

GAMBIT

Linnea Sinclair

*gam*bit—n.--a strategic move in an Olde Terran board game,
in which a pawn or a piece is offered in exchange for a favorable position.
— Intergalactic Heritage Dictionary, Ninth Edition*

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THE AIR in her cell was cool and fresh. The padded bench almost comfortable, even after a three-hour wait. Not much worse, Ty'mara Moran reassured herself, than most spaceport transit offices.

Then the silver-haired man walked into her cell, and fear skittered up her spine like a spider on ice skates.

She knew him, not that they'd ever met. But she knew him just the same. Knew the dark uniform of the Jhen. Knew the row of two gold stars over three denoting the rank of Senior Huntership Captain. Knew of eyes so ice-blue they were almost white, and legendary for their hardness. The eyes, the rank, and the legend belonged to only one man: Kirand Jhen-Aris.

Now so did Ty'mara.

She silently translated his curt command to the guard. "This is alpha priority. Leave us."

The force field behind him snapped back to full power, blanking her cell's entryway, framing his tall form with an opaque whiteness. His clipped Jhenian accent highlighted the sardonic tone in his voice.

"It appears you've stumbled into someplace you don't belong, Captain Moran."

That statement, Ty noted, pretty well summed up her entire life. She shrugged. "Wasn't my choice to come here."

"No? Then tell me. Who made this choice for you?"

"You did."

He frowned. "I fail to see how I'm responsible."

"I sure as hell didn't tractor my ship into your docking bay. Or throw myself into this cell. You're the one who insisted--"

"I insisted because you and your ship are somewhere you don't belong." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Why are you in this sector?"

She drew one leg up on the bench, rested her arm on her knee as if this were nothing more than a casual conversation. Her heart hammered in her chest. "Just lucky, I guess."

Too late she saw the flash of anger in his eyes. He grabbed her arm, pulling her forward on the bench. "I don't have time for your games. Why are you here?"

She twisted abruptly away from him and he lost his hold on the soft, pliant material of her flightsuit. In four steps she was across the cell.

"I had my reasons," she said when he made a move in her direction.

"Which are...?"

"None of your damned business!"

She regretted her words immediately.

He crossed the distance between them in two long strides, forcing her to back up the few remaining inches to the wall. His arms flanked her like barricades, trapping her.

She refused to flinch. Refused to do what she suspected a hundred other captains and crew had done before when faced with the Jhen-Aris.

She raised her chin a little higher. "This is T'Sri space, not Jhen. You can't tell me where I can or cannot go."

She waited for an explosion, but saw only an illogical shift in his attitude, almost a softening. And then an unlikely hint of a smile.

"Perhaps not. Yet, if the Abaris hadn't come along, you might've been picked up by the T'Sri. I take it that wasn't what you were after." His voice was patient, but no less commanding. Even with that disarming smile.

Part of her regretted he was Jhen-Aris. In other circumstances, she would have found him attractive, in spite of the premature silvering of his hair. She'd heard there was a story behind that; one of the many circulated about the Jhen. They were rebels of long-standing; smugglers, pirates.

But the T'Sri were worse. They were slavers, assassins. Cold-blooded murderers.

"No one in their right mind wants to be picked up by the T'Sri." In a quick movement, she ducked under his arm and regained her original position on the bench.

A low chuckle of laughter followed her. "So, what brings the *Dreamweaver's* lovely captain to this unfriendly location?"

Flattery's not your style, she wanted to say, but bit back the retort. She knew what was. "What brings the *Abaris* here? Run out of tri-haulers to hijack?"

Jhen-Aris's smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. "No. But I'm running out of patience."

She hesitated, listening to the muted sounds of the ship. A distant ping signaled the opening of the lift doors. She heard footsteps and a greeting called out to the guard who had accompanied Jhen-Aris to her cell.

The slight trembling under her feet that told her the huge interstellar drives were operating at sub-light; hyperspace would be smoother.

She could protest all she wanted, but the fact was, she was in a cell on the Jhen's premier huntership. And she was the captain's prize. For now.

Perhaps it was time for certain things to be said. She drew a deep breath. "The T'Sri attacked a Lifarian freighter off Devor. Killed everyone on board."

He shrugged in apparent indifference. "The T'Sri have been killing Lifarian witches for centuries."

The Jhen were none too fond of them either, Ty knew. But they had been content to leave the Lifari alone.

Not so with the T'Sri, who easily added the role of witch-hunter to their growing list of attributes. Now there were perhaps three thousand pure-blood Lifari left on freighters and generations ships. One hundred fourteen fewer after the attack on the *Rachella*.

"So that justifies the deaths of innocent people? Because of the T'Sri's inability to handle their superstitions?"

"The T'Sri aren't my concern at the moment. You are. What are you doing in T'Sri space?"

"My job. I guess you could call me a mercenary with a conscience, Jhen-Aris." She used his name deliberately, as if they were equals. But there was no reaction, and that tinge of amusement she'd sensed before was gone.

"The Lifari will not kill. You know that. Their precepts prohibit it. And they can't claim any protection under the laws of the Council. But nothing prevents them from hiring me." She stared past him, not meeting his gaze, hoping he wouldn't see the lies laced in with the truths.

"So you thought you would take on the entire T'Sri empire yourself?"

She bristled at the sarcasm in his words. "I'm not helpless. And I was only aiming for one person."

"You weren't going very far with one engine down."

"Think I don't know that? A major malfunction wasn't in my plans. But when I came out of hyperspace at the Nahil Border Gates, every blessed light on my starboard thruster board was screaming at me. Wasn't like I planned it this way."

"When you're going after game as big as Gri Pajtok, you have to account for all eventualities."

She wasn't surprised he'd guessed that the T'Sri Emperor-Elect was her target. "Easy for you to say. I'm five payments behind on my ship. A new thruster board would've put me back even further. That's why this job's so important."

"How important, Captain Ty'mara Moran?"

More than you know, she thought, but kept her response unemotional. "Enough."

"Enough to work with the Jhen?"

"Maybe," she conceded slowly, knowing one never worked with the Jhen, only for them or against them.

He asked the question she'd been waiting three hours to hear. "You want Pajtok dead?"

