

Landing Day

by

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Chapter 1

She'd been gone for far too long. Torrin paced as best she could from one end of the *Calamity Jane's* small bridge to the other. It wasn't the first time she'd paced off the six-and-a-half steps today. In fact, since Nat had left the ship to make the rendezvous, Torrin had been pacing almost non-stop.

She glanced at the nearest readout. Station time made it 1930 hours. Nat had been gone all of twenty minutes.

Is that all? "Tien, re-sync the readout with station time, if you please."

The AI's hologram flickered to life on the center of the nearest console. As usual, she was clad in traditional Chinese robes. Her semi-transparent face was devoid of expression as she turned to bow slightly to Torrin.

"Torrin, I have re-synced the time as you asked."

There was no more emotion in her voice than Torrin could see on her face, but still Torrin knew something lurked beneath the placid exterior. Was it exasperation? Maybe amusement. The readout flickered once, but the time refused to change.

With a sigh, Torrin forced herself to sit in the captain's chair. This trip had been too

important to leave to someone else, the cargo too precious for anyone but her, though Nat was the one making the actual pickup. Her sister needed to get more comfortable with this kind of work. It had made perfect sense when she was planning the trip. Torrin's right knee jiggled in place. It should be her meeting up with the contact, not Nat. Granted, she'd made certain Nat was armed to the teeth. Anyone who tried to get the drop on her would be shocked. In addition to the bristling arsenal of visible weaponry, Nat also had some nasty surprises lurking out of sight. Plus, she'd completed the intensive self-defense course Torrin had developed for her employees with the help of the Banshees. Anyone ambushing her sister would have far more on their hands than they'd bargained for.

None of that would have kept her out of Crimson's hands. Torrin was back on her feet. That little voice was as right as it was inconvenient. If something happened to Nat again, no one would forgive her, least of all herself.

"I'm going out," Torrin announced to the empty air of the bridge.

"Torrin, I do not think that is a good idea," Tien said.

"Nat's been gone for..." Torrin leaned over to check the readout again, "...twenty-three minutes." She flopped back down in the chair.

The front viewscreen shimmered, distorting the view of hangars and docking bays around them.

"Frozen hells," Torrin whispered, leaning forward for a better view.

"Torrin, this was in the data dump we received from Station Central when we docked. I am surprised you missed it."

"I had other things on my mind." Things like making sure Nat was set to meet one of her contacts and to take on all comers if something went pear-shaped. "I thought I had a little more

time. At least it's a flattering picture." She watched glumly as her holopic rotated on the screen. It was an old one. Her hair still hadn't grown out to its former glorious length. It had only recently gotten long enough to stay in the ponytail when she pulled it back.

Thanks to the vindictive Captain Mori and her overreaction to their communication troubles on Haefen, Torrin's likeness and a list of her supposed crimes against the League of Solaran Planets had been circulated among all League-affiliated worlds and stations. That was bad enough, but there had been no call to put a warrant out on her. Outing her as a smuggler had made it all but impossible to move unnoticed. That alone was a huge blow to her career. Knowing that she could be arrested simply for daring to enter League space was part of why the pickup had been arranged in this backwater.

Chaurus Station had very little to recommend it. A refueling and resupply station for the transports out of the mining colonies ubiquitous in this corner of the galaxy, it didn't get much more remote. It was small potatoes, which was perfect for a training run with Nat, and picking up her cargo.

"There's no mention of Nat, is there?"

"No, Torrin."

That was a relief. There had also been no mention of the warrant. Chaurus was quite emphatically not a League station, not with the haphazard way it had been built and was currently being maintained. When Torrin had piloted their way into the hangar, she had very carefully not looked too closely at the walls of the station. There had been enough station debris floating around it to let her know what she would find.

Still, Torrin hadn't built up the success she had without gleefully treading on a few toes. She wouldn't put it past some of the smugglers she'd out-manuevered to snatch her up and

deliver her to the League. They might not get a bounty for her, but she would be out of the way. And who knew, if they were enterprising enough, they might find some League cop looking to make their way up the chain of command. Selling her to an ambitious member of the authorities would sweeten the deal even more. It's what she would have done, but only for the worst of the dirt-bags who did business on the Fringes.

Okay, so I won't go into the station except as a last resort. Torrin reached behind her ear and activated her subdermal transmitter.

"Everything as it should be?"

"It's fine." If Nat had been in front of her, Torrin would have been hard-pressed not to smack her arm over her tone. She knew her baby sister was rolling her eyes.

"Be sure to keep an eye out." It took almost inhuman effort to keep her own irritation out of her voice, but somehow Torrin managed it. "My likeness has made it into station files here."

"I know, it came up when I checked the station dump before I headed out. There's no need to come over all snippy. I don't know how you missed that."

Snippy? She'd been anything but. "I was a little occupied." *Okay, that's snippy.* Torrin gritted her teeth into a smile before asking sweetly: "Any sign of the contact?" This was why she worked alone.

"None yet, but I'm early." Nat swallowed something.

"Are you having a drink? This is a training run, not some port of call for a cruise."

"I'm in a bar, Torrin. It would look strange if I didn't have a drink." Nat's voice was overly reasonable.

"Don't go overboard. Bars are dangerous places if you're not paying attention, especially in a place like this."

There was a short pause while Nat took a breath as if she'd been about to say something. She blew it out and started again. "I'll be fine, Torrin. Really."

She wasn't really talking about the meeting. "I know," Torrin said softly. "I worry."

"Well, stop it." Nat's tone softened the words somewhat, but there was no mistaking the message.

"Got it. Let me know if you need me. Torrin out." She terminated the connection and tried to relax into the chair. There was nothing to do except wait for Nat's return or her call.

The distress call never came, but Nat showed up about an hour later.

"What took so long?" Torrin had been waiting by the access hatch since Tien notified her that Nat was cycling the airlock. "Did you get it?"

"Your contact was late so I started a conversation with a lovely woman at the bar. I had to break it off to take care of your business, but it would have been rude to leave without saying goodbye." Nat smirked. "Goodbye took a while."

"Mm hmm." Torrin shook her head. "You could have called."

"I said I'd let you know if I got in any trouble. I already have two moms, I don't need another."

Just like that, Nat flipped from affable to angry. Her moods had stabilized somewhat since her ordeal on Haefen, but she was still prone to sudden shifts. Torrin held up her hands in an attempt to mollify.

"I got it." She brought her hands down slowly as if in doing so she could also sweeten Nat's suddenly sour mood. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah." Nat passed the long metal case over to Torrin. If she shoved it into Torrin's hands a little harder than necessary, Torrin pretended not to notice.

"Great!" Her face lit up with glee. She propped it on some exposed conduit and opened the case. Everything was in order as best she could tell. To be on the safe side, she'd have Olesya look it over when they got back to Nadierzda.

