

ELLORA'S CAVE REON

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HILL

Moonlight
on Water

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Moonlight on Water

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MOONLIGHT ON WATER

Kate Hill

Tydisian Glossary

clan – shell (masculine)

clana – shell (feminine)

decrah – jewel

drot – land (n)

gashuk – copulate (slang)

il – one

Il task. Il siw. – One cause. One soul. The motto of the ACT rebels on Nameless.

mari – Sea

ni towa – be strong

siw – spirit

Siw Maris Marin – Directly translated as the Spirits of Water and Air. A Tydisian religion. A form of nature worship.

sleeka – beautiful

swein – A traditional Tydisian greeting.

ta – of

task – cause

tusk – penis (slang)

wush – heart

Wushmari Slidrot – Heart at sea. Head on land. (Xenos' Tydisian name)

Wush ta Mari – Heart of the Sea. A type of jewel found only in the deepest oceans of Tydepth.

wassda – beloved (feminine)

wassdat – beloved (masculine)

Chapter One

Love and Hate

Moonlight Santos Gama perched on a chair in an otherwise empty sitting room in Xenos Nineteen's apartment in the officers' residence at ACT Corps headquarters. As a translator, she'd traveled to the Laetez home world before, but this time she'd gain no pleasure from her visit. Personal business brought her here.

During a recent protest to reopen private Alien Conversion Testing—or ACT—labs, her mother had been arrested due to her association with a group of activists and sentenced to six months in prison. Known for their cruel conditions, Laetez prisons were feared by many.

A human woman, particularly one unaccustomed to hardship, wouldn't fare well in one. Moonlight didn't consider her mother weak, but she nevertheless needed to do everything in her power to free her. She'd tried working through legal channels, but had gained no satisfaction.

Her friend, Re Halina, suggested she try a more direct approach. Superior Xenos Nineteen, leader of the Laetez ACT Corps, was known for his bias toward ACT humane organizations. Among the most powerful men on the planet, he would have the means to free her mother without any of the usual red tape.

Moonlight rebelled against going to him for many reasons, some personal. Known as a complete hardass, Xenos had been responsible for the death of her closest friend, Jola, during a skirmish in the Laetez-Draper war several years ago. Though she'd never actually met him, Moonlight hated Xenos and she wasn't alone. Cold and harsh, with a soul as ugly as his mongrel face, he inspired fear, disgust and loathing. A born soldier, he'd ensured many conquests for the Laetez and was a perfect example of what ACT sought to achieve in their despicable testing.

Superior Xenos was a monster, but Moonlight finally realized that to free her mother, she needed to walk into his lair. Her only hope was to escape wounded and avoid being devoured completely.

It was next to impossible for an average citizen to arrange a meeting with a man of his position, so she reluctantly agreed to Re Halina's plan to reach him through the escort service he used regularly. Selling sex for money was legal on the Laetez home world. In her youth, Re Halina had occasionally worked for a discreet, high quality escort service to pay for her advanced education. She still kept in contact with several women there and knew Xenos used their services.

Re Halina arranged for Moonlight to be sent to his private quarters on his next request for company.

"Whether he agrees to free your mother or not, you must be prepared to fulfill his desires," Re Halina had warned. "Or else the madam will be responsible and face his wrath. If she knew I was doing this —"

"Re Halina, were you ever with him?" Moonlight had inquired, her stomach flip-flopping at the thought of bedding the monstrosity.

"Hell no." She wrinkled her nose. "But I know girls who have. They say he's —"

"Violent?"

"Not really. Just *energetic*, if you get my meaning."

"So he never hurt any of them?"

"Not the ones who didn't want it."

A shudder ran down Moonlight's spine. "He actually gave them a choice?"

"Moonlight, are you sure you're up to this? You can wait for the legal forms to pass and —"

"By the time that happens, my mother's sentence will probably be up. No. This is the only chance I have of getting her out of that pit without delay."

That conversation had taken place two days ago. Now she sat at ACT headquarters, waiting for what would probably be the worst night of her life.

* * * * *

"What the hell were you thinking?" Chief Re Lord growled, glaring at Xenos through the spec monitor. Third in command of the Laetez government, Re Lord reported directly to their leader, Prime Re Vic. "On what authority did you order the capture of the private lab on Nortshire Base?"

"All ACT facilities on this planet and its colonies are within my jurisdiction. Private labs are still illegal, Sir. Are they not?"

"You know damn well the law to reactivate private labs went back into negotiation as of yesterday morning. Until the negotiations are complete, private labs cannot be touched."

"Providing they follow the laws of government sanctioned labs."

"You have no proof the lab was not following the laws."

"I have proof enough and have forwarded the documentation —"

"I don't give a damn about your documentation!" Re Lord snapped. "As you know, we are in the process of forming an alliance with the Drapers. Our greatest leverage is their interest in our ACT program. The private lab your men captured contained three of the Draper's top scientists. How the hell am I supposed to explain why they were arrested?"

"I suggest telling them —"

"Quiet! It was a rhetorical question. Listen to me very carefully, Xenos. Until this alliance is sealed, I want you to show leniency to private labs."

Xenos' gut tightened. Rage coiled deep inside him and he fought to overcome his temper. Usually he kept his Laetez aggression under control, however, since these new negotiations regarding private labs, he'd been on edge. The battle to close them permanently had been long, difficult and one he'd hoped not to fight again. It seemed the Laetez's thirst for power would always be their downfall. If they needed to create monstrosities to satisfy a desirable ally, they'd do it without hesitation.

Eighty-seven years ago, the Laetez had expanded their genetic testing to include close work with their Earth allies. Convincing their citizens that both governments supported ACT because of the opportunity it offered to cure disease and strengthen the biological structure of humans and Laetez, their main goal was to create an unstoppable army that would keep them at the top of the intergalactic food chain.

Private labs, secretly supported by the governments, engaged in testing with other species besides human and Laetez. They often created grotesque beings whom they tormented through experiments until they achieved their desired goals.

The result of combining human, Laetez and Tydisian DNA, Xenos had spent his formative years in a private lab. At that time, the Laetez had been at war with the physically superior Tydisians and sought to create soldiers with the ability to fight them on their own aquatic territory. To accomplish this, private labs used DNA stolen from Tydisian prisoners.

Most attempts to develop Tydisian hybrids resulted in physically or intellectually damaged beings, many of whom were destroyed. Finally they reached their goal in Xenos. With physical strength greater than the Laetez, the Tydisian ability to submerge for hours and the capacity to survive without a symbiotic connection, he possessed many desirable characteristics, at least by ACT standards.

Unfortunately for the Laetez, he also possessed cunning beyond their wildest dreams. Everything he'd done in his career had been to gain the power to protect ACT products like himself.

"Show leniency, Sir, or close my eyes entirely?" he continued, his voice low and calm in spite of his simmering anger

"Do whatever you must in order to help us get our alliance," Re Lord hissed through clenched teeth. "Another mark like this on your record and you will be stripped of rank. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Sir."

Without further comment, Re Lord signed off.

For several heartbeats, Xenos stared at the dark screen.

What the fuck did that pure-blood politician care about the lives of ACT products stuck in labs? For that matter, what did he care about the preference of the general public? Polls indicated most Laetez disliked the idea of private labs and didn't support ACT as a whole.

Sighing deeply, he ran his fingertip over the flat, heat-sensitive button on the spec. Yashel's secretary's pale face filled the monitor. When Xenos had been promoted to

Superior, he'd chosen Yashel as his second in command, with Zale ranking just below him.

Ten years ago, he had been introduced to Zale and Yashel, the only other free ACT products created through the use of Tydisian DNA. The superior in charge of ACT had called them his "brothers." That term had secretly disgusted Xenos. Other than Yashel's webbed hands and feet, both men looked human. Handsome. *Normal*. Unlike Xenos, they had been birthed by human females rather than grown in an artificial womb. They had been allowed a fairly average upbringing.

Xenos couldn't help wondering what his childhood might have been like if he had been raised in a home instead of a private lab. Even with his strange appearance, would he have fit into society like Yashel and Zale? Probably not. People's prejudice began and ended at the flesh.

As he had foreseen years ago, Yashel and Zale had become excellent officers, though Zale was more inclined to follow orders without question. Yashel's independent streak might be as annoying as ever, but Xenos needed someone directly below him who thought everything through carefully and wasn't afraid to challenge his ideas.

His train of thought had distracted him and Yashel's secretary prompted, "Did you want something, Sir?"

Sighing, he blinked and gazed at the monitor. "Inform Yashel I will be off duty for the rest of the evening, but will be available should he need to contact me."

He switched off the spec, still annoyed over Re Lord's reprimand, even though he'd been expecting it. Usually he'd have gone to his tank for some exercise to burn off steam, but tonight he had a better method.

The woman from the escort service awaited him in the sitting room adjoined to his office. He was in the mood for a good, long fuck.

* * * * *

The door leading to Xenos' office opened and Moonlight's gaze darted toward it, her pulse quickening. Willing herself to remain outwardly calm, she rose to her feet as he stepped inside.

Though she'd seen images of him, she hadn't been fully prepared for this meeting in the flesh. Prior to this moment, he'd been a lifeless holographic monstrosity. Rather like an image of a dinosaur from Earth's long forgotten past.

Now he stood before her—a living, breathing creature whose frighteningly human eyes stared at her with cool detachment from within a face that was more Tydisian than human or Laetez. Maybe the purplish-blue skin threw her off or the slight bumps where his ears should have been, but she was almost startled when he spoke to her in English, one of the four most common languages on Earth.

"Come in," he said in a surprisingly soft, smooth voice.

Nodding, she approached, her entire body tense, especially when she walked past him, her shoulder brushing him ever so lightly. She resisted the urge to recoil. After all, one way or the other, she'd be getting much closer to him before the night was through.

He was tall with broad shoulders and very long legs displayed to advantage in his black and blue uniform. The well-fitting trousers and jacket hugged his lean-muscled form. She grudgingly admitted his body was breathtaking. Even the most exquisite human athlete would envy it. Maybe when they did it, she could keep her eyes shut or at least look at him from the neck down.

How would she go through with fucking him? Just being this close to the person responsible for Jola's death made her sick.

Mother. She needed to focus on her mother. Freeing her was worth whatever degradation she would suffer with Xenos. It was only a few short hours in exchange for her mother's life. Many were known to die in Laetez prisons and those who survived their sentence sometimes never fully recovered.

"Have a seat." He gestured toward a chair and sat behind his desk, staring at her with those piercing eyes. Rather than round, black and almost lifeless, like Tydisian eyes, his were almond-shaped, bluish-gray and fringed with long, wispy lashes. Somehow it was wrong for this monster to have such beautiful eyes. "Well, Moonlight Santos Gama, you're either very new to the business or not an escort at all."

A sick feeling washed over her. Of course, she'd intended to tell him her reason for coming here, but she had no idea he'd be perceptive enough to guess her deception within thirty seconds of meeting her. Clothed as she was in the tight black dress and red high heels, she didn't see a difference between herself and any of the regular escorts.

"What makes you say that?" she asked, offering a seductive look.

His dark blue lips curved upward in an insincere smile that gave her too clear a view of his ferocious white canines. The teeth of a predator. "Just an instinctive guess."

Sighing deeply, she glanced away from him to look around the office. Except for his desk and the chairs, it was completely bare. Nothing on the pale gray walls. No images on his desk. The office appeared uninhabited, yet he'd occupied it for several years. Even his uniform carried none of the embroidered marks Laetez issued as medals of honor and she knew he had many. Only the pale blue braid down his left shoulder indicated his rank as Superior, the man in charge of the entire Laetez ACT Corps.

She turned back to him and met his gaze. "It's a good guess. I needed to speak to you, Sir."

It sickened her to address this cold-blooded killer with respect, yet she had no choice if she was to get out of here unscathed and preferably with her mother's freedom secured.

"You couldn't arrange a meeting by the usual channels?"

"It's a time sensitive matter."

For a long moment he stared at her, his expression unreadable. She nearly squirmed beneath his gaze.

Finally he said, "Ah. The madam has decided to take over as my personal secretary. I'll have to talk to her about that."

"This wasn't her fault," Moonlight said quickly, not liking the glacial look in his eyes. "I arranged this meeting behind her back and I have every intention of giving you what you paid for. Tonight I *am* an escort."

He smiled again, mocking this time. "Since you've gone through so much trouble, tell me what's so urgent that you'd trade your pretty human skin for it?"

"My mother was arrested in connection to the protest against reestablishing private ACT labs at the Laetez capital. She wasn't actually there, but is part of the activist group responsible for the riot. She's been sentenced to six months in prison on this planet."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" he asked. "I have no problem with activists, but riots are unacceptable."

"But she wasn't *at* the riot. I know enough about your career to be certain you're not in favor of reestablishing private labs," Moonlight continued, her stomach already in knots. She began to realize how stupid her plan was. Something told her this man was as impenetrable as a steel wall.

"Without discipline, where would we be, Moonlight Santos Gama?"

"What about justice?"

"If a criminal has been imprisoned, then justice is served."

"How dare a murderer like yourself preach about criminals?" she said, her temper finally snapping.

"Explain yourself."

"I'm talking about the capture of Blackstar Base during the Laetez-Draper war."

"That was unfortunate, but necessary."

"Necessary to kill hundreds of innocent —"

"I'm not here to defend my actions. You must learn the difference between murder and war, young lady."

"I know my closest friend was murdered in a war. She died on Blackstar Base."

"So is that your real reason for coming here?"

Moonlight blinked, her head clearing a bit. Her anger had nearly made her forget her plan. She closed her eyes for a moment, realizing she'd probably lost her mother's only chance for freedom.

"What do you mean?" she asked softly. "I told you, I want to know if you'll free my mother."

"And I told you I can't do that."

"You can, Sir. As a Superior, I know you have the power to help me."

"Why should I?" He leaned back in his chair. His long, slim hand, encased in a dark blue glove, caressed the flat buttons of the spec built into his desktop. "So far you've done nothing but annoy me and ruin an evening of relaxation."

"I said I'd act as your escort tonight."

"You loathe me. I see it in your eyes."

"Don't tell me a man who uses an escort service is looking for true love?" she said, then nearly bit her tongue. She needed to keep her temper in check.

"Of course not." He smiled again, then ran the tip of his tongue over the points of his upper canines. As if compelled, she followed the slow, seductive gesture with her eyes. "Interactions with escorts are meant to be empty of emotion. Not true in this case."

"I'll do whatever you want." She leaned forward in her chair, staring into his eyes and ignoring his horrible Tydisian features. "Whatever your escorts normally do."

"You're willing to sleep with a man you hate to get what you want?"

"Yes."

If he had eyebrows, they'd have been raised. "I'm impressed. Be flattered. I'm rarely impressed."

"Then you'll help me?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, I can get what you offer from any escort at the service for a flat fee. No turning of political somersaults necessary. To do what you ask requires more incentive."

"Such as?"

"I'm sorry, Moonlight Santos Gama, but you have nothing to offer me."

His insult struck her deeper than she'd thought possible. This revolting creature was rejecting her? Even worse, her mother would remain stuck in that Laetez hellhole.

Nodding, she asked, "May I go?"

He gestured toward the door and she stood on trembling legs, part of her grateful to be relieved of his presence.

Just when she reached the door, he said, "Or you can stay."

She jerked to a stop, a chill running down her spine and turned back to his cool gaze.

"You're right when you said there's something lacking in the escorts," he continued. "I have no interest in love. But hate...now that has some intriguing possibilities."

"What exactly do you want in exchange for my mother's freedom, Superior Xenos?"

"I want you to service my desires for two weeks. You will remain here."

Two weeks! She felt bile rise in her throat but swallowed hard and took control of herself. "And my mother? Does she need to wait two weeks?"

"No. I'll initiate her release process tomorrow. It will take a few days."

Moonlight sighed with relief, then a strange feeling crept over her. "How can I be sure you're telling me the truth? If I'm stuck here for two weeks—"

"You'll be allowed to contact your mother once she's free."

"I have a sister who will be worried about me."

"You may speak to her. This isn't a prison."

"Not much," she murmured under her breath.

"If it was, you'd see a difference in treatment," he told her.

"What exactly do you expect during this exchange?" she asked, sounding far more confident than she felt. In truth, the thought of sleeping with him nearly had her in a state of internal panic.

"I do not require kissing or conversation."

Thank the heavens for that, she thought to herself.

He continued, "All I want is your body, exposed and willing. Agreed?"

"Yes. Agreed," she whispered.

"Good. Then follow me."

He stepped through a door at the back of the office.

Moonlight glanced toward the exit and freedom, then with a sigh of resignation, turned and followed Xenos to his bedroom. He'd activated a dim light and she looked around, noting this room was as barren as his office, with only a bed and a table beside it containing three drawers. A spec and alarm were built into the tabletop. He pointed to one of three doors across the room and said, "The latrine."

Nodding, Moonlight couldn't bring herself to respond in words at the moment. She felt numb and a little nauseous. While this wasn't the first time she'd fucked, she'd never imagined being with a man like Xenos.

Moonlight removed a contraceptive-disease prevention tablet from her purse and placed it on her tongue, feeling it melt. She noticed he also removed a tablet from the top drawer of the table and popped it into his mouth.

"How do you..." She cleared her throat and tried to sound nonchalant. "How do you usually do this?"

In two long strides, he reached her and bent slightly so they were almost nose to nose, his gaze fixed upon her. "Without conversation."

"Yes. You mentioned that," she said, her voice just above a whisper. He'd also said no kissing, but she had the most horrible feeling he was going to touch her mouth with those awful blue lips.

As if sensing her thoughts, he pulled his head back slightly and swept her into his arms so she was forced to grasp his shoulders. Before she had a chance to fully regain her composure, he dumped her on the bed. The mattress was very firm and covered in white sheets.

He sat beside her and roughly pushed up her dress. Moonlight tried to control her breathing, to remain calm and passive as he began stroking her inner thigh with his gloved hand. She knew his gloves disguised webbed hands. Tydisian hands. Part of her was glad she wasn't forced to see those animal appendages, while another part of her wished for a glimpse of them to satisfy her perverse curiosity.

Xenos slipped his fingers into the waistband of her black lace panties and slid them down her legs. She kicked off her shoes, making it easier for him to remove her underwear. The sooner they got on with this, the better.

Then she realized it didn't really matter. She was stuck here for two weeks. She wondered if he intended for her to sleep in his bed? Probably not, since it was a standard-size cot with little enough room for one, let alone two.

If she had to share his room, she doubted she'd sleep at all during her stay.

He'd discarded her panties and resumed stroking her. This time, his large, long-fingered hand covered her soft mound and rested there, motionless for a moment before he began caressing her. Since his attention seemed fixed between her legs, she took the chance to study him carefully.

Those long, wispy eyelashes were lowered, casting delicate shadows on his purplish-blue face. She noticed a pattern of slightly darker blue patches covering his forehead and trailing down the length of his aquiline nose. His dark blue lips were parted, revealing the tips of his sharp upper and lower canines, as well as his flatter, human teeth. Though a hateful, savage creature, he exuded power and charisma. This was a man who always got what he wanted, of that she was certain.

In spite of herself, she began to relax beneath the gentle stroking of his cloth-covered hand. She watched him quietly, surprised he even bothered with foreplay of any kind. She'd been prepared for ravishment, but this wasn't entirely unpleasant. If she didn't loathe him so much, she might even enjoy herself.

Just when some of her initial fear began to dissipate, he tugged off his gloves and placed them on the table by the bed. Moonlight's gaze riveted to his pale blue hands. Folds of almost translucent flesh hung between his long, slender fingers tipped with sharp, midnight blue nails. As he settled back onto the bed, she noticed his fingers open and flex a bit, fully displaying the webbing. An involuntary shudder tore through her and his gaze met hers, a mocking smile on his lips.

"Cold?" he asked, though the look in his eyes told her he knew exactly why she'd shivered.

"No, I'm fine," she stated calmly, her gaze never faltering.

He rested one of his hands on her inner thigh and she willed herself not to flinch. She'd expected his hands to be cold and clammy like a fish, but they were warm and the skin rather silky. Covering her mound with his palm, he kneaded, then brushed the pad of his thumb over her clit. One of his fingers dipped inside her and he explored her gently, yet thoroughly.

The last thing Moonlight wanted to feel with this man was pleasure, yet her body responded, ignoring the warnings of her mind. Her pussy grew hot and wet, making it easier for him to stroke her damp walls faster and with more pressure. Another long finger entered her and Moonlight's breathing quickened.

Why the hell was he bothering with this? Why didn't he just get it over with?

He slid his thumb into her, gathering moisture, then resumed stroking her clit in rhythmic circles. A soft moan escaped her and she could have ripped her tongue out. She didn't want him to think she was enjoying this, yet how could he miss it when her pussy was drenched with passion, her clit swollen and sensitive to the touch?

Several more rolls of his thumb and she came, gasping and trembling, her legs spread and her lower half fully exposed to his eyes and hands. He continued rubbing until the last quiver of desire darted through her. Then, while she rested, he unzipped his trousers and released his cock.

Moonlight stared in fascination at his formidable weapon. Long, thick and patterned with dark blue veins beneath slightly paler flesh, it looked like a human or Laetez cock. The mushroom-like head was dark purple and a droplet of clear liquid beaded at the tiny eye. His purplish balls were pulled up tightly with desire.

His apparatus fascinated her so much that it took her a moment to realize exactly what was wrong with the picture—aside from the unusual colors. He had no pubic hair, nor any hair on his thighs. The lack of eyebrows and smooth head should have told her he was hairless all over like his Tydisian brothers.

She had no time for a longer look because he climbed on top of her and pinned her wrists to the mattress while entering her with a long, slow thrust.

Gasping, Moonlight closed her eyes and told herself she would get through this. As long as she didn't have to look at him, she'd be fine.

Now that he'd mounted her, she expected him to satisfy himself with a few fierce thrusts, but again he surprised her. Xenos pumped in a slow, steady rhythm, seeming in no hurry. He went on so long, his thick, velvet-skinned cock rubbing her in all the right places, that her passion rekindled.

Moaning softly, she lifted her hips, meeting him thrust for thrust. That wonderful, frustrating ache built inside her and she rolled her head from side to side, her breath coming in fevered gasps as she neared her peak.

The hands pinning her wrists to the bed grew warmer, so far the only sign that he was nearing his climax. His breathing remained annoyingly steady and his movements never faltered.

"Oh please," she panted, hating herself for giving him the satisfaction of knowing he got to her, at least physically.

He quickened his pace, but slowed it when she got too close to the edge.

"What was the name of your friend who died at Blackstar Base?" he said in her ear, his voice a rough whisper.

Moonlight's entire body stiffened and a sick feeling washed over her. Her eyes flew open and she found him staring at her without a hint of compassion or guilt, only a mocking curiosity.

She clenched her teeth and turned her face away, not wishing to look at this animal ravaging her body.

Xenos thrust faster and Moonlight, already teetering on the edge, responded despite her rage and disgust. Just when she hovered on the brink of climax, he paused, buried to the hilt inside her wet, throbbing pussy, and grasped a handful of hair at the back of her head. His fingers tightened, his grip bordering on painful, and forced her to face him.

"Her name," he repeated.

The urge to spit in his face almost overcame her, but something told her such a gesture wouldn't go unpunished and she was already being punished enough.

He thrust again, making her ache and writhe with lust. His fingers tightened on her hair. This time when he spoke, it was slowly, deliberately, as if to an idiot. "What...was...her...name?"

"Jola," she whispered.

"What?"

"Jola!" she shouted in his face. Her free hand balled into a fist and she swung at his head, but he caught her wrist before the blow landed and pinned it to the mattress. He fucked her fast and hard, hurling her into orgasm.

The intensity was almost painful. The chords in her neck tightened as she arched her head into the pillow. Her legs squeezed his lean waist as massive pulsations nearly hurled her into blackness. Hate and pleasure made her cry out mindlessly. Seconds later, he stiffened and came, his sleekly muscled body tight and staining. His breath rasped in her ear, tickling her seductively in spite of how she loathed him more than ever.

Thank heavens he wasn't the sort of man who liked to rest atop a woman after climax, because Moonlight knew this time she couldn't control her nausea. No sooner had he rolled off her than she leapt up and raced for the latrine, but not before seeing the unsettling half-smile on his lips.

Chapter Two

Sins of the Flesh

When Moonlight finally stepped out of the latrine, Xenos, fully clothed, was stretched out on the bed, his arms folded behind his head and his long legs crossed at the ankles. His distant gaze drifted toward her and she forced herself to meet it, though he was the last person she wanted to look at.

In a fluid motion, he stood and opened the door next to the latrine. "Come. I'll show you where you can sleep while you're here."

Thank heavens he didn't want her in his bed. She followed him silently into a mid-sized sitting room. An archway to her left led to the kitchen and through another open door she noticed a second bathroom. The few pieces of simple furniture looked as bland and gray as his office. Doubtless it had come with the apartment. He led her to a small, windowless guestroom off the kitchen. It had a bed and table with three drawers, like the one in his room. At least the table had a spec built into it.

"Feel free to use the kitchen and sitting room. My room and office are off limits unless I say otherwise."

"I don't have a change of clothes or toiletries," she said.

"You may contact someone to drop them at headquarters. Your sister, perhaps?"

"She's on Earth. I have a friend, Re Halina, who will bring them to me."

"I'll leave word at the gate," he said, then turned and shut the door behind him.

Moonlight closed her eyes tightly and pressed her forehead against the cool gray wall. Two weeks seemed more like two years, trapped alone in a monster's lair.

After a moment, she walked to the bed, sat down and contacted Re Halina on the spec.

Her friend's plump, youthful face framed by ash blond hair filled the screen. "Moonlight, how did it go?"

"He said he'll initiate her release tomorrow," she replied, pleased she was able to keep the quiver from her voice. Moonlight had never felt more alone in her life.

"Great! Where are you now?"

"His rooms. He wants me to stay here for two weeks."

Re Halina's eyes widened. "What?"

"I'll be fine," she continued, with more confidence than she felt.