She remembered the pain of one hundred fourteen voices screaming in terror. "Yes."

"So do I, Moran. So do I."

She stood beside him on the *Abaris's* bridge and tried to keep her mouth from falling open. She'd never been on a huntership before. Of the larger starfreighters, she knew the competent-- but outdated--systems of the *Grindley*. That looked nothing like the tri-level structure before her now.

It wasn't just the fact that there was instrumentation and cross-instrumentation. It wasn't even the precision with which everything worked. It was simply that everything had been designed by one man. Jhen-Aris.

"Does my bridge meet with your approval?"

She realized he'd been watching her. She hadn't thought her reaction would matter. Yet his gaze on her was questioning, almost searching. Well, if he needed his ego stroked, so be it. She wouldn't have to lie. "More than approve. I'm envious."

He arched an eyebrow. "I'm flattered."

"I doubt it."

His rumble of laughter did nothing to soothe her nerves. She was well aware of who he was, the power he wielded, and that his pleasantries were more than likely just a

facade. Or a ploy. She ran her fingers lightly over the gleaming metal cap of the railing that encircled the third tier. She didn't doubt other captains had stood where she was standing. But she knew of none who'd lived to tell of it. "Why show me all this?"

He leaned back against the railing and lowered his voice. "As I said, we may find each other useful. I wanted you to know what I had to offer."

"You're serious, then?"

"Absolutely."

She let out a small sound of incomprehension.

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't trust you. I'm just a small-time short hauler-"

"Who carries two illegal ion cannons and a fully loaded plasma torpedo rig? Not normal armaments for a Class III freighter."

Evidently he'd done some nosing around while she sat in his brig. "Look. I've been working the Colonies for over five years now. That's close enough to your territory that I carry ion cannons, legal or not."

"*Pavir jhadna, Gent'Duren.*" A young lieutenant stood a few feet away, at attention, apologizing in formal Jhenian for his intrusion.

Gent'Duren. Lord Captain, Ty translated.

Jhen-Aris nodded at the lieutenant, then, to Ty, "A moment, if you will." He left her alone with her thoughts.

So he was Lord Captain now. Climbing the political ladder as well as the military one. And yet he wanted to bargain with a lowly freighter captain who was clearly someplace she didn't belong.

But she was, Ty knew, exactly where she belonged. She'd discussed the plan with Fy'ella and Sagar over a pitcher of blue ale in Port Charleston. A single person stood a greater chance of gaining access to the T'Sri than a whole fleet coming in. Who would suspect a lone freighter, drifting off- course, stellar drives in disarray?

Except it wasn't the T'Sri who'd found her.

"I need some answers from you." Jhen-Aris returned to the bridge railing, suddenly all business.

She shook her head. "You're wasting your time. I'm in no position to help you with Pajtok. Unless you intend to salvage my ship for scrap to fund the mission. Which I doubt. So the best thing you can do is let me go."

He leaned both hands on the railing and tilted his face down to hers. "And let you drift about in T'Sri space unprotected? Now what kind of honorable captain would do that?" The mocking, teasing tone was back again.

"Seems to me there've been a lot of freighter captains left to drift all over occupied space. After the Jhen have stripped 'em bare."

He was silent. Then: "Moran, you're not cooperating."

She faced him squarely. "I have nothing to offer you."

"I could dispute that."

He said it so quietly she almost missed it.

She looked at him, startled. Not so much by his words, but by a tone she had heard enough times before in spaceport pubs. A soft tone, suggestive. Intimate. Definitely not all business.

"I hardly think...." But she had thought, and she let her sentence end right there. He was standing too close, watching her too intently. And for a moment it was as if there were no one else on the bridge but herself and Kirand Jhen-Aris. The few inches that separated them seemed to crackle with a primal energy. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks.

Then mercifully, he looked towards something at a far point on the bridge. The hard edge returned to his voice. "You ask that I let you go?"

"Yes."

"Denied. I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Don't be a fool."

She inhaled sharply. "Who am I going to tell what I've seen? My drinking buddies in Port Charleston? Even if I did, I'm not qualified to interpret this." She motioned to his crew at their stations and was surprised to see how steady her hand was. Inside, her heart thudded against her ribs. "I'm just blue-line rated. No one in any of the big transglomerates would even wipe their feet on a blue-liner, let alone talk to me."

He seemed not to hear her. "Perhaps you'll be in a more cooperative frame of mind when we get to Maros Prime."

Maros Prime. Her heart sank. She knew their present coordinates, knew approximately how long it would take a ship like the Abaris to return to its home base. It was time she didn't have to spare.

She had, at best, a little less than thirty-six hours. She'd received the information

from one of the dying minds on the *Rachella*. Not a Lifarian mind. A T'Sri. The Lifarian ship's distress call had been blaring for over ten hours by the time the *Dreamweaver* was able to respond. Ty had wandered through the ship's dim corridors, dazed and sickened by the carnage, the mutilated bodies. But one body, a T'Sri officer obviously caught unawares by an explosion, had still been alive. Barely. She would never have touched the woman, voluntarily, but she'd stumbled over a tangle of conduit and shredded bulkhead. Her hand splayed against a broad ridged back, still warm. The mental contact had been painful, almost revolting. But what she discovered made it all worthwhile.

Within three days Emperor Pajtok would pass through the Nahil quadrant in his Royal Convoy. Heavily guarded, it would no doubt detect and react to the presence of a Council or Jhen ship well in advance. But her own small freighter, with the drives showing cold, would arouse no such suspicion.

"I'm...I'm a little tired, Captain." She let all the strain she'd been feeling come through her voice. "And there's nothing more we can discuss. So if you don't mind, I'd like to go back-"

"Mister Jhen-Daray will escort you to a cabin. There's no need for you to remain in the brig."

Guard me is more like it, she thought as the muscular officer accompanied her into the lift. But her escort was the least of her problems. Getting off the *Abaris* was her major one. And one that would take considerable effort.

She hoped she was up to it. It'd been a while, and she knew she was out of practice.

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It could be worse, she thought for the second time in a few hours. She surveyed the small cabin. There was a decent-sized bed, a private 'fresher, a built-in work area and a small kitchenette. In truth, it was nicer than the cabins on the *Grindley* or the *Double Deuce*. And it was definitely preferable to the standard brig.