"That's the big secret?" Nat peered over her shoulder at the contents of the case.

"Yes." Torrin snapped it closed before Nat could look too closely. "Not a word to anyone."

"Fine."

"I mean it, Nat. I know how you get when you know a secret. No hints, no oblique asides. If you blow this, I'm going to be really upset. Besides, secrecy is something you'll need to get down if you're going to take over this part of my work."

"I'll be good, I promise." Nat grinned, little trace left of her earlier anger. Tightness still lingered at the corners of her eyes and mouth, but that never completely went away these days. Her eyes were far more relaxed than they'd been six months ago, and Torrin hadn't given up hope that Nat would eventually get back to her old self. Therapy had been good for her.

"Thank you. Now let's get out of here." Torrin stopped to stow the case carefully in her quarters, then joined Nat on the bridge.

Nat had taken her usual spot in the jump chair. It was shoved to one side of the bridge, affording a place someone aside from the pilot could observe what was going on, but with access to none of the ship's controls.

"Move over," Torrin said, flipping her hand at Nat.

"What do you mean?" Nat stared at her.

"You can't very well take the ship out from here, can you?" There were a couple screens nearby and a small console, but they were useful for little else than observation.

"Do you mean it?" Nat's eyes shone as she processed what Torrin was saying. "You're going to let me pilot us out?"

"I told you you're going to take over this arm of the business, didn't I?" Torrin's grousing was an act. Mostly. Finding her holopic in that station's data dump effectively completed her grounding. She could wish she'd had more time, but that wouldn't change things. It was almost worth it to see Nat's face light up, and to see the old Nat shining through. "Prove to me you can finish up the job. It's not over-"

"Until we're home, docked and the cargo has been stowed." Nat finished the sentence without the eye roll she usually provided when finishing one of Torrin's stock phrases. "Aye, aye, ma'am!" She really was excited, if she was willing to call Torrin "ma'am."

Torrin stood to one side while Nat disengaged her safety harness. She tried not to cringe when Nat plopped herself into the captain's chair. Instead, Torrin focused on engaging the harness and biting her tongue while Nat worked her way through safety checks and the navigation plan with Tien.

Nat's plan was good, though not the one Torrin would have used, but she kept her mouth shut. The path wouldn't expose Nadierzda to discovery which was all that mattered.

There was little to complain about when they uncoupled from the station and Nat took them out. She was an excellent flyer, even if she did lack Torrin's flair. Her flying style was more aggressive than Torrin's. Nat had a tendency to rely on the power of the engines and dispensed with much of Torrin's finesse. The ride was certainly fast, if not as smooth, but that was what inertial dampers were for. And anything that got them back to Nadi faster also got her back into Jak's arms faster, so Torrin wasn't about to complain.

Chapter 2

Torrin pored over the list of figures on her screen, trying to force herself to concentrate. The cryostasis hangover was no worse than normal, but reading dry reports wasn't helping.

The ride home had been uneventful. What took two days had passed in what seemed like mere hours to her and Nat. There had been no other cargo, so the final duties of their trip had been easy enough. Torrin had still insisted on putting Nat through the post-trip checklist. There was no sense in letting her slack off at this point, and besides Torrin was trying to deal with the blinding headache and mild shakes of her reaction to cryosleep. Nat handled it marginally better than she did, and besides, if she had an assistant she was bloody well going to take advantage of that. Beyond that, she needed to know, for her own peace of mind if nothing else, that Nat was ready for the responsibility. To her credit, Nat had complied without fussing, and had taken off as soon as it was obvious everything was in order.

They'd cut the trip close. Landing Day was only a few days away. For a while, Torrin had worried that her contacts wouldn't come through in time, and that she would need to come up with another present for Jak. It was Jak's very first Landing Day and their first as a couple.

Torrin wanted to be an occasion neither of them would forget.

"Don't forget about dinner at Irenya's," Torrin had called at Nat's rapidly departing back in the space port. It was a yearly ordeal she'd done her best to avoid. Things were better between her and her mother since she'd brought Jak home. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, but if it was, Torrin wanted as much distraction as possible.

She'd received a raised hand as her only acknowledgment. Torrin wasn't about to face their mothers alone, and besides she had surprises for everyone. This was going to be the best Landing Day ever.

Nat's route and aggressive flying style had shaved about half a day off the return trip. As soon as Torrin finished with this last bit of work at the office, she'd be able to surprise her sweetie. After a few days' absence, there was always work that needed her attention, but she wanted to be focusing on something else right now.

Torrin stared at the columns of numbers on the report. This part had hard enough to concentrate on without the competing promise of being in Jak's arms. The curl of arousal at her center was a powerful distraction. She rubbed her eyes in an attempt to force herself to focus, but the problem wasn't in her eyes, it was between her legs.

A little bit to take the edge off, that was what the situation called for. She undid the top fasteners on her jumpsuit. The shipsuit didn't allow for easy access. She keyed shut the lock on the door from her console. It wouldn't be the first time one of her partners happened upon her in a state of undress in the office, but it would be the first time she'd be the office's sole occupant.

Cool air caressed the center of her chest, tightening her nipples to nearly painful points against the stiff fabric of her suit. Torrin reached inside and pinched one nipple while freeing the remaining fasteners, the ones that covered her true destination.

"Oh, Jak," Torrin whispered to the empty office. She kept her voice down. The walls back here weren't nearly thick enough to cut down on noise between the partners' offices. Nothing untoward ever happened in Mac's office, but she'd had a front row seat for more than one of Audra's assignments. One day Audra would slow down, but that day showed no sign of being imminent.

She pulled on her nipple, tugging hard. In her mind's eye, Jak had her lips wrapped around the sensitive flesh and was biting down. Her eyes looked up into Torrin's, carefully gauging how hard to bite. A flash of pleasure shivered through her belly into her groin.

"That's it, baby," Torrin breathed. "You know what I need." She slid her hand down the front of her pants, letting her fingertips skate over flesh swollen and wet with need. From the copious amounts of wetness, it had been five months, not a mere five days since she'd last seen her lover.

"Show me what you got." Jak's voice rang out loud and clear.

Torrin had her legs open before she realized the directive hadn't come from her dream lover.

"I think you'll be pleased." Audra's voice filtered more softly through the wall. "She did her best for you."

"I just hope her best was good enough," Jak said. "I was clear in my instructions."

What on Nadi is going on over there? Torrin got up and pressed her ear to the wall her office shared with Audra's. *Who the hell is doing their best for my woman?* If Torrin found out who the mysterious woman was, she would break her thumbs, then she would stop being nice.

They must have moved away from the wall. Torrin couldn't make out anything useful, only muffled murmurs. She debated fiercely with herself. She had to find out what was going on.

And yet... The conversation had been so vague as to be meaningless. If she burst in on them now, it would look as if she didn't trust either woman. Neither Jak nor Audra would ever betray her, of that she was certain. So what was left? Curiosity, and the burning need to be certain she wasn't about to be betrayed.

