to imagine us as sisters. We'll be visiting our father's cousin, Alfred Lammerly, in Wheatley, because we got into trouble in Valleyvale, our home town. I'll tell you something about Valleyvale so you'll have an idea about it, but it's better than 3,000 miles away from Wheatley and Flowerville so you won't find too many people questioning you about it. We'll run away from Wheatley and go to Flowerville, and once we're in Flowerville we'll insist we're from Wheatley. If anyone mentions Valleyvale, just stare blankly and tell them you don't know what they're talking about. If something slips and somehow it can be proven that we're not from Wheatley, Valleyvale is our backup origin."

"I don't know Wheatley either," she said, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. "How long will I have to learn it?"

"A couple of days," I answered. "We really shouldn't take the time, but I have some sleep to catch up on. We won't get that vial back if I have to stop to nap in the middle."

"Would I be prying if I asked about what's been happening lately?" she said with obvious hesitation overlying curiosity. "You've been looking so distracted and far away, and I saw what went on between you and your partner. I don't mind telling you that my hands weren't too steady afterward... For a minute I thought you were going to kill him."

"I almost did," I said, not moving on the bed but holding tight to what control I had left. "And that's the second time I almost killed him, so I'm not going to wait for third time lucky. He can team with someone else from now on, and find a girl for himself who will collapse in hysterics when she cracks, not reach for the nearest weapon."

I wanted to turn over and bury my face in my arms, but the truth wasn't something I could hide from. I'd tried again and again to keep from thinking about what had happened, but some part of me hadn't cooperated. I'd suddenly found the whole situation spelled out in my mind in simple, open terms, ones which it wasn't possible to misunderstand or misinterpret. I had to turn around and walk away from Val, even though this time I hadn't hurt him as badly as I had the first time. There's hurt and there's hurt, and the expression he'd worn still haunted me in times of distraction...

"I don't think I'll ever forget the look on his face after I came so close to killing him, and I don't ever want to see that look again," I said almost to myself. "And it all happened because I was stupid, as someone so kindly pointed out to me. You can be stupid with your own life, but not someone else's." Then I stirred and pushed all those thoughts away from me again. "Let get to these clothes so we can get out of here."

I rose to my feet, and after a couple of minutes we found that the clothes were a pretty good fit after all so we got into them. I settled on very brief shorts and a low-cut combination vest and blouse affair that reached only half way down to my waist. Teddy chose a skirt that was hardly longer than my shorts, and a halter-like arrangement that circled her neck. Adding high-thonged sandals to it we looked like we were in the business of being on the make, but that was the effect we were looking for. I made a call to arrange for more outfits like the ones we wore and some longer and heavier stuff for the chilly evenings in Flowerville, and then we went to find Ringer.

We ran Ringer down in the doctor's lounge on the floor my room was on. The man I worked for was busy reminiscing with Ralph and a few other doctors about the "good old days" when he didn't have to play nursemaid to a bunch of crazy agents. I'd heard the story before, and could see his point, since I'd rather be one of the crazy agents myself. When we stopped in the lounge doorway, Teddy looked at the group and smiled faintly.

"I wonder how Mr. Ringer will react to these outfits," she mused softly. "He didn't seem too anxious to help us with the stay-tabs."

"Don't try him," I advised, feeling something of amusement. "I was reminded that it isn't backwardness that send him scurrying at the drop of a skirt. He doesn't believe in mixing business with pleasure any more than I do, so he stays away from his women agents. But from what I hear, if you push him too hard you'll end up very surprised."

She glanced at me showing a flash of dismissal for what I'd said, then she assumed a neutral expression and walked into the lounge. I followed her, wondering if she would take the advice or be like me and have to learn the hard way. The group around Ringer noticed us before he did, and most of them - the male part - stared in appreciation. One of them whistled, low and sincerely, and Teddy stopped to turn completely around. That brought applause from the ones who appreciated the

gesture and Ralph called, "You, too, Diana! We don't get much chance to see anything like you two around here. Give us a break."

I laughed and turned slowly, stopping with my back to them, then twisted around half bent over to look at them over my hip.

"Is that what you had in mind?" I asked mildly. The applause was so loud that a couple of security guards came racing in. They looked at Teddy and me, reholstered their disruptors, then went back out grinning. Teddy continued on to the group, and I straightened up and followed her.

"When do you plan on leaving?" Ringer asked me when I reached him. "I told Lammerly I'd call him again with a better ETA."

"We're going now," I supplied, crouching down briefly to straighten the thong on my right sandal. "We'll take a hopper to a point about twenty-five or thirty miles past Wheatley and hitchhike back. The sort of girls we are would never think of using a regular means of transportation. You can have the hopper picked up later."

"Do you want a hopper left for you outside of Flowerville?" Ringer asked as I stood up again.

"No," I decided after thinking about it for a minute. "After we get the vial, we'll find our own way back. The practice will do Teddy good."

Ringer looked at Teddy, and she smiled and started to come close and began to say something when she seemed to lose her balance. She tried to recover, couldn't make it, and ended up squarely on Ringer's lap. The doctors applauded again, and she blushed prettily.

"Oh, Mr. Ringer, I'm so sorry!" she said, staying right where she was. "I can't imagine what could have happened!"

"I can," Ringer returned dryly. He stood up and pushed at the same time, and Teddy ended up on the floor hard enough for us all to hear it. "Every time I get a new female agent I go through the same routine. Don't you girls ever stop?"

"I don't know about anyone else," Teddy muttered as she got up from the floor to rub at herself, "but as far as I'm concerned I have no intention of going on. Did you have to push so hard?"

Ringer grinned but didn't answer her. For my own part, I was happy to just stand by for once and see someone else get it. Then Ralph left his chair and came over to me.

"You'd better take some of this with you, Diana," he said, handing me a small vial of the dye he'd used on my hand. "The compound isn't supposed to wear off, but I'll feel better if you have a supply of it with you."

"I appreciate it, Ralph," I said, putting the vial away in the middle of my cleavage. "But I think you brought it to me just to watch where I put it." It's hard to believe, but he blushed at that! Which made me add, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you the same doctor who gave me a physical just about a week ago? What could you possibly be blushing about?"

He blushed a deeper shade, then a grin forced its way through.

"It's not the same," he said, using a gesture to show he groped for the right words. "When I give physicals I just check the parts, not how they're put together. It's a lot more fun to concentrate on the assembly."

Teddy and I laughed at that and Ringer said, "Are you taking any weapons? Those outfits tend to limit what you can carry."

"We're going out clean," I responded. "If we wanted to match their firepower we'd need an atomic cannon. Besides, I know how they handle things in Flowerville, and if we run into any arguments we won't be using conventional weapons. Any final comments or criticisms? If not, everybody wave bye-bye."

Some of the doctors did just that but Ringer growled, "Don't waste any more time than you have to, and make sure at least one of you gets back here with that vial."

I blew him a kiss, and Teddy and I left to pick up our battered old luggage and get a hopper. When I'd set the course and turned on the autopilot, I lit a cigarette and leaned back to relax.

"I didn't know you could fly a hopper," Teddy commented as she glanced out the window at the ground far below us.

"What made you think I couldn't?" I countered.

"Well, you always had a pilot when you came to 2 for the class," she said, dismissing the landscape to give me her attention again. "I just assumed you couldn't handle a hopper."

"That was no pilot, that was my guard," I said with a small laugh. "Pete wanted to make sure I didn't head for the shuttleport near Valleyvale, but you'll have to wait to get the whole story on that. But tell me, how did you like your first taste of real equality?"

She looked at me blankly. "What equality?"

"Didn't you hear Ringer's final comment?" I asked. "I would have thought you couldn't miss it."

"Oh, that," she remembered aloud after a moment of thought. "Sure, I heard it, but he was exaggerating, wasn't he? Sort of like 'with your shield or on it'?"

"That was no exaggeration," I said, watching her reaction. "It's the best thing about

Ringer. He expects all his agents to die if it means getting the job done, and in this instance being female doesn't buy you a thing. So I repeat, how does it feel?"

"I don't know yet," she answered slowly, obviously never having really considered the point. "I think it takes getting used to - like this seat," she added as she squirmed around. "And that fall I took didn't help any. Does he always do that?"

"Not always," I denied with amusement. "You're just lucky you weren't alone with him. He teaches a harder lesson in private."

"You sound like the voice of experience," she mused, studying me. "What would have happened in private?"

"Try it and find out for yourself," I came back, flicking some ashes onto the floor of the hopper. "Nobody warned me either. It was a long time ago, but I have confidence in Ringer."

"What could he possibly do?" she demanded. "I have a 5 rating in hand to hand combat."

"I have a 9 rating, but you didn't find me in his lap," I pointed out. "I can hold my own with him in the gym, but when nobody's looking he fights dirty. At that point it isn't a game anymore, and you either fight to put him away for keeps, or you take your lumps. Personally, I've had enough trouble with the Council lately. Female or no, I have no intention of having to tell them they need a new Chief of Agents because of me. But they don't know you yet. Maybe you could get away with it."

"Some other time, maybe," she muttered, her eyes saying she was sorry she'd asked. "What do we do when we reach Wheatley?"

"We act as obnoxious as possible to give Lammerly an excuse for not sending the police after us when we go," I explained, automatically checking our position at the reminder. "If we should be picked up by the Flowerville police we don't want to be sent back, but we do want a just-in-case alibi. It's better to be sent back and have to start all over than to have our final paychecks made out. I'll give you that sketch of Valleyvale now, so we don't have to worry about who might be listening."

I gave her a general, street by street description of Valleyvale, filling in only the main points of interest. Teddy listened with her eyes closed and no expression on her face, which meant she was memorizing the data. I had brought her along more on an impulse than anything else, but it looked like the impulse might pay off.

I finally grounded the hopper in a tall weed patch about half a mile from the main highway leading to Wheatley, then we walked back to the highway. After fighting our way through all those weeds, we really looked like we'd been traveling for a while. We strolled along the highway waiting for somebody to come by, but Tanderon's local ground traffic tended to be on the light side. After an hour's worth of strolling, Teddy stopped to wipe the sweat and dust from her forehead with the back of the

hand that wasn't holding a valise.

"I think five miles away from Wheatley would have been a better idea," she said, sounding as hot and sweaty as she looked. "At this rate it'll take us a week to get there."

"No, it won't," I disagreed, glancing at her. "If we don't get a bite soon, you get your first real lesson in overland travel mode. You've had the foundation for it laid down, haven't you?"

"Yes, and we were even given one practice," she answered glumly. "Somehow the classroom is starting to look better and better."

Meaning that that one practice had left her as drained as everyone got at first. Overland travel mode lets you move incredibly fast for a time, but it uses your bodily resources to do it. If you haven't used the mode enough to let you develop special caches to draw on, you end up feeling as though you're about to die of exhaustion. I wasn't terribly anxious to use the mode for an extended period, but we didn't have much time to waste.

So we kept going, and about ten minutes later we heard the sound of an engine. We turned to look, and saw an old-fashioned ground car coming along. Teddy started to look shocked then wiped the expression off, but I couldn't really blame her for the reaction as you don't often see relics like that. The vehicle was low slung and supposedly streamlined, but probably couldn't do much more than a hundred and fifty mph. The ground car started to slow, kept going a short way past us, then stopped and waited while we hurried to get to it. A short-haired man with a red face looked out of the window at us, wetting his lips with a thick tongue as he watched us come running up.

"You girls need a ride?" he asked in a hoarse voice while his eyes drank us in.

"You bet," I said, giving him a look that said a ride wasn't all I needed. Teddy said nothing, but gave him the same kind of look.

"C'mon, then," he said, and leaned over to open the door on the other side of the car. We went around to that side and I got in first after putting my bag in the back, then I moved all the way over to give Teddy room to get in. I also made sure to rub against red-face a little before I moved back slightly to give him room to drive. He stared at me and wet his lips again, then put a hand on my leg and slowly moved it up and down.

"Where you girls goin'?" he asked, just as hoarsely as before.

"To Wheatley," I said, closing my eyes a bit to the stroking. "I hope getting there won't take too long. We been on the road a long time with nobody's company but our own."

"I guess I c'n take care a that," he said, retrieving his hand and starting the car

moving again. "Wheatley's just up the road."

We drove in silence for a short while, and soon started to see old, abandoned, but once-elegant houses spaced out along the highway. When we rounded a turn we could see the start of a town far ahead, and that was when red-face began to slow down. After a minute he pulled off the road near a shack that was more rundown than the houses had been, obviously having been deserted for a longer time.

"Let's stop here a while," he said, his eyes looking at me hungrily. "We c'n count on th' privacy."

"Sure, baby," I murmured, running my hand over his arm the same way he'd done with my leg. "How much of the foldin' stuff you got? We don't come cheap."

"What d'ya mean?" he demanded, his hand grabbing my arm to stop the movement. "I give you a ride, and now you pay fer it! I don't hafta give you nothin' else!"

"The hell you don't!" I retorted, moving a short way away from him. "We don't put out for nothin' but a lousy ride! Whadda you think we are, a couple of kids?"

"No," he said in an ugly voice. "I c'n see yer pros all the way. Get out."