"The captain hopes you find the guest quarters to your liking," Jhen-Daray said. He lacked Jhen-Aris's commanding presence, almost innate elegance. Though he wasn't bad looking. She judged him to be about her age, just over thirty.

Obviously, he'd been judging her, too. But only in small glances. Not like his captain's bold stare.

"If there's anything that you need..."

A laser pistol or sonic rifle might do just fine, she thought, but shook her head. "Not right now, thanks."

She waited until the door irised behind him before turning her attention to the

computer. "Computer on," she said softly, wondering what security devices the room held and who, if anyone, watched her.

"Ident code or retinal scan?" responded a tinny autovoice.

"What the hell. Code." She settled into the chair at the console and tried several of her codes from the *Dreamweaver*. Stranger things....

But not this time. The second and third round she tried a generic series that could get you into the better liquor stock in just about any government run spaceport pub system. No luck. She leaned back into the seat and chewed her lip thoughtfully. This was going to take some work. She figured she had about an hour before the Abaris powered up for jump. One hour to get out of her pleasant prison, find the *Dreamweaver* and get the hell out of here.

It wasn't a lot of time.

Accessing the computer might allow her to pinpoint alarms and fail-safes in the corridors. And if there were a hangar lock override in the bay where Jhen-Aris held her ship. If she couldn't get the bay doors open, her only alternative would be to use the ion cannons rather creatively. It was a dangerous option--she could incinerate herself as well--and one she hoped she wouldn't have to use.

She wasted another fifteen minutes before giving up. She had to remember that Jhen-Aris designed the whole system. Like the man, this wasn't going to be easy.

There were several potential exits in her cabin. The most obvious and unlikely was the door. She lay her hand against the wall and tried to remember all she'd been taught, tried to forget the failures that haunted her because she was a half-breed. She let her mind drift.

It took her almost ten minutes, but she had her answer... one she didn't like. She 'felt' two guards on the other side of her door. Overpowering them mentally was out of the question. She was still shaking from a simple scan.

She sought other options. There was a fairly wide air-duct in the main room and one in the 'fresher. She stacked the chair on the desktop, then balancing precariously, carefully slid back the hinged cover. If, by any chance, she could hoist herself up far enough to get inside, she'd be trapped eventually by the narrowing of the ducts themselves.

It didn't look good.

She had less than forty minutes.

She looked over the room again. A narrow wall of adjustable shelves formed a partial privacy screen in front of the sleeping area. She grabbed some utensils from the cabin's small kitchenette and pried loose one of the thick plasteel support bars. She swung it in a small arc. It would have to do.

She pulled the cushions from the sofa and threw them to the floor so they overlapped. Beneath them, she tucked the bar so it was undetectable. Then she took two deep breaths and let loose the most bloodcurdling scream she could muster. She fell to the cushions as the door irised open. The guards rushed in.

Ty kept herself still and loose as they barked urgent commands in Jhenian. She felt the give of a cushion as the guards knelt beside her. One lightly grasped her wrist.

Then, the light trill of a wrist-com being activated. Now. It has to be now. In one smooth motion, she grasped the bar beneath her and rolled over. Before the guard could call for help, she slammed the heavy bar against his head with a sickening thud, then pushed herself to her knees.

The second guard sprang up, stunner in hand. He fired as she lunged for him, the bar whizzing past his head. The shot missed her, but was close enough that her skin itched. She caught the guard in the stomach with a backstroke.

He grabbed her as he fell and they tumbled to the floor. He tried to roll on top of her, but she squirmed sideways, bringing the bar upward. She slammed it into his throat. He collapsed beside her with a grunt.

Quickly, she pocketed the two stunners and slid under the bed. Footsteps pounded down the corridor.

She lay in the dark, listening to their anger and confusion. And waited for their boots to arrive.

A young woman's voice--and smaller boots--came first. An ensign in security, no doubt. The woman let out a string of expletives in Jhenian before slapping at the intercom on the wall. Emergency alarms blared throughout the ship.

More boots arrived. Four pair. The young woman apologized haltingly to the pair in front of her. Ty tried to follow the exchange the best she could. She knew enough of the language to secure a cold beer in a bar and make sure she wasn't overcharged on dockage fees, but that wasn't much help here.

Within minutes she heard Jhen-Daray's voice and then Jhen-Aris's. Now, those words she knew. Some didn't even need translation. And none were very flattering comments about Captain Ty'mara Moran.

The two injured guards were borne away on anti-grav stretchers. They'd live though they'd have nasty bruises for a few days.

Jhen-Daray and the man she assumed was Chief of Security organized several search parties, rattling off deck numbers and locations. She understood and memorized them. The chief ordered two guards posted in the *Dreamweaver's* bay.

Then a rapid conversation ensued that she couldn't follow. Jhen-Aris sounded terse,

his words clipped. The *Gent'Duren's* apparent dissatisfaction spared no one.

The chief asked a question she could barely hear. He stepped over to Jhen-Aris, obviously intent on a private discussion. Ty caught her name several times, then a chopped reply from Jhen- Aris.

"Mine," Jhen-Aris repeated and Ty translated. "Moran is mine." He stepped away, Jhen- Daray and the chief following, and she lost the rest of his words.

Then all was silent, her door, unguarded. She waited another ten minutes before slipping out from under the bed. She held one stunner in her right hand, the other tucked into the pants of her dark blue flightsuit. Her clothes were not as dark as the Jhens', but if she moved quickly enough, it might not matter.

There was a lift at the end of the corridor; a stairwell door to the left of it. It refused to budge against her weight and she had no ID tag to place in its slot. Again she lay aside her insecurities and opened her mind to the mechanical puzzle before her. The door clicked open. She took the stairs two at a time, her knees shaking.

She moved as silently as she could. Already she felt the trembling of the huge interstellar drive engines as the *Abaris* powered up. Time was critical. Fear sharpened her mind, brought forth that part of Ty'mara that was Lifarian.