Stop that, she said sternly to herself. *Someone who is about to leave you wouldn't be planning their life with you. They wouldn't be taking on even more responsibility. And you know how seriously Jak takes her obligations.* It was true. The idea of a disloyal Jak was an oxymoron right up there with the League's Office of Naval Intelligence. Though now that she thought about planning their life together, when Jak wanted to talk about their future, Torrin had been dodging the subject.

This wasn't getting her anywhere. Torrin took a couple deep breaths to bring her blood pressure back down to something more reasonable. Her errant libido well and truly quelled, at least for the time being, she did up her jumpsuit.

The discussion between Audra and Jak continued a little longer.

"Thank your woman for me," Jak finally said. "I think this is exactly what I need."

"She'll be pleased to hear that. What are you up to now?"

Exactly what she needs? Torrin wracked her brain for what that could mean. A sex toy, maybe? She already had a large collection, and surely Jak knew she could talk to her if she needed something else. Jak was rather hesitant when it came to discussing sex-related topics, though. She sometimes verged on prudish. Best to handle this carefully is that was the case.

"I'm going to head out on a quick hunt. It'll give me something to do until Torrin gets home."

"Should I send her after you if she gets in early?"

Audra knew very well Torrin was already back. She'd stopped by her partner's office to say hello when she'd gotten in. She was up to something, as usual.

"That would be great." The excitement in Jak's voice was impossible to misunderstand.

Torrin couldn't help the smile that stretched across her cheeks in response to the one she heard in Jak's voice.

She could have stopped Jak when she left Audra's office, but Torrin wasn't about to admit to eavesdropping on their conversation. There was no reason to give Jak the wildly inaccurate impression that Torrin didn't trust her.

So she waited. And waited. Jak might have left Audra's office, but Torrin could hear her as she stopped and chatted with various women in the office. For all that Jak thought of herself as socially awkward and a loner, she'd made many friends since moving permanently to Nadierzda. Torrin wondered if Jak knew how charming she was. Probably not. If she did, she wouldn't be so effortlessly endearing.

It had been a few minutes since Torrin had been able to make out Jak's voice over the low hum of the office's environmental systems. To be on the safe side, she stuck her head out the door and looked around. If Jak was still in the building, she was somewhere among the cubicles of Troika Corp.'s outer office.

Torrin knocked lightly on Audra's door.

"Come on in," Audra said cheerily.

"What are you and Jak up to?" Torrin came right out and asked the question on the forefront of her mind. There was no point in beating around the bush with Audra.

"I don't know what you mean." Audra blinked innocently up at Torrin. She leaned back in her desk chair. "Just like I don't know what you were up to on Chaurus Station the past few

days."

"Ugh, Chaurus." Torrin pressed her lips together at the reminder.

"What's wrong?" Audra sat straight up, the teasing twinkle gone from her eyes. She looked ready to take on the galaxy on Torrin's behalf.

"They had my info on file."

"Oh no! Any warrant info?"

"None, thankfully." Torrin dropped onto the couch that took up one side of the office.

"Looks like I'm well and truly grounded. If a place like Chaurus has my specs, then there likely isn't anywhere else that doesn't."

"I'm sorry, Torrin. I really am."

"It's not like I wasn't expecting it." Torrin ran her hand through her hair, a habit she'd picked up from Jak. It worked better when she wasn't wearing a ponytail. "Damn Mori. I didn't think she'd move this quickly."

"I don't doubt that we scooped some inner world merchant clan who had their eyes on Haefen. It probably kicked up the chain when Jak's home world was taken off the table."

"Maybe." It didn't change much, whatever the reason.

"So now what?"

"I find other ways to keep myself occupied, I guess. It's not all bad. Jak and I have all the time in the world now. We can settle in and play house." Parts of that didn't sound completely dull. Playing house had some intriguing connotations. They hadn't talked much about their future since getting back from Haefen six months previous. The time had been mostly spent getting Jak into a regular groove, and helping Nat readjust. That and Torrin had changed the subject whenever Jak brought it up.

"I meant about the smuggling side of our business."

Audra's dry clarification pulled Torrin out of daydreams of Jak with a baby at her breast. She stopped herself from looking down to see if she had one there too.

"Oh." Torrin blushed. Audra cocked her head and stared at her, both eyebrows raised. Her face got even hotter. There was no reason for her to be embarrassed, not that Audra knew. If Audra could read Torrin's mind, she would be rolling on the floor. "Nat will take that on." She waved a hand vaguely in Audra's direction.

"I know you were thinking about her in that capacity. Is she up to it?"

"I think so. It'll be good for her. I'm planning on telling her over the holiday."

"So long as you think she can handle it."

"She's tougher now than she ever was." Torrin smiled sadly. "No one should ever have to deal with what she did, but I think she's over the worst of it."

"If you say so."

"So what were you and Jak up to?" Audra hadn't been the one to change the subject, Torrin had done that, but that didn't mean she would let it go.

Audra simply smiled.

"Never mind, I'll find out myself."

"Do you need me to tell you where Jak went."

"I think I can find her myself. I do have ways of tracking down information, you know. I am a trained professional." One who'd heard as much as she needed to through the walls of their offices.

"All right then." Audra's eyes were so crinkled from amusement at the corners that they'd almost disappeared.

"Have a good Landing Day if I don't see you before then."

"And a safe Landing to you too, Torrin." Audra threw her arms around Torrin's ribcage and squeezed mightily.

Torrin's return hug was no less heartfelt, though not as bone-breaking.

She returned to her office and powered down the console without taking another look at the columns of numbers that still awaited her on the screen. They could wait. She had more important things to attend to.

Chapter 3

Nadierzda's hot dry air passed around Torrin, stealing the moisture from her skin. Even at higher altitudes, it was warm enough that she needed only the bare minimum of clothing against the cold. A light jacket and pants of the same wind-resistant material kept her plenty warm, and protected her from the ever-present sand. She wasn't going higher than the rim of the crater, after all. Jak wasn't too far from Landing. A quick call to Olesya had confirmed that Jak was out in her ultralight, so she wasn't going as far as the cliffs. Those she could land on with a glider, then take off again. The ultralight was necessary when landing on the flats away from the crater walls.

It helped to have friends in higher places among Nadi's armed forces. Usually, Jak's location wasn't noised about too much. She'd impressed upon the Ruling Council the need to be more circumspect about military communication. The most massive breach of Nadi's secrets in all of her history had come from one of their own, one on the highest echelons of Nadi's then-militia. Tanith's betrayal and subsequent death had shaken everyone. Worst of all, with her demise there was no way of knowing how badly, if at all, they'd been compromised.