"Why does he want you to stay?"

"I can't go into it now," she replied, unsure of whether or not her spec was being monitored, possibly by Xenos himself. "Would you bring some of my clothes and

toiletries to ACT headquarters? Superior Xenos has left word at the gate you'll be dropping them off."

"Moonlight, are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes. Will you drop off my things?"

"Sure. Yeah." Re Halina's brow furrowed in deeper concern.

"Thank you. Goodbye, Re Halina."

Moonlight turned off the spec, then lay on the bed, curled up on her side and stared at the door as if expecting her temporary master to burst through at any moment. Though she had responded to him physically, the emotional exchange had been warped enough to make her sick. In the midst of pleasure, he'd forced her to recall one of the saddest parts of her life—the loss of Jola. It was as if he'd wanted to see if he could rouse her hate and desire at the same time, making her climax while reminding her of how much she loathed him.

She lay for a couple of hours, listening for any sound from the other rooms, but none came. Maybe he'd left or gone to bed. If the heavens were with her, perhaps he'd dropped dead.

No! She couldn't wish for that until he freed her mother.

Her stomach rumbled with hunger, but she didn't want to risk leaving her room and possibly seeing Xenos again. She'd nearly drifted to sleep when tapping on the door startled her.

"Santos Gama," Xenos called.

She jumped up, her heart pounding, and smoothed her hair before opening the door.

Xenos stood outside, his cool eyes upon her. A black bag dangled from his gloved hand. "This arrived for you."

"Thank you." She took the bag and he turned away.

Compelled to stare after him, she again took notice of his lean, athletic build. He carried himself with confidence and masculine grace that almost compensated for his numerous physical drawbacks. The overhead lights picked up variances in the flesh of his smooth head.

Plotches of different shades of purplish-blue, some with a silvery overtone, gave his Tydisian skin a moist appearance. She couldn't help wondering how it felt. Was it dry and silky like his palms or was it actually as damp as it looked? When he'd taken her earlier, she'd been too stunned to notice, not to mention he hadn't been fully unclothed.

After closing the door, she carried her bag to the bed and emptied its contents onto the blanket. Re Halina had packed panties, bras, a skirt, two pairs of soft, thin trousers and several tops. She'd also included basic toiletries, as well as some extras, such as more contraceptive tablets, pain relief tablets and a large container of lube.

Moonlight took the lube and gazed at it, shaking her head. Something told her with Xenos it wouldn't be necessary. The bastard had the knack of getting her wet without synthetic assistance. She should probably be grateful he hadn't plunged his oversized cock into her dry.

A shudder tore through her. Maybe next time he would. There was no telling what strange desires propelled a man like him from one moment to the next.

* * * * *

After bringing Moonlight her bag, Xenos returned to his office and glanced blankly at his computer screen for several moments. Though he knew security had already checked the contents of her bag, he had done a search himself before delivering it to her. One could never be too careful, particularly when dealing with someone who hated him as much as Moonlight.

He'd borne the brunt of enough rage and loathing in his lifetime to notice the gleam in her eyes, yet in spite of her obvious revulsion at his appearance, she was also aroused by him. That was obvious since she'd already been very wet and ready before he'd used his fingers on her. Thrusting into her had been like pushing his cock into one of the soft, living caves in the warm Tydisian seas—hot, wet and pulsing.

Though not a beautiful woman, she had an innocence he found oddly appealing and the smoldering hatred in her eyes aroused him so much that he had to taste her. He couldn't resist taunting her while they fucked and her response had been as fierce as he'd hoped. Of course his intention hadn't been to make her vomit, but something told him she'd quickly overcome her squeamishness. Whether she knew it or not, Moonlight Santos Gama possessed inner strength. She just needed the proper circumstances in which to develop it.

His spec flashed and he answered the call.

Yashel's face appeared on the monitor, his chiseled jaw set and his large blue eyes flashing. No doubt he was upset about the seizure of the private lab on Nortshire Base.

"What is it, Yashel?"

"I would like to speak to you in private. Will you meet me at the shore? Area Six."

At least Yashel remembered to ask and not demand. Lately, the younger man had been treading on thin ice. While Xenos welcomed opinions from his officers, there was a very fine line between discussion and insubordination. Yashel, with his flaring temper and curious nature, liked pushing his boundaries. Xenos didn't doubt his "brother" fancied his job as Superior, but unfortunately for him, Xenos wasn't ready for retirement.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Xenos stated.

"Thank you."

With a curt nod, Xenos switched off the spec and stood. Area Six was part of the private beach owned by ACT headquarters. Aquatic units often trained in those deep,

powerful waters off the coast. To Xenos, they were a mild diversion. He'd dove in the roughest oceans of the Tydisian home world and no waters on any planet in the galaxy could compare to their ferocity or their beauty.

When he arrived at Area Six, he saw Yashel standing on the shore. Shorter than Xenos, he had broad shoulders and a tight, sleek build. Yashel was a magnet for females, but seemed to have a particular fondness for his secretary.

Xenos curled his lip with disgust. How common and how very typical of Yashel. While his social flitting never affected his career judgment, he enjoyed "fitting in," especially with pure-blooded Laetez and humans. In spite of his beautifully webbed hands and attempts by Xenos to introduce him to his Tydisian roots, Yashel had never felt a connection to them.

Yashel's gaze followed Xenos, who strode toward him.

"We needed to talk outside of headquarters," Yashel began.

"So I gathered."

"You know why." Yashel stared at him hard and Xenos turned from the rolling tide to meet his brother's gaze. "I had canceled the seizure of that lab on Nortshire Base. You overrode me. Why?"

"The lab was not following the law," Xenos stated.

"Chief Re Lord sent word that —"

"Do you believe Chief Re Lord cares whether or not they were following the law? All he sees is the treaty with the Drapers, no matter what the cost."

"And all you see are unscrupulous medics lurking in every corner."

"I'm starting to see something else," Xenos said softly. "Such as a demotion in your future."

Yashel's jaw tightened visibly and his eyes flashed, yet he managed to keep his temper in check. Laetez aggression certainly took its toll on most ACT products. Luckily for Xenos, he'd mastered the technique of tempering that aggression and focusing it where it could best serve him.

"I have always backed you, Xenos."

"I know you have."

"It is my job to point out problems you might not see. And it's my duty to keep you and this ACT Corps free of incrimination. I can't do that if you deliberately ignore the law to suit your personal system of justice."

"Regarding ACT, I helped create the current system of justice. I will do whatever it takes to protect it."

Yashel drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "I realize how important it is to preserve the law regarding private labs, but making an enemy out of Chief Re Lord as well as Prime Re Vic isn't the way to do it. You could destroy your career. A lifetime of —"

"Concerned for me, Yashel?" The slightest smile played around Xenos' lips. "I'm touched, especially considering you're next in line should I fail in my duty."

Now Yashel looked *really* angry. He took a step closer to Xenos so they were almost chest to chest. "How can you believe I'm anything but concerned for you after all we've been through?"

"There's nothing wrong with ambition, Yashel, but don't be blind to certain problems. A good leader must have clear focus." Xenos pressed his palms together and aimed the tips of his fingers toward a point on the horizon. "No matter how hard a man tries, he can't change *everything*, but he can change *some* things."

"A good leader thinks of his people."

Xenos' smile broadened and he once again held Yashel's gaze. "Exactly. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

For several seconds, they stared at each other. Xenos sensed Yashel wanted to preach more, but restrained himself. Finally, he shook his head. "No. That's all."

"Good. I will see you at our meeting tomorrow morning."

"Yes," Yashel said, then added, "Sir."

He turned and stalked off. Xenos' gaze followed him. Yashel was a good soldier and a born leader. In short, he was someone Xenos needed to keep a careful watch over, especially now. These changes in political climate would soon tell him where Yashel's loyalties rested.

* * * * *

Yashel's teeth clenched and he willed his breathing and heartbeat under control. If he didn't know better, he might have thought he'd missed his weekly dose of chemistry balancing meds.

His boots sank into the sand until he reached the stone walk leading to the officers' residence at ACT headquarters.

Xenos made him furious. The man could be stubborn to the point of dangerous. While Yashel understood his desire to keep private labs out of operation, ignoring the law wasn't the way to do it. The only way to make changes for the better was through legitimate channels.

Xenos himself had taught Yashel the value of discipline, now it seemed he'd tossed those lessons to the proverbial wind. The capture of the lab at Nortshire Base wasn't the first such incident Xenos had been involved in. Since negotiations with the Drapers started, he'd tightened security in all ACT labs—the slightest bending of the law enough to warrant punishment.

Yashel disagreed with cruel and unnecessary testing, yet scientific progress had been made because of ACT. He owed his very existence to it. Admittedly, there were drawbacks to his mixed blood nature, but the benefits far outweighed the problems. He

could have done without the meds and webbing, but they were a small price to pay for his other unique abilities. Perhaps if he looked like Xenos, he'd feel differently.

While Yashel could blend easily with both humans and Laetez, Xenos was marked as an outcast. Yet Yashel couldn't believe something as superficial as appearance was Xenos' reason for his hatred of ACT. Not a man like him.

Though Xenos had dedicated his life to his career, Yashel couldn't help feeling he was now headed down the path to destruction. Chief Re Lord had informed him that one more breach of conduct from Xenos and Yashel would take his place as Superior.

The thought of moving up in rank appealed to Yashel, but he didn't relish the idea of achieving it at Xenos' expense.

Inside the residence, Yashel made his way to his private rooms on the top floor of the south wing. Stepping inside, he saw a light shining in the sitting room.

"Yashel?" called Sola.

Though he didn't usually mix business with pleasure, his secretary was a special case.

Unzipping the front of his black and blue uniform shirt, he walked into the sitting room where she lay curled on the couch, her tall, slim body draped in a sheer nightgown. Her large, pink nipples poked enticingly against the fabric.

"Hello," he said and dropped beside her on the couch.

She scooted closer, placing a small, warm hand at the base of his throat and kissing him. Gazing into her green eyes, he saw questioning. In spite of her pale, delicate looks, this woman had a steel spine and a quick mind—two qualities that greatly appealed to him.

"Did you speak to him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And?"

"And it's Xenos," he replied flatly, cupping her breast and stroking her nipple. It hardened even more beneath his touch and he felt his cock twitch to life.

She raised her eyes to the heavens. "He's digging his own grave, Yashel. You're doing all you can to prevent it, but enough is enough. You're not the man's keeper."

Yashel's brow furrowed in irritation. "He doesn't need a keeper."

"You know what I mean," she said, her voice becoming softer as her passion grew. She thrust her breasts against his stroking hand and reached down to fondle his cock through his trousers. "His goals are reasonable, but his ways of reaching them leave much to be desired. The laws—"

"He helped create the ACT laws, if you remember correctly. If not for him, people like us wouldn't have the freedom we enjoy."

Years ago, when private labs had no real guidelines to follow and ACT products were considered mindless freaks, Xenos' superior intellect had earned him notice with

ACT humane organizations. Though little more than a child, he'd become a spokesperson for their cause and was a key force in implementing the regulations that, until recently, had governed ACT labs.

"I realize that," she said. "Xenos has many admirable qualities, but knowing when to quit isn't one of them."

"You think we should forget our rights to secure this alliance with the Drapers?"

"I didn't say that. But you know as well as I do the damage the war with them caused both our worlds for many years. This alliance is important."

"So is keeping private labs regulated."

"Regulated or out of operation entirely?" As she spoke, Sola's hand caressed his chest and stomach, then once again moved down to cup the front of his trousers. She squeezed gently and kissed the corner of his mouth, but this time he wasn't distracted.

"You weren't raised in a lab, so you have no idea what it's like," he said, dropping his hand from her breast.

Her parents—a human mother and Laetez father—had fallen in love and conceived Sola under ACT assistance, since interbreeding between the two species was nearly impossible without help.

"I wasn't raised in a lab, but if not for ACT, I most likely wouldn't be here at all," she said, removing her hand from his crotch, a coolness seeping into her eyes. "Neither would you. Or Xenos, for that matter. Even though in his case, I can understand his issues with the program. They probably should have stopped testing with Tydisian DNA earlier, but—"

"Thank you very much," Yashel said dryly.

"I didn't mean that how it sounded." She draped a leg over him and rested her head against his shoulder. "But look how many tries it took to produce you and Zale."

"According to private labs, it doesn't matter how many tries it takes," he muttered. "Tydisians don't blend very well with Laetez or humans, anyway."

Smiling tenderly, Sola straddled him, rubbing her softness against his stiff, aching cock. She took his face in her hands and gazed deeply into his eyes. "Not from where I'm sitting."

Her lustful expression stirred his desire. Placing a hand to the back of her head, he tugged her closer and covered her mouth in a deep, tender kiss.

* * * * *

Xenos stood on the shore for several moments after Yashel left. The full moon bathed the dark water in light and he knew it would be a perfect night for diving. He undressed and strode into the water, loving the tug of the tide and the scent of the ocean.

Upon contacting the seawater, his Tydisian skin released a clear, odorless secretion that prevented him from absorbing too much salt. It also helped filter out bacteria, since his skin was more susceptible to absorbing toxins. It was one of his few physical weaknesses. Skin irritations and infections had plagued him throughout his life. Washing with a medicated gel and wearing specialized fabric helped, but didn't alleviate the problem.

Drawing a deep breath, he closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and dove beneath the surface. His shields, protective membranes that covered his eyes upon contact with water, lowered to ensure comfortable vision. Moonlight cut through the depths, providing just enough light for him to swim with confidence.

He remained submerged for nearly an hour before surfacing and heading back to shore. Xenos could survive underwater for up to five hours. If he had more Tydisian glands, he could have stayed under indefinitely, however, he didn't possess enough to keep his body fully oxygenated. Therefore, he depended on his powerful lungs to supply most of his oxygen. Unlike Earth-based amphibians, Tydisians could not only breathe through their skin, but had incredibly strong lungs.

Out of the water, he shivered in the rapidly cooling night and dragged on his clothes. He picked up his gloves, shoes and socks and walked back to the residence on webbed feet. The swim had invigorated him and he considered exercising his rights with Moonlight again. Human women didn't usually interest him, but there was something about her that he wanted to devour.

Once he'd fucked her a few more times, he'd probably lose interest. If so, then he'd send her away before two weeks were up. In truth, he didn't like having someone else in his rooms, but he knew she'd hate the idea of staying there, so it was worth the slight inconvenience on his part. One didn't usually get passion from escorts and hate was the most passionate emotion. Love was fleeting, but hate endured. Hate made a person strong and able to overcome anything.

Fucking Moonlight was like swimming in water that was almost too hot for comfort, a challenge filled with pleasure-pain. Just thinking about it made his cock ache.

By the time he arrived at the residence, the secretion had evaporated from his skin. He entered through his office, walked to his room and tossed his gloves on the table and his shoes and socks on the floor. Then he strode to the sitting room. Glancing through the archway to the kitchen, he saw Moonlight looking in the cupboard. Apparently, hunger had driven her from her room.

She glanced at him, a slightly startled look in her eyes as he approached her.

"I was just getting something to eat," she said, grabbing her plate of food. "I'll be out of your way."

When she tried to brush past him, he grasped her upper arm, took the plate from her hand and placed it on the countertop. Her gaze met his and she drew a sharp breath. Her smooth face, touched with a hint of gold, went pale, and beneath the thin black shirt, her nipples stiffened, pressing enticingly against the material.

Xenos grasped her waist and hoisted her onto the breakfast table. She braced her hands against his shoulders and swallowed hard.

"You're not going to be sick again, are you?" he asked with a hint of annoyance.

"No."

"Are you hurt from our last encounter?" He cupped her soft mound through her skirt and kneaded gently.

"No."

"Good." He pushed up the skirt, happy to find she wasn't wearing underpants. His finger caressed her small, neatly trimmed thatch of pubic hair and brushed over her warm, delicate folds of flesh. A shiver darted through her.

"Your hands are cold," she said.

"I was swimming in the ocean," he replied, continuing to stroke her, knowing her heated flesh would soon warm his hand. He ran his thumb along the joining of her thighs and she jerked slightly, as if the motion tickled her.

"You shave this," he said, once again stroking her pubic mound. Moonlight nodded and he added, "Don't while you're here."

Being hairless, there was something about the fringe-like substance that fascinated him.

"If you want," she whispered.

Dragging her closer to the edge of the table, he squatted between her legs and covered her clit with his mouth.

"No," she gasped, pushing hard against him.

"No?" He glanced up, a smirk on his lips. "We have an agreement, don't we?"

Her gaze fixed on his and he saw anger, loathing and embarrassment gleaming in her beautiful eyes. Desire shot through him, making his cock go even stiffer.

"Yes, we do," she said and leaned back a bit, splaying her hands on the tabletop.

Xenos nodded slightly, then his mouth returned to her soft, sensitive flesh. His tongue rolled over it, exploring the warm, pink folds while his hands caressed her inner thighs.

She'd apparently showered, since her skin carried the scent of soap combined with the tantalizing aroma of her natural musk. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. At times like this, his highly developed Tydisian senses seemed like the greatest gift a man could ask for.

His tongue flicked her and a soft moan escaped her throat. Beneath his stroking hands, her thighs quivered. Xenos nearly smiled. In spite of herself, she enjoyed the touch of a mongrel bastard whom she despised. He'd known many women in his lifetime, but none as passionate as Moonlight Santos Gama.

Smoothing his palms over her hips, he relished the texture of her skin. He clutched her buttocks and squeezed hard enough to make her gasp. Ever so lightly, he pressed a

fingertip against her sphincter. The ring of muscle tightened, the delicate flesh pulsing to the rhythm of her throbbing clit. His lips tugged at her swollen little nub and his tongue lapped it.

Soon her ragged breathing and the tremors coursing through her told him she was close to the brink. Perfect, because his cock ached so much he could scarcely wait a moment longer. He rose and entered her with a long, powerful thrust.

“Oh!” Moonlight gasped and instinctively clutched his shoulders. Their gazes locked and he could feel her breath gently fanning his lips. He never kissed escorts. The gesture was far too intimate. Yet, for some reason, he felt the urge to taste her lips, in particular her full lower one. He’d love to sink his fangs into it, roll his tongue over it. This was madness.

Her eyes stared into his and in them he saw disgust and arousal. Thrusting hard and fast, he drove her closer and closer to orgasm. Moonlight’s eyelids fluttered then she closed her eyes and leaned her head back. Unable to resist, he ran his tongue along the side of her neck, then swirled it around her ear.

She moaned again and clutched him harder, wrapping her shockingly strong legs around his waist and squeezing hard, exciting him even more. He fucked her roughly, reveling in the feel of her tight, slick pussy throbbing around his cock. Panting and writhing, she came, her fierce pulsations hurling him over the edge.

Growling deep in his throat—a primitive, inhuman sound that only escaped him when his emotions ran high—he came with breath-stealing intensity. He could not remember a time when he’d enjoyed a woman more. Once his pulse started to slow, he withdrew from her and efficiently pulled up his trousers.

“Goodnight, Santos Gama,” he said, offering her a curt nod before he turned and walked to his room.

* * * * *

Still trembling in the aftermath, Moonlight stared after Xenos, torn between that wonderful, post-orgasmic pleasure and absolute revulsion because she gained some enjoyment from their sleazy encounters. How could he give her any kind of pleasure? He wasn’t even human. Nor was he Laetez. While she’d never been particularly attracted to alien species, the Laetez were at least a good-looking lot. Very similar to her own kind. If they didn’t come in pairs, she might have considered a relationship with one, but she didn’t do ménage.

Each Laetez was made up of two beings—the Re and the Er. The external being, or the Re, resembled humans in most ways, except for some strange variations in hair and eye color. The Re communicated directly with others through normal speech and functioned like any other mammal.

The Er, an internal being who lived within the brain of the Re, governed the Re’s emotional state and often possessed a higher intellect than its host, sort of a living conscience. The two were forever bound, completely dependent on each other. While

she was told this was usually a pleasant arrangement, it was also part of the reason the Laetez were so interested in the ACT program. They generally tried breeding with species that lived as individuals, which was why they'd originally migrated toward humans.

Their main goal was to harness the intellect and emotional control of the Er in an independent body. Unfortunately, humans only seemed compatible with the Res. That was why the Laetez were now so interested in an alliance with the Drapers, a species that might very well be compatible with the Ers.

None of this mattered to Moonlight anymore. This obsession with ACT from both humans and Laetez had led her to this degrading position. Once her mother was free, she'd better reconsider her associations with the activists because never again would Moonlight pull a stunt like this. It was too damaging emotionally.

She couldn't fathom how a man such as Xenos, with so much sexual passion, had the emotional capacity of a stone.

Hopping off the table, she glanced at her discarded plate of food on the counter. A short time ago she'd been starving. Now she seemed to have lost her appetite. Still, she assumed it would return later, so she decided to take the food to her room.

First, she washed her hands in the sink, then sprayed the table with disinfectant. For a long moment, she stared at the smooth white surface while flashes of her and Xenos coupling raced through her mind. She'd hated the thought of his hideous blue tongue on her, but when he'd stimulated her orally, she'd been surprised by how good it felt.

His tongue wasn't rough, as she'd expected, but smooth and velvety, much like the skin on the head of man's penis. Even now, she wished to feel it again, either on her clit or inside her mouth. She'd been grateful he didn't want to kiss, but when their faces had lingered so close, she'd been tempted to lean forward and find out how his lips felt, perhaps even explore the tips of his bestial teeth with her tongue.

No! Was she losing her mind entirely? This creature was responsible for Jola's death. He exhibited no sign that he felt human emotions of any kind, except perhaps lust. That he seemed to have in abundance.

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. Sleep. She needed to rest before she lost her mind.

Moonlight took the plate of food and walked to her room, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter Three

Bitter Blood

Yashel walked briskly down the corridor toward Xenos' apartment. He and Zale were due to meet with the Superior in half an hour for their daily training session, but Yashel wanted to see him privately first.

He touched the bell on the door and was surprised when a female voice called, "Who is it?"

"S-Master Yashel. To whom am I speaking?"

The door opened and a brown-haired woman who looked in her late twenties stared at him with large, dark eyes. "Superior Xenos isn't here. I'm Moonlight Santos Gama." She offered him her hand.

He took it, studying her carefully. While Xenos' escorts were no secret, he never left one alone in his rooms. Usually they were ushered discreetly in and out within a matter of hours. The possibility existed that she wasn't an escort at all, however Yashel doubted it. Xenos had never shown an interest in personal relationships. Not only that, he spent his every waking moment either training or working in his office.

Where would he find the time to meet someone outside of the ACT Corps? Something told Yashel this woman was not a soldier nor did she seem like the sort of lady who would appeal to Xenos. Not only did she possess a refreshing innocence, but she seemed so average and very human. Most likely she was of pure-blood. He'd have to look her up in ACT records.

"What are you doing here?" Yashel asked.

"You should probably ask Xenos."

"I'm asking you."

"We're acquaintances. I'm staying here for a short time."

"How did you meet?"

"Through my mother. She's an activist for an ACT humane organization."

She spoke calmly and held his gaze, yet something about her answer unsettled him.

"Would you like me to take a message for Xenos, letting him know you were here?" she asked.

"No. I'm meeting with him shortly. Thank you." He nodded and she smiled, inclining her head slightly before closing the door.

Using his wrist spec, he tried contacting Xenos, but got no reply. Most likely he was submerged in a training tank. He tried the next best source.

The face of a redheaded male appeared on the tiny screen. "Secretary Judson for Superior Xenos Nineteen."

"Judson, it's S-Master Yashel."

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you know anything about a woman named Moonlight Santos Gama staying with Xenos?"

"Yes, Sir. She'll be visiting for two weeks."

"I see."

"Is there anything else, Sir?"

"No. Thank you." Yashel turned off the spec and glanced thoughtfully at the door before making his way to the training hall. Xenos was probably there already.

Moments later, when he stepped into the large metal and concrete room housing the brothers' tank, he found both Xenos and Zale submerged. He climbed to the top of the tank, dropped in and sank to the bottom, where he exchanged glances with first Zale, then Xenos.

Though Yashel and Zale had similar lung capacity, Yashel's webbed hands and feet made him a faster swimmer. Still, there were times when he'd have traded his speed for the ability to pass as a pure-blooded human or Laetez. Wearing gloves all the time was a pain in the ass, but at least it made life easier in social settings. Unless, of course, he ran into the inevitable busybody who needed to know *why* he was wearing gloves. He wasn't ashamed of his roots, but being a curiosity sometimes became tiresome.

Looking at Xenos, he was once again reminded that, in the grand scheme of things, he had little to complain about. He didn't blame Xenos for the bitterness he harbored, yet he couldn't help feeling it would one day cause his destruction.

For the next hour and a half they swam, testing their speed and endurance with various underwater exercises. Then Xenos motioned for them to surface. After drying off, they discussed several topics pertaining to ACT Corps training and assignments.

"Zale, I want you to tighten inspections on all labs," Xenos said.

"Chief Re Lord said to ease up," Yashel reminded him.

"Report your findings to me before initiating any formal reprimands or seizures," Xenos continued, ignoring Yashel.

Nodding, Zale said, "The Unit Commanders have already briefed their men on the new standards that will remain in effect until the negotiations end."

"Speaking of negotiations, for the rest of the week, I'll be attending the negotiation meetings with Prime Re Vic, trying to sway the judges' votes."

"I can accompany you," Yashel said. At least Xenos was making sense again, fighting the system through legal means. If anyone could convince the judges to see reason regarding the dangers of reinstating private labs, Xenos was the man.

"No." Xenos glanced at him. "I need you here while I'm gone. Judson will be coming with me, so either arrange for Sola or a replacement to take my calls."

Yashel knew he was right. Unless the situation was unavoidable, it made no sense for both the Superior and his second-in-command to leave headquarters at the same time.

When the meeting ended, Yashel went to his office. Sola sat behind her desk in the sitting room. She glanced away from her monitor and offered him a smile.

"Sola, I want you to do a search on a woman named Moonlight Santos Gama. Most likely human, but possibly Laetez. Her mother is an activist."