Two more locked stairwell doors opened easily. She "felt" a trip-alarm before she saw it and convinced a mechanical eye she wasn't there. One deck below the shuttle bays she exited out into the corridors. They would be waiting for her at the lifts, she knew. She had to take another way.

It didn't matter that she'd never been on the *Abaris* before. She'd been on enough long- haulers to guess at the huntership's layout. Down this far into the bowels of the ship there had to be maintenance stairs and mechanic's accesses. The *Grindley*, she remembered, had deep access pits above and below the shuttle deck. There were always catwalks. And back stairways.

The *Abaris* was not all that different, though the narrow stairway she found was a bit farther aft than on Sagar's ship. The stairs ended in the lower level of a hangar bay. She did a quick mental scan, found the bay empty and slid the door open a few inches. It wasn't the *Dreamweaver's* bay, but then, she'd never intended to return to her ship, once she'd realized that's what Jhen-Aris expected her to do. She'd miss the *Dreamweaver*, Gods, how she'd miss her. Maybe one day she could reclaim her.

If she lived through the next thirty-six hours.

She poked her head around the door and listened, hearing nothing but the thrumming of the drives and the hammering of her own heart. Stunner ready, she crossed to the walled maintenance area and climbed the ladder up the side. Above her, three gleaming pursuit craft sat waiting. Zetas. Fast and deadly two-man fightercraft.

Such a prize might be almost as irresistible, though a tad more suspect, to the T'Sri as her lifeless, defenseless freighter.

She saw the ring of red lights circling the fighters and stopped, her senses tingling. More trip-alarms, activated by the ship's red-alert status. She closed her eyes. They were more complicated than she could handle. If she could locate the main computer access, though....

She turned, suddenly aware of movement on the other side of the hangar doors. She lifted her stunner, ready. Two guards rushed through the sliding doorway. She fired.

The first fell. The other dropped to a crouch and returned her fire. She skirted behind a Zeta. Something impacted, sizzling, on the floor near her. These guards carried laser pistols, not stunners! Her own fire fell short. Stunners were close-range weapons.

The guard spoke into a wrist-com; others, including Jhen-Aris, were probably on their way. But for the next few minutes, perhaps even seconds, it was only the two of them. She pocketed the stunner and brought her hands close to her chest, whispering words she had said only in the teaching chambers of the *Rachella*. She spoke hurriedly. She felt the warmth growing between her palms, but knew she couldn't bring forth the same intense magic that Graeme or Fy'ella could.

She let loose the fire-ball. The guard flailed backwards, his pistol firing impotently into the ceiling. One of the overhead lights shattered, showering the bay in sparks before it died.

She tripped the Zeta's alarms. It didn't matter; they knew where she was. She hoisted herself up on one black wing and was concentrating on unscrambling the hatchlock when she heard her name.

"Moran!" Jhen-Aris stood in the open doorway with half a dozen crew behind him. He cradled a sonic rifle in his arms. "Drop your weapon and climb down. Now. You won't be harmed."

His crew fanned out around him, coming towards the Zeta.

She balanced on the wing, her gaze darting left and right. She saw Jhen-Aris nod. Three guards on her left moved to raise their hand weapons, but she was quicker. Adrenaline pumped through her. Fear sharpened her senses. Her left hand shot out, sending a stream of flame like rainfall before them. They fell back, screaming, swearing. Someone shouted the word "*Myrlagh!*" Witch!

She whirled to the group on her right. They were frozen in their stance, staring at what they had heard of only in legends. Their hesitancy affected her. For a moment she was off balance, dimly aware that the hatch lock behind her was just now uncycling. The muted click drew her attention. She looked down to pull at the hand-hold as a high whining filled her ears. And her whole world suddenly went

black.

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Ty climbed out of the black well slowly. Her body ached in spite of the softness beneath it. She knew the feeling, recognized its dull throb. The last time she'd been shot was when she tangled with some slime ball dockworkers on Elnar Station. Before that it'd been... well, as she wasn't dying, there was no sense cataloging her misadventures.

She opened her eyes slowly, expecting the glare of a white-walled sickbay. But the lighting in the room was mercifully dim. As if the med-tech on duty had experienced similar misadventures.

Between the gloom and the pain lacing her senses, it took her several moments to focus on the figure seated in the chair next to her bed, sonic rifle cradled in his arms. His thick silver hair was tousled as if he'd run his hands carelessly through it. The high collar of his dark uniform shirt hung open; his sleeves unevenly rolled up. He looked rumpled, tired and more than a little disgruntled. Not the usual bedside manner for a med-tech.

But then, med-techs didn't tote sonic rifles.

Suddenly she remembered where she was. And what she'd been doing. And why.

The sub-light trembling of the drives was noticeably absent. She was on her way to Maros.

But why wasn't Jhen-Aris on the bridge?

"You almost made it, Moran." He leaned back, then adjusted the rifle's shoulder strap so the weapon balanced more easily in his hands.

A familiar spider on ice skates ran up her spine.

"I had my suspicions, you know," he said. "The Lifari don't deal with anyone other than their own kind."

"Do you blame them?" Her voice was raspy. She remembered the cruelty of Otherworlders when they learned of her heritage.

He didn't answer her question. "Moran's not a Lifarian name."

"My mother was human. My father's family name was Civarsna. But I never used it."

"Raised on the *Rachella*?"

"Port Charleston. I found the *Rachella* three years ago, by accident." She closed her eyes. She had volunteered enough information. Though there was more she knew

she could tell him.

As a child she'd believed she was full-human. Never knew differently until she discovered she could move objects with her thoughts, could create fire or ice just by wanting to do so. She had been excited, gleeful. Her mother was terrified and had sworn her to secrecy, warned her what would happen if anyone found out.

It would start with a witch-brand. An indelible tattoo that would mark her and, at the same time, strip her of her rights. She would be banned from living, working, hell, breathing in most of council-sanctioned space.

She'd never be able to work on a sanctioned freighter, let alone purchase one, even at exorbitant interest rates. Even lowly blue-line contracts would be out of her reach.

It had been a convincing argument. Until her instincts and her loyalties got the better of her.

There was a bar fight, typical of the spaceport pubs she and her older cousin frequented. Cornered and frightened, Milena unconscious on the floor beside her, she lashed out with her mind and found fire streaming from her fingertips. The Stationers would've killed her, but for two others who stepped in, recognizing her for what she was: an untrained half-breed.