So yes, Torrin understood and even approved of the tightened security measures. She just

didn't understand why they were being applied to her. Fortunately, Olesya was willing to bend the rules and check up on Jak for her, but when the Banshees were out of town, Torrin had to rely upon other methods.

Her stomach churned on the edge of queasiness. If only they knew what Tanith had said and to whom. The changes being implemented for their security had caused more than one of the planet's more isolationist factions to call foul. Surprisingly, her mother hadn't been among them. Perhaps it was that Irenya had known Tanith. At times, Tanith had practically lived at their house when Torrin was a girl. Or maybe it was that Irenya liked Jak more than she'd anticipated. They were very similar in many ways, and Torrin's mother had found out quickly how much they had in common. Torrin had never known two people who could be so happy sitting together quietly in a room without ever speaking, and yet those two did exactly that. Sometimes Jak went over to Irenya and Raisa's house to not talk to them.

As if the thoughts had summoned her, Torrin spied the long wings of an ultralight against the long grass up ahead. She made note of the location and landed her glider a little way off, hoping Jak hadn't noticed her. There was still the chance she might surprise her lover.

As she usually did, Jak had concealed herself among a stand of the scrubby and gnarled plants that passed for trees here. She might not say so, but Torrin suspected Jak missed the majestic forests of her home world. Nadierzda's trees were poor examples of the species, twisted and scoured as they were by the constant dust-laden wind. One day in the not-too-distant future, they would finish terraforming this world. If Torrin had anything to say about it, she would make certain there were trees from Haefen among the new species introduced to the planet.

She kept her eyes on the ground, trying to avoid stepping on the branches and dead leaves that gathered in the underbrush. At the same time, she kept an eye out for Jak. She couldn't be

much further out now.

Torrin peered through the screen of branches ahead and took another stealthy step forward. So far she'd been almost soundless. This time she'd sneak up on Jak for sure.

Her foot came down on something hard and Torrin recoiled before the branch broke. She reached out to a nearby bush steady herself. A small blizzard of yellow leaves rained down around her as the limbs of the bush rustled violently.

A muffled snort from behind her made Torrin's shoulders tense. "Damn," she said quietly. She turned, a rueful smile plastered on her face. "Surprise!"

Jak grinned down at her from her perch halfway up a tree. Torrin's heart felt like it expanded to twice its normal size, filling her with happiness and making it difficult to breathe for a moment. It had only been five days, yet Torrin drank in Jak's features as if they hadn't seen each other for months.

Jak's blue eyes laughed at her from her tan face. She wasn't outside as often as she used to be, but you couldn't tell that from her skin tone. Her hair had grown out a bit, from the severe buzz cut she favored. It was barely long enough to show a little curl, which meant she'd likely be cutting it soon. The curls framed Jak's face and softened the line of her jaw, but Jak only saw untidiness.

"Were you trying to sneak up on me again, my sweet?" Jak asked.

"Can a woman be blamed for wanting to surprise the love of her life?"

"Is that what that was?" Jak's eyes rounded out in a look of shock. "You're getting better, then. I only heard you from half a kilometer away this time."

Torrin narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Jak's faint praise. During the past six months, Jak had developed a sense of humor drier than Nadi's air. Torrin couldn't always tell when she

was joking, and Jak was too high up the tree to see if there was a damning crinkle lurking at the corner of her left eye.

"Are you going to come down and give me a proper hello, or not?"

"Yes, dearest." Jak swarmed down the tree in far less time than should have been possible. Her feet had barely touched the ground before she was throwing herself into Torrin's open arms.

Torrin closed her arms around Jak, reveling in the way their bodies molded together. This was the best part of coming home. Hells, this was coming home. Jak's arms around her would be home on any planet in the galaxy.

Jak nuzzled into her neck, kissing the exposed flesh above the neckline of Torrin's light jacket. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Jak-baby." Torrin leaned down and captured Jak's lips. They moved with yielding softness against hers before growing rougher, demanding more from their kiss.

"Let's get out of here," Jak growled when their searing kiss finally ended. "I need you."

"I'm not waiting that long." Torrin pulled Jak's shirt out of her pants, then slid one hand up the sides of Jak's torso.

Jak tried to push her hands down, but Torrin was having none of it.

"We can't do that out here," Jak hissed while trying to corral Torrin's roaming hands. "It's indecent."

Torrin couldn't help the chuckle that escaped her. Jak could still be so delightfully stuffy. The sexual mores of Nadi's women made Haefen look like they were stuck in Earth's first Dark Ages. She'd come a long way, but there were times when Torrin was reminded of where Jak started out.

"Why not?" Torrin asked. "Who's going to see us? An antelope? Do you care that much what antelopes think of you?"

"What if someone flies by?"

"They aren't going to see anything through the canopy." Torrin skimmed her hands along the undersides of Jak's breasts.

Jak gasped and closed her eyes. "The ground is...messy."

"We'll brush ourselves off after." Jak's nipples pebbled instantly through the fabric of her bra when Torrin dragged her thumbs lightly over them.

Jak reached up and grabbed Torrin's forearms. "We'll get cold." She made no attempt to move Torrin's hands, rather she seemed determined to keep them right where they were.

"I'll keep you warm." Torrin continued her assault on Jak's nipples. She lightly took Jak's earlobe between her teeth and bit down gently. Jak arched against her, moaning deep in her throat. Her ears were wonderfully sensitive, and Torrin lavished attention on them, never tiring of the response she drew from Jak. Torrin would have laughed at the whimper of disappointment from Jak when Torrin withdrew one hand from her breast, except she had more important things to concern herself with.

She undid the fasteners on Jak's pants with the deftness of much repetition. Jak thrust her hips against her hand, seeking more. Torrin moved her hand to rest on the outside of her pants and shifted with Jak's motions, denying the friction she sought. Jak growled low in her chest and grabbed Torrin's ass with both hands, holding her there while she ground herself against the hand trapped between them.

"Patience," Torrin breathed.

"Screw patience," Jak growled back.

Torrin thrilled at the words, the tone and the way Jak kept rubbing against her. Jak had totally abandoned herself to their lovemaking. She was so wet, and getting wetter with every move of Jak's. The dampness that had been accumulating between Torrin's thighs had long since soaked through her underwear. A part of her wondered if it had soaked through her shipsuit also.

She reclaimed her hand and slid it down the front of Jak's underwear. Jak groaned and angled her hips so Torrin's fingers speared through the thatch of unruly hair and straight into her opening. She was so wet there was no resistance whatsoever and Torrin suddenly found her fingers encased in Jak's damp heat. Jak cried out high and thin, the sound music to Torrin's ears. Her knees buckled and so did Torrin's.

Locked together, they swayed for a moment, Jak beyond caring, Torrin nearly so. With herculean effort, Torrin locked her knees and backed Jak up until she was supported from behind by a tree.