"Yes, Sir," Sola said in the cool, official voice she generally used when they were in public. When she spoke that way private, it meant he'd done something to annoy her. "May I ask who she is?"

He grinned. So that was it. A bit of female jealousy. That he could handle and he liked knowing she still felt possessive of their relationship.

"She was in Xenos' quarters and I'm curious what's up."

"Perhaps she's an escort?" she suggested.

"Negative. The woman is staying for two weeks."

One of Sola's groomed eyebrows lifted. "Staying? Well, that's a first."

Yashel grunted in reply. He wasn't sure why he was so interested in Xenos' connection to the woman. Just because he'd never had a relationship before didn't mean he couldn't now. Still something just didn't feel right about her. She didn't seem like the sort of woman who would migrate toward someone like Xenos.

"How did your meeting go this morning?" Sola asked.

"Xenos will be at the negotiation meetings this week. I hope things go as he wants them to."

"So do I," she said. "He's right, but I'm afraid greed will override common sense."

Yashel approached her desk and spun her chair to face him. Bracing his hands on the arms of her chair, he trapped her there and leaned so close their noses touched. "Getting rebellious against the law, are you?"

"Never," she said fiercely, a sexy gleam in her eyes that spurred his arousal. "I'm a loyal soldier."

He spoke in her ear, his voice a husky whisper, "I love it when you're loyal."

"I'm loyal to my planet," she stated. "Then I'm loyal to you."

"A woman after my own heart."

"Right now I'm on duty," she teased. "But tonight I'll be a woman."

He chuckled softly, straightened and walked to his office, glancing at her before closing the door. He could scarcely wait until tonight.

* * * * *

After Yashel left, Xenos and Zale remained in the training room and engaged in sparring practice. Zale might look human, but his powerfully muscled six-foot eight-inch body possessed Tydisian strength even greater than Xenos'. Each crushing blow of Zale's feet and fists had the potential to knock Xenos into oblivion. Only through his slippery skill was he able to defend against and often defeat Zale.

When they finished, they headed for the showers.

"Do you think you have a chance of preventing the judges from permanently reactivating private labs?" Zale asked.

"A slim chance," Xenos admitted. "The Laetez want this alliance badly. In spite of what the laws say, most still consider us property instead of free individuals. We are their guard dogs, Zale. Well-fed, well trained and expendable in times of danger."

"Yashel doesn't agree with that."

"Yashel is stubborn."

"I'm not sure I fully agree, either. ACT humane organizations—"

"Are useless against the government. And don't be fooled by those bleeding-heart activists. They don't consider us equal, either. To them, we're an object of pity. We don't want or need pity, but equality."

Xenos glanced at Zale, who stared at him with a serene look in his dark eyes. One thing about the younger man, his laidback manner made him difficult to read. Regarding Zale, the only thing Xenos felt certain of was his dedication to true justice. Unfortunately, his somewhat overdeveloped sense of compassion sometimes hindered his judgment, another reason why he'd chosen to promote Yashel to second-in-command instead of Zale.

After leaving the training room, Xenos spent the remainder of the day with his secretary, deep in preparation for the meetings with the judges.

Late that night, he still sat at his desk, pouring over screens of legal text, when Judson stepped in.

"I've downloaded the last of the files, Sir," the redhead told him. "Do you want to start them tonight?"

"No," Xenos replied slowly, his gaze still fixed on the screen. He finished the paragraph, leaned back in his chair and turned to Judson. He studied the man carefully, considering how much had changed since they'd met ten years ago. Doug Judson, the insolent prick who had insulted him on his first day as Unit Commander, had turned out to be most loyal. Over the years, Xenos had learned the man's contempt had more to do with his own shame at being an ACT product than with Xenos.

Xenos understood that to those in the program who hadn't learned to accept themselves, he was a glaring symbol of their variance from normal society.

Once Judson understood Xenos' goals regarding private labs and ACT itself, he had become a strong supporter. Xenos repaid him by seeing that he moved up quickly in rank, finally promoting him to the coveted position of secretary to the Superior. While

Xenos wanted a thinker as his second-in-command, he needed a steadfast follower as his secretary. Someone who could keep dirty secrets, if necessary, and who knew which files to dispose of should anything happen to his Superior.

"This isn't going to be an easy fight, Judson," Xenos said quietly.

"But it's worth it, Sir. We can't allow the private labs to reopen permanently, even if regulated. You know as well as I do that they'll always find a way to evade the law." Judson's green eyes flashed. "We'll have to do whatever it takes."

Xenos nodded slowly, a sad half-smile on his lips. "That's all for tonight. Dismissed, Judson."

"Thank you, Sir. See you tomorrow."

Once Judson left, Xenos remained at his desk a while longer before leaving for the residence.

He stepped into his apartment through the front entrance and found everything dark and silent. He called up the lights to their dimmest setting, unzipped his uniform shirt and headed for the kitchen. For the past several hours, he'd been so absorbed in work that he'd forgotten about food or hydration. Food wasn't an issue, but his Tydisian body desperately needed moisture.

He poured a glass of water, drained it in several gulps, then placed it in the sink. A shower was a more direct way to hydrate and would also clear his mind so he could start fresh in the morning. Shrugging off his shirt, he paused and narrowed his eyes. The delicate scent of Moonlight's perfume grew stronger and he turned toward the door to her room where she lurked in darkness, watching him silently.

Moonlight's heartbeat quickened when Xenos' piercing blue gaze met hers. She'd been nearly asleep when she heard water running in the kitchen. After a day spent completely alone in this apartment with nothing to do but think, she actually looked forward to seeing another person or hearing another voice, even if it belonged to the dreaded Xenos Nineteen.

Her door had been open partway, so it made no sound when she'd pulled it farther. Xenos had stood with his back to her and removed his shirt. She couldn't help staring at the oddly marked purplish-blue flesh running from his scalp, down his back and disappearing into the waist of his trousers.

Now he faced her and she could scarcely tear her gaze from his chiseled, hairless chest. A narrow strip of that multihued flesh wrapped across his shoulders and ran down the length of his sleekly muscled stomach. He'd fucked her several times already, but she'd never seen his body fully exposed. A voice in the back of her mind told her she should be disgusted, yet it was impossible. This aquatic beast had a terrible beauty. The urge to step closer and touch his strangely marked skin almost overcame her.

His gaze raked her from head to toe and she wrapped her arms around her middle, suddenly aware of how vulnerable she appeared wearing nothing but an oversized white nightshirt. Without her red heels, she realized exactly how much shorter than him

she was. Curling her bare toes in the rug, she continued meeting his gaze, wondering if he intended to speak or if she should try initiating conversation.

Finally he said, "Go to my room and get on the bed."

Again? Didn't this guy ever quit? In spite of her sarcastic thoughts, her belly tightened and nipples tingled with anticipation. A frustrating ache started deep inside her, making her warm and wet even though he had yet to touch her. Trembling a bit, she did as he ordered. In his room, she pulled down the sheet on his bed and climbed beneath.

He followed her, but didn't approach. Instead, he strode into the bathroom, calling over his shoulder, "Be undressed when I come out."

The door closed with a slight click and she quickly sat up, pulled her nightshirt over her head, tugged off her panties and tossed them on the floor. Again she stretched out beneath the sheet, pulled it up to her neck and stared at the door, her heart pounding.

She heard water running in the shower. Moments later it ceased, and a short time after, he stepped into the bedroom, completely naked. Rangy and well-muscled without being bulky, he moved like a graceful, powerful animal. She noticed the strip of patched flesh faded into his pubic area. The shower seemed to have little effect on his cock. It already swelled, thick and semi-erect. She remembered how good it felt inside her and hated herself for wanting it again.

A strange half-smile on his lips, he approached the bed, grasped the sheet and tore it off her. Moonlight gasped and flinched reflexively, resisting the temptation to cover herself with her hands. What was the point?

He knelt beside her on the bed and cupped her breast, his thumb brushing over her nipple. It tightened even more beneath his stroking and she turned her head aside. If she didn't look at him, it might make this easier.

Placing his hand to her cheek, he forced her to meet his gaze. The webbing between his fingers felt wispy against her face, but not unpleasant. "What's the matter, Santos Gama? Regretting your decision already?"

"Did you initiate my mother's release today?"

"That was our bargain."

Moonlight wouldn't believe it until she heard directly from home that her mother had arrived safe and well.

His hand moved from her face and trailed between her breasts down to her soft mound. Cupping it in his palm, he kneaded gently. His touch had been cool at first from the shower water, but stroking her, his hand grew warmer. Drawing a deep breath, Moonlight tried not to enjoy his touch, but it was difficult. Especially when he began fondling her clit with his thumb while dipping his fingers into her hot, moist pussy.

Xenos withdrew his damp fingers and stroked her sensitive nub, making her gasp with pleasure. Her swollen flesh tingled and ached, and though she tried not to squirm, she couldn't keep her belly from clenching and unclenching with desire. For several moments, he stroked with such a passive look in his eyes that, if not for his thick erection, she wouldn't have suspected he was aroused at all.

"Touch me," he said, his voice soft yet commanding.

She reached out and traced her fingers over his cock, exploring it from base to tip. Gaining confidence, she curled her fist around it and stroked. The quicker she prepared him, the faster tonight's degradation would end. Yet deep inside, she admitted feeling degraded only because each time she was with this sexy mongrel she allowed him to carry her to heights of pleasure she'd never experienced before.

After several moments of squeezing and stroking, she heard him draw a sharp breath and noticed his almond-shaped eyes had closed halfway. A pearl of moisture appeared at the tiny eye on the crown of his erection.

She recalled yesterday when he'd tormented her with memories of Jola as she'd neared her climax. A feeling of wicked vengeance shot through her. Tonight, she'd beat him at his own game.

Stroking faster and harder, she saw the smoldering expression in his eyes and the gleam of his canines through his parted lips. She rolled her thumb over his swollen, dark purple cock head, smeared the droplet of moisture over it, then used her fingertip to tease along the underside. His eyes closed almost completely, and as his pleasure grew, he slowed his exploration of her clit and pussy.

Still caressing the underside of his cock, she asked, "What was it like growing up in a private lab, Xenos Nineteen?"

His eyes opened and he met her gaze, a hint of anger in his expression. Then a glacial look crept over him and he smiled, a horrible twisting of his blue lips that gave her full view of his animal teeth.

"How sweet of you to ask," he purred. "I'll be glad to show you."

Grasping her wrist so hard she gasped, he hauled her out of the bed, sat on the edge of it and forced her onto his lap. She felt his hard cock pushing against her, like velvet-covered steel. His legs coiled around hers, holding them immobile, and he wrapped an arm around her, pinning one of her arms to her torso.

Survival instinct overcame her and she tried struggling, shoving her head backward in an attempt to strike his face, but he grasped her throat and growled in her ear, "Stay still. You asked a question. I'm about to answer."

"Let me go," she snarled, overcome by terror and fury. "I said I'd be your escort, *not* your punching bag."

"You're hardly that, darling. I said sit still." The pure rage in his voice sent chills down her spine. What the hell was this monster going to do to her?

"You want to know what it was like living in a private lab?" he demanded, reaching into the top drawer of the bedside table. He removed a dagger with a sharp, curved blade and forced it into her hand. "Take it."

"I don't want it!"

Ignoring her, he placed it in her palm, then wrapped his large, webbed hand around hers so tightly the weapon's handle dug into her flesh. Before she fully realized what he'd intended, he placed his other hand flat on the table and forced her to hack off his index finger just above the second knuckle.

"Oh my God!" she screamed. "Are you fucking insane?"

"No. I'm Xenos Nineteen. Product of a private ACT lab. You're a scientist. You need to know exactly how your victim functions. He has Tydisian DNA. Will he regenerate?"

"What?"

"Will he regenerate?" Xenos continued speaking in her ear.

She made a motion to run, but his legs tightened on hers and his arm wrapped around her again, holding her fast.

"You haven't answered me."

"I don't know," she said, her voice scarcely a whisper.

"Well, let's see." He held out his hand. It trembled a bit, probably from pain, but maybe from emotion. Though his voice remained calm, she felt his heart pounding against her back. Blood spurted from his severed finger. Thick droplets pooled on the tabletop.

Again bile rose in her throat. Her stomach lurched and she struggled to free herself from his grasp.

"Don't you dare puke again, you pretty little weakling," he growled, tightening his steely grip even more. "You asked for it."

"I asked you to tell me!"

"You wanted to repay me for last night."

She grew still and silent, her gaze fixed on his finger. She should have known better than to think she could beat this animal at his own game.

Slowly, the blood flow ebbed and she noticed a thin layer of flesh sealing over the wound.

"Will he regenerate?" Xenos asked again, his voice very calm now and his heartbeat returning to normal.

"Yes," she whispered.

"No need to make yourself sick over this little incident," he purred and nuzzled her neck. "By tomorrow, I'll have a new finger, ready to explore your soft wet cunt, my sweet."

"You disgust me," she said.

"I'm wounded by your words," he mocked and ran his fangs along the side of her neck. They pressed against her shoulder, not drawing blood, but hard enough to send a perversely erotic thrill through her.

"If I stabbed you through the heart, would that regenerate too?" she whispered.

He chuckled. "Don't think you'll ever get the chance to find out."

Xenos stood and shoved her into a corner. Her legs trembled, nearly buckling, but she righted herself and placed her hands against the cold gray wall. Standing behind her, he used his knee to spread her legs farther apart. His hands snug on her hips, he entered her lust-drenched pussy very slowly, as if savoring every moment.

Her eyes closed, Moonlight willed herself not to respond, but it was impossible, especially when he reached around and began fondling her clit. Between his rubbing fingers and stroking cock, she soon trembled on the verge of orgasm. When she came, she cried out sharply, her heart pounding and her entire body trembling.

Something told her she'd never recover from her experiences here. Two weeks with Xenos would taint her for life.

* * * * *

The following afternoon, Sola stepped into Yashel's office. He glanced at her and memories of their lovemaking the previous night flashed through his mind. A slight smile touched his lips, but faded at her stony expression.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I have the information you requested about Moonlight Santos Gama."

"Well?"

"She is human. A translator at an interrogation facility on Earth. Her mother is an activist. As a matter of fact, she was recently sentenced to six months in prison in connection with the big protest at the capital last month. Yesterday, her release was initiated at Xenos' order."

Yashel lifted an eyebrow. Was it possible Xenos had feelings for Moonlight? What other reason could he have for initiating her mother's release? If that was the case, Yashel was actually relieved. Maybe it was a sign that Xenos was finally loosening up.

"Don't you get it, Yashel?" Sola curled her lip.

"Get that he pulled a few strings to help out his girlfriend? Yeah, I get it."

Sola raised her eyes to the heavens. "Males can be so thick." She stepped closer and spoke in a low voice. "She's not his girlfriend. He's using her in exchange for freeing her mother."

"What makes you think that?"

"Where did he meet her?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly. This woman just pops up and Xenos initiates her mother's release. Think about it."

"Why would he do something like that? Sola, you've never liked Xenos —"

"I never said —"

"You didn't have to. I can tell. I might be *male*, but I'm not so *thick* that I haven't learned how to read your expressions."

"If you don't believe me, why don't you ask Xenos? Unless you think he'll tell you to go burn. Everybody knows the all-powerful Superior Xenos answers to no one."

"Technically, his relationships aren't my business."

"Then why did you have me research Moonlight?"

Smiling slightly, he leaned back in his chair. "You're right. On all counts. Still, whatever bargains he and Moonlight made have nothing to do with me."

"It makes me sick."

Yashel couldn't help agreeing. Still, he wondered what fascination the woman held for Xenos that he'd be willing to bargain with her at all.

* * * * *

Xenos worked late again the following night. Negotiations with the judges would begin tomorrow morning and he wanted to be well prepared. One way or the other, he would not lose this fight against private labs.

When he arrived at his apartment, he walked to Moonlight's door and tapped on it, then stepped inside.

Sitting up in bed, she said, "Couldn't you give me a chance to answer before you barge in?"

Ignoring her, he said, "I will be working late for the rest of the week. If you want to leave the premises during the day, you may do so. I've arranged for a security pass for you." He held the small metal chip out to her and she hesitantly reached for it. Xenos' hand closed snugly around hers and he stared into her eyes. "When you go out, I expect you to be back here by dusk. Understood?"

She nodded, trying to tug her hand from his grasp. With a slight, rather teasing smile, he released her.

"If you have any ideas about leaving before you fulfill your end of the bargain, your mother's release will be stopped."

"I honor my bargains," she said, her dark eyes burning. Her anger never failed to arouse him, yet tonight he needed to get some rest. The negotiations required his full concentration. As if sensing the turn his thoughts had taken, she asked, "Is there anything else?"

Her attitude both amused and annoyed him. Desire coiled in his belly. He tore off his gloves and shoved them in his pockets as he strode toward the bed. Grasping a

handful of the silky, perfumed hair at her nape, he tugged until her neck arched. She drew a sharp breath and stared at him from the corner of her eye. Fear mingled with anger on her face, and again he had the mad urge to kiss her—hard and deep.

“If there is, I’ll let you know,” he told her. He ran a fingertip down her throat, enjoying the softness of her skin. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to use her for a quick fuck.

No. Better not to indulge himself too much. He needed to keep a sharp edge for the rest of the week.

The scent of her perfume grew stronger and her stiff nipples pressed against the thin, white fabric of her nightshirt. Lust kindled beneath the anger and fear in her eyes. She might hate him. He might disgust her, but he knew when a woman wanted him.

In spite of his mongrel looks, he caught the interest of certain women, ones who enjoyed bedding a curiosity. Moonlight’s physical reactions during the times they’d been together told him their encounters brought her pleasure. She didn’t want to enjoy his company, but part of her did.

He allowed a slow smile to spread across his lips, deliberately giving her a clear view of his ferocious upper and lower canines. Moonlight tensed visibly and he felt her head jerk a bit, but he tightened his grip on her hair. He brushed his thumb over her soft, pretty mouth.

Her eyes closed halfway and her lips pursed the slightest bit against his thumb in a kiss that seemed almost unconscious on her part.

Curling his lip, he growled deep in his throat and released her abruptly. Though he didn’t so much as glance back at her, he felt her hot gaze upon him as he left the room.

Chapter Four

A Taste of Freedom

After Xenos left, Moonlight sat on her bed, staring at the door and waiting for her feelings of terror and arousal to fade.

At least he was letting her get away from the apartment for a while. She was becoming bored out of her mind with nothing to do and no one to talk to except brief conversations with her sister and Re Halina on the spec.

Tomorrow morning, she'd leave as early as possible. Her first stop would be the public library. Xenos had stirred her interest and she wanted to learn more about his background. Asking him was out of the question. The heavens knew what he'd cut off next if she mentioned his past. The last person she had expected to rouse her curiosity was this beast, yet she wondered what drove a man like him?

From her mother's activism, she knew about the horrors of private labs, but had been under the impression that the cruelest experiments were limited to what most people considered primitive specimens. Xenos might be vile, but he was not primitive, except perhaps in his cruelty. Surely an intelligent ACT product such as himself would be coveted rather than wasted through potentially deadly experimentation. After all, he was the sort of creature ACT strove to create.

With these thoughts heavy on her mind, she finally drifted to sleep, though her dreams were far from pleasant. The next morning, she awoke later than planned. Xenos had already left the apartment.

She wasted no more time before trying out her new security pass. Her heart pounded as she approached the gate at the front of headquarters. Relief washed over her when the security pass worked. Outside, she drew a deep breath of cool air. She was free, at least for a few hours.

She stopped at a café for breakfast. One thing about the Laetez, they had the most delicious fruit. Once she'd eaten, she walked to the library. She enjoyed the capital because while shuttles were available for travel, they weren't necessary. Most of the main public buildings were within walking distance of each other.

Being Superior of the ACT Corps, Xenos would doubtlessly have at least some information about himself available to the public. When he ceased to be lab property and became a free citizen, his personal records from the lab had probably been sealed, accessible only by those with special permission.

Within an hour after sitting at a terminal and scrolling through documents, she found a rather lengthy biography about Xenos. Most of it was information useless for her purposes. It listed his military record, honors and a physical description that she doubted covered all his idiosyncrasies.

The bio glossed over his past, stating that just months after becoming a free citizen, he disappeared from the Laetez home world for five years. When he returned, he joined the ACT Corps and advanced in rank at a startling rate, taking command of a unit within seven years of enlisting. He also pursued advanced studies in engineering and Laetez law. The bio listed the name of the lab where he'd been created and raised. Aquavalley. She decided to do a search on it.

Once she found the information, she was unable to glance away from the screen. Transfixed by disgust and morbid curiosity, she read the information several times over. She knew the documents most likely didn't cover half the horrors that took place there, but what she read was enough to do something she never thought possible.

She started to feel sympathy for the monster who had killed Jola. According to the document, when Aquavalley closed, Xenos was among the few victims granted free citizenship. Most others were either humanely euthanized or assigned to government sanctioned labs for the remainder of their lives.

After finishing the documents, Moonlight sat back in her chair for several moments, her thoughts churning. In spite of so many missing details, these documents at least gave her some understanding of Xenos' behavior. Emotions of any kind must be foreign to him and compassion an unknown concept. ACT had wanted to make perfect soldiers. Instead, they created unfeeling monsters.

Finally, she collected herself enough to leave the library and head for Re Halina's workplace, hoping her friend would be free for lunch. Moonlight needed to discuss her situation with someone she trusted and with whom she felt safe.

A short time later, she and Re Halina sat at a table at an outdoor café overlooking the river that ran through the capital.

"So, are you going to tell me what the hell is going on with you and Superior Xenos?" Re Halina demanded, keeping her voice low.

"Like I said, I'm to stay with him for two weeks. You did confirm that my mother's release is underway?"

"She's now on the public release records and should be on a shuttle home within the next day or two."

"At least he kept his word," Moonlight whispered.

"I know you love your mother, Moonlight, but I don't know how you can endure being with him, letting him slobber all over you—"

"It's not like that," Moonlight said quickly, unsure of why she felt the need to defend him.

"Don't tell me you're enjoying it."

Moonlight's belly tightened as she recalled the sensation of Xenos' hands and tongue on her, stroking and licking her to ecstasy. She remembered all too clearly the feeling of his thick, velvety cock deep inside her. Then she felt his crushing grip on her

hand when he forced her to cut off his finger. She saw the red, human blood spurting from a blue, alien hand.

"He terrifies me," she murmured.

"I can see why. He's horrible looking."

"It's not just that. He terrifies me because he's so strong. I mean, he's been through so many terrible things that no one can ever hope to reach him. He's cold. Hard. I've never met anyone that...tough in my life."

Re Halina narrowed her eyes. "Why do you think he agreed to help you?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you did reach him."

"No." Moonlight snorted. "Absolutely not. He seems to like the idea that I hate him. It's like he gets some perverse pleasure from fucking a woman who despises him. And it's strange, Re Halina, but the more I find out about him—" She paused and shook her head. "I can't imagine what his life must have been like, growing up in Aquavalley. They cut off his limbs, Re Halina, just to see if they'd grow back like a Tydisian's."

Curling her lip, Re Halina said, "Well do they?"

"Re Halina!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't bring myself to have a hint of pity for the man responsible for countless deaths. How many have suffered and died during battles he won for the Laetez?"

"You are Laetez."

"That doesn't mean I always agree with their choices or their methods."

"And I don't pity him," Moonlight said. "I mean, I can't say I'm not affected by knowing what he went through, but the man he's become doesn't need anybody's pity, that's for sure."

"Why are you going back? I mean, your mother's release is in process and he pretty much let you go."

"If I don't return and fulfill our bargain, he'll see to it she's sent back to prison. I can't risk it."

Sighing, Re Halina sat back and studied Moonlight carefully. "You're one hell of a daughter."

Moonlight gave a snort of humorless laughter. "Thanks."

"And if you don't mind my saying so, a little kinky."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she demanded. "Are you insinuating I *want* to be with him?"

With a shrug, Re Halina took a sip from her glass of water. "I know you pretty well, Moonlight, and you're not talking about this guy in the same way as before you met him in person."

"If not for him, Jola would still be alive. You think anything can change my hatred of him?"

"I didn't think so. I know you like to pretend you're tough and can handle anything, but underneath it all, you can be too compassionate for your own good. He might have been a tortured little tadpole once, but he's grown up to be a fucking poisonous toad. Remember that."

Moonlight glared. "It's hard to forget it when the toad is fucking me every night."

Re Halina's expression softened and she shook her head. "I'm sorry. You don't need another lecture from me."

"Especially considering the whole plan was your brilliant idea."

"It wasn't all my idea. Er Nika had something to do with it. Right now she's stomping around my brain, telling me not to get her involved."

"You're already involved, Er Nika," Moonlight said. Even after so many years of friendship with Re Halina, she still felt it odd that a third party was privy to their every conversation.

For several moments they picked at their food in silence then Re Halina said, "Moonlight, can I ask you something completely inappropriate?"

"Inappropriate? You?" Moonlight teased.

"And on the insensitive side," she admitted. "I'm sorry, but Er Nika and I both have to know."

"What?"

"Does he really have a big purple cock?"

Moonlight placed her fork aside and flung a disgusted look at her friend.

"I'm sorry. I told you it was an insensitive question," Re Halina said. "I've just heard so many stories—"

"Then you've already got your answer, don't you?" Moonlight forced an ultra-sweet smile.

After lunch, Moonlight went shopping, deciding that if she was to spend two weeks with Xenos, she could at least cook decent meals to enjoy. His kitchen only had a few basic fruits, vegetables and nutritional packs that were about as appetizing as eating sand.

At the gate, security combed through every article in her shopping bag before allowing her to pass. Finally arriving at the apartment, she unpacked the groceries, then flopped onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling, pondering the events of the day.

Over the next three days, she didn't see Xenos at all. He left the apartment early in the morning and came home late at night. She told herself she was glad he was kept so busy lately. She'd agreed to stay for two weeks. If he chose not to use her during that time, all the better for her.