It was Graeme who saved her life that day. Graeme who became her teacher. Graeme who had died on the Rachella.

Jhen-Aris's voice brought her back to the present.

"So you come to T'Sri space now, for revenge? For the loss of some people you've known only three years?"

"You could look at it that way." She stared up at the ceiling.

"But not with a workable plan. You were far from any T'Sri colonies. Even if your engine hadn't malfunctioned, it would have taken you weeks. You wouldn't be able to destroy even one of their scout ships, let alone Pajtok. Their defense grid would've targeted you."

"I know."

"You know nothing, Ty'mara Moran."

She looked at him, surprised by the gruffness she heard. But more so by the pain. It sounded personal.

He ran one hand over his face then met her gaze.

"You're far too young to consider suicide." The incongruous softness in Jhen-Aris's voice was back. And this time was accompanied by an unexpected vulnerability in his expression. "And you have far too much to offer."

He leaned one elbow on his knee, started to reach towards her, then stopped. He clenched his fingers and drew back.

A small lump of emotion formed in Ty's throat. She was back in the fighter bay again, standing on the Zeta's wing. She could see Jhen-Aris in the doorway, the powerful, lethal sonic rifle in his arms. He could have killed her. Killed the witch.

But it was set then, as it was set now, only for stun.

She remembered his security crew moving to her left and right. In their hands had been the boxy shapes of stunners. Not laser pistols, like the first two guards. Stunners.

They could have carried laser pistols. They could have killed her. Killed the witch. But, on their captain's orders-- ones she had overheard but not understood--they'd carried only stunners.

Jhen-Aris unwrapped the rifle strap from his shoulder. The weapon clanked softly against the floor. A jug of water and a glass were on the bedside table, and he filled the glass to halfway. "You need to get some liquid into you. Come. This will help."

She pushed herself up and the small cabin started to spin. Then she felt Jhen-Aris's arm around her back. The edge of the bed dipped as he sat on it and he pulled her against him.

The water was cool and tasted wonderful. She drank some more, his hand on hers, helping her steady the glass.

"I wasn't trying to commit suicide." She cradled the half-empty glass against her chest. The back of her head rested comfortably against his shoulder. She felt his breath against her hair as he looked down at her. But she stared straight ahead. The dim shadows of the cabin were easier to deal with than his unsettling presence. His disconcerting and illogical kindness.

She fought a brief urge to probe his emotions. But she was too tired to sense anything. And afraid of what she might learn if she could. "My people would never ask that of anyone. The Elders don't even know I'm here. This was something a small group of us decided had to be tried. I agreed, because of the *Rachella*. And because, well, I can do things Fy'ella and the others can't."

"Like kill? I thought Lifari couldn't kill."

"You learn to, when you've seen what I've seen. Besides, I'm only half-Lifarian."

"And that's why you were in T'Sri space?"

She pulled away from him and for a moment regretted losing the solid warmth of his body against hers. But the water had helped. She took another sip. The cabin no longer spun in crazy loops. She drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around her

knees, careful not to spill the rest of the water.

"Pajtok's convoy is scheduled to pass through the Nahil border within..." She glanced over at the glowing numbers of the chronometer on the wall. "Within the next three to six hours. He'll be in the mothership this time, instead of one of the Razim. The fightercraft are decoys."

Jhen-Aris was silent. Ty could guess at his thoughts. Many times the Jhen had tried for the Emperor-Elect. But T'Sri convoys were large affairs and Pajtok's tendency to ride in the fightercraft was well known. He rarely traveled in the mothership. But which Razim he traveled in had always been the question.

"You're sure of this?"

"Positive. I took the information from a T'Sri mind. On the *Rachella*."

He leaned forward to retrieve the rifle from the floor then stood. The weapon dangled absently from his hand, as if he knew it was there but it no longer concerned him. The frown on his face told Ty that other things did.

He paced over to the desk and tossed the rifle on top. When he turned back to her, two fingers lay over his mouth as if he were keeping inside, for the moment, questions demanding to be spoken. Then he dropped his hand, his palm open in supplication.

"Why did you lie about this? Why didn't you tell me?"

She saw no anger in his face, no accusation in his eyes. Just concern. Confusion. "It's not your fight. I know the Jhen's opinion of the Lifari. You confirmed that when you all but told me I was wasting my time avenging the deaths of the *Rachella's* crew."

"That's not what I said."

"But I know that's what you meant. Would you've worked with me if you'd known what I was? Or would you just have taken the information and...." She decided not to voice this option, in case he decided to exercise it now. His present kindness towards her notwithstanding, he was still Jhen. An Otherworlder. What was one more dead witch?

"So I told you I was doing it for money," she continued. "I figured you'd accept that."

"And now?"

She shook her head wearily, then rested her cheek against her arms. "Now it doesn't matter. I'd guess we're halfway, if not more, to Maros." She absently turned the glass still in her hand. "We'd never make it back in time to set the trap, even if you dropped out of hyperspace right now."

"Plus, the convoy'd sense your ship a long way off and never approach. That's why I used the *Dreamweaver*. A disabled freighter's hard bait to resist."

"You're right about one thing, you know. You're only half-Lifarian. A real witch would know exactly where we are. We're not headed for Maros Prime."

Not...? She raised her head from the cradle of her arms and stared at him. She felt no movement, no sub-light thrumming of the drives. That had to mean they were in hyperspace. Or....

Or they were standing still.

She closed her eyes, tried to reach out with the homing sense she was supposed to have, but pain and weakness prevented her. "I can't sense anything right now," she told him when she opened her eyes. "I'm not that good."

He confirmed her supposition with a smugness in his voice. "My order to return to Maros was a ploy."

"Why?"

"I told you I had my suspicions. An old Class-III freighter armed with ion cannons. A captain with a story of helping the Lifari for pay. A drive malfunction that could be corrected with the inputting of a code known to every bartender in civilized space."

She raised her eyebrows on that one.

"I knew there was some reason you were here, Moran. It just took time before I found out why."

Her mind raced. "How far are we from the border?"