She slid another finger to join the other two. Her eyes rolled up at the powerful contractions squeezing her fingers. There wasn't much room to thrust in the confines of Jak's underwear, but that didn't seem to matter. Jak cried out from even the tiniest movement, straining back against Torrin, her muscles tightening with each shout.

Torrin's own excitement was reaching its pinnacle. Her center throbbed in response to each of Jak's cries. With every squeeze around her fingers, she got closer to her own climax.

Unable to stand it any longer, but unwilling to come before Jak, Torrin did the only thing she could think of. She took the delicate skin of Jak's neck and bit down, giving herself something other than the arousal screaming through her to concentrate on. Jak cried out at the pressure on her neck. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around Torrin's waist and impaling herself deeply on Torrin's hand.

She was almost there. Torrin only had to hold on for a little longer. Her jaw flexed at the impossibility of holding off her orgasm, when Jak stiffened around her, head thrown back and eyes staring blankly at the branches above their heads. She exhaled once, twice, then groaned long and loud, shaking with the strength of her release.

Torrin froze, her limbs shaking to match Jak's. Her climax rolled over her, taking everything with it. She was falling, drifting outside of her body.

She came back to herself flat on her back, Jak lying on top of her and gazing down with a soft smile lighting up her face.

"You're a little...messy," Jak said. She plucked a small leaf out of Torrin's hair.

"I had other things to worry about." Torrin grinned up at Jak. She knew it was goofy, but couldn't bring herself to care in the least.

"You're going to get messier." Jak's smile was no longer soft.

"Oh dear, however will I cope?" Torrin laughed, then gasped. When had Jak opened the front of her shipsuit?

Some time later, Torrin lay on her back, looking up at the tops of the trees. Her head was nestled in the crook of Jak's shoulder. Jak's arms were wrapped around her, holding her loosely in place. Her arms and legs were heavy with complete relaxation, and she almost didn't mind the tree root digging into the small of her back. Moving would mean leaving Jak's arms, and she wasn't prepared to do so quite yet.

"How was your trip?" Jak asked.

"Mixed," Torrin said.

"That doesn't sound good. What went wrong?"

"Nothing went wrong, exactly. I got the merchandise, but I also found out my particulars

have been passed along to another non-League station. This one was a boil on the back end of beyond, and they still had it."

"I'm sorry, baby-baren." Jak ran her fingers through Torrin's hair. "What does that mean for you?"

"If means more for us than it does for me." Torrin grinned crookedly, trying to sound upbeat. "You'll be seeing a lot more of me. I'd say I'm now officially grounded."

"I won't pretend I'm upset about that." Jak's voice was quiet. "But I wish you felt better about it."

"I don't feel bad about the idea of spending more time with you." Torrin hastened to head off any misunderstanding on Jak's part. "And I don't feel bad about the rest of it, at least not precisely." She trailed off as she examined her feelings. Jak said nothing. She merely waited for Torrin.

"I'm worried about being bored, I guess," Torrin finally said. "My work with Troika is all well and good, but the aboveboard stuff won't keep me occupied for long."

"So find some more things to do."

"I do have some ideas." Torrin maneuvered herself around to get a better look at her lover's face. "There's you for one."

Jak laughed, her teeth flashing white in the shadows under the trees. "We can't spend all our time in bed. We'll be horribly malnourished and at some point they'll miss us at work."

Torrin stuck out her bottom lip in a mock pout. "Well, if you're going to be that way about it... I was thinking, maybe, eventually, I'd get into politics."

Jak raised her eyebrows, though she didn't seem overly surprised. She nodded slowly. "I can see that. You'd be good at it. People like you, and they respect you."

"And I've seen enough out there in the galaxy. I know why what we do and are on Nadi is important, and why we need to keep doing it."

"You don't need to convince me." Jak dropped a kiss on Torrin's forehead. "I'm already in your corner."

"Good."

"So what are you going to do until then?"

Torrin looked at Jak inquiringly.

"You said eventually, remember?" Jak said.

"That's up to you." Torrin paused and licked her lips. "I thought maybe we could do more family stuff."

"Do you mean that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You've been a little cagey about it when I tried bringing it up."

"Not cagey," Torrin said. "Careful. I wanted to make sure we'd be okay being us."

"And did I pass your test?" Jak's face was studiously neutral, but there was no disguising the edge to her question.

"I wasn't testing you." Torrin grabbed one of Jak's hands between both of hers. "I was testing me."

"That doesn't sound much better."

"What? Of course that's better—" Torrin sat halfway up when she realized what she'd unwittingly implied. "Oh."

"Yeah. You have about three seconds to explain what that means, Torrin Ivanov."

Jak had been spending far too much time with Torrin's mother. The words and tone were

classic Irenya.

"Jak, sweetie, I love you. You know I do. I would never cheat on you." That out of the way, Torrin took a deep breath. "I knew after what Mori did that my world was going to get a lot smaller. I wanted to make sure I'd be all right, that I wouldn't turn into a horrible person to be around." She looked Jak square in the eyes. "I wanted to be worthy of you."

"I see." Jak seemed somewhat mollified. "And what did your test teach you?"

"That I'll be fine. It'll take some getting used to, but nothing could be better than being at your side. I want to share everything with you." Torrin grinned. "I want to have your babies, or you to have mine, or whatever combination we come up with. We'll make amazing daughters, and I can't wait to meet them."

"One of each, I think," Jak said. At Torrin's perplexed look, she elaborated. "I'll have one of yours and you'll have one of mine."

"So you're okay with it?"

"Of course I am. I do have one condition, however."

"Anything."

"I want us to get married."

"If that's what you want, then of course I'm up for it." Marriage wasn't practiced universally by the couples on Nadierzda. Maybe half of them got married, and for varying lengths of time. Torrin would have been fine either way, but if Jak wanted a wedding, Torrin would make sure she got one.

"Permanently married, though. I don't want one of those five-year marriage contracts. I plan to be with you always."

"And I do with you. It never occurred to me that you'd want anything less. I certainly

don't."

"Good." Jak withdrew her arm from around Torrin and stood. She offered Torrin a hand up, then started picking small twigs and leaves out of Torrin's hair.

"What's the rush?"

"I want to get you home where I can spend more time on you. I mean with you."

She picked up her jacket. "And if we talk to Kiera soon, we can get in to see her before Landing Day. You know your moms will be happy to hear we're thinking of giving them granddaughters." Jak swung the jacket around her shoulders. Something fell out of one pocket, but she pounced on it and tucked it away before Torrin could see what it was.

"What was that?" Torrin pointed to the pocket where Jak had hidden the object.

"Never you mind," Jak said, lightly slapping her hand away. "I didn't pry into the mysterious cargo you had to get on this trip."

"Fine," Torrin grumbled. Her curiosity burned within her, and she grabbed Jak and tugged her in for a hug.

"Oh no you don't!" Jak said when she realized Torrin was trying to feel the shape of object through her jacket. She pushed Torrin away.