"Don't be like that, baby," I said immediately in a wheedling tone, going after his arm again. "We can do business... So how much have you got?"

"I said get out!" he repeated, leaning over to open the door near Teddy before giving me a shove. "I don't need you if I hafta pay fer it."

"Forget the cheapskate," Teddy said in a disgusted voice, already getting out of the car. "He couldn'a made it for both of us anyway."

"I guess you're right," I said in a bored tone, following her out and retrieving my bag before adding, "Big man."

Red-face leaned over again and slammed the door shut, then took off fast. We watched him and his dust cloud until they were out of sight, then Teddy turned to look at me.

"Weren't you pushing it a little?" she asked, brushing some of the dust out of her hair. "What if he'd agreed to pay?"

"Then we would have done business," I answered, wiping the heat of the sun from my neck. "If you need soft lights and sweet music you're in the wrong line of work."

She flushed a little, then laughed wryly.

"I was being juvenile, wasn't I?" she conceded. "Next time I'll get in first."

"Curb your enthusiasm," I advised with a sigh. "This routine goes only for around

Wheatley. If you try it in Flowerville you won't get paid either, but they'll stand in line six-deep. Almost everybody there belongs to a different 'social club,' and they're always on call for each other. When we get there we'll have to connect up fast with one of our own, or it'll be open season on us by all of them. Now that we're almost there, let's start walking again."

We trudged on down the highway, managing to get just inside the town limits before the trusty agents of the peace reached us. They came roaring down the street in their own version of modern transportation, screeching to a stop right in front of us. The doors on both sides of the ground car flew open, and two really rough types got out. They were tall and blankfaced with eye-hiding sun reflectors, and were wearing stunners as if they were showing the weapons off for sale. Teddy and I glanced at each other, then waited for them to reach us.

"Get in the car," the one near me said in a flat, lifeless voice, standing close enough to grab me if I started to run.

"What for?" I demanded brashly, just so as not to disappoint them. "Walking's not against the law."

Without changing expression, the one in front of me slapped me cross-handed so hard that I went down.

"Get in the car," he repeated in the same flat tone. I put the back of my hand to my face and showed a little fear, then got up and grabbed my bag. The man stepped back a pace to let me pass, and his partner pushed Teddy. She had to run a few steps to stay on her feet, but she managed it and joined me in getting into the back of car. They closed the doors on us, got in themselves in front, then after backing up and turning around we drove into Wheatley.

The whole town of Wheatley is a monument to dry throats. The old wooden buildings stood back in their coats of peeling paint, the dust drifting over and around them, and just looking at those buildings made me lick my lips and swallow. Teddy stared out the window on her side of the car with a bored expression on her face, but I didn't bother since I'd been to Wheatley before.

In a matter of minutes we pulled up in front of a dusty stone building, and our honor guard got out. The one on my side opened the door and said, "Out." Stunned by the brilliant conversation I climbed out in time to have him grab my arm hard enough to leave fingerprints. He hustled me inside the building, and his partner followed with Teddy.

It was cooler and darker inside, but the air was still around the 92% humidity mark. We were dragged over to a low desk that was surrounded by a wooden railing, where a man sat working. His bent head showed a bald spot, and when he looked up his jowly face was sweating. His narrowed eyes took in every inch of me before he gave the same inspection to Teddy, and when he'd finished looking he spoke to her rather than me.

"You might be old enough for a license, girl, but your partner ain't," he drawled. "Don't you know we don't like freelance workers around here?"

"I don't know nothin' about your crummy town, and we never needed a license before," Teddy answered sullenly. "That jerk was lucky we even looked at him."

"Well, you look at any more a our people, girl, and a licence'll cost you more'n you c'n pay without pain," he countered without changing expression. "Where were you two headed?"

Teddy glanced at me and didn't answer, so the jowly face turned in my direction to study me again.

"You know what happens to kids we pick up around here?" he asked me. "They get sent to live with some folks who don't like kids, and I know 'em. They really won't like you. Where were you headed?"

"The Federation Academy," I told him in a bored voice. "We're new cadets."

The fingerprint expert hanging onto my arm shifted his grip to a point down near my wrist, then levered my arm back. When he'd gotten it half way up my back I leaned over toward the desk and gasped.

"Where?" repeated the jowly man.

"Lammerly!" I gasped out, which caused my private arm bender to ease off and then pull me upright by the shoulder. If I'd answered their questions immediately they would have been suspicious; having the answers forced out of me made them much more acceptable and unquestionably true.

"What do you have to do with Lammerly?" the jowly man asked. I hesitated until I felt my arm being pushed up again, and then I talked fast.

"He's our old man's cousin!" I shrilled out. "We're supposta stay with him!"

"Let's find out," the jowly man said, turning away. He reached over and used his 'phone to call Lammerly, and asked him to come down without going into details. Teddy and I were pushed over to an old wooden bench at the side of the grimy room, and we all waited.

About an hour later, Lammerly walked in. He went over to the jowly man without even glancing in our direction, and stopped to shake hands.

"Had to finish some chores, Jake," Lammerly said to the man. "What'd you need me for?"

"You know those two, Alf?" Jowly Jake asked, pointing at Teddy and me. Lammerly turned his head as if noticing us for the first time, then came over to stand in front of us and stare. He was dark-haired and almost a giant of a man, with a broad and humorless face and dark, serious eyes.

"Where the hell've you two been?" he asked in a flat voice. "You were supposta be here a week ago."

Teddy and I didn't say anything, but Jake did.

"They were hitchin' along the highway an' tryin' to work their way here," he drawled. "How come they're visitin' you?"

"My cousin George couldn't handle 'em," Lammerly said, still staring at Teddy and me. "I said I'd take 'em for a while and try my hand at it. They were due a week ago, and I thought they went on to Flowerville for sure."

"Serve 'em right if they did," Jake said, the creaking of his chair saying he now leaned back. "You wanta take 'em, or should we keep 'em for a while? Sorta soften 'em up for you."

"I'm pretty good at softenin' things up myself," Lammerly responded, rubbing the knuckles of one hand with his other hand. "Walk, you two."

Teddy and I exchanged sour looks and got up, then picked up our bags again and walked out of the building just ahead of Lammerly. When we were all outside he pushed us to the right and said, "That way."

He followed no more than two steps behind us as we walked down the cracking street, and after a little more than four blocks worth of walking he stopped us by a hand on each of our shoulders.

"In there," he said, pointing to a dirty yellow house that must have once looked bright and cheerful and welcoming. The one-story house was patched and repaired, standing alone among many others like it, a driveway and carport to the left, scraggly grass running to a short, gaping wooden fence on the right. Teddy and I walked up the worn stone walk and then climbed the two overlarge concrete steps. We stood and waited until Lammerly moved past us to open the door, then I followed him inside with Teddy following me.

Inside it was dim and dusty silent, thin patched drapes covering the wide window to the left of the front door. I moved ahead until I stood in the middle of ancient, overused furniture before I dropped my bag, then was able to turn as Lammerly closed the door behind Teddy. He was also dividing his stare between Teddy and me, but he couldn't wait forever before taking the plunge.

"Diana?" he asked, looking at Teddy, which made her smile faintly. She already knew she hadn't been seeing the real me, but the matter wasn't one that made me feel like smiling.

"How soon they forget," I murmured, bringing Lammerly's serious eyes to me as Teddy's smile widened. Lammerly had a sense of humor, but his usual sober manner tended to hide the fact.

"Forget, hell," he returned with a snort, flipping a wall switch to get enough light for a better inspection of me. "You didn't look like that the last time we worked together. If Ringer hadn't told me, I never would have known you."

The ceiling light glared down on threadbare carpeting, old, faded chairs, a rickety couch, and chipped, dull lamp tables holding lamps that didn't work any longer. I looked at the two once-upholstered chairs standing only a couple of feet away, chose the one that seemed sturdier, then collapsed into it.

"That's the story of my life, Alf," I told him, shaking sweat-dampened hair away from my face. "Nobody knows me. Alf Lammerly, meet Teddy Hughes. Teddy and I are teaming on this one."

The man and woman nodded to each other as though they'd only just met, which happened to be exactly the way it was. Two agents meeting in public aren't really meeting, they're just reacting to the situation and each other's roles. Alf made his smile of welcome warmer than it usually was, then turned his attention back to me.

"Ringer told me you were coming here for a rest," he said, his long face showing nothing of curiosity. "Don't you rate a regular vacation anymore?"

"Not these days," I confirmed, deciding I'd wait a while before giving him as much of the story as I could. "How about being a good host and breaking out a chunk of bread? I want to show Teddy a few of the sights before it gets too late."

His dark, sober eyes stared at me for a minute before he said, "Sure," and went past me to the doorway directly behind my chair. There were two other doorways in the room, one to the left and one to the right, but his going to the one behind me probably made that the kitchen. His lack of expression had seemed stranger than usual, but it might have just been my imagination.

"He's got great working conditions here," Teddy commented in a soft voice, looking around at the broken down room before sitting in the other chair.

"It balances out," I shrugged, keeping my voice as low as hers had been. "Living here might be depressing, but he doesn't have to go into Flowerville. When he gets rotated out of here he'll probably go back to his apartment near headquarters, but then he'll have to stick his neck out again on whatever job comes up. If you're looking for a way to beat the game go right ahead, but if you find one let me know. I'm always interested in miracles."

Teddy didn't answer and I stretched out in the chair, relaxing my tired muscles. After thinking about it for a minute I decided it might be best if I cut the tour short and got back to the house as quickly as possible. Tomorrow, after some sleep, I'd be better able to do the tour job right. In a little while Lammerly called us, so we joined him in his dingy kitchen. We all took chairs, and Teddy and I sampled the stew-like meal he'd made. After the first taste I decided that Pete ought to meet Lammerly, and eagerly dug in. I finished it all and drank the coffee Lammerly had supplied, then

leaned back with a sigh.

"I'm tempted to ask you to marry me, Alf, but you'd probably insist that I do the cooking," I said. "Where did you learn to handle food like that?"

"It was learn or starve," he replied with a shrug, but his pleasure at the compliment was still obvious. "There aren't too many restaurants around here, at least not ones you can enjoy yourself in. How about some more?"

"Only if you want to see me explode," I told him with regrettable truth. "And it's time that Teddy and I got going. Are you finished, Teddy?"

"All set," she acknowledged, pushing her empty plate away. We both got to our feet and Teddy turned to the door, but before I could follow her the room suddenly blurred. I grabbed at the back of her chair to keep my balance, but almost fell anyway. Blinking my eyes didn't help to chase away the blur, but it did add to a growing dizziness that made the room spin around me. My legs and arms were abruptly very weak, but Lammerly was just as abruptly right behind me. His arm went around my waist, his strength alone holding me up.

"What's the matter, Diana," his voice murmured in my ear, sounding strange and blurry and very far away. "I thought you were leaving."

It was hard to follow what was going on, but somehow the truth fought its way through the externals.

"What did you give me, Alf?" I tried to demand, but the words came out slurred and lazy, as though the question wasn't at all important.

"Just what Ringer ordered," his murmur answered, sounding as though he were slowly moving away from me. "Something to make you get the sleep you need. Don't fight it, Diana, it's just what you need. Sleep is what you need ... sleep ... sleep..."

His receding murmur dragged me with it, down a dark and floating corridor, farther and farther away from the world I wanted to be in. I tried to fight being pulled away, tried to ignore what was dragging me down, but the effort was worse than useless. Alf's arm was still around me, his broad body pressed to mine, and I managed to croak out, "Damn Ringer!" just before it all melted away.

Chapter 13

There's a certain point at which waking up in strange places stops being interesting. When I opened my eyes the next morning I discovered I was rapidly reaching that point. I lay in a wide, rumped bed, an old, thin sheet covering me, the sun's glare

coming in through a broken slat on the window blind. I took a deep breath and forced myself out of line with the glare, finding it possible to move with only a little difficulty.

It was necessary to move again in order to sit up, which actually banished the small amount of difficulty. That let me look around to see that the room I was in gave off a feeling of rarely having been used. It was as rundown and threadbare as the rest of Alf's house, empty except for the bed I had slept in and my bag standing against the wall to the left of the bed. Clothes lay piled on top of the bag, casually dumped there by someone who wasn't interested enough to fold them.

That, of course, was when I realized I was naked under the sheet. I cursed under my breath, knowing Alf wasn't likely to have asked Teddy to undress me, and the anger I felt hit the charts and started to rise. When it came to men taking my clothes off I prefer to have a say in the matter, even if I happen to know the man and had gone through it with him once before when still awake. It was all Ringer's fault, him and his damned orders, him and his damned concern. I didn't like to have decisions made for me even under normal conditions; during an assignment there was no way I'd stand for it.

I threw the cover off me and got to my feet, then stalked over to my bag to find a cigarette. Ringer and I would have to have words when I got back, but right now there was someone nearer who could use a few of those words. I felt rested from the long night's sleep I'd had, but an acrid, metallic taste had made camp in my mouth, telling me exactly what it was that had caused the night's sleep. Alf had gotten cute since the last time I'd worked with him, and I couldn't wait to tell him how much I appreciated it.