Once she woke upon hearing him in the sitting room. An odd excitement had coiled in her belly and she'd considered getting out of bed and talking to him, then decided against it. Her feelings for him, once so clean cut and simple, now worried her. How could a man she hated interest her? How could so ugly a creature stir her passion? It frustrated her to admit he was a far better lover than the men she'd had in the past.

Already she longed for Xenos to claim her again, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing it. If he wanted her, then he could come to her. It was bad enough she'd used her body to bargain with him. She refused to give him the added bonus of having her beg him to fuck her.

She had so many questions about him. One in particular plagued her mind. What had happened to him during the five years he'd disappeared after gaining his freedom from Aquavalley? She told herself it didn't matter, that she could not let her curiosity overcome her reason.

Moonlight didn't waste her freedom, but spent her days jogging on the beach, visiting public buildings in the capital city and spending as much time as she could with Re Halina. Her mother's release went through as promised, and during a phone conversation, her sister said their mother was to arrive on Earth by the end of the week.

On the fourth night, Moonlight decided to take a warm, relaxing shower before retiring. She used a new fruit-scented fizzy gel, enjoying the delicious aroma that filled the steamy shower. The water flow slowed and she sighed with contentment. After drying off, she rubbed scented lotion into her skin, combed her hair and wrapped the towel around her middle.

She stepped into her room and gave a yelp of surprise upon seeing Xenos seated on the bed.

"You scared the hell out of me!" she snapped.

He didn't speak, nor did his expression change. He stood and approached her. Instinctively, Moonlight took a step back, then another. Fear coiled in her belly, but also excitement. Xenos continued advancing on her until she felt the cool pressure of the wall behind her shoulders. Unable to tear her gaze from his, she noticed there was something slightly different about him, especially through the eyes.

Now that they stood so close, her back against the wall and his hands braced on either side of her head, she realized he looked unusually strained. She nearly asked him what was wrong, but decided not to. Why should she care?

Xenos took her face in his hands and she drew a sharp breath of anticipation, wondering if he was going to kiss her after all. His blue gaze held hers and her knees almost turned to water, yet she held herself upright and tried to keep her expression cool and collected.

His hands trailed down her face and neck, finally resting on her shoulders. He'd removed his gloves, so she felt his warm, silky flesh directly against hers. Strength emanated from him, though at the same time she saw need burning deep in his eyes.

Impossible. Xenos Nineteen didn't need anything from anybody, of that she was certain.

With a swift tug, he jerked the towel from her body, leaving her naked and completely vulnerable to him. She gasped in surprise, but remained still, her chin lifted and her eyes on his. He bent his head and ran his lips down the side of neck and along her shoulder.

Reaching between her legs, he massaged gently with his palm while his fingers circled her pussy lips, then dipped inside to explore. His tongue snaked around her ear and the very tip swirled inside it, making her quiver with lust. Continuing to stroke her pussy, he used his other hand to tease her breasts. He kneaded them and flicked his thumb over her nipples. Instantly, they stiffened to his touch and Moonlight wished he'd run his wet, velvety tongue over them.

Moaning softly, she arched against him. She slid her hands beneath his shirt and caressed his back, curious to finally feel that odd Tydisian flesh. Rather than slimy or scaly, it felt like satin against her palms. She ran the pads of her fingers over it in feathery motions. His soft groan of pleasure inspired her and she continued caressing. If only he'd remove his clothes so she could explore him more freely.

She trembled, both from the stimulation of his touch and from the pleasure of touching him. Her drenched pussy grew even hotter and tightened rhythmically around his stroking fingers.

A low growl escaped his throat, the sound of it rumbled in her ear, increasing her desire even more. He took a step back and quickly shed his clothes. Before she had a chance to fully admire his athletic form, he covered her again. His knees bent and the tip of his cock prodded her slick entrance before he filled her ever so slowly. For several seconds he stood, buried to the hilt, his hands braced against the wall. Moonlight relished the feel of his thick, steely cock buried deep in her pussy.

Her hands roamed over him freely. Her fingertips traced the taut muscles of his broad shoulders and ran down his spine. She clutched his rock-hard buttocks and swept her palms over his lean waist and narrow hips. Closing her eyes, she arched her head back, allowing his teeth, tongue and lips easier access to her neck. He took full advantage, licking, sucking and nipping until she thought she might die from the pleasure.

Then he began thrusting, fucking her fast, hard and with a desperation she'd never felt before. Rather than hurt her, his powerful thrusts turned her on. Something told her he could have handled her a lot rougher, but he restrained himself, probably because he realized the damage his mixed breed body could do to a mere human female.

Being claimed by this sensual beast thrilled her. She hated herself for enjoying it, but was unable to stop the waves of ecstasy breaking over her.

"Please," she panted. "Please don't stop, Xenos. Keep fucking me. I'm almost—" Her sentence ended in a drawn out cry of pleasure. She pulsed around his thick, steely cock, sending him over the edge.

Growling, animal-like, he quickened his pace for several more thrusts, then came long and hard. Panting, he leaned against her, his big, warm body pressing her against the wall. If he hadn't been supporting her, she probably would have melted onto the floor.

Finally he straightened and she staggered a bit. He glanced at her with his almond-shaped eyes narrowed even more in contemplation before he swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and tossed her upon it. She lay on her back, hoping he'd join her on the bed, but to her disappointment, he picked up his clothes and held them in one hand.

All the while, his piercing eyes remained fixed on her, seeming to reach her very soul. He turned back to the bed, caressed her belly, then her breast, before silently walking out the door, leaving her alone and longing for his company in a way she never thought possible.

* * * * *

In his room, Xenos lay naked on his bed, his arms folded behind his head and his gaze fixed on the ceiling. Moonlight's scent still clung to him and he could almost feel her soft, warm body pressed close to his. If he wasn't so preoccupied, he would take her again, but the meetings with the judges had him on edge. Things were going as he had expected, but not as he'd hoped.

Prime Re Vic obviously wanted an alliance with the Drapers at any cost. The rights of ACT products were insignificant. They had been allowed a taste of freedom, now it would be taken away by their pure-blooded creators. These meetings were most likely a waste of his time, yet he needed to make one last attempt to manipulate the law. Besides, these meetings provided enough time to ensure his alternative plan was ready to be put into action.

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed. These meetings had stirred old memories—painful, shameful memories of his years in Aquavalley. Caged, drugged and mutilated. Talked through rather than to.

Since preparation for the meetings had begun, he'd scarcely slept. Maybe fucking Moonlight had relaxed him somewhat, because moments later he drifted to sleep. Memories of Aquavalley filled his nightmares. He awoke sweat-drenched and panting, his heart pounding as if he'd been swimming for miles against the tide.

"Xenos," Moonlight called from outside his door.

Taking several seconds to collect himself, he replied, "Yes?"

"Are you...is something wrong?"

"No. Why?"

"I thought I heard you shout."

"Go back to sleep, Santos Gama," he ordered, not quite succeeding in keeping the growl from his voice. She didn't speak again, and after a moment, he relaxed onto his back.

He wasn't actually irritated with her, but at himself. It annoyed him that his dreams had run away with him. Tydisians were masters of their own minds and could even direct their dreams. He had learned such techniques when he'd lived on Tydepth. Back then, he'd been plagued by nightmares often, mostly of the private lab, but his mentor, a wise Tydisian named Tepidat, had taught him how to control his mind. It had been a long time since he'd been overpowered by a nightmare. He hated how it made him feel and the memories it conjured.

* * * * *

After awakening to Xenos' shouting in his sleep, Moonlight found it impossible to drift off again herself. For the remainder of the night, she lay tossing and turning in bed. Shortly after sunrise, she washed, dressed and went to the kitchen for breakfast.

She'd bought fresh fruit and planned to make her favorite old Earth recipe, fruit crepes.

No sooner had she arranged the ingredients on the table and begun mixing a syrup of fresh berries than Xenos stepped into the kitchen. His cool blue eyes swept her before he filled a glass with water and stood near the counter, sipping from it.

"Would you like breakfast?" she asked, still hesitant to speak to him other than when absolutely necessary.

"Do you always make such a production out of meals?" He gestured toward the ingredients, bowls and spoons on the table. "Nutritional packs are more efficient."

"And they taste like garbage."

His lips curled up in the hint of a smile. "Units survive on them for months in the field."

"I'm making crepes," she said, continuing to stir the sauce. "Would you like —"

He placed his glass aside and stood behind her, one powerful arm wrapped around her waist. Pressed close to him, her body reacted instantly. Her stomach tightened and her nipples tingled, firming to hard peaks outlined starkly against her thin, sleeveless shirt. His hand covered hers and he dipped her fingers into the sauce, then lifted her hand to her mouth so that she had no choice but to suck her own fingers or smear her face with fruit.

While she sucked, he released her hand so that he could fondle her breasts. He cupped each one and gently squeezed, then brushed his thumb over her nipples. Even through her clothes, his touch aroused her, making her hot, wet and aching for him to claim her.

Simultaneously, Xenos tugged down her pants and underwear. One at a time, she lifted her bare feet so he could remove her clothes and toss them aside. He swept her

into his arms, carried her to the counter and placed her atop it. He dragged over a chair and sat in it, parting her knees and stroking her inner thighs. In spite of the excitement darting through her, she said, "Don't you ever use this kitchen to eat?"

A wicked smile touched his lips and he replied, "I'm about to."

He buried his face between her legs and lapped her ultra-sensitive flesh.

Moonlight knew better than to resist and she didn't want to. While he licked, sucked and used the very tips of his canines to tease her, she ran her hands over his shoulders. The sensations seemed to boost her courage and she cupped his head in her hands, her fingertips roaming over it, noting the subtle differences in his flesh.

His multihued scalp and brow were very warm and silky, like the patches of Tydisian flesh on his back and chest. The skin by his eyes and on his cheeks felt more human or Laetez. She swept her thumbs over the bumps she'd learned covered his highly sensitive, internal ears.

Her exploration ceased when he began devouring her in a fast, steady rhythm that soon had her writhing on the countertop. Had he not steadied her by the hips, she probably would have slipped onto the floor.

"Oh gods," she panted, clutching his shoulders hard, her fingers biting through his uniform shirt.

He continued the steady licking until she exploded, panting and squirming in a breath-stealing orgasm. After a moment, she relaxed backward onto her hands, her eyes closed and pulse returning to normal.

"Isn't it funny, Santos Gama, how the body doesn't give a damn what the mind believes?"

"What?" she asked drowsily, opening her eyes halfway to stare at him. Why must everything be such a chore with him? Couldn't he simply enjoy the moment without mind games?

"Unless through my gracious hospitality you're losing your hatred of me?" he said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Hardly." She curled her lip and opened her eyes fully. "Would you please move so I can get my clothes?"

Tilting his head slightly to one side, he studied her with an amused expression on his face. He stood, kicked the chair backward and stepped between her legs. Moonlight gritted her teeth in combined lust and annoyance as he grasped the hem of her shirt and pulled it upward. She didn't struggle against him and allowed him to remove her shirt.

Now she sat fully naked, shivering a bit since the room was cool. Dark pink berrylike nipples tipped her rounded breasts. He swept his thumbs over them, then bent and took most of one breast into his mouth. His sharp teeth grazed the tender flesh and his velvety tongue swirled over her nipple.

Moonlight drew a sharp breath and clenched her hands into fists, refusing to touch him this time, no matter how much she wanted to. He took his time with her, not

leaving one nipple until it practically stung with pleasure-pain before moving to the other.

Desire rekindled inside her. He used his teeth on her nipple and pushed two fingers inside her, gathering moisture that he used to fondle her clit, driving her toward another climax.

Panting and writhing, she hovered on the brink when he abruptly stopped all motion. She opened her eyes and met his gaze, noting amusement and arousal.

"What?" she murmured. "Why did you stop?"

"You'd like me to continue?"

What the hell was his game? He must know she wanted him to finish.

"I don't care," she said with far more conviction than she felt. "I'm here to do as you want. That was the deal."

The slightest smile touched his dark blue lips and he stroked her clit a few more times, making her squirm in spite of herself. A few more rubs like that and she'd come whether he intended her to or not.

As if sensing her limits, he withdrew his fingers just before she exploded. Still wearing that irritating half-smile, he stepped away.

Moonlight would not degrade herself even more by finishing the job he'd abandoned right in front of him.

He turned and left the kitchen and Moonlight sighed with relief. Dipping a hand between her legs, she closed her eyes and rubbed, her pulse racing and clit tingling as she neared her climax.

Strong hands grasped her wrists and she screamed in surprise, her eyes flying open and fixing on Xenos, who had stealthily returned. He pinned her hands beside her on the counter, covered her swollen little nub with his lips and lapped, hurling her into an orgasm so intense that for several moments the world seemed to go black. When her senses fully returned, she found herself leaning heavily against him, her cheek resting on his shoulder. His arms were wrapped lightly around her, his warmth seeping into her even through the barrier of his clothes.

Furious with him and herself, she straightened and hopped down from the counter, shoving past him and stooping to gather her clothes.

He grasped her upper arm and hauled her to her feet. "We're not finished. You've felt the pleasure of my lips and tongue several times now, Santos Gama. It's time for you to reciprocate."

Moonlight moistened her lips and her pulse quickened again. Stimulating him orally was something she'd fantasized about almost since the first time she'd seen his big, purplish-blue cock. Part of her hated the idea of giving him such pleasure while another part could scarcely wait to feel the thick, smooth crown of his erection against her tongue.

He tugged her into the sitting room where the floors were carpeted, pushed her onto her knees and stood in front of her, dropping his trousers. His engorged cock thrust toward her, the balls tight beneath. The beautifully veined staff summoned her touch.

Moonlight reached for it, but he grasped her wrist snugly and said, "If you're thinking about biting it off, it grows back."

His words jerked her back to reality—the reality that she was here with an emotionless mongrel, conditioned by pain and spawned in a chamber of horrors that no living creature should endure. That he would even suspect she'd try to maim him in the midst of lovemaking surprised and saddened her in a way she'd never expected to feel in regards to this monster.

"I wouldn't do that," she stated, meeting his gaze.

He lifted an eyebrow, gave a snort of contempt and released her wrist.

Edging closer, she grasped his cock and guided its head toward her lips. Her hands stroked the hard, velvety shaft while her tongue flicked over the bulging head.

Moonlight closed her eyes, enjoying his scent, taste and feel. She licked him from head to stem and back again. Her hands squeezed and stroked his staff and sac then wandered over his steely thighs.

His long, powerful legs fascinated her, as did every inch of his beautiful, hairless body. While she sucked faster and deeper, holding his quivering staff steady with one hand, she used her other to slide under his shirt and caress his taut abs and lean sides.

Xenos had remarkable control over his body. Only toward the end of his endurance, when her wet tongue teased the underside of his cock, did she recognize the signs of impending orgasm. He growled, animal-like, a distinctly Tydisian sound, and his hips rocked a bit. His breathing quickened and she felt the tension in his body.

Drawing him deep into her mouth, she sucked hard.

With an especially savage growl, he came, his body stiff and straining.

He quickly withdrew his softening cock from her mouth and hitched up his trousers. Still on her knees, Moonlight looked up and held his smoldering gaze for several seconds before he walked to his room.

He must have left through his office, because she didn't see him again. Still, he remained firmly in her thoughts throughout the day. Xenos wasn't a man easily forgotten.

Chapter Five

Enlightenment

Moonlight learned by listening to newscasts that Xenos had taken part in this year's law negotiations. He'd spoken for ACT, attempting to sway the judges toward keeping the current laws regarding private labs. At least that explained his absence over the past week. The last day of the meetings, he and his secretary, a rather pleasant human-Laetez soldier named Doug Judson, arrived at the apartment around dusk and spent several hours locked in Xenos' office.

After Judson left, Xenos joined Moonlight in the kitchen where she was cleaning up her dinner dishes. He drank a glass of water and filled another.

"Would you like something to eat?" she asked.

"Not right now," he replied. "I'm leaving for an hour or so. Be ready for me when I get back."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't report to you."

Her jaw tightened and she bit her tongue to keep from pointing out exactly how rude he was.

"I was just trying to make conver —"

"Rule number one. I don't require conversation."

"Or kissing," she added. "Yes. I remember. Then I won't bother asking how the meetings with the judges went this week."

He raised an eyebrow. "You know about that?"

"I do listen to the news, you know. Everyone is talking about the annual law negotiations. Do you think they'll keep the current laws for the private labs?"

"I doubt it. Prime Re Vic and his Chiefs want an alliance with the Drapers. They'll influence the judges to adjust the laws to their satisfaction."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Afraid your mother will get tossed in prison for protesting again?"

"Actually, I was thinking about the ACT products and their rights."

He stared at her hard, as if trying to decide whether or not to believe her. After a moment, he headed out of the kitchen, then paused. He turned back to her and his gaze swept her from head to toe in a manner that sent a quiver of desire down her spine. "I'm going swimming," he said.

Moonlight's heart fluttered. He was answering her earlier question after all and she wondered why. Was it possible that, in his strange way, he was extending an invitation to join him?

There was one way to find out.

She asked, "May I go with you?"

"Change quickly," he ordered.

She strode to her room and dressed in shorts and a sleeveless shirt since she hadn't brought a swimsuit. She grabbed a towel from the bathroom, then met Xenos in the sitting room where he sat on the couch, waiting, one long leg crossed over the other.

At this time of night, few people mingled in the halls at the residence. He guided her down several corridors and through double doors. He used a touchpad to turn on the ceiling lights and Moonlight saw that they stood in a spacious room containing an enormous tank, rather like a giant aquarium, minus the rocks and plants. A long ladder led to the open top of the tank.

Xenos walked to the three lockers across the room and opened one. He undressed and donned snug black swim shorts. Moonlight didn't bother averting her eyes, but studied every line of his gorgeous body. That wonderful sexual ache started deep in her belly.

He turned and headed toward the ladder, glancing at her over his shoulder. "Come on."

"I didn't know the residence had training rooms in it," she said, following him to the ladder and climbing up after him.

"This was specially built. Only two others beside me are permitted to use it."

"S-Master Yashel and Master Zale."

"You've done your homework."

"They're the only other free citizens of your origins, correct?"

"Correct." Reaching the top of the ladder, he dropped into the water. His eyes closed and an almost contented expression passed over his face.

"Are you more comfortable in water than out?" she asked.

"I have Tydisian skin and it requires more moisture than that of humans or Laetez. This week, I've been too busy to hydrate as much as I prefer."

At least that explained why he drank so much water.

"Is it true you can breathe and drink through your skin?" she asked, sticking a foot into the water. It was cooler than she would have liked.

He stared at her, a mocking half-smile on his lips. "Coming in?"

Raising an eyebrow, she drew a deep breath and dropped into the water. Hell, it was cold and she guessed about twenty feet deep.

"Can you?" she prompted.

"Yes, I can breathe and drink through my skin, but only through the multihued patches. I'm sure you've noticed those."

"Yes," she said, swimming toward him. An odd sensation darted through her, knowing the water below her was probably deeper than any she'd ever swum in before. "You have special glands, right?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You're familiar with Tydisians?"

"Actually, I don't know very much about them. I read your biography at the library."

"Should I be flattered or insulted?"

"Why would you be insulted?"

"That depends on your reason for looking me up."

"I was curious, and you did stipulate no conversation, so I could hardly come out and ask you these questions."

Maybe it was the constant swimming to keep afloat, but the water started feeling warmer to her.

Again he studied her with a discerning expression before making a neat surface dive. She glanced down and saw him swim toward the very bottom of the tank. He stayed under for so long that she started to worry, then she remembered what he was. Most likely he could stay submerged for as long as he wanted.

She swam toward the edge of the tank and held on, resting for a moment. A short time later, he surfaced beside her and she gave a startled gasp. A clear film covered his eyes, as if he was staring at her through plastic. Moisture matted his long, wispy lashes and beads of water dripped down his bare, bluish-purple scalp.

"Your eyes —"

"What you're seeing are membranes that protect my eyes underwater," he explained. "If I stay above, they'll retract shortly."

"Doesn't it hinder your vision?"

"Slightly above the surface, but below I can see quite clearly and without irritation from water or chemicals."

"Can you stay under for as long as you want?"

"No, but I'm able to submerge for several hours."

"Hours," she repeated, her voice a whisper. He was a truly amazing creature. Maybe she was getting used to him, but his face didn't seem quite as horrible as when they'd first met. Perhaps he just seemed to fit in an aquatic setting. Here in the water, human and Laetez were inferior and ill equipped, but Xenos was perfectly at home.

"I'm getting cold again," she said. "I think I'll get out."

He nodded and once again ducked below.

Moonlight climbed out of the tank and down the ladder. Shivering, she reached for her towel and wrapped it around her. From where she stood outside the tank, she could

see Xenos clearly through the glass. He swam with such grace and ease that he was beautiful to watch.

He circled the tank several times, then surfaced and climbed down the ladder. At the locker, he dried off with a towel and dressed in his uniform shirt and trousers.

"Let's go back to the apartment," he said. "I can think of several ways to get you warm again."

Their gazes met and a slight smile passed between them.

Moonlight's head spun. This should not be happening. They shouldn't be having an almost normal conversation and they should definitely not be enjoying each other's company outside of the bedroom.

While she couldn't say she felt comfortable in his presence, tonight he seemed almost...human.

Of course, that wasn't entirely impossible. He did have human genes somewhere in the midst of all his Tydisian-Laetez traits.

In the apartment, he gestured for her to join him in his room. She followed him, watching him remove his shirt as he walked. Behind him, she studied the pattern of Tydisian flesh on his back and longed to touch it again.

Moonlight closed the bedroom door behind her and he turned to her. They held each other's gaze as he removed the remainder of his clothes and she shed hers. Stepping toward him, she felt almost lightheaded from excitement. It sickened her that she'd come to feel anything but hatred for him. She tried to tell herself this was merely a coping mechanism that allowed her to pay her debt to him, but deep inside she knew the truth.

When she stood so near that their bodies almost touched, he grasped a handful of hair at the back of her head and tugged. Her neck arched and he ran his tongue along the length of it, then followed the trail with a feather-light scraping of his upper canines. She shivered with passion at the feel of his velvety tongue and cool, sharp teeth against her flesh.

His hand covered her left breast and squeezed gently. Moonlight's pulse quickened and she sighed with contentment. She placed her hand over his on her breast as he continued stroking the soft sphere. Then he swept his palm down her side and over her hip, finally dipping his fingers between her legs and caressing. His touch made her weak with desire and she placed a hand on his shoulder to steady herself.

Growling deep in his throat, he released her hair, grasped her waist and hauled her close, burying his lips against the side of her neck. He nuzzled, licked and nipped until she writhed and giggled softly.

"That tickles," she purred.

He grunted in reply and continued teasing her shoulder before sweeping her into his arms and sitting on the bed. Moonlight repositioned herself so she straddled his lap, her arms around his neck and their noses almost touching. From here they were so close

she could count his long, chestnut lashes and see the soft gray rings around his blue irises.

Staring so intimately into his eyes both unsettled and thrilled her. It was like baring her innermost soul to the wildest, most powerful creature in the galaxy. He had the authority of life and death over her. No doubt he could snap her like a twig, shred her with his savage teeth. Or if he preferred a more civilized mode of destruction, he had the legal power to imprison her, stealing her freedom and her reputation.

He slid his hands beneath her ass and squeezed. Moonlight drew an excited breath as he lifted her just enough for the tip of his swollen cock to enter her hot, wet pussy. Bracing her hands against his shoulders, she slowly lowered herself onto his staff, feeling his warm, velvety flesh fill her. She began rocking upon him. Waves of delightfully frustrating pleasure rolled through her, edging her closer and closer to orgasm.

As her desire grew, her eyes closed partway and his did as well, his long lashes casting shadows on his pale bluish face. His darker blue lips parted slightly, revealing the brilliant white tips of his fangs.

The urge to kiss him overcame her and she leaned closer. Just before her lips touched his, he turned his face away and growled—not a sexual sound, but one of warning. Somehow, she instinctively knew the difference and a twinge of fear darted through her. She drew a sharp breath and jerked her head back slightly, her body stiffening. Placing his hands on her hips, he held her snugly and thrust upward until desire once again overcame her and she resumed her sensual rocking.

As pleasure grew, her motions quickened. Her eyes slipped shut and her fingers gripped his steely shoulders tightly. Coherent thoughts vanished from her mind, replaced by sensations of breathtaking ecstasy.

Moaning and writhing, she came, her passion drenched body pulsing around his thick, hard cock. With a contented sigh, she melted against him, her head resting against his shoulder and her hands on his lean sides.

Before she'd completely recovered, he stood, his arms fully supporting her, and placed her on her back. His body covered hers swiftly and he thrust into her possessively. Moonlight's breath caught and she clung to him. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she allowed him to take complete control of her—not that she had much choice. He pumped so fast and hard that she couldn't have kept up with his rhythm if she wanted to.

"Oh gods, Xenos," she gasped, her eyes closed and body trembling as she quickly neared another climax. Her body racked with pleasure-pain, she knew a powerful orgasm waited just around the corner.

His grunts and growls echoed in her ear, arousing her to a fevered pitch. His rock-hard, satin-skinned weapon drove into her, flinging her headlong into ecstasy. Nothing could have prepared her for the intensity of the orgasm that nearly hurled her into

oblivion. Crying out incoherently, she clung to him so tightly it must have caused him pain, but he didn't seem to care.

Xenos' hot, tight body stiffened atop her. His hips jerked hard, demanding every last bit of pleasure as he climaxed.

She must have drifted off for several seconds, because when she opened her eyes, she was lying beside him, close, but not quite touching him. Resting on his back, Xenos' half-open eyes stared straight ahead. He looked relaxed, but she could almost see the thoughts churning inside his head.

Usually when they finished, they parted ways, but at the moment she didn't feel like moving. Not only did she feel pleasantly numb, but for some reason she wanted him nearby. This was wrong. A mistake, but she indulged herself anyway.

"May I stay for a few minutes?" she asked.