It wasn't like Torrin could make out what it was, since she hadn't been able to get her hands near it. "I only wanted to give you a hug before we head home."

"A likely story." Jak pointed Torrin back toward her glider. "I'll be right there to tow you into the air."

Chapter 4

Torrin was having second thoughts, which she didn't care for at all. Jak already had one, hells she had two and access to others on the base. The gift idea that had seemed so genius to Torrin at the time ate away at her. Though from the way Jak kept eying the large brightly-wrapped package in the back seat of the car, she was intrigued. Covered as it was in traditional wrappings of yellow and orange, the box looked even bigger. There were other gifts piled back there, but Jak's eyes had homed right in on her name on the tag.

Jak held a small pile of packages on her lap. She'd refused to let Torrin handle them, for which Torrin really couldn't blame her, not after the way she'd tried to find out what she was getting the other day, not the number of times Jak had caught Torrin snooping about their flat. She hadn't managed to discover Jak's stash. Where had she been hiding them? Her smuggler's sensibilities were highly offended. Torrin excelled at hiding loot, and uncovering it, but somehow Jak had managed to foil her highly developed instincts.

They arrived at her mothers' house, the little bungalow nestled among sandy hills. Brown grasses showing only the occasional clump of green were all that was left of Irenya's lawn during the dry season. It was a hot day, even for Nadi. The car's interior had been nice and cool,

but as soon as they opened the door, the heat enveloped them. It was so dry, any sweat evaporated off her skin immediately without cooling her anywhere near enough.

Irenya peered out the front door, then came out to meet them. The heat didn't seem to bother her at all.

"Pass me some of those boxes," she said to Torrin. "Let's get you two inside as soon as possible."

Jak had acclimated well enough to many things on Nadierzda, but the dry heat wasn't one of them. She smiled gratefully and hurried up the walk. Torrin passed her mother enough boxes to be able to handle the rest. She made sure to hold on to Jak's gift.

"Thanks," Torrin said to Irenya.

"Don't mention it," Irenya replied. "I need your help to finish our present to Raisa."

"Of course. How did you keep her away from the room?"

"It was easy enough. I claimed it as a place I could use to change out of my work clothes. I've been using it for months since you and I started talking about the project."

"Clever."

"We'll see about that when she realizes I'll be changing in the bedroom again."

They were at the front door, so Torrin didn't have to respond further. As soon as she stepped inside the tidy little house, she was swept into a hug by Raisa.

"Safe Landing, Torrin," Raisa said.

"And to you, Raisa." She shrugged to indicate her arms full of boxes. "Let me put these by the fountain and I'll greet you properly."

"When you get the chance." Raisa gave her a final squeeze then let her go. "I've been told you'll be helping your mother with a mysterious project. I'm to keep out of your way." Her eyes

sparkled with excitement.

They'd set up the fountain in the living room, in the same place it had been placed for as long as Torrin could remember. The fountain had been handed down to her mama from Tamra's mama. It was one of the few reminders of her first wife that Irenya had kept, and all the more precious to her for it.

She took her time putting out the presents, while searching for her gift from Jak. There was nothing.

"You're taking your time," Jak said from the doorway. "Is everything all right?"

"She probably threw her back out." Nat joined Jak by the door. She leaned against the frame. "I hear that happens a lot when you get older."

"Very funny." Torrin deliberately arranged a package just so, then stood up.

Jak watched her with wide-eyed innocence. Nat made no attempt to hide a wide grin.

"I need to help Mother with some things," Torrin said with as much dignity as she could muster.

Nat stepped into the room. "Maybe we should open one present now." Her eyes raked the pile of gaily-wrapped packages with poorly-concealed avarice. It was a line she used every year. She squatted in front of the presents.

"Not a chance," Irenya said.

"But Mother, look at all that." Nat's outstretched arms took in the substantial pile. "How can you expect me to wait until after dinner?"

"It builds character."

"They have this argument every year." Torrin's loud whisper to Jak was ignored by Nat and Irenya.

"I have more than enough character," Nat said.

The words were the same as they'd been in previous years, but Irenya's reaction was vastly different. She hesitated, her eyebrows knit together for a moment.

"One present then."

Nat rocked back on her heels and turned to give Irenya a shocked glare. "I'm going to see if Mom needs help with the baking." She brushed between Jak and Irenya in the doorway.

Jak and Torrin shared a look while Irenya reached toward Nat. She let her arm drop back to her side.

"I'll check on her," Jak said quietly.

Torrin nodded, and Jak followed in Nat's wake. Nat didn't take offense at what Jak said. She probably thought the sniper was the only one who understood.

"I can't talk to her anymore," Irenya said.

"She's not mad at you, try to remember that."

"I try, but it's hard." Torrin's mother smiled bitterly. "It's hard for me not to give it back to her when she gets angry."

"I know." Torrin reached around and draped an arm across Irenya's shoulders. "I remember." She squeezed gently to show she wasn't trying to get in a dig. "You're doing better this time."

"Raisa's a big help." She straightened her back and dusted her hands off on her thighs. "We have work to do." Irenya strode from the room, leaving Torrin to follow along in her wake.

There was much more work to do than Irenya had implied. To listen to her talk, it had sounded like she was almost finished. If the loom was even halfway assembled, Torrin would have been surprised. They had a lot of work to do if they were to be done by dinner. Torrin

picked up a spanner and stepped into the fray.

As they worked, Torrin became uncomfortably aware that her mother was getting old. The sturdy muscles she'd developed over a lifetime of physical labor were still there, but they'd become ropey. Things simply took longer, which explained why there was so much to do on the loom. Torrin doubted Irenya had even noticed the decline. She'd put aside as much time as she'd normally needed for the project and was coming up short. Not that Torrin minded helping out. She liked to work with her hands, but if she'd known this was in the offing, she'd have brought her work gloves and coveralls.

The time passed quickly enough. Irenya responded with her typical monosyllabic answers when Torrin tried to engage her in conversation. Eventually, Torrin stopped trying, but she couldn't take the refusal to chat personally. Irenya didn't shut down conversation because she didn't like Torrin, she simply didn't like to talk. Torrin wished she'd realized that a couple decades ago. It would have saved her years of hurt feelings. Was this what growing up felt like? The ability to look at her parents' actions and realize how little they had to do with her. For the first time, the silence between them didn't feel awkward. Torrin hummed as she worked, a smile on her face.

By the time they finished, the sun had swung around to the back of the house and was barely kissing the horizon.

"Just in time for dinner," Irenya said. She stretched broadly and rotated her neck until the joints popped loudly.

Torrin winced, she hated that sound. "I need a shower."

"We both do. You take the one in the house, I'll clean up quick in the outbuilding."