I lay down on the bed again until I finished the cigarette, then found a bathroom behind one of the two doors in my bedroom. The bathroom had another door besides the one I'd used, and I locked them both just for the hell of it before taking a shower. There was a water meter on the shower, shutting the water off after no more than a couple of minutes, but I was as clean by then as I was likely to get in that town. I let the air jets dry me before going back to my room for a clean outfit, and then I was ready to have that chat with Alf. Not even bothering to run a brush through my hair, I went out into the house's dingy living room.

Lammerly had one of the table lamps in pieces and had obviously been working on the wiring when he heard me opening the door to my bedroom. His head came up and he watched me come closer, his hands still doing something to the wiring. He sat perched on a chair arm next to the lamp's table, and he didn't move or say a word. Teddy was also in the room, I knew, but for the moment my mood considered her invisible.

"Well?" I demanded, stopping about five feet away from Lammerly to put my fists on my hips.

"Well what?" he countered, his long face looking uninterested. "You're not thinking of starting something foolish, are you? This is hardly the place for it."

"I'm thinking of finishing something," I growled, taking another step closer to him. "Since when are you so keen on following orders?"

"I follow them when they make sense," he responded with a shrug, still looking unimpressed. "Ringer said not to use the stuff if you took it easy on your own, but you didn't so I did. It's as simple as that."

"Simple is the right word," I agreed with a nod, finding myself getting angrier. "In case you've forgotten, that's not the way I work."

"Then you'd better change the way you work while you're here," he came back, anger beginning to touch him as well. "You can't expect to go into Flowerville while you're half asleep. As long as you're in my territory, you'll do it right."

"Is that so," I murmured, feeling my voice soften as my anger built. "Well, congratulations, Alf. You should have let me in on the good news right away."

"What good news?" he asked, finally changing his expression to one of confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the news of your promotion," I said, watching his eyes to see if it reached him. "I hadn't known they'd made you senior to me. The last time we worked together, you weren't."

He went motionless as his sober gaze became startled, and he suddenly seemed to find himself with nothing more to say. There wasn't much he could say, but I didn't have that trouble.

"If the promotion hasn't come through then you can keep your ideas to yourself," I pressed, not about to let the matter drop. "As long as I'm senior agent here, we'll continue to do things my way."

"It's hard to remember you're senior to everyone but other hyper-A's," he muttered, sounding a lot less cocky than he had a couple of minutes earlier. "Why do you look like that?"

"My sins caught up with me," I said in disgust, turning away to keep him from seeing my expression. "One of these days I'll have to hang a sign around my neck, just to remind everyone who I am."

"Believe me, you need it," he said from behind me, giving me exactly the kind of support I was dying to get. I swallowed an appropriate comeback, then forced myself to turn and look at him again with less hostility.

"Anything interesting happen while I was in dreamland?" I asked, just to keep myself from starting the fight all over again.

"No," he answered, then gestured to one side. "One of my neighbors dropped by early this morning with a couple of gifts, so I took Teddy around town and showed her the sights on my own."

I looked at Teddy where she sat in a chair to my right, and for the first time noticed what she was wearing. It was a faded print dress that came down below her knees, and was at least three sizes too big. It hung on her like a sack, and if her face had been covered I wouldn't have made any bets about whether she was a girl or a boy.

"Good thinking," I said to her with a straight face. "Confusion to the enemy is always sound doctrine."

"It was his idea!" she snarled, jerking a thumb at Lammerly as she straightened. "'You can't walk around dressed like that with me,' he said! 'I have a role to protect,' he said! 'Put this dress on,' he said! Dress! He wouldn't know a dress if it dropped on him from a tree! Would it bother you if I told him where to put this dress?"

"It would bother me," Lammerly said, bringing her blazing eyes over to him. "Life here has got to be as unpleasant as possible for you two, so you'll have a good reason to run to Flowerville. If I let you parade around in your original get-up and never said a word, don't you think people would start to wonder when you left?"

Teddy was still mad, but she turned back to me with a pleading look. Unfortunately, all I could do was shrug.

"He's right," I told her. "A slip like that on this end could mean the game for us in Flowerville. It's a choice between feeling foolish here and feeling dead there."

"Okay, okay, I understand it," Teddy conceded in a grumble, throwing herself back into the slouch she'd been in a minute earlier. "But I don't have to like it! How many more times do we have to go out?"

"Two more times should do it," Lammerly said. "You learn fast and there isn't too much left to show you." Then he turned to me with a dirty grin. "One of those times Diana will be coming with us. She needs the excuse too, and I have another dress just her size. We'll leave her here the second time, and she can get some more sleep while we finish up."

Teddy sat up again and looked at me with sudden interest. "Let's see her dress, Lammerly. I want to know which one of us is going to be more stylish."

Lammerly laughed and went for the dress, and I went for another cigarette. It's easy giving advice, but it's not as easy to take it even when it's your own advice. I didn't like the idea either, but it was necessary to the job. When I went back in, Lammerly had the dress.

"It's not really fair, Diana," Teddy said, almost choking. "He saved the best one for you."

I looked at the dress, then looked at Lammerly.

"Would you try to find something else if I took back what I said earlier?" I asked him. "Horizontal stripes don't do a thing for me, and round, frilly collars and puffed short sleeves are definitely out this season."

"I couldn't find anything better if I tried," Lammerly said soberly, the grin showing only in his eyes as he turned the dress around to look at it again himself. "This little number was made for you. You can get into it while I put a meal together, and we'll go out after you've finished eating."

"Oh, no," I said as fast as I could. "I'll do my own cooking, thank you. I'd hate to exhaust your supply of Lethe, so I'll change when I finish."

"You'll change now," he contradicted, holding the dress out to me. "You know you're safe until after we get back, so you're just stalling."

"Life in this town has made you vicious, Alf," I said, grabbing the dress. "I think I'll recommend a transfer to the planet Esmonia for you when I get back."

"If I thought you were serious about that crack, the next time you fell asleep you wouldn't wake up again," he said with a laugh. "Those so-called females on Esmonia are worse than you are. You don't pick up a whip when I try to argue with you."

"Well, just keep finding things like this dress for me, and you'll see how fast I adapt to new ideas," I told him sweetly. He grinned again and went into the kitchen, and I went into the bedroom to change.

I didn't even look for a mirror when I was in the dress. The sagging belt around where my waist should have been, and the long-buttoned stay-tab down the front of the dress told the whole story. Needless to say, the high-thonged sandals made the whole thing look even more ridiculous. I went back out, and Teddy turned away from me fast to study the faded pattern on the wallpaper.

"I bet my knees are warmer than your knees," I said to her, making her break up. She turned back to me and we both laughed, then we looked at each other critically.

"You're right," she said, studying the matter seriously. "Yours is longer than mine."

"I know it'll be hard, but try your best to remember that we resent having to wear these things," I advised dryly. "Work at looking surly when we go out."

"It'll be a struggle, but I think I might manage it," she replied just as dryly, then shook her head to dismiss the silliness and added, "I wonder if Lammerly's making anything for me to eat. We had an early breakfast and I'm hungry again."

We went into the kitchen, and Lammerly was just about finished making something for all of us. He fumbled a pot when he saw me and didn't bother to hide his grin, but I just dropped into a chair to wait for the food and ignored him. When we

finished eating, we headed out.

This time we walked behind Lammerly, dragging our feet and almost snarling. He kept stopping to tell us to hurry up, but we stuck to the same slow pace. Teddy and I were passing some small, dirty stores when Lammerly looked back, saw how far behind we'd fallen, and turned around to retrace his steps to us.

"You two have been draggin' long enough!" he said in a hard voice when he reached us. "You pick up your feet and move, or I'll give you another taste of my belt right here! I didn't mind doin' it to get you into decent clothes, and I don't mind doin' it to get you movin' right! You're not out here lookin' for customers!"

"Who'd want us in these rags?" Teddy asked bitterly, pulling at her fashion frock.

"Nobody'd better," Lammerly returned with a dangerous edge to his tone as he started to open his belt. We looked at the belt and started to move faster, and the loafers from the dirty stores who had come out to watch the show laughed.

"That's tellin' 'em, Alf!" one called as he scratched himself. "Show 'em who's boss."

"Give it to 'em anyways," another called. "Save you some trouble later on."

"Can't now, Josh," Lammerly called back. "Got to get a haircut and then get on with things. Been wastin' enough time on these two."

After supplying our reason for being out there like that Lammerly caught up with us, then led the way to a dingy barbershop that stood all by itself.

"You two stay out front by the window where I c'n see you," he ordered when we reached it. "If you wander off, I'll find you."

He went inside after giving us individual hard looks, and we walked across the wooden boards to the window where he might have been able to see us through the dust. We had only been standing there a couple of minutes when five of the younger generation of male loafers came over. They made a semicircle around us, then snickered.

"Whata you two?" the leader asked with a lot of amusement. He wasn't very big, but he had broad shoulders and a thick neck and chest. "Ya look like girls from the neck up, but the rest of ya must be pretty bad fer ya t'hide it like thet."

I looked around casually and saw that I was almost to the end of the small window. With that in mind I moved slowly until I was past it, then grinned at the group.

"I'll show you what I am, but it'll cost you to do more than look," I purred, then opened that giant belt and simply tied it closed again around my waist. With that done, I began to pull the skirt of the dress up through the belt, using the tightness of the belt to keep the skirt from sliding down again. I took my time with the pulling,

and when the skirt was above the middle of my thighs there wasn't a sound from any of the five. They were too busy staring and breathing hard.

"I don't think you oughta do that, Diana," Teddy said nervously as she glanced around. "If he sees you he'll kill you."

"He'll hafta catch me first," I said, grinning at my audience. I also began to peel open the stay-tab on the front of the dress, and five pairs of eyes were glued to me.

"So you still ain't learned!" a furious voice said from behind me, and Teddy and I spun around to see Lammerly not a foot away from us. I tried to run, but he grabbed my hair and pulled me back to where I'd been. Then he turned me around to face him, pulled the dress back down to its original length, and finally bent to throw me over his shoulder before straightening again.

"Put me down!" I yelled, pounding on his back as my former audience laughed. "I'm sick of this stinkin' place and I'm sick of you!"

"You're gonna be a lot sicker when I get you back to the house!" he countered, smacking me hard on the behind. "I'm gonna need a new belt when I'm finished with you!"

He grabbed Teddy's arm and dragged her along while I squirmed and struggled and tried to keep from falling off on my head. Considering Lammerly's size, it was a long way down to the ground. We got back to the house in half the time it had taken on the way out, and Lammerly slammed the door closed behind us.

"Nice going, Diana," he said as he put me down. "Half the town must have seen that act, so they won't wonder where you are when I finish Teddy's tour. When they find out you've both run away, they'll just grin and nod in understanding."

"Thanks for the applause," I acknowledged, looking at him with less than friendliness. "I'd just like to know if you really had to hit me that hard. You're no 90 pound weakling, you know."

"I guess I got carried away," he answered with innocence flowing out of every pore as he shrugged. "You don't think I'd hit a senior agent on purpose, do you?"

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" I asked straight out, already knowing the answer even before he grinned and shook his head. "Okay, in that case I'm going in to get some more rest and you can take your injured masculine pride out on Teddy for a while."

Teddy glanced at me, then looked straight at Lammerly.

"I don't care if he does," she said quietly. "He's been working very hard trying to help me, and I appreciate it."

Lammerly turned to her and looked her over as though seeing her for the first time.

"Let's sit down a talk for a while," he said after a very brief hesitation. "We can get acquainted during the time I'm supposed to be beating the hell out of Diana. If the beating lasts a little longer than everyone expects, well, she deserves it."

They went to the dilapidated old couch, and I smiled to myself as I returned to my "bedroom." Teddy did learn fast, and it looked like she would never be lonely. But when I thought about what lay ahead of her in Flowerville I no longer felt like smiling. If there was any other way I would have chosen that instead of what I had, but this job was too important to let personal feelings mix in. Even if I let them mix in normally. I hoped she and Lammerly hit it off well enough so that she'd have some pleasant memories from it - since she was going to need them. I got rid of the dress, then lay down and tried to rest.

Teddy and Lammerly went out one last time, and when they got back I was awakened by Teddy's crying. From what they said I gathered that she'd tried to give Lammerly an excuse for pushing her around too, but she'd gone too far and he'd had to use his belt on her right on the spot. As soon as the outside door was closed the scene became downright fascinating. Lammerly towered over her and apologized like a small boy who'd been naughty, and Teddy stood sobbing while comforting him and telling him it was all right. I stayed behind the door in my room, and when Lammerly took her gently to his own room, I went to put up some coffee.

I'd eaten long ago and had just about decided to call it a night when Lammerly came into the kitchen. He poured some of the still-hot coffee for himself, then sat down near me at the table.

"When are you leaving?" he asked too neutrally after sipping at the coffee.

"Before first light tomorrow morning," I said, stretching a little. "We'll take your ground car, and you can threaten your cousin George into replacing it."

"He'd better do it quickly, too," Lammerly said with a faint smile. "I can't afford to let something like that go."

"Ringer will have another ground car on its way to you in no time," I said, deciding to notice his distraction out loud. "Would you like to tell me what's bothering you?"