His cool gaze turned to her and she nearly left the bed, assuming a cuddle after lovemaking was out of the question. How could he live like this? Didn't he feel empty, having sex without emotion?

"You may," he replied in his usual aloof tone.

The ridiculousness of the situation struck her, but somehow she refrained from laughing. Instinct told her he wouldn't appreciate it.

The humor of the moment passed quickly and she lay on her side, staring at him. Xenos made no motion to touch her and once again fixed his gaze across the room. He blinked, those shockingly pretty eyelashes once again catching her attention. His lashes were the only hairs on his smooth, sleek body.

Moonlight lifted her hand tentatively and it hovered over the strip of multihued flesh running down his breastbone. Resting her hand on it lightly, she smoothed her fingertips over it, once again enchanted by its silky feel. His blue gaze darted toward her hand and he watched her explore his unusual, yet oddly attractive, skin.

"Do Yashel and Zale have skin like this anywhere?" she asked.

"No."

"Yet they have your genes? Some articles at the library called them your brothers."

His expression seemed to freeze and he said in a soft, yet dangerous, voice, "Brothers? You've met Yashel. Do we look like brothers?"

The relaxed, almost pleasant sensations drained from Moonlight and fear coiled inside her. For a few moments, she had almost forgotten what he was. With a man like Xenos, such complacency could be fatal.

"I didn't mean...I was just curious," she said.

"I've noticed that about you." He took her chin in his hand, not allowing her to turn away from him. "Would you like me to satisfy your curiosity, Santos Gama?"

"Only if you don't cut anything off," she replied, meeting his gaze with confidence in spite of how she quivered inside. The more time she spent with him, the more she

began to know him. He didn't appreciate weakness. Subservience, yes. He enjoyed that, but not weakness. A man like him could neither understand nor forgive it.

He smiled humorlessly. "No. Nothing like that. Get up. Get showered and dressed." He rose from the bed and she sat up, about to stand, but once again he cupped her chin in his hand. His thumb brushed across her lips, his webbing tickling a bit. "Tonight we're going out, my sweet."

Xenos released her abruptly and strode to the bathroom. For a moment, Moonlight remained on the bed, listening to water run in the shower. What the hell had she gotten herself into now?

* * * * *

A short time later, Moonlight found herself seated beside Xenos in his sleek, black two-person shuttle.

The shuttle darted over the beach, past the ACT training facilities, the vast outdoor obstacle course and the airbase.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Lab 1A," he replied. "To satisfy your curiosity."

Moonlight's stomach tightened. She had no desire to visit any lab, even a government regulated one. Her mother's activist work had influenced her and she questioned the morality of ACT. Yes, some important medical breakthroughs had been made because of the program, but did that excuse the suffering of ACT products? Did it justify creating military monsters who lacked the ability to feel normal emotions?

Sometimes, she felt she had no right to question anything. She enjoyed the freedom provided by a strong government and the alliance between humans and Laetez. She had no right to say whether or not cures should be available for those suffering from diseases she had thankfully never experienced. Yet at the same time, she couldn't help thinking about Xenos hacking off a finger because he knew it would grow back—knew because he'd been held down and butchered to satisfy scientific curiosity.

They stopped in the shuttle dock outside a vast white building. The guard at the door greeted Xenos by name and checked their security passes. Then they took an elevator to the third floor where they walked down a long, brightly lit corridor.

Finally they paused in front of a door at the end of the hall. He opened it and they stepped inside. Moonlight's eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness and the eerie blue and green lights glowing softly above several rows of enormous tanks, similar to Xenos' training tank, except these greatly resembled oversized aquariums, complete with rocks, sand and vegetation. They were actually quite beautiful and Moonlight found it difficult to tear her gaze away.

A young woman in white medical uniform approached. "Superior Xenos. Good evening, Sir. We weren't expecting you."

"Medic Re Hollis. It wasn't a planned visit. Carry on your work. We won't disturb you."

"Yes, Sir." She nodded and cast a curious glance in Moonlight's direction before walking to the far end of the room and sitting behind a computer terminal.

"This way," Xenos said, placing a hand on Moonlight's lower back and nudging her toward one of the tanks. Even through the barriers of his glove and her clothes, his warmth seeped into her. The contact felt most welcome, and when he removed his hand, she almost wished he'd touch her again.

Pausing in front of the tank, he said, "Look there. Behind the cave."

Moonlight narrowed her eyes, straining to see through the dimly lit water. Then she caught the slightest movement amidst the rocks and greenish-blue reeds. A thickly muscled creature with a disproportionately small head floated in the water. Its round, close-set eyes fixed on them and its malformed lips curled back, revealing jagged white teeth.

"Xenos Eleven. He's shy of strangers," Xenos said.

Unsure of what to say, Moonlight tore her gaze from the tank and glanced at Xenos Nineteen, whose expression remained unreadable.

They visited several tanks, each containing creatures that were obvious mixes of Tydisian blood. Some appeared more humanoid than others, each with severe deformities. Small heads and multiple limbs seemed to be the most common problems.

"Can any of them survive out of water?" Moonlight finally asked.

"Not for long," he replied. "Nor do they have normal brain function. They're fairly passive, however, which is what saved them from euthanasia."

They continued throughout the lab. Reaching the last tank, he turned to her and asked, "Satisfied?"

"In what way?"

"You were curious about my lineage." He extended his hand toward the rows of tanks. "Here it is. At least what's left of it."

Moonlight nodded. What was his reason for bringing her here? Was it to prove this was the reason he could never truly relate to her or anyone else? The insinuation that Yashel and Zale were his brothers angered him, yet these inferior creatures he called his lineage. Of course he was right, yet how could he link himself so closely to these abominations? They had his skin and teeth, but beyond that she saw no similarities. At least not where it mattered.

Maybe the fact that they were still imprisoned struck a chord within him. He could relate to their situation, but whatever he might think, he was not like them. Yet it didn't matter what *she* believed.

The tank's inhabitant lifted a webbed, three-fingered hand and placed it on the glass. Xenos raised his gloved hand and placed it on the tank, his gaze locking with the

creature's. "They would be mistreated in private labs," he spoke softly, more to himself than to her.

She felt a pang of compassion and waves of disgust. If the current laws were revoked, who knew what would happen to these ACT products? Victims was a more appropriate word.

Stepping back from the tank, Xenos turned to her. "You have questions?"

"No, I don't think so," she whispered.

"Then you've seen enough?"

Moonlight nodded. "Unless you'd like to stay longer?"

His gaze fixed on her, yet she couldn't decide what he was thinking. That in itself unsettled her. Without a word, he strode toward the exit, Moonlight close behind him.

They rode home in silence, and when they reached the apartment, she asked, "Are you hungry?" She knew he hadn't yet eaten dinner, so it seemed a normal question. She wanted to break the silence between them, but hadn't been quite sure how.

"No. I'm going to bed." He held her gaze and the faintest smile touched his lips. "Pleasant dreams, Santos Gama."

"Xenos?"

"Yes."

She stepped closer to him, tilting her face up toward his. For some strange reason she wanted to touch him, and not just physically. She wanted to offer him something he'd never had before—a tiny portion of his birthright that had been stolen from him by ACT. Staring into his icy blue eyes, she knew he would not accept it. He'd rejected her kiss earlier. It wasn't part of their arrangement.

Sighing, she said, "Goodnight, Xenos."

He nodded abruptly and turned from her. Moonlight watched him disappear into his room, closing the door behind him.

Sighing deeply, she walked to her room, undressed and climbed into bed. Falling asleep proved difficult. She kept thinking about what she'd seen at the lab that night and about the strange relationship developing between her and the most unlikely man in the universe.

* * * * *

Rather than go directly to bed, Xenos walked to his office and sat at his desk. He searched on his personal computer, sorting through the casualties from the battles on Blackstar Base. Though one of many battles he'd fought in his lifetime, he remembered it clearly.

Draper spies had been infiltrating what should have been a neutral base. At the time, he'd been commander of the unit sent to capture the base and flush out the spies.

He'd done his duty with his usual swiftness. Many free citizens, including Draper, human and Laetez, had died during the capture and interrogations.

Toward the middle of the list, he found the name Jola Alexander. Further reading stated she had been killed during the initial capture. The next name on the list was Martin Alexander, highlighted, indicating he had been a possible spy for the Drapers. Apparently he had died in questioning before the truth could be extracted.

Xenos had been molded as an ACT soldier since the moment of his creation. He did his job well and without the hindrance of emotions. Guilt was a foreign concept, and while he had done his duty, he could understand Moonlight's anger toward him. Even if her friend, Jola, had connections to a spy, had perhaps been a spy herself, Moonlight felt a link to her.

Such bonds were common, even necessary, among most species. They were a characteristic of beings spawned in a natural environment. Being concocted in a lab, Xenos didn't have those needs. His womb had been a lifeless shell, without pulse, breath or voice.

The mocking insinuation that Yashel and Zale were his brothers still galled him. They had grown inside a human woman and been touched by ungloved hands. They still didn't know if their limbs had the power of regeneration because the government lab where they'd been studied had deemed such testing unnecessarily cruel.

Moonlight had even less comprehension about the sort of man Xenos was. The hate he'd found so titillating had faded over the past week, replaced by morbid curiosity and, even worse, compassion. He'd tried to enlighten her, show her what she was dealing with, but the woman had been too heavily influenced by her bleeding heart activist mother.

Scowling, he turned off the computer, stalked to his room and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He could try making their physical encounters a little less pleasant, but rape had never appealed to him. It reminded him too much of life in a private lab.

He drifted to sleep and awoke a few hours later to a beeping spec. He sat up and switched it on. The face of Chief Re Lord's secretary filled the screen.

"Superior Xenos, Chief Re Lord wants to meet with you, Zale and Yashel in one hour at his residence."

"I'm on my way," Xenos replied. He rose swiftly, washed and dressed.

When he arrived at the Chief's residence, Zale was already waiting and Yashel joined them moments later. Apparently, the Chief was in need of their special aquatic unit.

"Any indication of what this meeting is about?" Yashel asked, glancing from Xenos to Zale.

"No," they replied simultaneously.

Before their conversation could continue, Chief Re Lord's secretary joined them. He guided them to the Chief's office, then left them alone.

Re Lord wasted no time before explaining why they'd been summoned.

"Intelligence has reported that the Cuthtez have military stationed among their aquatic exploration team in the Re Chet Sea on Phanteppe," the Chief stated.

The Laetez had once been part of the Cuthtez, but had left their home planet generations ago. The Laetez had expanded until they had nearly surpassed the Cuthtez in strength and technology. Since then, the rivalry between them had kept both planets on the brink of war. Phanteppe was a neutral planet located between the Cuthtez and Laetez home worlds. Both peoples had agreed to use its many natural resources for scientific and agricultural purposes, but military activity was strictly prohibited.

"We believe they're setting up an aquatic base," Re Lord continued. "If that's the case, then we must act."

"You want us to see if the reports are true," Yashel said.

"Correct," Re Lord stated. "And if they are, you must deal with the situation."

They were expected to destroy the base.

As always when preparing for a dangerous mission, Xenos' senses came alive and his brain combed through every possible detail regarding his situation.

"The Cuthtez have never breached our treaty before," Xenos said.

Re Lord's sharp gaze darted toward him. "There's a first time for everything."

"I was simply wondering why they would choose an underwater base on Phanteppe. They can't match our aquatic teams and the planet has worked well for both sides as a neutral point."

"Just because their treachery makes no sense to you doesn't mean it's not happening," Re Lord said coolly.

"If the base exists, we will find it, Sir," Yashel said, glancing from Re Lord to Xenos.

"I don't doubt you will," the Chief said.

While Re Lord continued providing further details, Xenos listened carefully, controlling his loathing of the Chief. He and Re Lord had never cared for one another, and lately the rift between them had grown.

As the Chief in charge of ACT, Re Lord showed little real concern for the program itself. To him, it was a way of gaining power for himself and for the Laetez. To him, ACT products were slaves to pure-blooded species. No one could call Xenos overly sensitive, but he had enough experience with people to know who considered him inferior and who did not.

Once the meeting with Re Lord ended, Xenos spoke briefly with Yashel and Zale. They would meet at the airbase in two hours to prepare for their mission.

On his way back to his apartment, Xenos tried to control the nagging sensation that something about this mission was not right. He found it difficult to believe the Cuthtez

would invest in such a base at this time when their aquatic technology couldn't compete with that of the Laetez. In spite of the tension between both species, neither was eager to engage in a full scale war with their closest relatives in the galaxy. Whether or not intelligence reports proved accurate, this mission would be dangerous.

Stepping into the apartment, he heard water running in the shower.

Moonlight. What was he to do with her? She still owed him several days, and while he was far from bored with her luscious body, he began to see the mistake in their arrangement.

He entered her room just as she stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her middle. Her large eyes widened a bit in surprise, then a quirky smile touched her lips and she said, "You have got to learn to knock."

"Get dressed and collect your things. When you leave today, security will destroy your pass."

"What?" She took a step toward him. "We had a deal. My mother's freedom—"

"Your mother's freedom is already secure. You know that. I will be leaving today, so there is no point in you staying here."

"Leaving? Where?"

He cast her a chilling look that usually silenced anyone unlucky enough to be faced with it.

A flicker of fear darted across Moonlight's face, but as usual, the woman was too stubborn and stupid to obey her own survival instincts. "Is it something dangerous?" she asked. "Most Superiors spend their time behind a desk, but from what I've read, you're still used in the field."

"That's classified. Where did you find that information?"

Her eyes widened. "I read it at the—"

"Don't insult my intelligence by saying you read it on a library file."

"I have a friend who knew someone who worked at ACT headquarters on Earth. Before I decided to come here, they accessed information about you."

"Classified information. It will be easy enough to find out who your connection is and see that they're properly punished."

A smug grin touched her pretty lips. "Too late. She's already been discharged."

"Humans are a pathetic, dishonorable species," he observed.

"You are human," she reminded him.

"Scarcely," he said and took her chin in his hand, squeezing a bit harder than necessary. Her moist pink lips puffed out a bit and he had the mad urge to kiss them. "I expect you to be ready to leave in ten minutes."

"When you return, I imagine you'll contact me so that I can pay the remainder of my debt?"

"Consider your debt paid." He released her chin, but continued holding her gaze. "I have no further use for you, Santos Gama."

Emotion sparked her eyes and her jaw tightened visibly. They stared at each other for a moment and he couldn't quite pinpoint the exciting, yet frustrating, sensations churning between them.

"Glad to hear it," she said. "Will you allow me privacy to dress or do you intend to watch?"

Grasping her upper arms, he dragged her close so that their lips almost touched. He glared into her eyes, his gloved fingers biting into her flesh. "I might if I had more time." His voice sounded rougher than he'd intended. This woman annoyed and aroused him more than he wanted to admit.

He knew his grip must hurt her, but she refused to show it. Growling, he released her and left the room.

A short time later, he stood with Moonlight at the gate while security destroyed her pass. He had arranged for a shuttle to take her to her friend's home in the city.

Outside the gate, they faced each other and a strange feeling swept over him, much like the previous night when she'd tried to kiss him in the midst of sex. It wasn't that he had anything against kissing. He rather liked it, but not with a woman like her, not for so many reasons.

Still, he could almost feel her soft, human lips and warm, wet tongue against his.

"Goodbye," she said softly.

"Goodbye, Santos Gama."

Simultaneously, they turned from each other. At the gate, he glanced over his shoulder and saw she had already disappeared into the shuttle.

He drew a cleansing breath and thrust her from his thoughts.

If he intended to stay alive, he needed to focus completely on the mission ahead.

Chapter Six

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Moonlight arrived at Re Halina's, dizzy from the emotions battling inside her. Finally free of Xenos, and with her mother's freedom secured, she should have felt relieved. Instead, she found herself wishing for just a little more time with him. Part of her still despised him for Jola's death and nothing could excuse his actions, but in learning more about him, she at least found some understanding.

What the hell was wrong with her? She shouldn't want to understand or care about him at all. But she did and her feelings confused and frustrated her. Worst of all, she missed making love with him. She wanted to feel his hands and lips on her body again and she wanted to touch him.

Why hadn't she kissed him before they'd parted? Most likely he would have rejected her again, but perhaps not. Several times she got the feeling he'd wanted to kiss her as well. No doubt he didn't want to deal with the intimacy. With the life he'd led, she guessed tenderness was a foreign concept.

For the remainder of the day, she tried not to think about him. Xenos was out of her life, a brief, shameful chapter best forgotten. She contacted her mother and sister and they expressed concern for her, as well as relief.

"When are you coming home?" her sister asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied. Maybe she'd stay with Re Halina for a while. For some reason, she didn't feel like going home, even to see her mother. Though she didn't exactly blame her mother for what happened, she couldn't help feeling a bit resentful. Of course, that was childish. Her mother had already expressed her guilt and displeasure that Moonlight had made such a horrible bargain with Xenos. She'd called him a few bigoted names she'd never expected her activist mother to use.

After turning off the spec, she cooked a meal she didn't feel much like eating, then listened to the news. Since the yearly law meetings were over, the judges had sealed themselves away in private discussion before making their final decisions. This information only reminded her of Xenos and she hoped he hadn't wasted his time and effort in trying to convince the judges to keep the current laws regarding private labs.

Re Halina arrived home shortly after dusk and greeted Moonlight with a warm embrace.

"How are you?" Re Halina asked, her gaze fixed on Moonlight.

"All right."

"At least he let you go earlier than expected."

"Do you mind if we don't talk about him?"

Re Halina's brow furrowed in concern and she hugged Moonlight again. "Of course not. If there's anything I can do —"

"You've done so much for me already."

Her friend gave a snort of humorless laughter. "Right. I'm the one who got you involved with that beast to begin with."

"You probably saved my mother's life." She wanted to add "and he's not a beast", but couldn't bring herself to form the words. He was still responsible for Jola's death, not to mention if she defended him in any way, she'd most likely have to deal with another lecture from Re Halina. Tonight she simply didn't have the strength.

The women ate dinner, and shortly after, Moonlight excused herself to go to bed. Not that she was tired. She couldn't stop thinking of Xenos. Even when she finally drifted off, he haunted her dreams. She felt his arms around her, his steely grip on her hand as he forced her to drive a knife into his flesh.

Moonlight awoke gasping, her heart pounding.

She thought of Xenos and the creatures in the lab. In her mind, she recalled what she'd read about him in the library files. What hadn't been mentioned in his bio, she surmised from the horror stories she'd heard about private labs.

His iciness terrified her, but when he took her in his arms, he hadn't been cold. Rarely, she'd seen the slightest flicker of emotion in his eyes, caught a hint of the man he might have been if not twisted by people far colder than any lab-created monster.

The stress of the past week finally caught up with her and tears sprang into her eyes. She buried her face in the pillow, stifling sobs.

"Moonlight?" Re Halina called, tapping softly on the door. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

The door opened and her friend, dressed in a pale green nightgown, stepped inside. She sat beside her on the bed. "Want to talk about it?"

Moonlight shook her head. "I don't know how to say it."

"What?" Re Halina placed a hand on her shoulder. "What did that bastard do to you?"

"Not me." Moonlight wiped her eyes and made a vain effort to keep tears from spilling. "It's him. They destroyed him, Re Halina. You can't imagine the life he had. I hate him for what happened to Jola, but gods, he didn't have a chance."

"There's nothing you can do," Re Halina said softly, her hand still resting on Moonlight's shoulder.

"That's the problem. There's nothing anyone can do. They wanted to create a perfect soldier and that's what they did. He's like a fucking machine, or at least that's what I thought. At first I didn't think he could feel anything, but he does. He's angry, Re Halina. So angry. And I don't blame him. Worst of all, I feel for him, but even if I wanted to let him know, he wouldn't accept it. He'd consider it a weakness."

"I wish I'd never arranged for you to meet with him," Re Halina muttered. "I'm so sorry, Moonlight."

"I don't regret it." She turned her gaze to her friend's.

"Moonlight, I can't say I understand how you can feel anything for this guy, but knowing that you do, I can only tell you this—it sounds to me like there's nothing you can do for or about him, so it's best to forget him entirely if you can."

Moonlight forced a sad smile. "That's good advice, but I'm afraid it's impossible."

"You need to find another male."

"No." Moonlight shook her head. "No more men. At least for a while. I've had enough."

"Then maybe I should find one," Re Halina sighed. "I could use a distraction."

Moonlight wiped her eyes and this time smiled genuinely.

"Are you feeling better?" Re Halina asked.

"Yes. Thanks. Sorry to disturb you."

"You didn't."

"Re Halina, would you mind if I stayed for a few more days? I'm not up to going home right now."

"Stay as long as you want." Re Halina stood and walked to the door. "Goodnight."

"See you in the morning."

Once again Moonlight lay in bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering what Xenos was doing and if she'd crossed his mind since she'd gone.

* * * * *

Xenos and Zale sat in the cockpit of the shuttle on their way to Phanteppe. Though theirs was a military mission, they traveled in an exploration shuttle to keep their business secret and not arouse Cuthtez suspicion. Yashel had gone to the cargo area to check their equipment. Within the hour, they would be landing on the Re Chet Sea. The unsettled feeling, beyond the usual apprehension he felt before any mission, still plagued Xenos.

"What did you tell Moonlight?" Zale asked, his gaze not moving from the controls.

"She's gone."

Zale glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "What do you mean gone?"

"I mean I sent her away."

"Really? I thought you might have liked her. Yashel seemed to think so."

"You and Yashel need to get lives of your own if mine is so interesting to you."

A quirky smile touched Zale's lips. "So, did you like her?"

"Getting attached isn't acceptable. It clouds judgment."

"Let me get this straight, Xenos. You sent her away because you *do* like her?"

"This conversation has nothing to do with our mission."

"No, it doesn't."

"Then end it."

"Yes, Sir. And here I was thinking you were getting in touch with your human side."

Xenos gave a low growl of warning and Zale smiled again, but fell silent.

A short time later, the shuttle hovered over the Re Chet Sea, some distance from the coordinates supplied by Laetez intelligence for the alleged aquatic base. While Yashel piloted the shuttle, Xenos and Zale would swim to investigate the area and confirm whether or not the base existed. Using bubble protection—a moldable skin that covered them from head to toe, they would avoid detection from any known scanners.

ACT studies of Tydisian skin had led to the creation of bubble protection, and while it was fairly comfortable to swim in, Xenos didn't care for it because it dulled his sensory glands. Like his Tydisian relations, he was able to detect, through his skin, the faintest ripples in the water, indicating the approach of anyone or anything within several miles.

"Ready?" Yashel called from the cockpit.

Xenos and Zale, the former wearing only sleek black swim shorts and the latter in a complete wetsuit, stood in the cargo area.

"Just about," Zale replied as they pulled on the bubble protection. The synthetic flesh would allow water to pass through it freely, while masking their presence to mechanical scanning devices.

After signaling to Yashel that they were ready to dive, the shuttle hovered low over the powerful waves. Though the day was calm, the Re Chet Ocean was known for rough water at all times. If not for the mission, Xenos would have enjoyed the dive.

Moments later, he and Zale were swimming through the water toward the coordinates. The currents were powerful, but the water clear. With the ferocious sea creatures known to inhabit Phanteppe, Xenos wished his sensory glands weren't muffled by the bubble protection. If one of those beasts was coming, he wanted to know as soon as possible, giving him and Zale time to seek protection in reeds or sea caves.

After close to an hour of swimming, they neared the vast formation of rocks that allegedly disguised the base. Dark caves riddled the mountain, colorful fish swam in and out of the mouths and vegetation swayed, dancing in the current. Xenos and Zale glanced at each other and Zale motioned for them to move in closer.

It took nearly another hour for them to fully search the structure, and as they looked, Xenos' apprehension grew. There was obviously no sign of a base. He caught up with Zale and signaled that they should leave. It was rare that intelligence was this far off. Something about this entire mission was not right. Had he been the sort of man given to panic, he would have lost his proverbial cool by now.

Outside the caves, Xenos felt ripples against his skin and he grasped Zale's arm, tugging him behind a jagged purple rock just as a troop of Cuthtez military divers emerged from the caves, their weapons aimed in Xenos and Zale's direction.

They reached for their stun pistols and traded fire. Between shots, Xenos shed his bubble protection, since it was now useless and he knew his sensory glands could still be helpful.

He and Zale needed to escape from the cave. If they could make it to the reedy sea bottom, they could easily out-swim the Cuthtez divers while the vegetation cut down on their enemies' visibility, making a clear shot nearly impossible.

Outnumbered, he and Zale would soon run out of ammunition, leaving them trapped and vulnerable.

Then Xenos' sensitive Tydisian flesh detected new ripples in the water. Experience told him it was a school of large creatures closing in, probably drawn by the fighting. He signaled to Zale and keyed a short message on the aquaspec attached to his wrist, stating his observation. Zale nodded, giving a hand signal that they would be ready to swim for it when the opportunity arose.

A short time later, the Cuthtez paused in their attack and motioned to each other. Xenos guessed their shuttle had picked up the approach of the sea creatures and warned them through communicators.

The school of creatures attacked and the Cuthtez divers were forced to turn their attention to the thirty-foot, razor-toothed beasts desperate for a meal.

Xenos and Zale wasted no time before darting out of the cave and heading for the reeds. A shot from a Cuthtez diver zapped by Xenos' shoulder, missing him by inches. A glance behind him revealed Zale swimming as fast as he could, one of the creatures on his tail.

Not only were they concerned with out-swimming the deadly sea creatures, but Xenos knew Zale would soon need to surface for oxygen. They'd already been under a couple of hours and the younger soldier's capacity wasn't nearly as great as Xenos'.

Several moments later, they'd lost the school and the Cuthtez in miles of reeds. Both men used their aquaspecs to signal Yashel, if he could respond. No doubt he had been attacked above while Xenos and Zale had been surrounded below.

Zale indicated that he needed to head for the surface and together they ascended. Within moments, their shuttle approached, smoke trailing from a blast in its side. Yashel hovered low so that Xenos and Zale could board quickly.