When Torrin opened the door, the combined scents of goat and machinery lubricant in

which they'd been laboring were wiped out by the smells of dinner. The top notes were savory, but she thought she could detect freshly-baked cookies and pudding beneath. She stood in the doorway, transported back to a time when she'd been young, when Landing Day had been the most anticipated time of the year, better even than the rodeo.

"Smells good, doesn't it." Irenya elbowed Torrin lightly in the side.

"It does."

"Well, hurry up and shower so we can dig in. Sooner dinner's done, sooner presents'll be opened." She looked behind her into the room. Irenya was as excited to give Raisa their gift as Torrin was to give Jak hers. Maybe. They shared a look of anticipation. "Go on." Irenya pushed her out the door.

Torrin showered and changed in record time. The sonic shower made dealing with her hair a breeze, though it lacked the hedonistic pleasure of the water one she'd installed in their flat at Jak's request. She had to borrow some of her mother's clothes. They were a little short through the wrists and ankles and much more rustic than she preferred. No one would accuse Irenya of being fashion-forward. Still, the clothing would do for family. Torrin had nothing to prove here.

She made her way back to the kitchen. Jak and Nat sat chatting on one side of the counter while Raisa pattered about on the other, putting the finishing touches on dinner. Completely unaware of Torrin's arrival, their discussion continued unabated,.

"How are the nightmares, then?" Raisa asked as she ladled gravy into a shallow dish.

"Getting better," Nat said. "I sometimes get a full night's sleep. My therapist is very pleased. The cats don't like the nightmares at all, though. I wake up and they're hiding under the bed. They don't come out until I call for them."

"Poor things." Raise tutted sympathetically. "What about you, Jak?"

"It's not so bad. Having Torrin there helps. I don't feel like I'm so trapped in them."

What Jak wasn't saying was that she didn't really want the dreams to go away altogether. They'd talked about it when the frequency of her nightmares had actually increased upon their return to Nadi. As terrible as the dreams were, they were Jak's strongest tie to Bron.

Torrin crept a few steps back from the doorway, then entered the kitchen, making sure to scuff her feet. It was no mean feat in socks, but she managed.

"Oh wonderful, you two are finally done with your mystery project in Irenya's mud room." A small smile curled at the edge of Raisa's mouth. If Torrin's mother thought she was fooling her wife, she was sadly mistaken. Clearly, Raisa knew what was going on, she was simply much less of a snoop than the rest of her family.

"Yep. Mother should be in soon, she's getting cleaned up."

"Then we can start setting the table." Raisa shoed Nat and Jak from their comfortable perches through the simple expedient of handing them dishes. They disappeared into the next room while Torrin accepted the first of the sides.

Irenya managed to time her entrance perfectly. They had just finished bringing out the last of the dishes and placing the cutlery when she walked in through the back door, accompanied by a blast of heat and sand.

They sat around the table. Irenya took her place at the head and carved the roast as everyone passed around the sides. Traditionally, the youngest members of the family would tell the story of how Zana Krikorian and her women discovered Nadierzda and settled on it. There were no children now, but someday soon there would be. Torrin smiled to herself as she looked around.

Nat had been the last one to tell that story, though she'd been prone to embellishment.

When Nat told the story, the settlers were forced to fight off all sorts of beasts, each more ferocious than the last until Irenya had to tell her to knock it off and tell the story properly.

Conversation was quiet but animated. From the way Nat's eyes kept straying toward the next room, she was distracted by the surprises waiting there. Torrin knew Nat would love her present. The time was right, though the idea still made her throat tighten.

Irenya seemed content to linger over her mug of bitrian after the meal while Nat's fidgets grew more and more pronounced. Torrin caught the tiny smirk hovering around Irenya's lips when she took another leisurely sip of the steaming beverage. Their mother was messing with Nat, and with no sign of remorse. Beyond that, Torrin also thought it was time. Her palms were sweaty with excitement and worry. Would Jak like her present? Surely she would, but what if she didn't?

"I think it's time for presents," Torrin announced, pushing her chair away from the table.

"Didn't think you'd be the one to crack," Irenya murmured as they all moved to the next room.

The first person to mention opening presents after dinner was the last to open theirs. It was a cunning strategy her parents had developed to deal with Nat's over-enthusiasm. In fact, Torrin couldn't recall a year when Nat hadn't been the last one to open her gifts. From the slightly stunned look in Nat's eyes, she wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

Torrin claimed one corner of the couch and pulled Jak against her. A sharp object poked into her ribcage.

With an evil smirk, Jak pulled a small box from her coat pocket. Torrin's name was clearly visible on the tag.

"So that's where you've been hiding it, you saucy wench!" She shook her head. "I've been

trying to get a better look at that for days."

"I know." Jak looked so pleased with herself that Torrin stuck out her tongue at her. "You can open it now." Jak tried to hand it to her, but Torrin held up her hands.

"Oh no, she can't," Irenya said. "Torrin knows the rules. She has to hand out the gifts and wait quietly until it's her turn to open them." She turned out the lights in the room, leaving only those from the fountain. The glow through the fountain's water shone a shifting pattern of light onto the ceiling.

"Fine, but you're getting your gift second to last," Torrin said. "I think it's only fitting that Nat gets the first present, since she's never had the experience before."

She made a show of perusing the small pile of gifts before picking out her present to Nat. It was a small package, easily among the least impressive on the pile, but it was heavy. "Here you go."

"Thanks," Nat said dryly. "Glad to see you're starting with a bang." For all her grouching, Nat tore into the package, showing no regard for the layers of thin paper Torrin had used to wrap it. She pulled a metal cylinder about the width of her hand from the box and held it up. "This is great! What on Nadi is it?"

"It's the locking mechanism for the *Calamity Jane's* airlock." Torrin's lower lip wobbled a bit as she smiled. "Do you know how hard it is to find something concrete to symbolize giving a ship to someone?"

"Hilarious, Torrin. Now where's my real gift?" She craned her neck to look around Torrin at the remaining packages.

"That is your real gift. The *Jane* is yours."

"It's true, Nat," Jak said from the couch.

"You're shitting me." Nat looked from Torrin to Jak and back again.

"Language, Natalya," Irenya said.

"Yes, Mother." The reply was automatic. Nat looked down at the cylinder and back up at Torrin. Her eyes shimmered wetly. She engulfed Torrin in a hug, squeezing so hard Torrin was certain she heard her ribs creak.

"You're welcome," Torrin said, laughing. If the laugh was a bit snuffly, no one commented. "I think we should give Raisa her gift now."

Irenya leaped from her perch on the arm of Raisa's chair and tugged her wife up to join her. She practically dragged Raisa down the hall. Nat and Jak followed along behind them while Torrin took a moment to wipe her eyes. She would miss piloting the *Calamity Jane*, but Nat had more use for her now. Torrin wouldn't need her, not if she was staying on Nadi to have babies with Jak.