"Does she know what to expect in Flowerville?" he said, answering my question by not really answering it - and not quite looking at me.

"Not completely," I admitted, hating to tell him that. "Not yet. But she'll know by the time we get there. I can't afford to let her be surprised."

"Damn this business!" he growled, then got up to pace. "You never get a chance at a normal life!"

"Why don't you quit then?" I countered as gently as I could.

He stopped pacing, picked up a chair, then slammed it down again.

"All right!" he ground out. "You've made your point, but I don't have to like it! I'll see that she's ready on time to leave."

He stalked out of the kitchen, but I heard him close the door to his room softly. After another minute I went to my own room, then managed to go back to sleep.

Teddy was already waiting for me when I carried my bag out of my room early the next morning. She stood drinking some coffee, and when she saw me she gestured toward another mug standing on a table.

"I made it fresh myself," she said lightly. "If you're feeling brave, join me."

"Danger means nothing to fearless agents like me," I said, picking up the mug and taking a very tiny sip. It didn't kill me on the spot, so I drank more of it before adding, "You're looking very wide awake at this ungodly hour."

"I had a very restful night," she answered, a blandness in both tone and gaze. "What are the chances of coming back this way after the job is over?"

"The chances are great - if you plan to settle in permanently," I told her after sipping again at the coffee. "Otherwise I wouldn't advise it."

She glanced toward Lammerly's closed door after losing her amusement, then looked away again.

"Isn't it time for us to leave yet?" she asked without any inflection.

"Past time," I said, and traded the mug for my bag. We went out to Lammerly's car and found that the keys weren't there, but that made no difference. I located the ignition wires under the dashboard and the engine started quietly enough, but the deep silence all around magnified the sound incredibly - which made Teddy glance around nervously.

"Hurry up and let's get out of here," she said, obviously not joking. "I'd hate to have anyone catch us."

I released the handbrake and put the car in forward gear, but let it coast until we were out of the driveway and down to the corner. Then I gave it some gas and we moved smoothly ahead. When we got to the highway to Flowerville, I really let it out.

"Why don't you put it on automatic?" Teddy asked as the still gray scenery flashed by. "We have a long way to go."

"This isn't a hopper," I answered, only glancing at her. "There is no automatic setting."

"You can't be serious!" she responded in a shocked tone. "How can they live like this?"

"They have no choice," I said with a shrug. "They know how to build hoppers, but

their raw materials supplies can't handle it. They can't produce some of the hopper components, so they build ground cars instead - mostly out of scavenged and reworked parts. If you think it's bad now, wait until they can't produce ground cars anymore. The greater part of the soil is contaminated, the mines are played out, their oil fields are almost gone, and the best brains around have moved on to other planets. Those people are walking ghosts, but they won't admit it. Why were you so nervous about being caught? We just would have had to try again later."

"I didn't want to force Alf into having to use his belt again," she said after making a face and rubbing gently at her right shoulder. "I like the way he apologizes, but when he's hitting me he doesn't hold back much."

"He's a good agent and knows how to stick to a role," I said with an inner sigh for her unplanned field exercise. "When you have more experience you'll know what to expect from another agent who's playing a part, and then you'll be able to decide how you should act. It'll save you some bruises."

"I'd better get that experience fast," she muttered darkly. "I didn't have to become an agent to get beaten. I could have stayed home for that."

I let the comment go by the way she undoubtedly wanted me to, and we just drove on. Hours went by and Teddy slept for a while, but I was too keyed up to nap even if I could have. But when I saw a rundown diner in the distance I headed for it, needing a break to stretch out the stiffness driving so long had caused. Teddy woke up when the sound of the engine changed as I began to slow down, and she glanced around blearily.

"What's that?" she asked, finally peering at the diner. "It looks like it's about to fall apart."

"It ain't much, but it's home," I said, pulling up next to the only other car in front of it. "Or at least it's home temporarily. There aren't so many of these places that we can afford to pass it up. Let's see what we can scrounge, sister."

We got out of the car, and climbed the three broken steps to the door. I'd disconnected the ignition wires to turn off the car, then had put them back where they belonged. Anyone looking in would assume we had the keys with us, or at least they should. The door creaked when we opened it, and we stood just inside the doorway for a moment to let our eyes adjust to the gloom. There was a sloppy-looking woman in her late twenties standing behind the counter staring at us, and she snorted when she saw us looking around to find the rest of the place empty.

"Too bad," she sneered in a lazy voice as she picked up the suggestion provided by the skimpy clothes we wore again. "If ya want anythin', y'll have t' pay fer it yerself."

"That's life," I answered with a shrug. "What've ya got that won't poison us?"

"If y're fussy ya c'n head fer the next place," she said, wiping at her nose with the

back of her hand. "It's only 'bout a hunnert miles away."

"Thanks anyways, but we'll take a chance," I told her dryly. "Trot it on out."

Teddy used the bathroom while I waited at the counter, then I used it while she waited. When I came out, I found that I could have waited longer. The mess on the plate the woman shoved at me would have made Pete's cooking look good. I ate the mess anyway and so did Teddy, but we had to stop breathing while we did. Then we paid up with the local currency we'd gotten at Blue Skies and left, glad to get out of there.

Once we were rolling again, I decided it was time to talk about Flowerville. Putting it off any longer would be foolish, and Teddy had already had a nap.

"I know you were out hunting while you were at 2," I said to draw her attention, and incidentally to ease into the subject. "What I don't know is how much information you have on Flowerville people."

"Aside from what you said about them the other day, not very much," she admitted in distraction while trying to get air rather than dust through her open window. "Why does everyone get so tight when they talk about Flowerville? They tried to ambush us, but we got them instead."

"You're not very impressed because you were armed and had other agents around to back you at the time," I said, paying only half attention to the road. "And you weren't in the middle of their own town, either. Teddy ... how much rough treatment do you think you can take? Without any help from me and without showing off your 5 rating in hand to hand?"

"I don't know," she said, and I could feel her stare as well as glimpse it out of the corner of my eye. "Why won't I be getting any help from you?"

I pulled off the road and stopped the car so I could turn in the seat to look at her.

"Do you remember when we were dragged in front of that man Jake back in Wheatley?" I asked. "Who did he speak to first?"

"He spoke to me first," she answered with a frown when I seemed to have gotten off the subject. "What are you getting at?"

"He spoke to you first because you look like the older one of us," I explained with a calm I wasn't feeling. "You'll get the same attention in Flowerville, and that's just the way I want it. They'll concentrate on you and I'll be too scared to help, but that will leave me free afterward to look for that vial. Their attentions aren't gentle and I won't be getting away with it entirely, but I can't afford to take the chance of something serious happening to me. You don't know Flowerville, and even if you happened to locate the vial you might not be able to get to it."

"What will they do to me?" she asked in a toneless voice, staring at nothing.

"Everything a bunch of warped men can do to a woman," I told her with a sigh, not about to pretty it up. "They consider it an initiation rite when you join their club, but if you don't push too hard it ought to be just bearable. Tell me now if you think you can't handle it, and I'll try to come up with something else. Once we walk into that place there's no backing out."

She thought about that in silence for a time, and the obvious - but false - conclusion finally came to her.

"Is that why you brought me?" she asked, bitterness heavy in her voice. "Because you needed a decoy to sacrifice to the animals?"

"I brought you because I thought you could handle it," I said in complete honesty, keeping my gaze on her even though she hadn't looked up. "If all I needed was a decoy to waste, I would have brought Nalvidi. I doubt if there's anyone around who would miss him."

Her body trembled faintly, but she found it possible to force a smile as she finally looked up at me.

"That's one of the good parts about being out here," she said, obviously fighting to chase the bleakness out of her eyes. "I don't have to listen to Nalvidi and his 'what ifs.' Do I have to take it quietly, or can I at least scream?"

"As loud as you like," I assured her, making no effort to hide how much I hated the necessity. "See if you can drown me out. And fight back as hard as you can without getting fancy. They like a struggle and get meaner if they miss it. None of it will be a picnic, but the first day will be the worst. Try to remember that."

She took a deep breath and leaned back to send her gaze through the windshield again.

"Well, I was the one who wanted to be an agent," she reminded herself with a sigh. "Nobody twisted my arm, so the worst part about all this is that I have no one else to blame for my being here. Let's get started. The sooner we get there the sooner it'll be over."

"I'm going to put some more gas in the tank first," I decided aloud. "If we don't pass a place to get more gas soon, all of Alf's cans in the trunk will be empty and we'll be walking again."

I got out and used up another can of gas without really filling the tank all the way. Another half dozen cans and that was it. I started the car up again and we both watched for somewhere to stop, but didn't find it until we were down to the last two cans. It continued on like that until we were within twenty miles of Flowerville, a point we reached in about the same number of hours. It was still dark when I pulled the car off the road into some bushes and trees, and then Teddy and I went to sleep. Going into Flowerville in daylight was bad enough. If we'd tried it in the middle of

the night, we might not have survived.

Chapter 14

Driving into Flowerville was worse than driving into Wheatley. Flowerville had been a mining town before the mines gave out, and it was dreary with a permanent feeling of deep, empty holes. The dirt covering everything wasn't light and dusty but dark and brooding, the whole picture making you want to walk close to the buildings to keep from having to go down the middle of the deserted street.

We parked the car on a side street and walked farther into the town, and that was probably the last we'd see of the vehicle. Any car that wasn't clearly marked as the property of a club was up for grabs, either to be stolen as it stood or stripped down to its component parts.

It would have been nice to continue using the car, but walking was safer than driving even if Flowerville was bigger than Wheatley. The police were harder here and tried to keep the size of the clubs down so those clubs would be easier to control. That meant if the police caught us they would send us back "home" - after having their own fun. And sneaking along is more easily done on foot, especially since we saw only a few people up and about. Most of the club members were probably resting up from the revels of the night before.

We'd gone a number of blocks without seeing anyone who looked like a club member, but we'd seen a few people scurrying around showing faces filled with hatred and fear and a desperate hope that they not be noticed. The clubs didn't accept everyone, I knew, and there were also those who couldn't face the "initiation rites."

We were passing an ugly, three-story building when a man in a worn yellow suit topped with strings of junk jewelry stepped out of a doorway right into our path. We made sure to gasp as we stopped short and tried to back up, and only then noticed that there were two more like the first behind us. The three closed in and started to pluck at us with big, unpleasant grins on their faces.

"Lookit what we got here," the first one said with a laugh. He was only a little bigger than average height, and was very thin. "I guess we been extra special good 'cause somebody give us a couple a presents, and I do love playin' with new presents."

"Better not break them presents, Havelin," a second one said with just as much amusement. "Wiger'll chop you t'pieces if'n you do."

"Wiger don't scare me none," Havelin sneered, running his hand over Teddy's body. "I like the looks a this one, an' I might just keep 'er."

"We didn't come here for that!" Teddy said sharply, pushing his hand away as she took over the lead the way she was supposed to. "We come to join a club, not play on the street. Are you th' boss around here?"

The two behind us snickered, and Havelin scowled.

"You want the boss a this here club?" he asked, furious madness peering out of his dull eyes. "Okay, yer gonna get 'im. Too bad, pretty, 'cause I woulda treated ya good. Let's go see th' boss."

He grabbed a handful of Teddy's hair and dragged her into the brick building. I pretended to hesitate as I looked around, only to find the other two grinning at me. I started to back away, but they still had no trouble grabbing me and dragging me after Teddy.

It was dark inside the building, but the dark was lifeless and stifling rather than cool and soothing. There were shadowy doorways to either side of the reeking, garbage-strewn hall we were taken through, and every twenty feet or so was a bare, feebly glowing lightbulb hanging from a strung wire. The lightbulbs were trying to keep the lifeless dark away, but it wasn't difficult to see that it was a losing battle. Teddy was pulled along ahead of me, and I could almost feel the brief shudder that passed through her.

We went down to the end of the long hall, and Havelin turned into one of the doorways on the right. I was forced that way too, into a room that had no furniture in it and almost no air. Heavy pieces of material in clashing patterns and colors hung from all of the walls behind the lightbulbs, and even our footsteps on the bare floor were muffled.

The only thing the room held was a big, stained mattress over in the far right-hand corner, with an uneven mound right in the middle of it. Teddy was already standing near the end of the mattress, and in another moment so was I. Havelin let Teddy's hair go, and he moved to the left of the mattress to kick it.

"Wake up, Wiger," he called with a strange sound to his voice, as though he was being as loud as he dared. "Got a couple a pretties here askin' t' see ya. None a us would do 'em."

The body on the mattress stirred and then sat up, giving us our first look at Wiger. Standing up he probably would have been as broad as he was tall, which is not to say that he was short. He had thick hair all over him that he scratched at automatically, and his face had a broad, flat nose and narrow, mean eyes. He inspected Teddy and me for a moment, and then spoke to Havelin.

"Where'd ya get them two?" he asked in a flat rasp. "I ain't never seen 'em around b'fore."

"He didn't get us nowhere," Teddy interrupted insolently, tossing her head. "We got

ourselves here all on our own. We come from Wheatley to join your club, but if you don't like the idea we'll find someplace else."