"I can return to your original coordinates within the hour."

"But will you?"

He looked at her with an air of condescension. The teasing, mocking tone was back. "Do you truly think I would pass up the chance to strike at the T'Sri?"

"No." She could provide him with a means to glory. "So where do I fit in?"

"Oh, so you want to work with the Jhen now." He took the half-empty glass from her and placed it next to the water jug.

"I want Pajtok dead, Jhen-Aris. I've decided the rest doesn't matter." If the Jhen were going to kill her later, so be it. But at least she'd see the Emperor-Elect in hell first.

She stood shakily, her knees still weak. She felt his hand grasp her arm to steady her, then move around her waist. He pulled her against him. She looked up into blue-white eyes that were no longer cold, and she wondered, not for the first time,

exactly what else Jhen-Aris was after. And damned her erratic Lifari talents for providing her no answers.

Evidently, she wasn't the only one with questions.

"Can you be trusted, Moran?"

"About as much as you can."

Something sparked in his eyes, crackled again in the air between them. She felt his arm tighten around her. Then his hand moved up, his fingers threading into her hair. His mouth came down hard against hers, his kiss forceful, intense.

She responded, her mouth opening, suddenly wanting the taste of him. She felt his breath, hot on her cheek. The roughness of his face scraped her jaw.

She pressed herself into his heat and hardness. Passion, desire flowed over her. And the spider ran up her spine once again, not with ice skates, but a flamethrower.

His wrist-com trilled a short cadence into her ear and Ty wrenched back into reality. This was Jhen-Aris. *The* Jhen-Aris. She stumbled out of his arms, shaken.

He was breathing heavily. He tapped at the wrist-com. "Jhen-Aris," he said in acknowledgment, and reached for her.

She backed up another step.

A quick spate in Jhenian, words and numbers sounding like coordinates.

He repeated the information tersely and clicked off.

"Ty'mara. Forgive me. I'm ... misbehaving."

"Damn straight. Use of my ship doesn't grant you use of my body."

He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "That's not what I intended."

She could almost believe him. If he weren't Jhen-Aris. If she didn't so clearly see herself as a pawn in a game between two deadly powers: the T'Sri and the Jhen. His soft words and kindly actions could be nothing more than another ploy to ensure her cooperation.

Though admittedly the name Jhen-Aris was linked more with military strategy than seduction. She was wary, nevertheless.

"Let's try to concentrate on getting the *Dreamweaver* back in position, okay?"

"Of course." Formality was back in his tone. "She's berthed on deck twelve. If you'll accompany me...?" He gestured towards the door.

She followed him into the corridor, silently damning all too-handsome, untrustworthy

Otherworlder men.

-4-

The *Dreamweaver* hung lopsided in space, an ungainly collection of spiky scanners and scarred braking vanes. Her elliptically shaped hull was dented and pitted and showed signs of one too many hurried patch jobs. But beneath her skin were ion cannons and a fully loaded plasma torpedo rig. Her forward laser banks were charged. Only her aft drive exhausts were cold and silent.

Ty shifted restlessly in her seat at the controls. The distress beacon still flashed, the red light annoying her. She put her hand over the signal and the small bridge became that much dimmer.

"You could never be Jhen," Jhen-Aris said, a clear note of amusement in his voice. "You have no patience."

Breaks my heart, she wanted to say but held back. There'd been enough sharp words in the past few hours. And whatever had flared between them in the small, dimly-lit cabin only added to the tension.

Now, she didn't want to antagonize him further. Especially not in the small confines of the bridge.

"What if they don't drop the shields?" she said after a while. They'd been waiting for over two hours and Jhen-Aris was right in one thing: she had no patience. And even less of a tolerance for inactivity.

He shrugged, the material of his dark flightsuit rustling against the chair at the nav station. "They will. There's no other way to attempt to tractor us on board. And attempt they will."

"Just as you did." She wondered if that were the wisest thing to point out to the Abaris' captain.

"Yes, Ty'mara. Just as I did."

She turned. His mouth was quirked in a smile, giving him a definite rakish charm.

Well, just because she didn't trust him didn't mean she couldn't be civil.

"Ty. My friends call me Ty."

One eyebrow shot up. "Are you finally willing to admit we could be friends?"

"Probably not." At least, not yet. "But it's kind of strange to be on formal terms when we might end up dying together."

"So if we meet again in one of Procyon's Seven Hells I'll know what to call you, is that it?"

She sighed. "That's about the size of it, Jhen-Aris."

"Kirand. Or Rand," he corrected her. "But I have no intention of dying today. Nor should you."

"Well, that's encouraging," she murmured under her breath, ignoring inner warnings that suggested there were things worse than death. Bringing home a half-Lifarian witch for display might be just another way of adding more shine to the senior captain's stars. She hoped he'd be satisfied with Pajtok.

Fifteen minutes later she sat upright. "We're being scanned."

"T'Sri?" He pulled himself up straight in his chair.

"Can't tell."

"Your ship can't or you?"

"Neither." She shook her head. "I'm only half-Lifarian, remember? And the *Dreamweaver's* incoming scans program's fritzed out."

"You should've told me." He tapped at the console before him. Figures danced across the screen. "I could've corrected that while we were still on the *Abaris*."

"Remind me when we get back," he added after a moment.

"Optimist," she murmured and heard him laugh softly.

"Always, Ty, always. You can't live through what I have without learning that optimism is a key to survival."

She had heard a story of a power struggle amongst the Jhen, some ten years ago, and of a trial in the deserts on Kalfhiar. Jhen-Aris had won, but he had not come out unscathed. His silvered hair was but one reminder.

He seemed to understand the question in her eyes as she glanced at him. "You are thinking of Kalfhiar, no? I'll tell you about it, if you like. Later."

"Yeah, right. If I buy the beer?"

"A good bottle of wine. And I buy. There's a quiet restaurant--"

But she held up her hand, halting his offer for more reasons than that it unsettled her. New data blinked onto her screen. "It's the T'Sri convoy. I've got confirmation."

He scanned her monitors, then his own. "Seven Razim and the mothership."