"I ran into a couple of Cuthtez military shuttles," Yashel shouted from the cockpit. "Did you find the base?"

"There is no base," Xenos stated, dripping water on his way to the controls at the back of the shuttle. "We're losing fuel."

"I know. We'll make it home, though."

"What happened to the Cuthtez shuttles?" Zale asked, joining Yashel in the cockpit.

"Disabled. Am I good or am I good?"

"None of us are good," Xenos stated, rage boiling inside him. "Gentlemen, I believe we were set up."

* * * * *

Back at ACT headquarters, the trio met with Re Lord for a debriefing. Xenos made no secret about his suspicions that someone had used the bogus base information in an attempt to eliminate their special aquatic unit.

"One of two things happened," Xenos stated. "Either the Cuthtez have found a way to detect our bubble protection or else someone alerted them to our exact location."

"Why would military be there at all?" Zale asked. "According to the treaty, neither Laetez nor Cuthtez are allowed to have military on Phanteppe. There was no base at the coordinates, so why would military shuttles be there?"

"They were sent for us," Xenos replied.

Chief Re Lord's eyes blazed and he growled, "Are you insinuating we have a traitor amongst us?"

"I'm not insinuating anything, Chief," Xenos said, holding Re Lord's gaze. "I'm telling you point blank."

The Chief looked away, his jaw visibly taut. "I agree you might have a point. Rest assured there will be a full investigation."

"And I will receive updates?"

"Since when are you privy to intelligence proceedings, Xenos Nineteen?"

"Since my unit was nearly destroyed due to their negligence or their treason."

"Funny that word should fall from your lips. Intelligence will handle their own. Anything else?" Re Lord glanced at each man. All three remained silent. "Dismissed then."

Outside the Chief's office, Xenos, Zale and Yashel strode down the corridor toward the exit.

"If I were you, I'd be careful, Xenos," Yashel warned. "You're on thin ice with Re Lord."

"You know how I feel about Re Lord." Xenos didn't bother keeping the disgust from his voice.

"Why do you think intelligence wants to get rid of us?" Zale asked. "It makes no sense. We're the most effective aquatic unit the Laetez have ever had."

Xenos had several thoughts on that matter, but at the moment he kept them to himself.

"I'm going back to the residence and getting some sleep," Zale said.

"Sounds good, once I check my messages with Sola." Yashel glanced at Xenos. "How about you?"

"Later. I'm going to the medical facility."

"You weren't injured, were you?" Zale turned to him.

"No."

Seeing that Xenos wasn't about to elaborate, the men parted ways.

One drawback to Xenos' Tydisian skin was that even with the bacteria-fighting secretion, he still picked up infections and absorbed toxins fairly easily. Usually the subtle differences in his system were enough to tip him off to problems and he hadn't felt quite like himself since he'd emerged from the Re Chet Sea.

At the facility, the medic on duty examined him. Medic Trissa, a tall dark-haired human-Laetez mix in her early thirties, had been with the ACT Corps for five years and excelled at her duty. She'd developed a keen intellectual interest in Xenos and probably knew more about his mongrel physiology than anyone.

After a brief examination, she announced, "Just a mild infection, Sir. This shot should take care of it. As usual, it prevents contagion within ten minutes of injection. When showering, use your medicated wash for the next couple of days."

Same routine. It was the tradeoff for all the remarkable talents of his unusual flesh. Unfortunately, his immune system wasn't as powerful as a pure-blooded Tydisian, who could fight off bacteria that would kill most Laetez and humans.

On the way to the residence, his thoughts churned with the events of the past few days. Glancing skyward, he noticed it was a starry night. The cool air carried the scent of the nearby sea, and if not for his many political and now personal concerns, he would have enjoyed the walk.

He took the stairs to his apartment and when he stepped into the corridor, an indefinable jolt shot through him at the sight of Moonlight seated on the chair across from the elevator.

Upon seeing him, she drew a visible breath and stood. Her eyes wide, she waited in silence as he approached.

Her heart pounding, Moonlight watched Xenos stride toward her.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded without preamble. His icy gaze met hers, and for a moment, she wished she hadn't come. For the past two nights, she'd stopped by the security gate and asked to speak to him, but the guard's answer had been the same. Superior Xenos was not on the premises and no one knew when he'd return.

In her gut, Moonlight knew he was on a mission, and deep inside, she feared never seeing him again. It was a horrible thing, to care about a man she should hate. She'd never felt so confused in her life. Everything had changed since meeting Xenos. Things were far simpler when she'd despised him.

"I stopped by the gate to see if you'd returned and Yashel was passing through. He let me in."

He nodded, though she saw the calculating look in his eyes and something told her the next time he saw S-Master Yashel, the man would catch hell. While she hadn't expected a warm reception, now that she was faced with his frosty expression and clear displeasure at her presence, she nearly lost her resolve. It was stupid of her to return once she'd been freed from this monster. What sick, masochistic tendencies had driven her back here?

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Because I still owe you time and I pay my debts."

"I released you." He stepped closer, backing her into the chair.

"And I wanted to be certain—"

"I don't generally repeat my orders."

"I'm not one of your soldiers."

"No. You're far too undisciplined to ever survive military life."

"I don't like owing anyone a favor, so I would appreciate it if—"

"I'm not in need of an escort at the moment and I've made it clear you needn't stay for the length of time bargained for."

She didn't miss the annoyance in his voice and there was not a hint of welcome in his expression. Why had she thought they'd made a connection? Maybe he made a habit of cutting off his fingers for all his lovers—yet somehow she doubted it. Even if he felt something for her, he'd never show it. Heavens, he probably wouldn't even realize it himself.

Moonlight nodded, torn between relief and disappointment, and headed for the elevator.

"However, if that arrangement isn't agreeable to you," he said and she paused, her back to him and her heart pounding with anticipation. "I'll allow you to pay your debt in full."

She turned and moistened her lips, her gaze fixed on his. Neither spoke, but he opened the door and waited for her to step past him into the apartment. On her way by, he wrapped an arm snugly around her waist, holding her close to his lean, hard body. He cupped her breasts and squeezed gently. Moonlight's breathing quickened and she closed her eyes, leaning her head against his shoulder. His cool, smooth fangs glided along the side of her neck, then he shoved her away from him and into the sitting room.

A low growl rumbled in his chest and she stared at him, aroused from his touch, yet once again apprehensive. A few days away from him and she'd nearly forgotten just how intimidating he could be—and how incredibly sexy with his hideously beautiful face, gorgeous body and expression that could seduce a demon out of its horns.

"I know this is like *deja vu*, but I don't have a change of clothes," she said.

A wicked smile curved his lips, revealing his sharp, gleaming canines. "You think you're going to need clothes?"

Taking her lower lip between her teeth, she dropped her handbag in which she'd packed some emergency toiletries just in case and approached him. She slipped her arms around his neck and moved in for a kiss. Before her lips touched his, he grasped a handful of hair at her nape and tugged.

Moonlight gasped softly, not because his grip was painful, but because of the ferociously lustful look in his eyes. Gods, he had such lovely eyes, slanted, intense and fringed with those long light brown lashes.

"I'm guessing the same rules apply?" she whispered.

His gaze moved across her face, lingering on her parted lips. He lowered his head and his mouth hovered over hers. Moonlight's head pulled against his grip, inching closer to his mouth. For a moment, she thought he was going to shove her away again, then his mouth descended on hers.

His dark blue lips felt surprisingly warm and moist. His tongue traced her lips, then thrust between them. Xenos loosened his hold on her hair. Cupping the back of her head, he pressed her face closer to his while his arm snaked around her waist, holding her to his long, powerful body.

Moonlight moaned softly and locked her arms around his neck. Her eyes closed, she surrendered to him completely, drowning in his deep, intoxicating kiss. When it broke, she continued leaning heavily against him, almost dizzy with desire.

He placed a finger beneath her chin and raised it so their gazes met.

"I have work to do, but it will take no more than an hour. Be in my bed when I return."

Moonlight nodded and rose onto her toes to brush his mouth with another kiss. He stepped away and though his lips didn't smile, his eyes did.

Her gaze trailed after him as he headed for his office. Just looking at his tall, sleek body aroused her and she could scarcely wait for him to join her in bed. She knew her feelings for him were wrong, but it was as if she couldn't control herself. The bastard had an almost unnatural power over her.

Once he'd gone, Moonlight walked to his room and glanced around. It was exactly as she remembered it, so cold and empty. Out of curiosity, she considered checking the closet and drawers, but she wouldn't be surprised if he had the apartment under surveillance. Still, she would have liked to learn just a little more about him, and since he wasn't the most talkative individual, she'd have a better chance of getting to know him through his personal belongings.

In the adjoining bathroom, she undressed and stepped into the shower. After allowing the warm water to soak her from head to toe, she glanced around for some shampoo, then chuckled. What the hell would a hairless man be doing with shampoo? She did find a bottle of medicated gel which she decided not to use.

Instead, she took floral-scented gel from her bag and washed from head to toe. When she finished, she stepped out and dried off with a big white towel. She scrubbed it over her hair, ridding it of the excess moisture, then she wrapped it around her head.

Back in Xenos' room, she turned down the sheet and climbed beneath, her pulse racing with anticipation. Her gaze fixed on the door as she waited for him to join her.

Finally, she began to relax. Her eyes slipped shut and her breathing deepened. Still thinking of Xenos, she drifted into a light sleep.

* * * * *

In his office, Xenos contacted Judson on his spec and asked his secretary to join him. Moments later, the red-haired officer entered through the back door.

"Sir, I wasn't aware that you'd returned," Judson said.

"Do you have messages for me?"

"Yes, but nothing urgent."

"I'd like a full report from you now."

Judson's brow furrowed. "Now, Sir?"

"Yes. It's a nice night. Let's talk outside."

Understanding gleamed in his secretary's eyes and he nodded. "Of course."

They left the residence and walked to the beach where Xenos briefly explained what had occurred during the mission.

"Our time is running short, Judson. We must move soon or else it will be too late. How are our plans coming along?"

"We need more time, Sir. Not much, but some."

"I'll do what I can. Our recruits number almost fifty now."

"It's not much, I know, Sir, but they're dedicated to the cause."

"On the contrary, it's more than I'd expected."

"Have you spoken to Yashel and Zale yet?"

Xenos sighed and glanced at the moonlit sea. "No. I don't want them to know anything about my plans until right before I'm ready to execute them."

"I don't understand how they could not back you."

"I can. Particularly Yashel. He is very...rigid when it comes to following their rules."

Judson's lip curled slightly in disgust and he shook his head.

"One more thing, Judson. Regardless of what Re Lord would have us believe, I know my life is in danger. Should I not survive until we're ready to execute our plan, it will be up to you."

"You can count on me, Xenos."

Xenos' gaze flickered toward Judson. The man rarely addressed him by his given name except in moments of uncommon intimacy.

Nodding, Xenos once again glanced to the sea, tempted to undress and dive beneath the waves. Not tonight.

"Also, I believe we should formulate an alternate plan," Xenos continued, "should the time come when the only way we can buy more time for preparation is through extreme measures."

"You think the situation as that bad, Sir?"

Xenos turned and met his secretary's gaze. "I know it is, Judson."

They men talked for close to half an hour, then Xenos returned to the residence.

An unusual excitement encompassed him when he thought about Moonlight awaiting him in his bed. It annoyed him how glad he'd been to see her. He should have sent her on her way, but after the past few days, he looked forward to a stress relieving fuck and he strongly preferred her over an escort. Not that he needed to worry about letting her get too close. Very soon they would go their separate ways forever. He intended to enjoy her while he could.

Chapter Seven

Playing House With the Devil

Yashel blinked slowly, making a conscious effort to keep control of his body while Sola sat astride him, her silken thighs rubbing against his sides. His hands swept over her narrow waist, then slid around to cup her tight, smooth ass as she rode him, guiding their pleasure.

They had only been parted for a few days while he'd been on Phanteppe, yet any separation from her seemed eternal. As soon as he'd returned to the residence, he'd summoned her to his apartment, where they raced to his room, tore off each other's clothes and began fucking like it was a new discovery. From the moment he'd seen her, he'd wanted her, but she'd been a hard woman to win. Independent, intelligent and ambitious, she'd foolishly believed she didn't need an emotional attachment. Yashel had made it his duty to convince her otherwise.

Cupping her breasts, he squeezed the small, firm spheres, then pinched her stiff pink nipples. Sola gasped, her beautiful green eyes closing as she quickened her pace. Having her breasts fondled drove her wild.

Within moments, she exploded atop him, her hot, wet sheath pulsing around his cock and pushing him over the edge. Grunting with pleasure, Yashel's hips lunged upward and he erupted into her quivering body.

Sola dismounted and curled up beside him, a contented smile on her face. Holding her close, Yashel rested for several moments, simply enjoying her nearness. All too soon, memories of his unit's near capture popped into his head and he shifted uncomfortably.

"What's wrong?" she asked, raising herself onto her elbow. "I know you can't talk about where you've been, but—"

"I can't give you details, but if I give you a general summary, I can use your input."

As if sensing the seriousness of the situation, her smile faded and she sat up, covering her lovely breasts with the sheet. "Go on."

Leaving out specifics, he told her about their near capture and Xenos' suspicions. When he'd finished, Sola stared into space, her brow furrowed. He knew that expression and it meant she was in deep thought.

Finally, her gaze flickered in his direction. "Though I hate to agree with him about anything, I think Xenos is right. Our interaction with the Drapers has changed many things, especially regarding ACT. You and I both know how Xenos feels about private labs and the rights of ACT products. He's worse than any pure-blooded activist."

"He even hates the activists," Yashel snorted with humorless laughter.

"He hates everybody, but that's beside the point. You and Zale have also been great supporters of ACT products and the laws about private labs."

"I still stand behind those causes."

"Chief Re Lord might see you three as liabilities now that we're so interested in an alliance with the Drapers. You're also well respected and in positions of power. The best way to get rid of you with no questions asked would be if you all happened to die on a mission."

"I would never turn traitor to the Laetez," Yashel stated, anger stirring inside him. "No matter what."

"I know that, however, I'm not exactly sure how Zale feels and I don't trust Xenos at all."

Yashel held her gaze. "Regardless of what you think, he is a man of integrity."

"I don't doubt it, but what kind of integrity? What is his idea of honor? He might be a Superior, but where do his loyalties lie? His zealot behavior is why your unit was targeted."

"You're giving him too much power," Yashel said, yet inside he wondered if she was right. Xenos had a way of manipulating people to get what he wanted. Even those who despised him often couldn't keep from bending to his will. Though Yashel found this to be an admirable quality, it was also an irritating one and it could be dangerous.

"I'm not the one who tried to have you killed. Yashel, don't think I'm allowing my feelings about Xenos to influence me. My main concerns are the Laetez and you." She let the sheet fall, baring her breasts as she took his face in her hands. "I don't want to see you hurt because of him. Listen to me. Unless you want to suffer Xenos' fate right along with him, you'll have to make your intentions very clear to Chief Re Lord."

Yashel gently grasped her wrists and guided her hands away from his face. He sighed deeply, walked to the window and gazed out at the sea. Dark, frothy waves churned in the moonlight and licked the sandy shoreline. In that ocean, he had learned most of what he knew about aquatic combat. Xenos had taught him. He had also enforced lessons in honor and discipline.

Over the years, many people had called Xenos and Zale his "brothers". While he accepted they had a connection due to their shared ancestry, he had never looked upon them as brothers. Though an ACT product, he had been raised in the home of his biological mother and her husband, so he had a family. Most of his childhood had been spent at the lab, yet he didn't believe he had been mistreated. He even liked several of the medics who had worked with him.

He agreed with Xenos in many of his views about ACT, but he was not willing to give up his life or his career fighting a war they couldn't possibly win. He had been a soldier long enough to fully realize governmental power. Reform was possible, but only through internal changes. That could not be achieved by one man abusing his power, such as Xenos had been doing by ignoring the new laws for private labs.

"Yashel?" Sola asked softly. She stood behind him, her warm body pressed to his. Wrapping her arms around him, she rested her cheek against his back.

"I'm going to the tank for a while, Sola. Stay here if you want. I'll be back later."

"All right." She released him and stepped back. "I'm sorry if what I said upset —"

He flashed her an irritated look. "Don't get soft on me. That's why I promoted you to my secretary. Because you say it like you see it. No bullshit. The day you stop that is the day you find yourself in another job."

Sola smiled and kissed him. He returned the gesture, holding her tightly for a moment before releasing her and slapping her bottom.

After pulling on his clothes, Yashel walked to the tank room, hoping an hour or so underwater might clear his mind.

* * * * *

Xenos stepped into his room and found Moonlight in bed, as ordered. He'd been gone longer than anticipated and she'd obviously relaxed enough to fall asleep. Approaching silently, he studied her face—rounded, the jaw soft and smooth, her nose straight, though a bit wide.

With her wide-set eyes closed, the thick, dark lashes seemed even longer somehow. She wasn't especially tall, but had a tight, yet curvy, body that was pleasant to feel. He liked how she didn't hide her pleasure when he fucked her. While he didn't have a rush of women eager to bed down a mongrel, he knew some found him fascinating, even morbidly attractive.

Moonlight hadn't returned to pay the remainder of a bargain he had already erased. She had enjoyed their time together as much as he did. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, and if his plans went as expected, he wouldn't be around her long enough to bother with emotional ties, which worked out perfectly for him.

Squatting by the bed, he ran a hand lightly over her hair, scarcely touching it. Her eyes flew open. Their startled look faded to one of welcome and the slightest smile touched her lips. He wasn't sure he liked how familiar she seemed to have become with him. Just a short time ago, she'd loathed him. He almost missed all the fire and rage when she looked at him.

His hand tightened in her hair and tugged, forcing her to arch her neck.

Moonlight gasped, wariness creeping into her eyes.

"Made yourself comfortable, I see," he said.

"You told me to."

"I told you to undress and wait for me."

"I'm here, aren't I?" In spite of her sarcastic tone, she wore a hungry expression and he knew she wanted him to fuck her as much as he wanted to fuck her. It would do

them both good to wait. Overindulgence could lead to complacency and that was always dangerous.

He loosened his hold on her hair and guided her face toward his as he leaned forward. Moonlight moistened her full lips and edged closer to him.

Covering her mouth in a possessive kiss, he stroked her hair and enjoyed the sensation of her hands roaming over his scalp and down the back of his neck. She moaned softly and sat up, her arms snaking around him and her tongue thrusting against his.

Xenos closed his eyes, momentarily surrendering completely to her feel, taste and scent. Then he pulled back, grasping her wrists and forcing her hands away.

"Xenos," she said softly, her gaze fixed on his. The openness in her expression was unexpected, yet enticing, and still a bit unwanted. What was her problem?

She was a fickle human, that was her problem. One thing he'd always been glad of was that he seemed to have so few human traits, physical or emotional.

Releasing her, he said, "Go to the guest room, Moonlight."

"But I thought you wanted me —"

"You'll know when I do. Dismissed."

Rage glistened in her eyes. "Dismissed? I'm not one of your damn soldiers, Xenos."

His desire kindled, making his cock twitch and his heartbeat quicken. With a low growl, he jerked the sheet off her, baring her naked curves to his hungry gaze. He picked her up and she instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck, excitement mingling with the anger in her expression.

He carried her to the guest room and dropped her on the bed. Seated beside her, he swept her hand over the slight swell of her belly, then cupped one of her full breasts and squeezed gently. He removed his glove and stroked her nipple with his bare fingers. Pinching lightly, he watched her eyes darken with passion.

Moonlight's luscious breasts rose and fell more rapidly. When he rested his hand against her ribs, he felt her heart beating fast and hard against his palm. A wicked smile touched his lips as he cupped the soft mound between her legs and kneaded.

"Xenos," she whispered, her eyes closing and hips arching against his hand. "You bastard."

He dipped a finger inside her and gave another low growl of pleasure upon finding her hot and wet with need. Touching her felt so good. He pushed in two more fingers, stroking and exploring. How he longed to rip off his clothes, cover her body with his and fill her with his swollen, tingling cock. Patience was one of his virtues and he was an expert at self-control. Not only that, deprivation made the actual experience even better.

Xenos withdrew his drenched fingers and rolled them over her clit. He manipulated the warm, swollen nub until Moonlight trembled with need, her gorgeous body flushed with desire. With several flicks of his thumb, she came, moaning and writhing. He

continued stroking her clit until the last shudder tore through her and she lay still, her breathing returning to normal.

He stood and walked to the door.

"Xenos?" she called.

"Yes?" he replied without turning to her.

"Nothing."

He stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

In his room, he undressed, knelt on the floor and closed his eyes. Daily meditation learned during his time spent with the Tydisians enabled him to control the Laetez aggression that plagued so many crossbreeds. The strong Tydisian characteristics that made him a physical oddity allowed him to harness the most powerful traits of the other species within him.

For years, he had considered his very existence sweet justice. After years of tormenting their creatures, ACT scientists had succeeded in conjuring a near perfect warrior who could survive without assistance on land or sea, yet they could not control him. Xenos was an individual and master of his destiny.

In spite of the rights won by ACT products, the laws governing private labs and his rigid enforcement of those laws, he suspected the government continued their studies in secret.

With the recent ambush of his special unit, he realized the Laetez must have created replacements for them. Tydisians were not the only intelligent, physically superior aquatic beings in the universe. He knew the Laetez-human ACT program had stolen DNA from other species as well.

Drawing a deep breath, he released it slowly and forced himself to clear his mind. Sometimes it was difficult, especially when his Laetez temper got the better of him, as it often did when he thought about ACT.

Eventually he felt calm enough to sleep. He stretched out on top of the bed, his arms folded behind his head and his gaze fixed on the ceiling. Again his thoughts drifted toward the woman sleeping in the next room. Closing his eyes, he pictured her face and could almost smell the aroma of her perfume.

Tomorrow he'd indulge his desires.

He could scarcely wait until then.

* * * * *

Moonlight awoke early the following morning. In spite of the excitement and apprehension churning inside her, her stomach rumbled with hunger. She washed and dressed in yesterday's clothes. At least she had a change of undergarments in her bag. Before walking to the kitchen, she contacted Re Halina on the spec.

"Why didn't you call sooner?" Re Halina demanded. "I worried all night about you."

"I'm fine. I just...everything slipped my mind last night."

"Your mother and sister have contacted me about five times already. If you're allowed, why don't you talk to them directly? None of us can understand why you went back. You're certain he didn't force you?"

"Xenos has never forced me to do anything."

Re Halina gave a snort of disbelief, but knew better than to say too much on the spec.

"I'll contact my mother and sister now," Moonlight said. "Thanks again for every —"

"If you thank me one more time for getting you into this mess, I'm going to puke."

Moonlight chuckled. "All right. I'll talk to you soon."

Her next call was to Earth. Her mother answered the spec, her face etched with concern. "Moonlight, I thought you'd be coming home."

"I will. Once I'm ready."

"I don't understand this entire situation. You know I sympathize with ACT products, but this Xenos is —"

Why had it taken Moonlight so long for her to see her mother as she truly was? While she knew her mother and the other activists were trying to show compassion, Xenos was right in his belief that they didn't view ACT products as equals. To a man like him, that was as great an insult as the indignities he'd suffered in the private lab.

"Xenos isn't in need of anyone's sympathy," Moonlight said. "Trust me."

"Of that I'm sure. Creatures like him are why —"

"Creatures like him?"

"Moonlight, that's why it's so important to keep control of ACT. To prevent such mistakes. Violent beings whom people fear and therefore —"

Gods, Moonlight prayed this conversation wasn't under surveillance.

"Mother, do you think you can reel it in a little? You just got out of prison. Enjoy your freedom before starting out on another crusade."

"How can I reel it in, as you so charmingly put it, when my daughter is in the hands of a...a genetically engineered *soldier*."

"There's nothing wrong with soldiers."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. Haven't you listened to anything I've taught you?"

"How could I avoid it?" Moonlight said with more bitterness than she'd intended. "You've shoved it at us all our lives."

A pained look crossed her mother's face and she sighed deeply. "I blame myself for this. If not for that damn jail sentence, you'd have never struck such a horrible bargain with that —"

"He has a name."

"So did Jola, if you recall."

"Why does everyone insist on reminding me about my best friend?"

"Because you seem to have forgotten. You claim he hasn't forced you. Could it be that you have some sick fascination with him? Are the stories about what's in his pants true? Are you thinking with something other than your brain?"

Moonlight could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

"If not for me, you would still be rotting in a Laetez prison," she said coolly.

"I fear your sacrifice has damaged you more than you realize," her mother said softly. "Moonlight, come home. Forget about everything that's happened. We can all start fresh and —"

"I'll be home when I'm good and ready," Moonlight said. "Goodbye, Mother."

She shut down the spec in the midst of her mother's protests.

Sighing deeply, she shook her head and remained seated on the bed for several moments. Then she stood and walked to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

Moonlight had opened a cabinet and was standing on her toes, trying to see if there was anything decent to eat on the top shelf when Xenos grasped her from behind and tugged her to his lean, hard chest.

She gasped and gave a little shout of surprise, her pulse racing. One of his gloved hands cupped her breast while the other, curled into a loose fist, rested against her hip. She placed her hands over his and leaned harder against him.

"Good morning," she murmured, unable to keep the slight smile from her lips.

"It will get better," he whispered in her ear, then used his tongue to tickle the curve of it. Moonlight squirmed with pleasure. She felt the hardness of his cock pushing against her from behind and her legs went weak as passion flooded her.

Xenos raised his fisted hand to her lips and opened it. Two contraceptive tablets rested on his palm. He shifted one between his fingers and held it to her mouth. Moonlight took it, gripping his finger gently between her teeth and wishing he hadn't bothered with the gloves. While his webbed hands had unsettled her at first, she had grown to appreciate them and the sensations they provoked.

He tugged his hand from her mouth and swallowed the second tablet, then guided her toward the table and made her lean over it. Without hesitation, he pulled down her pants and underwear. They pooled around her ankles and she kicked them off along with her shoes, then spread her legs, her hands braced against the tabletop and her pulse racing with desire.