"Teddy, don't get him mad," I whispered, plucking at her shirt as if too afraid to do any more. I could see the angering effect of Teddy's words in Wiger's eyes, and could only hope she got the message. She was pushing too hard again, and Wiger wasn't Lammerly.

"I don't care if he does get mad," Teddy answered with a haughty toss of her head, making me wish I could close my eyes in pain. "Let's go find someplace else, Diana."

She turned and started toward the door, but I didn't move. I'd been watching Wiger carefully, and it was clear he wasn't the sort to be impressed by haughtiness. Now he nodded toward Teddy, and Havelin and one of the men near me went after her.

Havelin ran ahead and slammed the door closed before Teddy could reach it, and then the two men grabbed her. She struggled and fought but didn't use anything that could have won the fight for her, not even when they ripped her clothes off and went to work with their fists. I crouched down where I was and buried my head in my arms, fighting to keep myself from ruining everything by interfering. I kept my eyes closed and my fists clenched, and didn't think about how easy they would be to kill even when Wiger and the fourth man joined them and they switched from fists to rape.

Teddy's screams and the men's laughter attracted the attention of a few more club members, and some of them discovered me. I was roughly pulled out of the crouch by my arms, and suddenly found myself the center of interest of three men. They laughed happily as they looked me over, then laughed even harder when I tried to pull away. They were dirty and in need of a shave, but their eyes said they didn't care what they looked like since they were there for their own pleasure rather than mine.

The two who weren't holding me put their hands on me too, and kicking and struggling didn't keep me from being lowered to the floor. They took their time taking my clothes off, but that was only supposed to add to my very obvious terror. When they got down to serious fun, they didn't take their time.

There's no way of knowing how long it went on, but eventually party time ended. I lay whimpering on the floor at the feet of the last ones who had used me, curled up on my side with my eyes squeezed shut. I'd been able to hear sounds from Teddy for quite a while, but right now there was nothing but the sound of satisfied laughter and casual conversation from the men standing above me.

Teddy and I had been an unimportant diversion, but we'd been found attractive enough to keep. A hand touched me and I cried out involuntarily - which set the men to chuckling - but the touch had only been a prelude to being lifted off the floor. Teddy and I were carried to a nearby room and dumped back on the floor, our ransacked luggage dumped down with us, and then the door was closed and we

were left alone. A few minutes earlier Wiger had given someone instructions to check on whether or not we'd really come from Wheatley, which meant our visit to the town hadn't been a waste of time.

It took a couple of minutes, but eventually I was able to get to my knees and crawl over to Teddy. She looked worse than I'd thought she would, and I grabbed her wrist fast to check for a pulse. I found one but it was thready and weak, and if I'd had a stimulant I would have been afraid to use it. I checked her out as best I could and tentatively decided that at least one of her ribs was broken. Her face was puffy and badly bruised, and there were large, ugly marks all over her body. There had also been so many club members waiting to take her that she was bleeding.

I sat back and put my head in my hand for a minute, during which time I asked whatever powers there are why she'd had to act the way she had and make things worse for herself. In Flowerville the situation was bad enough without needing any encouragement. Then I noticed that there was a mattress in this room too, so I blocked out my own pain and moved Teddy over to it as gently as I could. When I got her onto the mattress her eyelids flickered, and then her breathing started to come in gasps.

"It's all right," I said quickly, stroking her forehead. "It's over now and they're gone."

She moved her head back and forth a little, then managed to focus on me.

"Did I do all right?" she whispered raggedly. "Did they leave you alone?"

"They didn't even look at me," I lied with a smile after forcing the lump out of my throat. "Are you sure you've never done this kind of work before?"

The ghost of a smile crossed her face. "I guess I'm learning," she whispered - then twisted to the side to throw up. The spasms racked her, forcing her to press her arm to her side where she had the broken rib. When she'd finally emptied herself I helped her to lie down again, then I checked out the room.

There was a big can of very warm water over near the door in a corner, so I used it to clean Teddy up all over, then cleaned the floor. By the time I'd finished Teddy was sleeping, and I found a torn blanket to cover her with. After that I sat down on the floor and leaned against a wall, drawing a picture in my mind of where we were.

The building that had become our new home wasn't far from the center of town, and I should be able to cover all of Flowerville in only a few days. The only problem was, I couldn't afford to start until I had some idea of the schedule this club building was run on. If someone came into the room while I was out they might not even notice I was gone, but they'd certainly noticed that Teddy was still here. If she had to go through anymore there would be nothing left to come back for, and that I refused to let happen. Taking one last glance at her, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes.

I woke immediately when, hours later, someone came to the door, but stayed where I was. The door opened, and a man I recognized from the party came in. He carried two bowls of something and he put them on the floor, then he reached back out to the hall for two tall glasses. He put the glasses down near the bowls, then closed the door and started toward Teddy. I waited until I felt sure what his purpose was, then struggled to my feet and hurried to cut him off by throwing myself down to shield Teddy with my body.

"Leave her alone - please!" I begged, having no trouble making the words come out ragged. "She's so hurt ... you can't do anything else to her!"

"She's a new member, an' new members gotta do what old members want," the man responded with a shrug, then he showed a grin. "But yer a new member too, ain'tcha? C'mere, pretty, I'll take you."

I'd been trying to lure the man away from Teddy, but when he reached for me I didn't feel the satisfaction I should have. I got to my feet and backed away from the mattress as I shook my head, feeling my eyes widen as he came after me. He laughed a dirty laugh as he cornered me against the wall and then his hands were touching me, his face bending toward mine. I gagged on the smell coming from the ragged suit he wore, and tried to cringe away from the feel of the crusted material against my body. But cringing away didn't work, and his mouth gave me his foul breath as his dirty hands squeezed my flesh, and there was no getting out of what he wanted.

He lowered me to the floor and tore his clothes open, then forced his way into my body. He held to my hair and one breast as he jerked his hips harder and harder, knowing he was hurting me and that I was trying to keep from screaming out loud. His fingers closed tight on my breast and his hand in my hair jerked my head so far back that I thought my neck would snap. I gurgled and began to choke, now trying to give him the scream he so obviously needed, and when I finally got it out his release was immediate and violent.

He kept me like that for a while, trying to rekindle his interest, but finally he gave it up in disgust. He got to his feet to fix his clothes, then he sauntered out of the room. I lay where I was for longer than I should have, but when I was finally able to force myself to my feet I went immediately to see what he'd brought. It was some rancid-looking meat soup and thin beer, but I picked up a bowl and glass anyway and brought them over to the mattress.

"Teddy," I said, shaking her shoulder gently. "You're missing some of the best food ever cooked. Come on, I'll help you."

She opened her eyes and tried to sit up, but she was in too much pain to do it. I held her head up and fed her the soup, then gave her some of the beer to drink. When she lay back down, she looked at me and tried to smile.

"I'll bet you're sorry you took me now," she whispered. "If you'd taken Nalvidi instead you wouldn't have worried about feeding him."

"You're right," I agreed, making myself return her smile. "If I had Nalvidi here all I'd have to do would be to water him occasionally. Are you feeling any stronger?"

"A little," she responded with a nod. "When do we go looking for the vial?"

"I go looking for the vial," I corrected before she decided it was her duty to get up. "And I'll be going later. I'll have to pick up some clothes first, and then I'll strut around like a club member. It'll be a cinch."

"Do you know who he reminds me of?" she asked as though we'd been discussing the subject for an hour.

"Who?" I asked, controlling the urge to frown.

"Wiger," she returned, staring straight ahead. "He reminds me of my father, and that's why I tried to leave. My father did the same thing to me once. I'm going to kill Wiger before we leave. Can I kill him before we leave?"

"He's all yours," I promised the urgent pleading in her eyes. "But you'd better get some sleep now. I'll wake you if I need you."

She smiled and closed her eyes, and in a moment was fast asleep. I went to the door and got my own meal and ate it, but only took small sips of the beer. When I finished I located a dirty window behind the cloth hangings and took a look outside. It was almost dark, so the club members ought to be leaving soon.

It would have helped having the window on the ground floor if it hadn't been sealed somehow, but I'd have to go into the rest of the building to find club member-type clothing anyway. Going out after dark would make things harder, but it would still have to be done. The sooner we got out of there and back to Blue Skies the better, most especially since Teddy couldn't afford to wait very long. I lowered myself to the floor and wrapped my arms around my middle, using the waiting time to force all thoughts of pain from my mind.

I stood in the shadows of an alleyway, watching the goings-on around me. I'd had very little trouble locating a cache of clothing in Wiger's club house, and now was wearing pants, shirt, and jacket like any other club member - plus a cap to cover and hide my hair. I was only about three blocks from my point of departure, but I'd been able to cover half a dozen different clubhouses in that section. The vial hadn't been in any of them, and I was anxious to get on to the rest of the town. I wanted out of that place, but I couldn't leave without the vial.

Right now I was being delayed by needing to skulk in the alleyway. I'd almost walked into the middle of some town action, and had pulled back into the alleyway just in time. One of the clubs had been waiting in ambush for another, and the first group had caught the second group good.

A dozen or more bodies littered the ground, and the survivors were swinging wildly at each other with heavy chains, pieces of pipe, lengths of wood, or knives. Stunners

and disruptors weren't used in town, not when they needed to be saved for use on the people at 2. Dark pools clumped in the dirt near some of the bodies, and if it had been light the pools would have shown themselves to be red.

Suddenly there was the sound of sirens in the distance, and the two warring groups hesitated then reluctantly separated. Some few of them stumbled away to the safety of the surrounding buildings, but the larger group searched the ground around the bodies quickly, salvaging what it could of dropped weapons before running off in different directions. Seconds later ground cars with squealing tires and flashing lights careened onto the scene, separating and taking off after the fleeing figures. The noise of the fight and the chase hung in the air for a few moments even after everyone was gone, and I still didn't move from the alleyway.

The police in Flowerville wanted to run the town themselves and tried to offer protection to as many of the clubs as would go along with them. But the rest of the clubs didn't like the idea and tended to concentrate their nightly attacks on the clubs that had allied themselves with the police. The club that had been ambushed had probably been one of the police allies, and if any members of the other club were caught they'd never live to see the light of the next day. But that wasn't enough to keep the clubs from doing as they pleased, not by a longshot. Life was cheap in Flowerville, and they'd been killing each other long before they began to try the same thing with the agent trainees at 2.

I was just about ready to step out of the alleyway when I heard some sounds coming from the street to the left. Moving carefully to the end of the buildings I looked out, and the streetlights showed me a group of about a dozen men who laughed as they walked and pushed along with them two other men and a woman. The woman was crying as she was hauled along by the hair, and the two men, hands bound behind them, were stumbling and breathing hard. They also occasionally cried out when a pipe or piece of wood was shoved hard into their backs to keep them moving.

I faded back into the alleyway until they had passed, then moved up again to watch them disappear into the darkness. Three of the frightened, harried non-club members had made the mistake of allowing themselves to be caught by club members on the hunt, and they would pay hard for the mistake.

The woman would be used without thought of saving her for another day, and the men would find out just how much pain it was possible for them to feel before they died. They would have been relatively safe during the daylight hours, but at night they hadn't had a chance. I looked around carefully to make sure the streets were deserted again, then moved on to the next clubhouse on my list.

I came back early on the sixth night, and Teddy looked up when I opened the door. She didn't say anything, but when I shook my head to her unasked question, she sagged back on the mattress. I'd gone over every club building in town and then had rechecked them, but there wasn't a single sign of the vial. The bracelet I'd managed to keep still glowed very faintly in the dark, but it hadn't vibrated even once during

any of my trips.

"Where can it be?" Teddy asked desperately as I approached. "How long is it going to take to find it?"

"I don't know," I said with a grunt as I collapsed onto the mattress next to her. "No matter how they try to shield it I'll know when I get near it, but we're running out of time. The longer it takes, the greater the chance of someone trying to use it."

"I almost wish they would," she said in a choked voice, and I covered my eyes with my arm. I'd been able to divert attention from her most of the time, but the last couple of days they'd brought our meals in pairs and there had been no way to get one of them to wait or double up. Teddy threw up every time she tried to eat, and was getting thinner and paler by the hour. She wouldn't talk about her rib, but she didn't move around much.

"Let's try to get some sleep," I suggested instead of commenting about what she'd said. "Tomorrow we'll have to think about this."

We both lay still in the dim lightbulb glow, but all I could think about was the most important fact of our new life. We had one or two more days at most before Wiger decided that Teddy was healthy enough for us to be put in with the rest of the women members. When that happened the visits would no longer be limited to mealtimes, and there would be more than one apiece for us. I hadn't told Teddy about it because I didn't think she could face the prospect, but I wasn't too sure how well I would face it. The job I had to do kept most of my attention away from everything else, but if I became convinced there was no job...

I tried to blank my mind, but I was too tired to keep my thoughts from going back to the question of where the damned vial might be. Ringer had said they were moving it around, but I hadn't been searching randomly. The pattern I'd used was designed to make sure that even if they moved it every day I would have crossed its path at least twice if not more.