Raisa's excited voice echoed down the hall when she saw the huge automated loom Torrin and Irenya had assembled. She joined the small group in time to see Raisa giving her mother the most thorough kiss she'd ever seen. It went on for quite some time. She exchanged awkward glances with Nat and Jak, who then looked anywhere but at each other and the spectacle in front of them. Jak leaned forward to examine part of the mechanism. Torrin studied the frayed edge of her shirt's too-short wrist.

"Should we wait for you in the living room?" Nat finally asked.

"No need," Raisa said. She gave Irenya a smoldering look that promised things Torrin never wanted to contemplate her mothers doing.

"All right, back to the gifts," Torrin said, shooing Nat and Jak before her. The knowing chuckles of her parents chased them down the hall.

They must have indulged themselves in another kiss. By the time Raisa and Irenya rejoined them, not only were they quite mussed, but Torrin had sorted everyone's gifts out.

What followed were a string of thoughtful presents that took much too long to open. To Torrin's way of looking at things, there was far too much discussion over how lovely this gift was, or the usefulness of that one. She had to admit that the blanket Raisa had woven for her and Jak was beautiful.

When all the gifts had been opened, Jak tried again to give her the package from her pocket.

"Not quite yet," Torrin said. She pulled her and Jak's gifts to her mothers out from behind the fountain and passed them over.

Both women were entirely too composed about opening them. Torrin kept herself from snapping at them to move faster, but it was a close thing. Irenya and Raisa pulled the tiniest socks Torrin could find out of their respective packages at almost the same moment. They traded identical expressions of befuddlement.

"This is very nice, Torrin, but they're not my size," Irenya said.

"Oh, they're not for you," Torrin assured her. She bounced up and down a bit in her chair. "But you'll want to hold on to them for later."

"I don't understand," Irenya said.

"Oh, Torrin!" Raisa said over top of her wife. "Which one of you is it?" She looked back and forth between her and Jak.

"Both of us, actually."

Jak put a hand on Torrin's thigh. "Or it will be. I told her it was too soon to tell you, but she couldn't help herself. We've been to see Kiera. They'll extract our eggs in a couple weeks,

then use the genetic material to fertilize us a few weeks after that."

"Eggs?" Irenya's eyes were ready to bug out of her head.

"That's right," Torrin said. "You're going to be a grandmother, and before a year has gone by. Kiera foresees no issues for us. We're genetically compatible and biologically fit." When the expected dig about her age didn't materialize, Torrin looked around. "Where's Nat?"

There was no sign of her sister. No one else had seen her slip out.

"I'll go find her," Jak said. She scooted off the couch before Torrin could say anything, leaving Torrin to contend with her beaming parents.

They had all sorts of questions she couldn't answer, reluctantly leading her to admit Jak might have been right about their announcement being a little premature.

Irenya launched into a history of the family, detailing what each illustrious ancestor had accomplished. Torrin assumed it was to help her with name choices.

"Then there was your great-great Aunt Hildie. She invented the opalescent glaze that's still one of the most popular colors on Nadi porcelain today."

"We already know one name," Torrin said, gently but firmly cutting into her mother's litany. "We're calling one Brona." Where was Jak? And Nat for that matter. She wanted to give Jak her gift.

"Of course." Raisa nodded. "It's a lovely name, and it makes so much sense."

Jak finally reappeared. "Nat needed some air. She'll be back. She said we should keep on without her."

"All right." Torrin rubbed her hands together.

"Just a moment, Torrin." Irenya held a hand out toward her. "Maybe we should wait."

"Nat thought you might say that. She doesn't know how long she'll be."

"Very well." Irenya lowered her hand.

"Here's your present from me, Jak." Torrin slid the long box out from behind the couch.

"Don't worry about the paper."

Jak had methodically unwrapped each present so far as if she might give offense if she didn't take her time. She flashed Torrin an excited grin and tore off the paper in a flurry of scraps, quickly revealing the metal box beneath. She thumbed open the catches and opened the lid.

Torrin slid to the side to get a better look at Jak's face. It lit up with delight. There no question as to whether or not she liked it. Torrin exulted silently inside.

"It's beautiful, sweetie!" Jak exclaimed.

"What did she give you?" Raisa asked. She and her wife craned their necks to get a view of what was bringing Jak so much joy.

Wordlessly, she turned the case around on her lap.

"That's very nice, but what is it?" Irenya asked when confronted with a case full of components.

"It's a sniper rifle," Jak said. "A really nice one."

"That's very...romantic." Irenya might like Jak better than she'd thought she would, but she still wasn't thrilled about her vocation. Her smile was wooden and not terribly convincing, but at least she'd tried.

"It's custom-made," Torrin said. "I had it built to your measurements. Everyone I talked to agreed those are the finest gas-propulsion rifles in the galaxy. You'll be able assemble it to your own preferences. I made sure they included all the options."

"I love it, baby. It's perfect." Jak turned the case back around and stroked the pieces

reverently. "I can't wait to try it out." She looked over at Torrin and her face fell.

"What's the matter?"

"This must have cost you a fortune. My gift for you is silly."

"Nothing you could ever give me would be silly."

Jak looked away, but Torrin placed a finger under her chin and gently turned her head back around.

"I mean it. I treasure everything you've ever given me. If you gave me pocket link and told me it was special, I would keep it always because it came from you."

As Torrin hoped, Jak smiled. She fished the small package out of her pocket and handed it to Torrin. "For you, my love."

Torrin accepted the box with a kiss. She weighed it in her hands. It was light. She turned it over in her hands and tried to find the tape Jak had used to fasten the paper together. There was no tape. Her clever love had figured out how to fold the paper so it stayed put.

The wrapping unfolded like a flower, revealing a simple wooden box. Torrin opened the lid and stopped, staring down at its contents. She didn't know what she'd expected, but it hadn't been this.

"You didn't," she whispered.

"Of course I did," Jak replied as softly.

Torrin blinked rapidly to clear the tears from her eyes. They spilled over onto her cheeks in front of everyone, but now she could see the beautiful blue comb cradled in satin.

"What is it, Torrin?" Raisa asked softly.

She tried to tell them, but couldn't get the words past the lump filling her throat. Torrin swallowed once, then again, but couldn't force out more than a whisper.

"A comb?" Irenya said when she showed them.

She coughed once then cleared her throat. "Jak made me one after she rescued me. She saw how much trouble I was having with my hair. I had to leave it behind when we left, but I loved it. It was the first thing she ever gave me."

"It's not the original, of course," Jak said. "That's long gone. But Audra had the last Troika expedition to Haefen bring back various samples of wood. I was able to make another one. It's even better than the first one. I was able to sand the wood this time."

"It's perfect." Torrin cradled Jak's cheeks gently between her hands and placed their lips together. Jak's lips moved against hers for the softest, sweetest kiss they'd ever shared. "You're perfect," she said. "We're perfect."