Xenos flung his gloves on the table, then stroked her bottom with his warm, webbed hands. His short nails gently scored her backside, then he slid his palms over

her hips and belly. One hand cupped her soft mound while the other returned to her ass, stroking and teasing. He slid a fingertip along the indentation of her cheeks and she quivered with anticipation.

Maybe wanting to be with him was wrong, but at the moment there was no place else she'd rather be and no other man she'd want to be with. Xenos brushed aside her long hair and pressed his lips to the back of her neck. His tongue snaked across her shoulders while his fingers slid into her pussy.

Drenched with her juices, his fingers rolled over her clit, teasing her to the brink of orgasm, then he pushed her closer to the table. She heard the rustle of fabric as he slid down his trousers, then seconds later his smooth, velvety cock head pushed against her. He entered her lust-drenched pussy with a long, slow thrust, then began pumping in a steady rhythm while his hand continued stroking her swollen, sensitive clit.

"Gods," she panted, her hands pressing hard against the table. "Oh, Xenos, please."

He took her earlobe between his teeth and bit gently, then ran his fangs along the side of her neck, a gentle teasing from this horrible, beautiful creature who could tear her apart if he so desired.

A few more rough thrusts and Moonlight came, shaking and gasping, her body throbbing around his cock.

Xenos gave a low growl and climaxed, his lean, hard body straining against her. Still catching her breath, she felt him withdrew his softening cock. She turned, watching him hitch up his trousers, his intense blue gaze upon her.

Still shaking in the aftermath, Moonlight reached for her clothes and pulled them on. "Are you hungry?" she asked. I was going to make—"

"I have to go." He washed his hands in the sink, then reached for his gloves and pulled them on.

"But—"

"I'll be back around dinnertime."

"Do you plan to eat with me?"

"With you and from you." Though his lips didn't smile, his eyes did and she couldn't control the warmth flooding her.

"I can hardly wait," she said.

This time he did smile, a wicked curving of his lips that revealed the gleaming points of his fangs. He left her standing by the table, her body still tingling and thoughts racing with what might happen when he returned tonight.

* * * * *

After cleaning her breakfast dishes, Moonlight wandered around the apartment for several moments. The door leading to Xenos' room and office was locked. Since she no longer had a security pass, leaving the residence was not an option.

With nothing better to do, she undressed to her underwear and washed her clothes. Afterward, she went to the kitchen to plan dinner. This would be the first meal she and Xenos shared, and for some inexplicable reason, she wanted it to be memorable. Unfortunately, that would prove difficult, considering the limited food supply in his cupboards. Did the man survive on nutritional packs? In her experience, most normal guys enjoyed eating. But since when was Xenos normal?

Several food items that she'd bought last week were still there, so at least she'd have something decent to cook, but she wouldn't need to start until later.

At least this time she'd remembered to bring her personal computer so she would have something to keep her busy. Security had checked it at the gate and put a lock on it so she couldn't receive or initiate transmissions. She had several book files, so she spent most of the day reading and studying languages.

From an early age, she had displayed an aptitude for languages—a good skill to have since her greatest interest was learning about alien cultures, a passion she'd inherited from her mother. The best way to learn was through direct interaction.

She spent most of her youth in a transfer program that encompassed planets in several solar systems. There she satisfied her curiosity and gained the education necessary for her to enter a well-paying career as a translator. She missed traveling and had been considering a transfer to a position on an exploration vessel, though such jobs were coveted and scarce.

Moonlight had always been so obsessed with her career that she hadn't considered her private life. She'd never imagined a permanent relationship with a man, but since meeting Xenos, the strangest thoughts occupied her mind. How could the man responsible for the death of her closest friend stir fantasies of a long-term union? As if he would ever truly ally himself with another person to begin with. He would never allow it. She wasn't even certain he was capable of it.

By the time Xenos returned that evening, she had the table set and dinner prepared.

As soon as she heard the door open, excitement washed over her. She drew a deep breath to calm herself, switched off her computer and stepped out of the kitchen.

Xenos glanced at her absently and nodded. "Santos Gama."

"Xenos. Dinner is ready whenever you are."

"I'll be in soon," he said and walked toward his room.

She couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. All day she'd anticipated this dinner, now she would have to wait longer. She reminded herself not to expect an emotional bond with him.

Back in the kitchen, she sat at the table and returned to her reading. She found it difficult to concentrate now that he'd arrived.

Moments later, Xenos stepped into the kitchen, still dressed in his uniform and looking as immaculate as when he'd left that morning. She couldn't help noticing how the black and blue jacket and trousers accentuated his long, lean body. As striking as he

looked in the uniform, she could scarcely wait to see him out of it. She longed to run her hands over his smooth bluish-purple skin and feel the rock-hard muscles beneath.

Their gazes locked and heat rose in Moonlight's face. She stood and placed her computer aside, then brought their food to the table.

Xenos sat across from her and they began eating in silence. She noted he ate slowly and had excellent table manners, though she shouldn't have expected any less from a man who carried himself with such dignity.

Xenos Nineteen was a strange, yet incomparable, blend of savageness and civilization, ugliness and beauty. The man fascinated her and Moonlight realized she had become obsessed with him. But how did he feel about her? Other than his obvious animal lust, what did he think of her?

"Here." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a security pass.

"Thank you." She took it from his gloved hand, allowing her fingertips to linger over his palm.

The slightest smile curved his lips before he resumed eating.

"Do you like the food?" she asked.

"It's fine."

"You didn't have many groceries."

"There are nutritional packs."

"I saw. How much fun are they to eat? I'll be glad to cook while I'm here, but I'll have to go shopping."

"Your security pass can be used at the base market. It will charge to me."

"Thanks." She smiled. "What do you like to eat?"

"I'm not selective."

"Why am I not surprised?" she muttered.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing."

"No. You mean something or else you wouldn't have said it."

"I just meant that, other than sex, you don't seem to be into pleasure."

"You haven't complained about that before."

"I'm not complaining. I—"

"Finish eating."

Her appetite had gone and she placed her fork aside.

"Done already?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Yes, I think so."

He stood and tugged her chair away from the table. Bracing his hands on the arms, he leaned down and kissed her. Moonlight closed her eyes and slid her arms around his neck. Their tongues met, exploring each other.

"I need to hydrate. After that, I intend to get my only pleasure in life," he said, his voice particularly soft, though laced with sarcasm. Lust burned beneath the surface of his cool blue eyes. The expression made her weak with desire. He still leaned so close that she could almost count his long, light brown lashes.

Lifting her hand, she ran a fingertip over where his eyebrow would have been if he had any. She touched the silky Tydisian skin on his forehead and moistened her lips. Rising a bit in the chair, she kissed his temple, then his cheek and asked, "You hydrate in the shower?"

"No, I climb into the sink."

She gave a short laugh. "And here I thought you had no sense of humor. Would you like some company in the shower?"

This time he smiled seductively, exposing his sharp white teeth. He straightened and offered her his hand. She slipped hers into it, relishing its strength and warmth.

In his bathroom, he turned on the water in the large black shower. They shed their clothes.

Moonlight's pulse raced and she could scarcely contain her excitement. His body was so damn sexy – long-limbed and muscled. Perhaps she was growing accustomed to him, but his strange multihued flesh looked seductively beautiful to her.

Eager to touch him, she followed him into the steamy shower.

Chapter Eight

Thrice Bitten

Though Moonlight had lovers in the past, she hadn't realized how deficient they were until she started this affair with Xenos. Everything about him—the sound of his voice, the look in his eyes and the way his body possessed hers, was perfect.

She tried to justify her feelings for him, but couldn't. Everyone, including Xenos himself, reminded her of what he was, how dangerous and ruthless he could be. She knew they were right, yet something told her that somewhere amidst his cool, calculated actions, self-deprivation and vastly different species battling inside him, dwelled a man she could ultimately relate to.

At the moment, however, an intellectual connection was the least of her concerns.

Xenos stood so close she could reach out and touch him. Closing his eyes, he tilted his face toward the faucet and a hint of jealousy sparked inside her. His expression was so blissful that she actually envied the water for the obvious pleasure it brought him.

Her gaze drifted to his gorgeous body that was now slick with water and she couldn't keep from touching him. She splayed her hands across his chest, relishing the sensation of rock-hard muscle beneath his satiny skin. Her thumbs brushed his dark blue nipples, then trailed down the center of his flat, tight stomach. Moonlight glanced down at his cock. The smooth, purple head poked past the foreskin.

A fresh thrill of arousal darted through her and she curled her fist around his cock. Xenos lowered his head abruptly and his eyes snapped open. The protective membranes covered them, but beneath she could see him studying her, his pupils nearly filling his irises as passion grew.

"I'm not disturbing your hydration, am I?"

"No. It's an involuntary action and requires no concentration on my part." He placed a hand on her waist, leaned nearer and spoke against her lips. "Some things take a bit more conscious effort."

"Such as?"

A low growl rumbled in his chest as his mouth covered hers. Closing her eyes, Moonlight slid her arms around him. Her hands roamed over his back.

Xenos grasped her bottom and kneaded for several moments while his lips and tongue plundered hers. For a man who didn't require kissing from his escorts, he couldn't seem to get enough of it and she had no complaints about that. She'd never enjoyed kissing anyone as much as she loved kissing him.

The kiss broke, leaving her gasping and tingling with desire. He turned her to face the wall and brushed her hair aside so he could kiss the back of her neck.

She smiled and moaned with need.

"Oh, Xenos," she purred, squirming with pleasure as he cupped her breasts and squeezed gently.

His fingers toyed with her nipples. She relished the feel of his long, slender fingers and the ticklish sensation of the delicate webbing between them. Overcome by the urge to explore his beautiful alien hands more thoroughly, she grasped one and raised it to her lips.

She nibbled the tips of his fingers ever so gently, then trailed her tongue over his webbing. He gave a low groan and this increased her desire. For some strange reason, she enjoyed pleasuring this cool, collected warrior. She loved watching his beautiful eyes darken with passion, loved hearing his lustful growls and feeling the tension in his powerful body.

While she continued licking and stroking his webbing, he used his free hand to caress her thighs and stroke her soft mound. The tip of his finger found a particularly sensitive place along the side of her clit and she gasped, her body tightening with uncontrollable passion.

He tugged his hand from her mouth, grasped her hips and slowly filled her with his thick erection.

"Oh Gods," she breathed, her hands braced against the slick shower wall. Her bottom thrust toward him and she shivered with desire as he lightly trailed his sharp teeth along her shoulder.

"You say that a lot," he whispered in her ear between licking and nibbling the lobe. "Do you believe in deities?"

"Yes," she murmured, thinking this was a strange conversation to be having while making love in the shower.

"Interesting. We'll have to discuss this further at some point," he commented, his voice soft and steady. It amazed her that he managed to sound so detached while thrusting his cock into her passion-soaked body.

Soon she teetered on the verge of orgasm. Several more quick thrusts and she climaxed, gasping and writhing. In the midst of her own pulsing pleasure, she felt him come, His ragged breathing echoed in her ear and his smooth, steely body lunged hard against her, forcing her even closer to the wall.

For several heartbeats, they remained locked together, Moonlight blissfully trapped between the warm, wet wall and Xenos' warm, wet body. Then he straightened and moved away from her. He reached for the container of medicated wash she'd seen earlier, squeezed some into his hand and began washing.

"What is that exactly?" she asked.

"Depending on the bacteria I'm exposed to in various bodies of water, my skin can pick up infections more easily than a pure-blooded Tydisian."

"Are you infected now?" Fear darted through her, then she recalled the contraceptive tablets she'd been taking were also powerful enough to fight off most diseases.

He smirked. "Don't panic, Santos Gama. I'm not contagious. If I could make people sick every time I picked up an infection, I'd be spending my life in quarantine at the lab alongside the other Xenoses."

She relaxed. No doubt he was right about that.

"I am a big anti-pollution advocate, though," he said, his eyes glistening with humor.

"I can see why. Would you like me to get your back?" she asked, glancing at the strip of multihued flesh running down his spine.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye and passed her the wash. She squeezed into her hands and rubbed them together to warm it, noting it was scentless.

Moonlight smoothed her palms over his shoulders and back. It seemed a weird contradiction, that a man with such a hard, strong body had skin as soft as a baby's bottom and probably more sensitive.

"I'm guessing you don't have any normal wash in here I can use?" she asked.

He stepped out of the shower and returned a moment later with another bottle of unscented wash, this one not medicated.

They quickly finished showering, then dried off.

"Now I'm hungry again," she said.

"So am I. Let's finish eating."

Moonlight reached for her clothes, but he grasped her wrist and tugged her to his bedroom. He pulled a soft white T-shirt from the shelf in his closet and tossed it at her. "Wear this. Less to take off later."

Heat rose in her face and she smiled, pulling on the shirt. It hung almost to her knees. Xenos dragged on shorts and then they headed to the kitchen where they sat at the table and ate with far more enthusiasm than earlier.

"I was under the impression few humans believed in gods and goddesses anymore," he said.

"You're right. I practice a very old and nearly extinct religion. It's actually a form of nature worship."

Interest flashed across his eyes. "Many Tydisians have a similar faith. It's called *Siw Maris Marin*."

She smiled. "Directly translated as the Spirits of Water and Air."

"You speak Tydisian? It wasn't listed in your record."

"You checked my...of course you would," she murmured. "That only makes sense. I didn't take a formal course in the language, but learned through a friend while I was in the transfer program."

Meeting her gaze with a challenging expression, he asked in Tydisian, “Do you speak fluently?”

“I can converse but I’ve had limited practice,” she replied in kind.

“We can rectify that while you’re here.”

“Where did you learn to speak Tydisian?” she asked. “Did they teach you in the—”

“Lab?”

“I was going to say in the military, but it’s one in the same for you, isn’t it?”

“Not remotely. To answer your question, I lived among the Tydisians for nearly three years.”

Her interest grew. “Was that where you went during the time you were missing from Lab 1A?”

He smiled, an amused look in his eyes. “Missing. Yes. After we ACT products judged intelligent enough by the courts gained our freedom, I was still a minor and became a ward of Lab 1A. You saw exactly how free life there is.”

Moonlight nodded, recalling their visits with the others Xenoses.

“Though conditions were admittedly better than in the private lab, I wanted to experience the universe. I wanted to see things I’d only heard about, so I went AWOL. My destination, Tydepth.”

“What did you think of it?”

“I’ve seen many planets in dozens of galaxies, but none are as beautiful as Tydepth.”

The expression in his eyes—longing and awe—took her by surprise. She’d never expected to see such blatant emotions in him, other than anger and contempt, of course.

“If you loved it so much, why didn’t you stay there?”

“There were complications.”

“From what I read, you were gone for five years. What happened during the other two?”

“Many things. Most of which you wouldn’t enjoy hearing about.”

“I’m curious to know—”

“I said the topic is not open for discussion.”

“All right,” she said softly.

“How many other languages do you speak that aren’t on your resume?”

“Only a few. Just what I picked up from friends here and there.” If Xenos wouldn’t discuss certain aspects of his life, then she had the same rights. Only one person knew about her greatest secret—Jola. And she was dead.

On a visit to the planet Vanskae when she was still a student, Moonlight had undergone experimental surgery for a translation implant that allowed her to communicate with hundreds of species spread throughout dozens of solar systems. The

research had been scrapped before the device was perfected, but she had been lucky and suffered no side effects, providing she only used knowledge stored in the implant for limited periods of time. Extended use resulted in killer migraines.

For several moments, they ate in silence. Afterward, they cleared the kitchen, then Xenos took her face in his hands and spoke against her lips, "Let's go to your room. We have the whole night ahead of us. You can practice Tydisian. There are some very interesting phrases I'd like to teach you and I believe certain experiences will help you remember them."

"Learning by association." She grinned, locking her arms around his neck. "I like that."

Xenos' mouth covered hers and she once again surrendered to his deep, delicious kiss.

* * * * *

The following morning, Xenos had just settled into a meeting with Judson at headquarters when Medic Trissa contacted him.

"Sir, I'd like you to report to my lab as soon as possible."

"What's the problem?"

"I re-examined your test results from a few days ago when we discovered the mild infection and I would like to take another sample."

Xenos raised an eyebrow. He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. "I'll be there in about an hour."

The medic nodded and her face disappeared from the spec.

"I can come back at another time if you'd like to go to the lab now, Sir," Judson said.

"No. We'll finish up." Xenos turned his full attention to his secretary, though in the back of his mind, curiosity burned regarding the medic's call.

A short time later, he entered Trissa's office.

"What's going on, Medic?" he asked.

"How have you been feeling, Sir?"

"Fine. Now get to the point. What was wrong with the tests that you didn't pick up the first time?"

"The samples seemed common enough, but there was something that bothered me, so I looked again and found a minute trace of an unusual bacteria."

"What kind of bacteria?"

"It's a mutation of an extinct bacteria found on several planets, including Tydepth. From what I've been able to learn, it nearly destroyed the Tydisian race over two thousand years ago."

"How the hell did I get bacteria that's been dead for two millennia?" He murmured, more to himself than to her. "It had to be from the Re Chet Sea, but why hasn't it affected the life forms there?" His brow furrowed. "How does this affect me and anyone else I'm in contact with?"

"The bacteria isn't contagious," she reassured him. "It was actually like a poison released by certain aquatic plants. When the plants were destroyed, the poison disappeared as well. In order for people to become infected, they have to absorb the poison directly into their bodies, either through the skin or through oral ingestion. Usually only amphibian life forms are affected, Tydisians and Searillas, for example. The bacteria in you is mutated, however. I've run tests and it can affect mammals as well—Laetez, Cuthtez and humans for certain. Fortunately, the medication we developed specifically to control your infections destroys the bacteria. The down side is it takes a massive dose compared to the number of bacteria."

"Zale was in the water with me and Yashel was also on Phanteppe. Have you tested them?"

"This morning, Sir. Neither show any trace of the bacteria. Zale's skin isn't nearly as penetrable as yours, so that's probably why in his case."

"Have you made your report to Disease Control?"

"Of course."

"The dose of medication you gave me, was it enough to destroy the bacteria in my system?" he asked.

"I believe so. There was only a trace of the bacteria in you and I gave you a full dose of medication, however, I want to test you again to make sure it's gone."

Xenos nodded and followed her to the examination room. While the medic went about her work, he thought about how ironic it was that they had notified Disease Control, a department that specialized in protecting the Laetez people. He suspected Prime Re Vic, Chief Re Lord and Laetez intelligence already knew about this mutated bacteria. Or perhaps he was becoming as paranoid as Yashel so often suggested.

According to Trissa, the bacteria could affect Laetez as well as other species. Surely they weren't trying to destroy themselves. Of course, one of their goals was to overpower the Cuthtez and the two species were almost identical. While trying to find biological weapons to use against their enemies, Laetez secret ops could have discovered poisons and diseases that could kill themselves as well.

They could have easily dumped their waste in the Re Chet Sea. Not expecting Xenos, Zale and Yashel to survive the attack on their unit, they hadn't considered Xenos' Tydisian skin possibly picking up evidence of their pollution.

"I'll have the results for you in a few minutes, Sir," Trissa said.

He nodded and watched her leave the room to test the blood and skin samples.

A short time later she returned, assuring him that he was free of the bacteria as well as the other infection.

"Please send your report to me," Xenos told her before he left. He wanted to research this Tydisian bacteria.

At that moment, he had other work to attend to. For the remaining time he had, he needed to make what difference he could, legally, for the ACT Corps.

* * * * *

For the next few days, Moonlight began to believe she and Xenos were making an emotional connection. He seemed to enjoy having someone to speak Tydisian with and the practice helped her immensely. Learning a language through classes or with the help of a translator could never compare with actual conversation with a fluent speaker.

Xenos took to eating at least one meal a day with her, either breakfast or dinner, and she looked forward to the almost relaxed intimacy they enjoyed during those times. Still, she never forgot with whom she was dealing. His sharp glances and often detached manner constantly reminded her of who and what he was. Yet the more time she spent with him and the more she learned about him, the more she began to respect him as an individual.

Yes, she hated him for his ruthlessness, but she reasoned that if not for those like him, many freedoms enjoyed by his people would not exist. In times of conflict, others depended upon those like Xenos to do what must be done, no matter how brutal.

Politicians and even common people enjoyed the rewards of his conquests while denouncing his methods. For the first time, she began to examine his point of view. Though she couldn't always agree with it, she at least understood it. Unfortunately, this made her feel like a traitor to Jola and those who had died, unfairly, under his orders.

Moonlight had never felt so confused in her life. She wanted to continue hating Xenos, but now doubted she could ever summon that pure and untainted loathing of him again. Not now that she had begun to know the man beneath the monster.

That afternoon, she'd heard on the news that the judges had finally come to a decision regarding the private labs. Once again, those hellish places would open, supposedly with new laws to govern them.

She could only imagine how Xenos and other ACT products must feel about it.

To keep her mind occupied, she spent the afternoon cooking. When he came home that evening, she had just placed the food on the table.

"Hello," she said softly, stepping into the sitting room.

His glanced at her and nodded in greeting.

"I heard about the judges' decision. I'm sorry it wasn't what you'd hoped for."

"I'm not surprised," he said, approaching her.

"They're wrong."

"Yes. They are."

"Are you hungry? Dinner is —"

"I'll be out in a moment."

He cupped her chin in his hand and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

Moonlight touched his cheek, her gaze fixed on his. His expression was unreadable, yet she knew he must be disappointed. She was and it wasn't even her planet or her fight.

A short time later, he joined her in the kitchen and they had a rather quiet dinner. Afterward, she cleared the table while he disappeared into his room. It was nearing the end of the week and she thought about asking him if he might have a day off so they could go out together.

"I'm going to the tank," he said, stepping into the kitchen. He wore black trousers and a blue T-shirt that accentuated the color of his skin and hugged the shape of his sleekly muscled torso. "I plan to submerge for several hours, so I won't require your services tonight and you needn't wait up."

"I won't," she said, curling her lip. Damn, she hated how he still tried to pretend they meant nothing to each other. She knew better, even if he was too stupid to see it.

He turned abruptly and strode out of the apartment.

Moonlight sighed, shook her head and leaned against the counter.

Maybe she should call Re Halina and see if she wanted to do something.

No. She didn't feel like going out and combing clubs for male company, which was Re Halina's favorite pastime.

Instead she went for a jog on the beach, took a long, hot shower, then curled up in a chair in the sitting room, where she fell asleep reading.

Several hours later, she awoke a bit disoriented. Glancing at the time on her computer, she saw it was nearly midnight. Then she also realized what had woken her. Tapping on the door.

"Xenos?" a man's voice called.

"Who is it?" she replied, tossing her computer aside and walking to the door.

"Zale," came the reply.

She opened the door and gazed up at the tall, dark-eyed warrior.

"Xenos was supposed to meet me an hour ago. He never showed and I can't reach him on his spec."

"He's not here."

"No?" Zale's brow furrowed and he glanced past her.

"He said earlier he was going to the tank and would be awhile, but that was about five hours ago."

"All right. I'll check it out," Zale said.

Moonlight's stomach actually tightened with concern and an unsettled feeling crept over her. "Would you—would you let me know if you find him?"

"I'll ask him to contact you on the spec."

"Uh...no. Don't do that. I don't want him to think I—Just if you would call me, I'd appreciate it."

Shaking his head, Zale murmured, "I don't get you two, but I'll let you know when I find him."

Zale disappeared down the corridor and Moonlight closed the door, sighing deeply. She didn't want Xenos to think she was worried about him. Not only didn't she want to give him the satisfaction, but a man like him simply wouldn't appreciate a lover's concern. Sleeping with him was one thing, but caring about him was another.

* * * * *

After leaving his apartment, Xenos went directly to his tank. He had an eleven o'clock meeting with Yashel and Zale, and until then, he intended to remain underwater. He'd been busy that week, but didn't want to neglect his training. Keeping up his formidable submergence time could mean the difference between life and death when on a mission.

He changed into swim shorts, set the timer on the tank and dropped into the water. The cage-like cover slid over the water, preventing him from surfacing until the timer released. The tank had a safety switch, but it alerted a medical team and wasn't to be used except in a dire emergency.

Closing his eyes, he floated freely, enjoying the cool water and letting his thoughts drift. He thought about the judges' infuriating decision, the Tydisian bacteria and the secret rebellion that would soon be underway. Inevitably, his thoughts drifted to Moonlight.

He liked her far more than he should. She could do nothing useful for him. All she was good for was pleasure and cooking far better meals than he was accustomed to eating. She was intelligent and he enjoyed talking to her, especially now that he knew she could communicate in Tydisian. Still, those were pleasures, not necessities. She couldn't help his cause. If he allowed himself to get any closer to her, she might even hinder it.

It wouldn't matter. Soon they would part ways forever.

He knew he'd been under for hours and glanced at his aquaspec, not wanting to be late for the meeting with his unit.

Five minutes to eleven. He'd better hurry.

Glancing at the top of the tank, he saw that the cover was still in place. Strange. He had only set it for three hours and he'd been under nearly four. He swam to the top and saw the lights on the controls were dead. His brow furrowed. If the main control failed, the backup should have kicked in.

He waited several moments and when the cover didn't release, he grew more concerned.

Pressing close to the side of the tank, he reached through the bars, but no matter how far he stretched, he couldn't get to the controls. Though he hated the idea of sounding an alarm and summoning an entire medical unit, he had no choice but to hit the emergency button, unless he wanted to drown.

He struck the emergency button, but moments passed and no one came. His lungs started to burn and panic set in. If he didn't remain calm, he'd lose what little air he had left.

Grasping the bars, he pushed and pulled with all his formidable strength, but even a full-blooded Tydisian couldn't break through those bars. Another quick glance at his spec showed that he had been submerged for over five hours, past his usual capacity.

Once again stretching vainly toward the controls, he thought a better choice would have been to slip into his Tydisian trance while he still had enough oxygen saved. By allowing his heart to slow so drastically, he could have survived longer, hoping someone might find him. Yet even that would have been useless. By the time Yashel or Zale came to the tank the next day, he'd be dead.