I was being forced to believe that the vial wasn't in Flowerville, but it had to be here. If anything special had been started with it, the word would have been all over. I'd spent a lot of time listening carefully, but no one had even mentioned it. It wasn't here, but it was. No one had it, but it was being moved around. No one knew about it, but the information had been bought. I felt as if I were searching for an invisible man in a place where no one believed in invisibility.

My thoughts went around and around and I finally fell asleep, but only to dream. I found myself back in the classroom at 2, but I was the trainee and Nalvidi was teaching the course. He stood ten feet tall and held a knife that was bigger and sharper than any knife ever made, and he began to wave it around.

"Flexibility is the key!" he roared at me, coming closer and closer with the knife. "Don't ever fall so in love with any weapon or plan that you stick to it no matter what

new information you come across! You're stupid, and you've earned a cheap funeral!"

He stabbed down at me with the knife and I yelled and woke up on my feet with my wrists up and crossed, ready to block and break his arm. I was covered in sweat and shaking visibly, and Teddy stared up at me with fear on her face.

"Things were getting too dull around here," I told her as I sank back down onto the mattress and wiped some of the sweat away. "I thought we could use a little diversion."

"Don't let it get to you too, Diana!" she begged, pulling the torn blanket closer to her. "I don't think I can get out of here with no one to help me."

"Sure you can," I answered in distraction, running both hands through my tangled hair. "No one's been doing so much around here that helping you ought to be a breeze."

"Come on, Diana, things have to be done by someone," she said unsteadily, back to staring at me. "They can't be done by no one, so please try to get some rest and tomorrow we'll think about it."

She put her hand on my shoulder and gently tried to pull me down, but I was suddenly sitting stiff and straight and my mind was finally working.

"Teddy, when you're back in good condition I want you to do me a favor," I said at last in a tone filled with self-disgust. "I'll bend over, and you kick me as hard as you can. Talk about stupidity!"

"You know where it is!" she all but breathed, still not moving but now trembling with excitement.

"I don't know exactly where it is, but now I know where to look," I answered, turning toward her with excitement. "It's so obvious it's ridiculous. We know it has to be here, but I've checked all the club buildings and can't find it. We know someone has it, but none of the club members is talking about it. It can't be that just one club has it because they could never keep it a secret. They'd have to brag about having it, and they aren't. I've even checked out the police, but they don't have it either. Who does that leave?"

"No one," Teddy replied, shaking her head. "There's no one besides the club members and the police."

"Exactly," I said in satisfaction. "The small number of no-ones who slink around the streets trying not to be noticed. It doesn't sound very likely, but that has to be it. How much of the night is left?"

I got my feet again and went to look out the dirty window. By figuring out when I'd started, how long I'd stayed out, and guessing how long I'd been back, I estimated

less than four hours left till dawn. That wasn't much time, but I still decided not to waste it.

"I'm going out again," I told Teddy, turning back to her. "If any of them come back before I do, hold on. We'll be out of this place before you know it."

"Hurry," she whispered, no longer looking at me. Rather than say anything more to her, I left the room and got the clothes I'd stashed. I also made sure that I still had the vial of dye Ralph had given me, which had survived being hidden in my luggage by not being found or broken. I didn't know if it would do for what I had in mind, but it couldn't hurt to take it.

Using the club building as a center, I began to search every non-club area in a radiating pattern. Virtue may be its own reward, but intelligence gives more tangible results. About an hour after I'd started, the bracelet on my wrist started to vibrate very faintly. The closer I got to a deserted warehouse, the more it vibrated.

The warehouse was so far away from the club buildings that I'd never been anywhere near it on my previous trips. When I got really close I saw that it was locked tight, but that was no problem. I quietly broke in from the back, then stood just within the small doorway to let my eyes get used to the deeper gloom. That was when I grew aware of soft breathing, and in another moment was able to make out the shapes of sleeping people. They were scattered all over the floor, leaving just enough room for someone to pass among them.

I let the bracelet guide me to one sleeping form, and I searched him without thinking about him or looking at his face because I didn't want him to wake up. When I located the vial in his shirt pocket I removed it, then after a brief hesitation replaced it with the vial of dye. I couldn't tell what the contents of the special vial looked like, but the longer it took for these people to discover that the vial was gone the better chance Teddy and I had of getting clear.

I put the special vial away carefully, then exited the way I'd come in. Cleaning up the few traces my breaking in had left didn't take long, and then I was able to go back to where Teddy waited. I got some clothes for her before returning to the room, but when I walked in I found her shivering violently on the mattress. I began to hurry over to her, but after no more than two steps the door slammed closed behind me. I turned fast to see what had caused that, and found Wiger standing there.

"Where you been, bitch?" he snarled, his broad, ugly body blocking the door.

"Nobody leaves here less'n I say so, and I din't say so. Now you can get outta them clothes an' lay down. She din't do me no good, so it's yer turn. I ain't never tried you yet."

"How many did he bring with him, Teddy?" I asked, keeping my eyes on Wiger while ignoring what he'd said.

"I - I think he came alone," she managed to force herself to say, obviously trying to

keep her teeth from chattering.

"I don't need no help with you two!" Wiger spat, his pig eyes now blazing. "I told you t'get outta that stuff!"

"Do you still want him, Teddy?" I asked, smiling unpleasantly at the slime pretending to be a man as I tossed the armload of clothing aside.

"You got it!" she said just before her voice caught. "Please, Diana, help me up. If I don't do it I won't be able to live anymore!"

Wiger stood staring back and forth between us, but when I turned to Teddy he woke up and moved fast to grab me. He pulled me close and forced my head back with a handful of hair, but I just reached out and drove a knifehand into his middle. I made sure that the blow landed just under his heart and he dropped like a stone, almost taking me down with him.

I had my balance back in a second though, so I got one of the dirty beer glasses and smashed it. Taking a big, jagged piece of the broken glass over to Teddy, I helped her up and over to Wiger's unmoving form. She leaned heavily on me until we reached him, and then she dropped to her knees beside him. Her movements were jerky and clearly filled with pain, but she used the piece of glass I'd given her to saw back and forth across Wiger's throat.

It didn't take long before Wiger's blood began to spurt, and the satisfied look on Teddy's face was worth seeing. Happily, she hadn't noticed that the blood should have spurted much higher, which meant she didn't know that Wiger had been dead as soon as he hit the floor. I had the vial but still had to get it back, and so couldn't afford to take any chances. After she was done with Wiger, I got Teddy into the clothes I'd brought for her, and then we left.

When we got to the edge of town the going was easier than sneaking along the dark and treacherous streets, but we still had to be very careful. The club members were starting to come back from their nightly games of ambush with each other and with the people from 2, and they were all keyed up. If they'd even spotted a shadow, we would have had a bad fight on our hands. I carried Teddy on my back because she couldn't move well enough for safety, and the farther we got from town the harder I had to try to keep from hoping.

Just how early did the people from 2 call it quits and go home these days? I'd been out a couple of times until just before first light, but I'd also gone back early a time or two. If some of our own people weren't around to give us some help, I wasn't sure I could make it all the way without collapsing...

We were a good distance from Flowerville and I had begun to stumble where I walked next to the edge of a deserted highway, when I stopped still and then got us both down to the ground. I couldn't be completely sure, but I thought I'd seen a slight movement in some bushes up ahead.

"Stay here and don't move," I told Teddy in the softest of whispers. "I'll be right back."

After she nodded I forced myself mostly erect again, then did my best to melt into the landscape. That let me circle the spot where I'd seen the movement in order to come at it from the back. When I got close enough to actually see who was there, I also got lucky. The man lying in wait turned his head, and the hook-nosed profile was one I recognized from the class I'd taught.

"Tag you're it, Taylor," I called softly, and Taylor spun around while he brought up his longbow to train on me. No one at 2 ever goes hunting with a modern weapon; that would be cheating.

"What are you doing here?" Taylor asked after a moment, lowering the bow once he'd peered closely at me. "I haven't see you since that last day in infiltration class."

"Teddy Hughes and I went sightseeing," I told him, moving away from the bush I'd stood behind. "It was a fun time, but we got bored so we decided to come home. Now I need you to give me a hand."

He followed me warily back to where I'd left Teddy, but when he saw her he put his bow down and knelt next to her.

"Remind me never to ask you to take me sightseeing," he remarked, touching Teddy's face carefully. "Good thing my hopper isn't far from here."

He picked Teddy up and I followed him, fetching his bow and watching in all directions just in case. We got to the hopper without any trouble, though, and I squeezed in behind the two seats. Teddy sat all folded up in the co-pilot's seat, just as if she'd lost all her bones on the way, and Taylor wasted no time in getting us to Blue Skies.

Chapter 15

By the time we'd gotten Teddy turned over to the doctors at Blue Skies, Ringer showed up. He must have been sleeping when we arrived, but he was wide awake as he watched Teddy being taken away. Taylor looked at Ringer, then at me, then he headed back to his hopper. I watched him go, wondering if he'd reconsider becoming an agent. What he'd seen was the end of a successful operation.

"Present for you," I said to Ringer, handing him the vial. It was amusing to see that whatever was inside was only slightly different in color from the dye I'd substituted for it. I wondered what the no-one's had planned to do with it... "If you'll buy me a cup of coffee, I'll tell you the funniest joke I've heard in a long time. It's all about how the big, bad club members were innocent victims of malicious slander."

"I've already heard that joke," Ringer growled, taking the vial. "They located the rest of Masterson's records. I'll buy you that cup of coffee and fill you in."

We went to a doctor's lounge, and I stretched out on a couch while Ringer went to pour two cups of coffee. During the wait I took the detector bracelet off and tossed it into a nearby chair. It continued to vibrate because of how close the vial still was.

"Masterson sold a complete plan to the non-club members," Ringer said as he came back with the coffee. He handed me my cup, then took a chair near my couch.

"Masterson knew the vial contained something deadly, so he teased his 'clients' with the idea of getting even with all the club members together, then taking off in a big ship all their own. He waved the security plans of Blue Skies at them, and added step by step directions for taking over the liner to Faraway.

"By the time the liner was missed they'd be able to disappear, he told them, and all he wanted in return was a few of the chunks of gold still available in the old mines. What he and they didn't know was, if they'd used this vial they wouldn't have had time to get to the orbital station to catch the liner that's due in late this afternoon. I still don't know what's in the vial, but the lab people tell me that it spreads more quickly than most people would believe. The whatever-it-is spreads so quickly, in fact, that no one would have been left alive on this planet twenty-four hours after it had been added to the Flowerville water supply. You got to it just in time."

"'Better late than never' hardly ever applies in this business, does it?" I commented, sitting up to drink some of my coffee. My limping mind waited until I'd taken the third sip before it put all the information together, and then I groaned with feeling.

"What's the matter?" Ringer asked quickly, leaning toward me. "Are you hurt?"

"Not hurt, hurting," I corrected with pain. "Have you done anything about guarding the orbital station shuttle?"

"No," he replied with a frown. "Putting a guard on the shuttle wasn't necessary. If you hadn't gotten the vial, the guards would have gone with everyone else. Since you did get the vial, there won't be anything for those people to run from."

I put the coffee cup down on the floor and wearily buried my head in my arms. Me and my big ideas about playing for extra time.

"What happened?" Ringer asked heavily, his tone saying he already knew there was something.

"Remember that vial of dye Ralph gave me?" I asked, lifting my head just a little. "I didn't want those people to cry when they found the vial gone, so I left the dye in its place."

Ringer took the vial out of his pocket and looked at it, then got up and went to a 'phone.

"I'm getting this back to the lab people before I lose my temper and do something stupid," he said. "I don't think I've ever seen so much trouble over such a small package." He called for the lab people, then came back to stare down at me. "Just how bad off are you really?" he asked. "You look like hell."

"You'd better watch that, Ringer," I said, pushing my tangled hair back with one hand. "I'm a sucker for pretty compliments and you know it. If I had a few more hours of sleep behind me, I'd probably attack you."

"Is sleep all you need?" he persisted, ignoring the rest of what I'd said. "I want to know if you can finish this."

"What do you have in mind?" I asked, curiosity beginning to poke at me. Ringer's finishes are never dull. Involved, maybe, but never dull.

"I'm going to give those people a chance to take over the liner," he said, folding his arms. "The way things stand now, if they show up at the shuttle port all we can do is turn them away. There's no Federation law against dyeing a town's water supply then taking a liner ride, but once the piracy bug bites you never get rid of it. If we stop them from going now, they'll surely try it again some other time when we aren't ready for them. And don't forget that piracy's punishable by immediate execution. The Council's still convinced that if we start to arrest anyone it will encourage even more malcontents to try, so don't bring any of them back. There shouldn't be more than a dozen of them, so I don't think you'll have any trouble."

"Okay," I said, planning the operation as I reached for my coffee again. "But get me a suppressor. There's no sense in taking unnecessary chances."

"You'll have it," he agreed with a nod. "Anything else?"

I was about to answer him when the lounge door opened and Ralph came in. He walked over to the couch and sat down next to me, then rubbed his eyes with one hand.

"She'll be all right, at least as far as her physical condition goes," he said in a tired voice. "Aside from that Joanne will have to have some sessions with her. That was a rough one for first time out."