"They're breaking formation." Four of the small fighters moved left, three to the right. The mothership stayed in the center. Her hands were suddenly clammy. When the incoming message light flashed on the console she almost jumped out of her chair.

"This is Razim fighter three," said a high-pitched voice made more nasal by the translator. The T'Sri had their own language as did the Jhen and the Lifari but unlike the others, the T'Sri refused to speak in Standard. "You are a non-T'Srian ship in T'Sri space. Please identify."

"Razim three, this is Captain Moran of the *Dreamweaver*." She tried to keep her voice steady. "Profuse apologies offered. And reverences to your Emperor. But I've got one drive down. Something happened when I came out of jump at the Nahil Gates and I lost control of my ship. Apologies offered."

"Proper apologies noted." The Razim pilot seemed pleased by her correct use of T'Sri protocol. "Situation acknowledged, *Dreamweaver*. Our scans confirm. Please state your full name and identify your crew."

"Captain Ty'mara Moran of Port Charleston. And navigator Jeremy Reece." She hadn't asked how Jhen-Aris had acquired such flawlessly forged documents as she loaded them into the *Dreamweaver's* personnel files. But she had wondered where in Council-sanctioned space he'd used them.

"You have personnel verification?"

"Affirmative, Razim Three."

"Transmission of same required."

She waited until his receiving code came up on her screen.

"Transmitting." The pounding of her heart filled the silence.

"Data received and confirmed, *Dreamweaver*. Prepare to be tractored on board."

She drew a deep breath and chose the proper emotion to portray. Anger. Fear. Indignation. Not all that different from when the *Abaris* had hailed her--was it only ten hours ago?

"Tractored?" She let her voice squeak. "Hey, just a minute, Razim Three. With all good apologies to your Emperor," she added hastily. "I'm a Council-sanctioned freighter. All I ask is that you contact my Council's outpost at Nahil and have one of my people come out and get me. There's no need to--"

"Prepare to be tractored on board," the nasal-toned voice repeated.

The fightercraft banked to port and slid away. The other fighters moved back to flank the mothership, a huge black rectangular structure. Twice the size of the *Double Deuce*, Ty noted.

And that was saying something.

"Helm on manual." She added the proper note of resignation to her voice.

"Confirmed," said a new voice, not from the Razim. She had to assume she was in direct contact with Pajtok's mothership. At the edge of her hearing, she could hear Jhen-Aris quietly counting off the distance between them.

"One hundred fifty."

"Shields still up," she hissed.

"One hundred thirty. One-twenty."

If he were as scared as she, he gave no sign of it. Her own hands were like ice.

"One hundred even."

"Rand, we can't get much closer and still--"

"Ninety," he said. "We can do it, Ty. They'll drop the shields any moment now."

"Famous last words."

"Eighty."

"Rand, they're not--!"

"Shields down! Fire!" He jumped for the weapons control, releasing the plasma torpedoes. She hit the aft lasers. A small explosion rocked the ship, signaling the destruction of two Razim on their tail.

"Now!" he ordered. She keyed in the override code, throwing full power to the dormant drives.

The ship wrenched under the force of the engines coming to life.

"Shields up," she called out as the *Dreamweaver* fell away from the T'Sri convoy.

"Rand, the mothership--"

Exploded. The torpedoes impacted dead center. And the rest of her sentence was lost as she was thrown hard against the back of her seat.

They were too close, in spite of the Jhen captain's optimism. The *Dreamweaver* bucked and shuddered. The freighter pitched wildly on the outflowing shock waves that threatened to send her tumbling out of control. Alarms wailed shrilly around her, pressure gauges maxed out. A communication panel blew, sparks fizzing like a nest full of firewasps broken open.

Suddenly Jhen-Aris was beside her, clawing at her armrest for balance. "Cut main drives! Don't fight it!"

She lunged for the console and cut all power. He held onto her seat, doing something with the helm she didn't understand. But the shuddering stopped, though the ship still spiraled sickeningly. Jhen-Aris swore out loud. She didn't need a

translation into Standard to understand the object of his frustration: her ship was old and it was not the *Abaris*.

"I need a four second burst on the port aux thruster," she told him. He might be a Jhen Senior Captain, but she understood her ship. "Now!"

She keyed in a radical course change into the direction of the spiral as he gave her the power she needed. Slowly the ship straightened out. The *Dreamweaver* glided in a graceful arcing movement before all instruments registered they were back on their subjective horizon again.

Ty leaned back in her seat and ran her hand through her hair. It was damp with sweat. Cold sweat.

"In answer to your question," Jhen-Aris began, his breathing a bit more strained than normal, "the mothership has been destroyed." He sagged against the edge of the console in front of her, a smug grin on his face.

Ty looked over his shoulder. That spider on ice skates was back. "But two Razims weren't. Get back to weapons, hot shot. We've got trouble!"

He was in the seat before she finished speaking.

"Coming up hard on our tail," she said.

"I have them." He threw power to the ion cannons. Ty felt the ship jerk as one fired.

"Winged 'em." She turned her ship sharply to avoid incoming fire from the T'Sri fighter. "I'm down to seventy-five percent power on my port drive. You better have a damn good aim!"

The *Dreamweaver* jerked again. "Direct hit," said Jhen-Aris.

"Don't sound so pleased with yourself. There's still one more."

The remaining Razim danced in and out of their range, firing when it came close, using its maneuverability to its advantage.

"Damn!" Ty swore as something overhead popped and sizzled. "Motherless son of a bitch got my starboard generator feed!" Monitor screens dimmed and flickered. "Going on port generators. Power now down to fifty percent."

"Then we have no choice. Bring her up in a high-180 arc."

Ty visualized her ship executing a back-flip. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes." His eyes sparkled dangerously at her. "On my mark." He paused, watching the readouts on the Razim now behind them. "Now."

Ty forced the ship up and around, cringing as metal screamed in objection. Lights flashed in overtime to register their complaints. She saw the Razim dead-ahead in her

sights. Jhen-Aris fired the forward ion cannon. The *Dreamweaver's* screens went white.

"You've singed her," Ty said with a hurt note in her voice. Outside a light thumping sounded as the shredded remains of the fightercraft bounced off the hull. "And shields are gone. Completely."

"So's the Razim," Jhen-Aris pointed out.