"They're all rough," I told him, trying not to feel my own end of it. "I know what she went through, but Dr. Jo will take care of it. I think Teddy has what it takes to make it."

"I wonder just what that is," Ralph said, turning to stare at me. "Maybe I can find it with a stethoscope. Let's go, it's your turn."

"Nothing wrong with me that a shower and some sleep won't cure," I denied, sipping at my coffee. "But ask me again after I finish this job. Maybe I'll be in a mellow mood."

Ralph frowned, then turned quickly to Ringer.

"You can't send her out again!" he grated, his voice just short of trembling. "I thought this was all finished, or I would have sedated her as soon as she walked in! Don't you realize she never knows when enough is too much?"

"Who else will you send?" I asked Ringer as soon as I saw his hesitation. "How many of the agents at 2 can handle what you just asked me to do?"

"How many times were you raped in Flowerville?" Ralph asked me harshly while Ringer looked from one to the other of us without saying anything. "How many times did you eat? You can't keep going on like this as if you were indestructible!"

"Of course I'm indestructible," I said softly, smiling into his furious face. "If I didn't believe that, I couldn't keep going out on new assignments. What do you say, Ringer?"

Ringer stood staring into space for a moment, and then he turned away to study a picture on the wall.

"Sorry Ralph, but you'll have to catch her in another day or two," he said without inflection. "I don't have anyone else to send."

"You're both crazy," Ralph said with deep bitterness as he got to his feet. "Maybe that's what it takes."

Then he walked out without saying anything else, and the silence was so thick it could have held down a shuttle.

"Diana..." Ringer finally said, still staring at the picture on the wall, and I suddenly knew what he was thinking. I could almost hear myself back on Xanadu O.S., talking about the times he'd pulled me out of a hospital bed half healed because he'd had an assignment that needed seeing to. I wasn't anywhere near as cocky as I'd led Ralph to believe, but I don't like to leave things I start unfinished.

"You're not sending me anywhere I don't want to go," I told Ringer's uncertainty. "Ralph doesn't understand but you should. I may look like hell to the casual observer, but sitting around thinking about it will only make me feel the same way. Has it been so long that you've forgotten?"

He took a deep breath and shook his head.

"All right then," I said, hiding relief. "I'm heading for a shower and a bed. Get me up in time to have a light, high protein meal."

I started to stand up, but he turned back toward me and put a hand out.

"Just another minute before you go," he asked. "There's one more thing I want to discuss with you." I settled back again and waited, and he studied me again. "We had some action around here too while you were gone. I missed the best part of it,

but I managed to put the whole story together and I don't really understand it. Maybe you can explain it to me."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I shrugged and then nodded for him to continue.

"It starts the last night you had the class at 2," Ringer went on after my nod. "I know you don't need to be reminded of what happened while you were there, so I'll begin from when you left. Everyone got so excited and shouted so many questions at each other that the guards came in about two seconds after you were gone to see what the disturbance was all about.

"Valdon was right in the middle of it as he tried to follow you, but the guards refused to let anyone leave until they found out what had happened. Valdon ended up going over all three of the guards, but by the time he reached the hopper field you were gone. The guards caught up to him as he was trying to figure out how a hopper works, and it took six of them to get him out of the hopper. He shouted and fought so much that the guards decided he must have gone over the edge, and they carted him off to Blue Skies."

"Ringer, do you have a cigarette?" I interrupted to ask. I'd listen to his story, but I refused to think about it since I'd already made my decision. He gave me a cigarette and lit it, and after lighting one of his own he continued.

"At Blue Skies they locked him up tight and arranged for Dr. Jo to see him the next day, but Pete's emergency call to her sent her to the Academy instead. She stayed with you until the day after, and only got to see Valdon after she got back to Blue Skies. By that time, he was alternating between shouting something about needing to apologize and brooding for hours. Dr. Jo got him calmed down, and they had a long talk. Just what they said to each other I don't know, but at the end of the talk Dr. Jo arranged for a hopper and pilot for him. It was the same pilot, as a matter of fact, who took him to the Academy the night of that dance. I hear you have reason to remember the night of that dance."

I took a drag on the cigarette and didn't answer him. I just sat there feeling everything I'd gone through in the last week.

"In any event," he said after a pause, "they must have gotten to the Academy only minutes after we left and I still don't know how we missed them. Pete was just about ready to leave the mess hall when Valdon stormed in, demanding to know where you were.

"Now, you may think you know how Pete feels about that gag Valdon pulled the night of the dance, but believe me, you don't. Pete is convinced that if not for that gag, he would have kept closer tabs on you and that trouble with Langley would never have happened.

"When he saw Valdon walk in, Pete exploded. Freddy told me that nobody breathed

in that entire mess hall the whole time those two went at each other. Pete was on one side of his table, Valdron on the other, and the shouting they did was enough to deafen everyone at the Academy. Valdron yelled that he'd tear the place apart if Pete didn't produce you on the spot. Pete yelled back that if Valdron ever went near you again he'd personally grind him up into fertilizer.

"It went on like that until a squad showed up, and Valdron found himself locked up again only this time in the guardhouse. A few members of the squad had to go to the infirmary afterward, but Valdron was still locked up. If there's anything I regret, it's missing seeing Valdron and Pete go at it."

Ringer was grinning, but I must have been even more tired than I thought because I couldn't seem to see anything funny about it. To tell the truth, the strain of the last week just made me want to cry. Ringer's grin faded, and he cleared his throat before going on.

"A short while after you and Hughes left, I got into the act when Freddy called to tell me what had happened. He'd tried to get Pete calmed down, but hours had gone by and Pete was still raging. I took a hopper back there and told Pete all about how Valdron had shaken you loose on Xanadu. Pete huffed and puffed some more, but finally had Valdron released. I brought Valdron back here, and Dr. Jo and I managed to convince him that if he tried to go after you to Wheatley and Flowerville it could mean your life. After that I had him taken back to 2 and he's been over there ever since, brooding and poring over the procedures texts - to give him something to do, I suppose.

"Now we've come to the part I don't understand, so let me explain. Ever since you two got back here from Valdron's part of space, there's been an almost constant battle going on between you. He beats the hell out of you and you poison him. He frames you on a job then slaps you around, and you start to carve him up. All this happens, then suddenly he's chasing all over the planet trying to find you, incidentally going over anybody who tries to get in his way. What I don't understand is why the sudden change of heart? Is he crazy or am I?"

Ringer sat waiting for an answer, watching my face for what he thought he'd see. My body ached and I felt deathly tired, but I tend to find the strength somewhere for things that have to be done.

"You're not the crazy one," I answered with a wide yawn before leaning back on the couch again to swallow at my coffee. "Val always wants to tag after me, and to tell the truth I'm beginning to get tired of it. I made a bad mistake bringing him back here, and I can see now that he'll never make an agent. Tell you what, though, I'm willing to do the right thing. I brought him so I'll get rid of him. Have him meet me on the liner to Faraway and tell him he's assigned to help me stop the pirates, but don't tell him anything else. I'll take care of the rest."

Ringer continued to stare at me, so I managed a grin even though I couldn't add any

words.

"Diana, are you sure?" Ringer asked gently, confusion and vague hurt showing in his eyes.

"Of course I'm sure," I responded, back in control after the momentary lapse. "Don't worry, going home will be his idea and the Council won't be able to say a word to you. Right now I'm going for that shower and bed. Don't forget to order that meal for me."

I got up and headed for the door, waving to Ringer without turning around. I found out what room I'd been assigned to, then got to it as quickly as possible without leaving people to stare after me. Once the door was closed I leaned on it for a moment, then forced myself to head for the bathroom and the shower screen.

Turning on the bathroom light made me stop short, but the haggard female I'd been startled by was only me, reflecting back from the full length mirror on the bathroom wall. I moved forward and stopped in front of the mirror, staring at a redhead who seemed to have aged years in a matter of days. There were dark smudges under bloodshot blue eyes, filthy clothes covering a gaunt and weary body, tangled hair surrounding a face without expression. A true vision of loveliness, I thought to myself, something any man would be eager to compliment and take to bed.

I was too tired to keep the tears back any longer, and they mercifully blurred the picture I saw. Val, oh, Val, why did I ever have to bring you here from where I found you? For a compliment or two I could finally believe? For someone to fill a cold and lonely bed? Or for someone to turn on when the kill lust was burning high?

I hadn't learned to know him any better than he'd learned to know me, but I did have a knack for knowing which basics a given person responded to most strongly. When Val and I met again I'd be digging for all the wrong responses, and going home would really be his idea. After he left ... well, after he left I'd go back to doing what I always did, and I'd never be stupid enough to take a partner again.

I dropped my clothes to the floor then, and stepped into the shower without looking at the mirror again. The mirror would have shown me nothing but a crying woman, and sights like that don't do much for the professional point of view.

Chapter 16

It's amazing what a few solid hours of sleep can do for a fifteen-year-old body. By the time I woke up the blush was back in my cheeks so to speak, but I was moving around too fast to notice it myself. I got to the orbital station early enough to catch the first shuttle to the liner to Faraway. When I got to the liner, it took the ship's captain's skepticism about my errand to tell me I was back in the running for Miss

Teenager of Tanderon.

If the captain could have felt my body the way I felt it he wouldn't have been that skeptical, but swapping with him wasn't much of a practicality. Ringer had arranged for a replacement of my I.D. - the original having been left in the slaver Radman's collection of mementos - and a Special Agent's cultured and biomatched I.D. is enough to convince anyone about anything.

Once convinced that I wasn't pulling his leg for the sheer girlish joy of it, the captain then had to be talked out of grabbing the group of would-be pirates as soon as the fools showed themselves on his ship. I told him what I meant to do instead, coerced an agreement out of him, then headed for the cabin I'd been assigned to. Once everything in the cabin was arranged and ready, I sat down to wait for Val. Something I'd eaten that morning must have disagreed with me because I was beginning to get a headache and my stomach felt queasy.

The last shuttle from the orbital station delivered its load and left, and we had just gotten under weigh when the door to my cabin opened and Val was there. He stood in the doorway and stared at me with an expression that said he was trying to think of what to say, but I was already prepared for the moment.

"Well, hi!" I greeted him with a friendly smile, projecting surprise. "I didn't know Ringer was going to send you to help me. I guess it doesn't matter, though, because there isn't much for you to do. If you remember to follow my orders there shouldn't be any trouble."

I went back to buffing my fingernails on an emery puff, but had no trouble seeing Val's frown.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" he asked unbelievably as he closed the door behind him. "I almost tore that planet apart trying to find you!"

"Why would you do a thing like that?" I asked in a puzzled voice, looking up at him again. "I know that place too well to get lost there."

His beautiful face lost all expression, and his voice went flat to match it.

"You act as if you don't remember what happened the last time I saw you," he said. "But if you don't remember, I certainly do."

"The last time," I mused, acting as though I had to think for a minute before suddenly "remembering." "Oh, that!" I said with a laugh, gesturing a dismissal with one hand. "It was nothing special. When I work I tend to forget about everything else, and sometimes I get a bit tense. I've lost more boyfriends that way, but for me the job always comes first."

"So the whole thing was nothing special," he said, his tone still flat. "And I suppose our partnership is nothing special either."

"Of course our partnership is special," I assured him with another smile. "Our governments are very anxious for it to work, so we have to look at it the same. I know I've been neglecting you lately, but I have been a little busy... Tell you what: as soon as this business is over, we can come back here and I'll make it up to you. How does that sound?"

He took a step toward me without saying a word, and his hands had turned to fists. His pain-filled stare was terrible to see and then he turned away to stare at the wall instead, his breathing faster than normal. Inside me I shivered at the way I'd hurt and insulted him, but there was no backing out of the course I'd chosen. The first string was pulled and the first button pushed, and he was already on his way back home even if he didn't know it.

The silence might have gotten awkward if the ship's radiation alarm hadn't sounded briefly. That was the signal I'd been waiting for, so I got out of the chair and quickly activated the suppressor. With the suppressor field on the ship's main drive would not work no matter what anyone tried. I didn't know what principles were involved in the device but I could use one, and if anything slipped in my operation against the pirates all they would win would be a dead hulk. The suppressor was a Federation secret, so I hadn't mentioned it to the captain.

"Okay, Agent First Class Valdon Carter," I announced as I headed for the door. "The fun's started, so let's see what you can do. The sooner we finish the sooner we can come back here."

Val's face was pale, but he followed me out of the cabin. We moved quickly through the passenger areas and down one level to the service corridors, making our way to the power room. That was what the no-ones were supposed to take first, but if the captain had followed my instructions they would have found it locked. Just before we reached the last corridor leading to the power room corridor, I signaled Val to stop and peeked quickly around the corner.

And it turned out to be a good thing I'd decided to check first because five of the no-ones were heading our way, dressed in old suits and bangles and strutting as if they were club members. I held my hand up to Val with all five fingers spread, the pointed toward the corridor around the corner. Val nodded, thought for a second, then his features blurred as I stared at him. What he'd changed to was still recognizably him, but he was old. He bent over a little and seemed to shrink into himself, and even his eyes were washed out. I smiled a little before taking his arm to support him, and then we walked slowly around the corner.

The no-ones stopped short when they saw us, but we kept going as if we didn't see them. Then they grinned at each other and rapidly closed the distance between us. When they reached us, they spread out and surrounded us.

"Looks like we don't hafta go all the way to passenger country for hostages a'tall," one of them said. "That cap'n'll open the door, or he'll watch us finish off these here

nice folk right in fronta his eyes."

"Yeah," another agreed, pushing in closer. "But they won't be 'specting us back fer a time yet. Let's have us some fun with that pretty little girl first. Just shove grampa outa the way, 'cause I'm gonna take 'er first."

The friendly one reached for me, but I'd already decided to take him first. When he stretched out his arms toward me, I stiffened my fingers and jabbed him hard enough under the rib cage in front to cause his heart to burst. Then I turned to another of the no-ones and throat-punched him to crush his windpipe. After that I looked around quickly, and saw that Val had accounted for another two of the group. But number five had taken advantage of being ignored to turn and run back the way he'd come. The knife from my boot stopped him before he got more than twenty feet away, and it was all over with without a sound.

I walked down the corridor to number five, got my knife loose and cleaned it on the shirt he didn't need any longer, then gestured to Val. When he came up I handed him the knife, then pointed toward the end of the corridor nearest the power room corridor. Val looked down at number five, matched his features, then started toward the power room corridor. I took the second knife I had from the sheath at the back of my neck and headed for the diverging corridor that came out half way down the corridor we were in. The diverging corridor also led to the power room corridor, but came out to the left instead of to the right.

I eased up to the far end of the diverging corridor, and looked out carefully. About twelve to fifteen members of the crew were there with their backs to me, all of them being watched by six of the remaining seven no-ones. The no-ones carried stunners and disruptors but handled them uncomfortably, as though they weren't used to them.

Number seven was in the middle of the group standing directly in front of the power room door, and the captain stood to his left. I glanced over to the other side of the crowd and spotted the late number five coming up behind one of the no-ones on that side. The no-one stiffened and they both backed away from the crowd, but the no-one wasn't in any condition to move on his own. I got busy and ghosted up behind the nearest no-one and put him away, then lowered the body quietly to the floor.

Everyone's attention was on the power room door, so it wasn't hard to finish off the other two on my side, then I checked on Val again. He'd already finished his three and had turned back to himself, and was now starting toward number seven. That meant I had to hurry, so I pushed my way through the crowd of crewmen and showed myself first.

"Nice time for a liner ride," I commented to a suddenly startled number seven, not letting him see the knife. "How's Flowerville doing these days?"

He swung toward me, and the ugly look on his face matched the ugly look of the

disruptor in his hand.

"Who in hell're you?" he snarled. "Where the hell d'you come from?"

"Don't you know me?" I asked in surprise, still moving slowly toward him. "He said you would know me."

"He who?" the man rapped, beginning to look confused. "I don't - "

He cut it off because Val had come up behind him to grab his wrist before forcing the man's arm straight up. The man tried to pull away but Val tightened his grip, and the disruptor abruptly fell to the floor. When that happened number seven sagged and became the picture of a beaten man, which was really too bad. I set myself and walked over to him, studied his haggard face for a moment - then slipped my knife between his ribs. He made a sound that was almost a grunt, and the stunned look stayed with him even when he slid out of Val's loosened grip and folded to the floor next to the disruptor. There wasn't a sound from the captain or any of his crew, and Val stared at me in shock.

"Why did you do that?" Val demanded after a moment, his voice harsh with bewilderment. "He didn't have to die, not when I already had him!"

"But this way no one has to have him," I said softly with a shrug, making the words sound totally reasonable. "It saved a lot of paperwork and a lot of time and effort. Now we have the whole ride back to play."

I gave him a wink then bent to clean my knife on number seven's shirt, keeping my face down just in case my expression slipped. The silence around me was absolute, and then Val dropped the knife I'd given him to the deck beside me and walked away without a word. I stared at the knife for a few brief seconds then slowly picked it up, feeling the warmth the hilt still retained. When I straightened up, the captain came closer and cleared his throat.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything like that in my entire life," he stated shakily. "To just execute him like that, all by yourself! I know it's your job, but it's not one I could do. You don't look it, but you must be the Federation's toughest agent."

"I'm not the Federation's toughest agent," I whispered, holding the still-warm knife to me as I watched Val disappear around the corner. "I'm only as tough as I have to be. So long ... partner."

Chapter 17

My mind was working just enough to let me tell the captain that I needed him to personally see to clearing the bodies away before he started to turn back to

Tanderon. I needed a few minutes to get back to my cabin to turn off the suppressor, but that was the best excuse I could come up with. I got back to the cabin, straightened everything out, then called the captain to ask him to arrange for a special shuttle for me. I didn't want to have to go through the orbital station.

When I was landed at the Academy's shuttle port, I went straight to the hopper field then flew to Blue Skies. The flight took forever, but as soon as I grounded I went to the room that had been assigned to me. I needed to pack some of the things from my luggage that had been brought from the Academy, and then I was out of here. I didn't need much, just enough to last until I got to wherever I was going. The main thing was to get away from here as fast as possible before my mind started to think, and I was too tired and in too much pain to keep it from happening much longer.

I went out into the hall with the small bag I'd packed, trying to decide who to leave the suppressor with. I had no intention of going looking for Ringer, but I saw him only a short way down the hall talking to Ralph so I walked over to him.

"It's finished," I told him, handing him the suppressor. "I'm taking one of the departmental ships from the field here, and I'll let you know where I am when I get there."

Ringer only frowned as I began to turn away, but Ralph put a hand on my arm.

"But you can't leave now," Ralph said with a gentle smile. "We have a date, remember? Let's see if you can make me blush again."

"Some other time, Ralph," I said, holding up one hand and pushing vaguely in his direction. "Maybe some other time."

I started to turn away again, but his hand stopped me again. "Diana, you can't - "

"I can do any damn thing I please!" I snarled, pulling my arm away from him. "Just leave me alone!"

I headed away from the two of them, knowing the sort of looks I was being followed by but not giving a damn. My head throbbed and my stomach was filled with acid, and all the stares from all the people within hearing range couldn't have kept me from getting out of there. I went straight toward the front door, and was only twenty feet away from it when I thought I'd begun to hallucinate.

A figure that looked just like Val seemed to be coming in, but it was no hallucination because when he saw me he turned in my direction. I stopped short, feeling my head whirl, knowing I couldn't go through facing him again for anything in the universe. In another instant I had backed up a few steps, dropped the bag I carried, then turned and started to run.

I raced down the hall between startled, exclaiming people, pushing my way through in deep, mindless panic. I barely saw Ringer and Ralph as I passed them, heard nothing but the sound of Val's footsteps pounding on the floor behind me. I tried to

run faster, tried to get away, but I'd been through too much and simply had nothing left. Then Val's hands caught me from behind and pulled me to a stop. A moment later he'd pushed me up against a wall, his hands on my arms as I faced him.

I really did try to struggle to get loose, but there seemed to be no way to break free without hurting Val and I couldn't force myself to do that. My head jerked back and forth as I searched frantically for a way out, but there wasn't one. All I could see was Val's body in front of me and the two guards to the left who were being kept from interfering by Ringer. I didn't know what to do, didn't know what to say, and then the decision on both was taken from me.

"Look at me!" Val ordered, his big hands shaking me to make me obey. "Look straight at me!"

Reluctantly I turned my head back to him and raised my eyes to his face, then immediately wished I hadn't. He was absolutely furious, somehow angrier than I'd ever seen him before.

"I want the truth!" he rasped, black eyes blazing down at me. "When you killed that last man aboard the liner, you were executing him, weren't you? Not playing twisted games but finishing the job according to Federation Law?"

I should have laughed at him and denied it, but his eyes refused to let mine go - which meant the only thing I could do was nod very hesitantly.

"And that 'nothing special' routine you gave me, earlier in the cabin," he growled. "That was to set me up for the big show, wasn't it?"

I nodded unwillingly a second time, and the gesture set him off like a spark to dry kindling.

"I'm going to beat you like you've never been beaten before!" he suddenly roared, back to shaking me like a dirty rug. His eyes were blazing mad, but somehow his finger strength didn't match; although I couldn't free myself, he wasn't hurting me in the least. "I know what you were trying to do, you were trying to protect me from you, trying to force me away for my own good! Who the hell do you think you are that you can tell me who to associate with? If I want to be partners with a crazy female who poisons me and pulls knives on me that's my business! I don't need anyone trying to protect me, and when I've had enough I'll say so on my own!"

I tried to cringe back from the volume of that roar, but those big hands held me right where he wanted me - in place for the rest of his tirade.

"It's time things were changed," he growled, his voice lowered back to the too-soft volume he'd started with. "I've had enough of you doing everything to suit yourself, so here's the way it's going to be. When we're on a job you're the boss, but when the job's over I'm boss. You'll listen to me and do as I say, or you'll be very, very sorry. Do you understand me?"

He shook me again to emphasize his words, then waited for an answer. There's usually a choice as to what a given answer should be, but right now I had no choice at all since I couldn't have argued with him even if I'd wanted to.

"Yes, Val, I understand you," I whispered, trying to swallow the catch in my throat.

"And one last thing," he added, the blaze in his eyes beginning to fade as his voice went to normal softness. "There are a large number of things I need to apologize about, but if you ever apologize to me again I'll break your neck."

I sobbed once and closed my eyes, and then his arms were around me, holding me to him. I leaned against his chest as I hung onto his shirt, fighting to keep myself quiet, knowing I'd ruined all my careful planning but helpless to do anything about it. There was such a strange feeling of safety and contentment in his arms, one I'd never experienced before, one I couldn't let go of. I was too confused to know what it meant, and then, abruptly, we were no longer alone.

"That was some show you just put on," Ringer's voice came, sounding amused. "Is it over now?"

"It's over," Val confirmed, still holding me. "It's a good thing I used those procedures texts to keep from going crazy this past week. There's a whole section on procedures to be followed when dealing with piracy, and if I hadn't remembered it when I got to the orbital station, this would have ended differently. She's too good at playing a part."

"How did you get here so fast?" I asked, suddenly curious as I lifted my head to look at him.

"I commandeered a private ship at the orbital station," he said with a grin before pushing my head back down on his chest. "Between my I.D. as an agent and the landing field here at the hospital, I made it almost as fast as you did."

I thought that would be the end of it, but I'd forgotten about Ralph - who wasn't a man to let himself be forgotten about forever.

"If all these little problems are taken care of now, there's still a hospital bed and treatments waiting for Diana," he put in. "As far as I'm concerned, they've been waiting much too long already."

"Treatments for what?" Val asked, and I could hear his frown.

"She and Teddy had a bad time in Flowerville," Ralph responded with his own oral frown. "Didn't you know?"

Val's hands were suddenly back on my arms, and I found myself being held at arm's length and stared at in a very untender way.

"Am I mistaken, or were you on your way out of here when I first came in?" he

asked in what was little short of a growl.

"I - ah - well, it was just - you see - " I groped around trying to sound lucid, but none of the sentences wanted to come out whole. I would have stood there floundering for an hour, but Val wasn't about to wait.

"There won't be any more of that same nonsense," he stated, his voice hard again. "You get to where you're supposed to be."

"But, Val, I don't want to - " I began, but the protest ended abruptly when I tried to meet his eyes. I hadn't agreed to anything more than that I understood what he'd said, but right now it was beyond me to point that out. And since I understood nothing at all about the rest of how I felt, I ended up saying meekly, "Yes, Val."

"That's better," he told me with a nod, pushing me gently toward Ralph. "You go with him now, and I'll come by later to make sure you're behaving yourself."

I moved a few steps toward Ralph, then turned to look at Val and spoke to him in the trade language of his people.

"Why don't you use the waiting time to think about this a little more carefully," I suggested, hating to say the words but knowing they were necessary. "I have the feeling you still don't know what you're getting into, so a bit of calm, unhurried thought will - "

"Do nothing to change my mind," he interrupted very flatly. "I'm not doing this on a whim, Diana, but I don't expect you to take my word for that. I'll have to work at getting you to believe me, which I intend to do as soon as you're out of this place. Until then you'll just have to give me the benefit of the doubt."

I found myself forced into nodding to that, then went ahead and followed Ralph down the hall. But I also looked back a few times, to see that Val had this ... open expression on his face. I believed that he hadn't been lying about how he felt, but I still didn't know how I felt.

Considering the way he'd handled himself on the job today, I doubted if it would take me more than two weeks to give him the balance of that procedures course. After that I would twist Ringer's arm until he gave Val and me a short vacation, one during which he and I should be able to clear the air. I needed that vacation even if Val didn't, and I wanted to go home for a few days.

I tried to remember if I'd ever told Val that my home planet practiced nudism, and finally decided that I hadn't. Oh, well, no sense in burdening him with too much information since he'd find out soon enough once we got there. I wondered if he had body modesty, but couldn't really tell. Just because he wasn't modest with me didn't mean he could peel in public with the same equanimity. It wouldn't be too long before I found out, but meanwhile thinking about it certainly was ... interesting!

The End

Diana Santee returns in Tristesse Book 1