She refused to allow him his glory. "All I've got is fifteen percent power on the starboard aux." She tapped at a panel. "Lasers are dead, torpedo tubes empty and scanners three and five are going--no." Two small monitor screens flickered and darkened. "They're gone. Deep space com is out, too."

"Pity." Jhen-Aris turned in his seat and leaned towards her, his elbow on the armrest. "We'll have to wait until my ship finds us."

"We can't hail them." Ty tapped a touch pad on the arm of her chair. The sound of static cut in and out. "This time we really are dead in T'Sri space."

"Not for long." He pulled out a thin metal rectangle from his utility belt. Pinpoints of yellow lights blinked rapidly. "They're just waiting for an 'all clear' signal from me." He touched a small tab. "Mission accomplished."

Mission accomplished. She rose from her seat. A light giddy feeling ran through her. Much better than the ice-skating spider. "Damn! We did it! We got the convoy!"

Jhen-Aris stood up, chuckling.

She launched herself at him. "We did it!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and bounced on her tip-toes, hugging him, lost in the sheer exuberance of the moment.

She heard his laughter rumble in her ear, felt his arms close around her back, her waist. His mouth brushed down the side of her neck, leaving her shivering and flushed. She pulled back. But not only because of his touch. Inadvertently, and so very briefly, her mind had linked with his. And she'd sensed, not only his intense desire, but his admiration. For her.

"Please don't." She wondered how he was supposed to believe her if she didn't sound the least bit convincing to her own ears

His hands rested lightly on her shoulders. "And if I were to say that you were the one to start it, this time?"

She hesitated. Temptation to get to know this brilliant, arrogant, enigmatic man pulled at her more strongly than his ship's tractor beam had hours before. But fear still rode alongside her, in the co-pilot's seat.

"There's nothing to start. Or finish," she told him. "You're who you are. I'm... not anyone important."

"You are, to me."

"Because I'm a Lifari witch?"

"No. That's not why."

"It doesn't matter." She sought a reasonable explanation. "The timing's all off. Look, we've known each other maybe ten, twelve hours. Most of which we've spent trying to kill each other. Six months from now,"--*if you let me live through this*--"I don't know. We can meet in Port Charleston for a beer."

"Just a beer?"

She fought the rakish smile, the teasing, suggestive tone, the heat in his gaze. "There are more serious issues to consider right now. How can we confirm if Pajtok was in the convoy? We need to know if he's dead."

He brushed her cheek with his thumb then let his hand drop. "I don't think it's something they'll announce. But I have ways of finding out."

Good. The conversation was back to business. She stepped away, tapped distractedly at the touchpads on a dead scanner console next to her.

"When you do, will you let me know? I'll give you my trans code to my message drop in Port Charleston. If I'm not there, someone--"

"I know your code, Ty. But I don't think I'll be needing it."

It was what the little voice had warned her about. She turned back to him, squaring her shoulders. "I suppose it'd be stupid to ask why not?"

"Not stupid. Futile, perhaps."

Anger boiled up inside her. "Damn it, Kirand Jhen-Aris! I thought we were in this together. You needed me to get this done. It's a hell of a way to reward my cooperation by denying me my freedom!"

Jhen-Aris shook his head and let out an exasperated sigh. "Ty'mara, listen to me for a moment. You've just cataloged for me all your ship's ills. How far do you think you'd get on fifteen percent power? And how do you intend to contact anyone to tell them you need assistance?"

At his words, Ty stepped back against the bulkhead and glared at him. "But--"

He held up his hand, silencing her. "By my estimations, it will take me about two weeks to confirm what happened on the T'Sri convoy. By my estimations, it will also take two weeks, if not more, to get your ship repaired. The best place to do both of these things is Maros. Now, do you have any comments?"

"You could drop me off at Port Charleston," she grumbled.

"Out of the question. Besides, what would you do for funds?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"I thought so."

His smug confidence would have annoyed her had her ice-skating spider not started practicing figure eights again. "How will your people react to your bringing a Lifarian witch on Station?"

"I see no reason to tell anyone about your pedigree. Nor do I have any intention of doing so."

She stared at him. "But your crew knows."

"They know many things, Ty'mara Civarsna Moran. They tell none. That's why they're on the *Abaris*."

"You mean, when the repairs are done, you'll just let me go?"

"That's up to you."

"Oh, really? What's the catch? What do you want?"

"What you want, I think. You said we've known each other too short a time. Two weeks on Maros and who knows? Maybe you'll learn to trust me."

She laughed shakily. "And why should I trust you?"

"Those are things I look forward to discussing over that bottle of wine. And dinner. Many dinners. Besides, I think our ride's arrived." He nodded at one of the functioning scanners. The *Abaris* showed up as a large blot under which the Dreamweaver named her only as 'Jhen Ship'.

Ty stared out the viewport. Could she stay on Maros two weeks, or more? The Jhen were not her people, but then, who was? Her Lifari blood--thin as it was--damned her anywhere in Council space. A security inquiry had been issued after the incident in the pub where Graeme had rescued her. Her ID was flagged in all but the smallest of Council stations.

And life on one of the few Lifarian generation ships would be frustrating for her, at best. Though touched by their wholehearted acceptance of her, she was exasperated by their placidity, their meekness. No, if she loved her father's people, she could demonstrate that by gaining them a protector. Jhen-Aris would be a very good one.

And he accepted her. More than that, he wanted her. She wanted him, too, she finally admitted, though she knew she'd probably be cautious and test the truth of his intentions awhile longer. Maybe not pull away so quickly the next time she linked to his thoughts.

Maybe not pull away so quickly the next time he kissed her.

Two weeks. A couple of dinners. A couple of bottles of wine. A lot could happen. She might even find, for the first time, a place where she truly did belong.

She batted away Jhen-Aris's hand as he moved to throw the helm to manual.

"I can take her from here." She returned one of his haughty looks to him. "After all, I've done this part before."

"And well I know it." Jhen-Aris grinned. "Tell me, Captain Moran, will you be any less trouble this time around?"

She indulged herself in a moment of feigned deliberation before answering. "Not a chance, Jhen-Aris. Not a chance!"

-end-

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