It seemed he was going to die anyway, because his oxygen was about gone and he knew within moments he'd involuntarily gulp water. Re Lord wanted him killed and the bastard had succeeded.

He tightened his grip on the bars and he tossed his head, battling to hold on for a few seconds longer. His vision faded to black and the next thing he knew he was lying on his side on the floor outside the tank, coughing up mouthfuls of water.

"Easy, easy," Zale said, placing a hand on Xenos' shoulder.

For several moments, all Xenos could do was gasp and cough. He hadn't come this close to drowning since he'd been tested in the private lab. The feeling shook him more than he cared to admit.

"This is Zale. I need a medical unit to —"

"No." Xenos rolled over and clamped his hand over Zale's wrist spec. "I'm fine."

"You weren't fine when I pulled you out of the tank," Zale stated.

"No medical unit."

"What the hell happened in here?" Zale demanded, supporting Xenos with his arm as they stood. "Rule number one, no one goes into the tank alone with the cover on."

"Don't pick now to throw my own rules back in my face."

"Obviously it's a good rule and should be followed by everyone."

Xenos jerked away from Zale's helpful grasp and headed for his locker.

"Why didn't you use the emergency release?"

"I did," Xenos said. "Like the main control, it failed. Clearly the tank has been tampered with."

"I'm ordering a full investigation. Immediately. I don't know who the hell could have done it. Only the three of us have access to this room."

The door burst open and Yashel raced in, panting. "What the fuck is going on? Zale, when you called, you said Xenos was—"

"Drowning in our tank," Zale stated.

"Another second and I would have," Xenos said, meeting Yashel's gaze. "Wouldn't that have been convenient?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Yashel demanded. He looked convincingly worried. "Are you all right? You don't look good. Zale, why didn't you call a med unit?"

"All these motherly instincts, Yashel," Xenos said sarcastically. "I need clear heads at the moment, not emotional ones. What do you know about possible tampering with the tank's controls?"

Yashel's brow furrowed. "Nothing. You think someone other than us has been in here? Maintenance isn't scheduled until the end of the week."

"The main and backup controls are dead and so is the emergency release." Zale had climbed the ladder to the top of the tank, where he confirmed what Xenos already knew.

Yashel's eyes darkened with anger. "I'll order a full investigation."

"You do that," Xenos stated. "And I guarantee you'll uncover no useful information about who is responsible."

"Oh no." Yashel raised his eyes to the heavens. "Is this going to be another 'the government is out to get me' speech?"

"Our unit is attacked while searching for a phantom base. A mutated strain of Tydisian bacteria if found in my body. Now I nearly drown in my own tank because the top won't release. You're trying to tell me it's coincidence?"

Xenos and Yashel stood inches from each other, their gazes locked.

"I agree it warrants investigation," Yashel said.

"Damn right it does," Zale stated, joining them. "And any one of us could have been in that tank. Not just Xenos."

"I realize that," Yashel said.

Xenos studied both men carefully. Zale was right. It could have been any one of them, but it had been him.

"Just between us, Xenos, if someone is trying to get rid of you—"

"Not someone. You know who I'm talking about."

"All right. If a certain Chief wants to get rid of you, maybe it's because you've lost his trust."

Pure rage shot through Xenos, yet he managed to control it.

"Yashel," Zale said in a warning voice. He took a step closer, glancing from one to the other as if waiting for them to attack each other.

"I'm telling you this for your own good, Xenos," Yashel continued. "And for the good of our unit. Making enemies out of those in power won't help ACT products."

"You're telling me what will and will not help ACT products?" Xenos said, his fists clenched. Somehow he managed to keep his voice soft and calm. Never had he been so close to sinking his fangs into Yashel's throat. "If not for me, you'd still be lab property. Would you prefer that to being a free citizen?"

"Times have changed, Xenos. Now that we're dealing with the Drapers —"

"We're going to allow them to dictate how we treat our own people?"

"I didn't say that. All I'm telling you is the best way for you to continue helping ACT products is by remaining in power so you can argue your case legally. If you're dead or demoted, you can't do that."

"So you agree that I'm not imagining these attacks?"

"I'm not yet convinced one way or the other."

"I am," Xenos said. "I'm convinced about many things."

"Meaning?"

Xenos' lip curled and a low growl rumbled in his chest as he reached for his clothes and pulled them on.

"You still ought to be checked out by a medic," Zale told him.

"I've lived this long without a mother. Now I suddenly need two?"

"Let him do what he wants." Yashel waved his hand in disgust. "It's what he does best anyway."

"If you agree, we'll have our meeting tomorrow night instead?" Zale asked Xenos.

"The meeting is cancelled," Xenos stated.

"Oh. Cancelled." Yashel spun on his heel to face Xenos again. "It was so important that we had to hold it at eleven at night, but now it's cancelled?"

"Come here, Yashel," Xenos said in a deadly voice.

After a moment's hesitation, he approached and stood before Xenos, who continued, "As always, you are free to speak your mind, however when you do so, you will address me with respect. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Yashel stated, then added, "Sir."

"Dismissed."

Yashel turned and strode out of the room, his spine rigid. Gazing after him, Xenos wondered if Yashel himself wasn't responsible for tampering with the controls. The man was desperate for power and obviously coveted Xenos' position. By killing him, he would not only earn points with Re Lord, but also gain a promotion to Superior.

"Let's get out of here," Zale suggested. "Unless you want to go swimming again?"

"I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I've had enough diving for one day."

They exchanged slight smiles before leaving.

Chapter Nine

Under the Influence

Moonlight waited anxiously, hoping Zale would contact her soon. He did so moments before Xenos himself stepped into the apartment.

She had just switched off the spec when the door opened. The first thing she noticed was that he didn't look well—rather pale, his skin light blue rather than its usual purple undertone.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Why?"

"You don't look good."

He glanced at her sharply, then noticing she appeared genuinely concerned, he replied, "I'm fine. I thought you'd have retired hours ago."

"I fell asleep in here reading and woke up when Zale came looking for you."

"I see," he said softly as if speaking to himself.

Approaching him, she couldn't help feeling that something was wrong with him, but apparently he had no intention of confiding in her. Perhaps it was some deep, dark military secret and he couldn't.

Impulsively, she embraced him. His arms tightened around her and he buried his face in her hair. For several moments they stood, locked in each other's arms. Then he released her.

"Go to bed, Santos Gama."

"Let me sleep with you tonight?" she asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "Not tonight. I don't require your—"

"I'm not talking about sex. I mean let me sleep with you. All night."

Their gazes met and she thought she saw longing in his eyes, but the expression passed so quickly that it might not have been.

"Goodnight," he said and strode to his room where he closed the door, leaving her in the sitting room.

Rejection and embarrassment raged inside her, quickly turning to anger. She walked to her room, slammed the door and flopped on the bed.

By morning, she had calmed somewhat. Xenos had spent his life cut off from emotions such as love and tenderness. She had only known him a few short weeks. It would take time for him to accept an emotional relationship. Physical was safer. She needed to be patient.

When she stepped into the kitchen, he was already seated at the table, dressed in his uniform and involved in reading something on the screen of his personal computer. He glanced at her with the same detached expression as when they'd first met.

"Santos Gama" he said in a deceptively pleasant voice. "I believe you've fulfilled your end of our original bargain. I expect you to leave today."

This took her by surprise. She stared at him for a moment, then said, "If this is about last night, I didn't mean to pressure you into anything."

He smiled. "I assure you that's not the reason. We had an arrangement. Now it's over."

"Why are you doing this?" she approached and sat beside him, staring into his cool blue eyes. "I thought we enjoyed each other's company."

"You've been an exceptional escort."

Anger kindled inside her. "You and I both know I am not an escort. Will you tell me why you want me to leave? And don't give me any crap about our bargain being fulfilled."

He sighed, wearing a rather condescending expression that she'd love to slap off his face. "I didn't think it possible for you to become emotionally attached to a man you despise."

"I don't hate you. Now that I know you —"

"You don't know me," he snapped.

"I'm starting to. I think you like me too."

"That's irrelevant."

"No, it's not," she raised her voice slightly as her frustration grew. He was asking her to leave just when they were starting to develop something real. If she left now, she might never see him again. Taking his hand, she leaned closer, their gazes still locked. She looked for any sign that he was softening toward her, but there was none. His hand remained still in hers, neither responding to her touch nor pulling away. "Xenos, don't you feel anything for me at all after what we've shared?"

"I'm sorry if you feel misled, Santos Gama, but I've shared similar experiences with many other females. Don't take this personally. It has nothing to do with you. It is simply how I am."

She dropped his hand and stood, laughing humorlessly. "I can't believe I'm having this clichéd 'it's not you, it's me' conversation with *you* of all people."

"You're upset. You may take some time to collect yourself, then I expect you to go."

"I don't need to collect myself!" She shouted, her hands clenched into fists. "Why? Because I don't think there's anything wrong with emotions. Let me ask you, Xenos Nineteen, would you even *know* if you were upset?"

"Now you're becoming irrational."

"Gods!" She raised her face toward the heavens. "I can't believe you." Moonlight opened her eyes and stared at him, shaking her head. "You are a sad, lonely man and you have my sympathy."

"Fine. I have your sympathy. Now if I can have you out of my rooms, I will be thoroughly satisfied."

"You'll never be thoroughly satisfied," she said, turning away from him and stalking to her room.

She packed her few belongings quickly and walked to the kitchen where he still sat, reading from his computer.

They glanced at each other briefly but neither spoke before she left the apartment. On her way to the gate, she passed Yashel.

"Moonlight." He nodded. "How is Xenos feeling this morning?"

"He doesn't," she snapped.

"Excuse me?"

Sighing, she shook her head and said, "I'm sorry."

"I just wanted to see if he'd suffered any aftereffects from his accident."

In spite of herself, concern darted through her. "What accident?"

"Last night when he nearly drowned in his tank because of a controls malfunction."

Moonlight's stomach tightened. At least that explained why he'd looked bad when he'd returned home.

No. She would not allow herself to feel for him when he obviously cared nothing about her.

"I didn't know about that. He didn't mention anything."

"I see you're headed for the gate. Are you going to the city?"

"Yes. I...Xenos and I just...I'm leaving."

His brow furrowed. "Oh. I hope nothing is wrong?"

"You'll have to ask Xenos."

"I was on my way to see him, actually."

"It was nice meeting you, S-Master Yashel." Moonlight extended her hand and he grasped it in a firm handshake.

"Take care, Moonlight."

"I will." She smiled slightly and headed for the gate where the guard collected her security pass.

This time she planned to return to Earth. Now she knew without doubt there was no reason for her to stay.

* * * * *

Xenos sat at the table for several moments after Moonlight left. An inexplicable feeling coursed through him. Part of him actually missed her presence. Thrusting such thoughts from his mind, he focused on other more important issues.

He and Judson had a meeting shortly and he intended to let his secretary know that they needed to speed up their plans. After this latest attempt on his life, he knew if he didn't do something drastic to protect himself, eventually his enemies would succeed in killing him.

The best way to save himself as well as give Judson and his rebels the time they needed to finish their plans was to place himself in protective custody, specifically a Laetez prison. If he gave Re Lord the excuse he wanted to put him behind bars, that would give him at least a few weeks of interrogation before his trial and inevitable execution. If all went as planned, he would escape long before they took his life.

In the corridor on his way out of the residence, he met Yashel.

"I wanted to give you a report on our tank investigation," Yashel said, falling into step beside Xenos.

"Proceed."

"Preliminary investigation indicates a malfunction in the entire tank system."

"Thank you so much for that," Xenos said sarcastically.

"What I mean is, there didn't appear to be any tampering."

Xenos couldn't control the sinister smile spreading over his lips. "Either you're deliberately trying to insult me, Yashel, or else you're more stupid than I've ever suspected."

"Neither," Yashel said, his jaw visibly tight. "I'm only telling you what we've found so far. The investigation isn't over."

"Then when you find some real evidence, inform me. Otherwise do not waste my time."

"I saw Moonlight at the gate a few moments ago. She looked upset. What's going on with you two?"

Xenos paused and grasped Yashel's arm. They stood outside headquarters, their gazes locked and the tension between them almost tangible. "Never ask about my personal life again, Yashel."

An annoyed smile twisted Yashel's lips. "That's your problem, Xenos. You have no personal life because anyone who might be personal to you is cut off like this." He snapped his fingers.

"I didn't ask for your opinion. I told you to stay out of my personal life. Is that clear? Only a yes or no is required."

"Yes, Sir."

Xenos released Yashel. They approached headquarters and entered through separate doors.

In Xenos' office, Judson awaited the Superior. An hour later, they left the building to talk privately on the beach where Xenos told his secretary they would have to move on to plan B.

"Have the arrangements been made?" Xenos asked.

"Yes, but you're certain this is the best option?" Judson held his gaze with a hint of concern. "You could be in just as much danger in prison."

"Re Lord won't bother having me done in by other inmates. A public trial and execution for me is exactly what he's been dreaming of."

"I was referring to the interrogations," Judson said. "We won't be able to help you."

"I'll deal with the interrogations. You just do your part and get me out before the point of lethal injection."

"I will not let you die there, Sir. You have my word."

Xenos nodded.

"Can we depend on Zale and Yashel to join us?"

"No. I haven't spoken to Zale yet, but I will before I'm taken away. Approaching Yashel would be useless. He would betray us in a heartbeat."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yashel spends so much time sucking on Re Lord's ass that his lips are bluer than mine."

Judson gave a snort of laughter. "You know him better than I do."

"We'd better get back to headquarters. The faster we get on with this, the better."

Several hours later, Xenos sent an ACT unit to seize a private lab just outside the city known to employ several Draper scientists. Once the orders were given, he called for Zale to meet him on the beach where he told him of his plans for rebellion, baiting a trap that would help him decide whether or not his "brother" could be trusted. Afterward, Xenos returned to his office, sat behind his desk and sighed deeply, enjoying his last hours of relative freedom.

By late afternoon, he was arrested by Chief Re Lord's order and found himself in solitary confinement in Saber Island, the most brutal maximum security ACT prison on the planet.

* * * * *

Xenos wasn't sure how long he remained in the dark, tiny cell, his only conveniences a cot and a toilet. He knew by his dangerously low hydration level that several days had passed. Given no food and scarcely enough water to survive, he realized his captors wanted to weaken and disorient him before starting the interrogation.

His Tydisian skin had already dried so much that he considered using the dirty toilet water to hydrate. Only the danger of picking up an infection prevented him from doing so, as he was unlikely to receive proper medical treatment in this place.

No one spoke to him, even when the guards opened the cell, bound him in shocker cuffs and led him to an interrogation room. Almost blinded by the brightness of the room after so many days in the cell, Xenos discerned the shape of the guards leaving. As his vision cleared, he saw a tall, slim Laetez male dressed in black enter the room and take the seat across from the straight-backed iron chair he was bound to.

The man had short dark hair, classic features and pale green, unreadable eyes. In spite of his disarming appearance, Xenos knew interrogators at Saber Island underwent rigorous training. During his time in the ACT Corps, he had gone through similar training, learning how to extract information from even the most unwilling captives. What he was about to face would not be easy. The man across from him would do everything to break down his resistance, but he would not succeed.

"Xenos Nineteen," the interrogator began in a deep, yet calm, voice. "I have questions. Depending on how you answer, this can be easy or it can be difficult, but I'm sure you already know that."

Xenos' gaze remained fixed on the interrogator, but he didn't speak.

"We know you have been using your position as Superior in an attempt to destroy the Laetez-Draper alliance. We know you have implemented steps to thwart the functioning of private labs throughout our world. You will tell me all you have done and all you planned to do. You will detail the unlawful steps you have already taken for your cause."

"I have done nothing illegal nor did I have any such plans."

"Tell us about Ro'Tika."

At the mention of that uninhabited planet, Xenos' heartbeat quickened the slightest bit. This was the bait he'd fed Zale. During their conversation, he'd mentioned several false places that were allegedly important to his rebellion. Knowing that Zale would be questioned after Xenos' capture, he asked the younger man to tell his interrogators that Ro'Tika was where they should look for information. He also told Zale not to mention Oren'Da, for that place was most important to his plans.

If Xenos' interrogators mentioned Oren'Da, he would know Zale had sold him out. Otherwise, when the time came, he would welcome Zale as a member of his rebellion.

"I know nothing about Ro'Tika."

"We have been told otherwise. You confided in the wrong man about your plans, Xenos. Most Laetez soldiers are loyal. A creature such as yourself can't truly understand that. Now tell me about Ro'Tika."

"I know nothing about Ro'Tika, and as I've already said, I have no plans."

"I want to believe you. I want to believe this last order you gave to seize the lab is a stupid mistake made by a man with delusions of his own power, but knowing what I

do about you, I can't believe it. I know your move against the lab is an attempt to hide a much greater plan."

"You're wrong."

The interrogator smiled slightly, his eyes fathomless pits. "We'll see."

* * * * *

The day after Moonlight arrived home on Earth, she returned to work. Though she had taken three weeks' vacation time to travel to the Laetez home world, she needed something to keep her mind off Xenos. Her mother and sister tried to discuss him, but Moonlight refused, saying she wanted to forget him. This seemed to please her family and she was glad they stopped mentioning him. They would never understand what she felt for Xenos. How could they when she didn't completely understand it herself?

She was seated at her desk, studying her daily schedule, when the intergalactic news scrolled across the bottom of her computer screen. Seeing Xenos' name and the report that he'd been arrested, she felt as if time momentarily stopped. Her stomach twisted and a sick feeling washed over her.

Finally her senses returned and she contacted Re Halina on her spec. Her friend could provide little more information than what had been given on the news.

Xenos had been arrested after ordering the capture of a private lab. Charged with treason, he now awaited trial.

"The Laetez execute people guilty of treason," Moonlight murmured.

"Not always," Re Halina said weakly.

"But they will execute him, if only because of his position as a Superior."

"Most likely."

Moonlight's throat constricted and she closed her eyes for a long moment. Why did the thought of him dying affect her so much? A few weeks ago, she would have rejoiced over the possibility of his execution. How many people had died by *his* order?

"The night before he told me to leave, I knew something was wrong with him. He didn't look well."

"How could you tell the difference?" Re Halina murmured.

"That's not funny."

"Sorry."

"When I saw Yashel at the gate, he said Xenos had nearly drowned in his own tank. I wonder if it had anything to do with—"

"Wouldn't doubt it. A man like that has more than a few enemies. I wouldn't try reading into this situation too deeply, though, Moonlight. He got himself arrested by taking the law into his own freaky hands."

"I can't believe he'd do something this stupid," she continued.

"The power went to his head."

"You don't know him, Re Halina. He's not the type to let anything go to his head. He's too...focused. Believe me."

"Then why is he sitting in Saber Island prison?"

"Any word yet about when his trial will be?"

"No. Most likely they're still interrogating him. They're not letting out much information yet, but I'll keep you posted about anything I hear."

"Thank you, Re Halina."

"I'm sorry, Moonlight. I know the bastard got to you, for whatever reason I still don't understand."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon." Moonlight sighed, leaning back in her chair and wondering what was happening to Xenos right now.

Recalling their last conversation, or rather their last argument, she began to realize that maybe he'd had a good reason for sending her away.

Could it be that he somehow knew what was about to happen and he'd tried to spare her from a messy situation?

No. It was too much to hope for that he cared about her in such a way. What was the point of considering it now? No doubt he would soon be put to death. That sickened her. For some reason, the thought of losing him was almost unbearable.

If only she could help him as easily as she'd helped her mother, but it was impossible. There was no one she could bargain with for his life and in her heart she knew that was justice.

* * * * *

Xenos grunted as the interrogator struck him with the end of a shocker stick, sending a fiery jolt through his body. He lifted his face from the puddle of vomit on the table in front of him, its pungent odor filling the room.

The interrogator hadn't wasted much time questioning him before turning to the Laetez truth drugs that worked on many species in the galaxy and beyond. Xenos' resistance forced the interrogator to use dangerous amounts of the drug. For the first time, Xenos questioned his plan. Maybe the bastard would overdose him before he had a chance to reach trial. No, Re Lord wanted to see him publicly humiliated.

"Open your eyes," the interrogator ordered, placing the end of the shocker stick under Xenos' chin.

He did as ordered, but the room spun so quickly he was nearly sick again. Already he'd vomited so much his throat and his stomach were on fire. No doubt he was dehydrated as well. His skin itched and burned, desperate for water.

Just before he lost consciousness again, he heard the interrogator say, "Guard, bring in that medic from ACT headquarters. The one who's allegedly an expert on this mongrel."

* * * * *

"Why is he able to resist these drugs?"

Xenos heard the interrogator speaking, but this time he kept his eyes closed, feigning unconsciousness for as long as possible. At least it gave him some time to recoup.

"He is Tydisian," Trissa stated, her voice icy. "They are highly resistant to our truth drugs."

That was true enough. Xenos knew the Laetez had tried long ago to find drugs capable of controlling Tydisians. Fortunately for him, the prisoners they had in custody—the same ones whose DNA ran through Xenos—had died before they concocted drugs powerful enough to penetrate their minds.

"He's not a true Tydisian," the interrogator stated. "He is Laetez and human as well. Both species are vulnerable to the drugs."

"But he is mostly Tydisian," she stated. "Before he tells you anything under the influence of these drugs, you will kill him. Is that what you're trying to do?"

"No. He will stand trial."

"Then I suggest you give him some water. Tydisians cannot live for extended periods without adequate water and he's already dangerously dehydrated."

"Give him enough to keep him alive. No more than that until he tells me something useful."

He heard footsteps, then a gentle hand on his shoulder. Trissa, no doubt.

"I've brought you some water, Sir," she said, holding a glass to his lips.

"You needn't address him as Sir," the interrogator said. "As you recall, he has been stripped of rank."

Opening his eyes, Xenos saw Trissa standing beside him. Her gaze fixed on him. He glanced across the room to where the interrogator stood, his arms folded across his lean chest and his eyes boring into him.

"Come closer," Xenos said, his voice a harsh rasp.

The interrogator took a step nearer.

"I'll tell you," Xenos murmured. "But only you."

Nodding, his jaw visibly tight, the interrogator stepped nearer, took the water from Trissa and shouldered her aside.

Xenos gagged and the interrogator raised his eyes to the heavens, but held the water to his lips. It felt so good to his dry mouth and he was nearly overcome by the need to swallow just a bit. Instead he took a big mouthful and spat it in the interrogator's face.

The man sputtered and threw the cup onto the floor, wiping a hand over his dripping face. Glaring, he again struck Xenos with the shocker stick.

Xenos' scream turned to laughter.

"Failure," he rasped, glaring at the interrogator. "Tell me how it feels."

The interrogator summoned the guards, who hauled Xenos back to his cell where he was stripped and beaten. Climate control was lowered, uncomfortable to one of Tydisian blood. Lying naked on his cot, he thought about what would come next, for he knew they weren't nearly finished with him.

* * * * *

Sluggish from the cold, Xenos was dragged from his cell into a warmer interrogation room. It took several hours before he began to thaw and finally emerge from the almost blissful state of semi-hibernation.

The door opened and Chief Re Lord stepped inside, wearing a pleasant smile. It didn't surprise Xenos that the bastard had come to gloat.

"Xenos Nineteen, how are we feeling? A little exposed, perhaps?" The Chief carried a gray prison robe in his hand. He draped it over Xenos' shoulders. "Better?"

Xenos shrugged off the robe and twisted his wrists where they were manacled to the arms of the chair.

"Why are you making this so difficult?" Re Lord continued, sitting across from him. "Why have you turned against your own kind? You were among the finest Laetez warriors. You achieved the rank of Superior, yet you've thrown all that away for what? Help me understand your reasons. Tell me what you had planned and I will see to it you're made comfortable and perhaps even sway the judges to spare your life during the trial. I can help you, Xenos Nineteen."

"How can you possibly help me, Re Lord, when you can't even help yourself?"

"What's that supposed to mean? Is that a threat?"

"Threats from a man in my position? Look at me, Re Lord. You've hated me from the first and now you've won."

Re Lord smiled, rested a patronizing hand on Xenos' knee and patted it gently. "I'll have won when you tell me everything, you pathetic, traitorous mongrel. I know you're hiding something. Even Yashel suspects you've lost your sense of reason."

Xenos would have liked to believe Re Lord was telling him this to manipulate him, but he knew in his heart it was the truth. He and Yashel hadn't seen eye-to-eye for a very long time. He had been wise not to include him in his plans.

"You won't talk to me then?" Re Lord asked.

Xenos shot him a fierce look and the Chief sighed deeply. "Then I'm forced to bring in the only person who ever controlled you."

He walked to the door and opened it. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "This is your last chance, Xenos Nineteen. I hate to put you through this sort of degradation."

Smiling wickedly, Xenos said, "Just enjoy it while you can, Re Lord."

The Chief glanced into the hall and made a slight gesture with his hand.

A Laetez male of medium height and build with salt-and-pepper hair entered the room, a black case dangling from his gloved hand. Xenos' stomach twisted with rage.

Medic Re Torley. The butcher who had led the study on Xenos while he had been in the custody of the private lab. He had created Xenos through stolen DNA, tormented him from his first moments of life in an artificial womb until the time the government had deemed it illegal to force him into brutal experiments. If Re Torley had simply been seeking knowledge, Xenos might have understood, even overlooked what he'd done. But the bastard had *enjoyed* it.

"Xenos Nineteen. It has been a long time," Re Torley said. He motioned for the guards to approach.

They used a strap to secure Xenos' neck to the back of the chair, making any type of motion impossible.

"You still have such interesting webbing." Re Torley ran a gloved finger across his hands. Withdrawing a small, sharp surgical knife from his black case, he smiled slightly. He dragged the interrogator's chair beside Xenos and sat.

Chief Re Lord stood across the room, flanked by the guards.

"What makes you even more interesting is your ability to endure so much more than other prisoners," Re Torley said. "Each time you refuse to answer a question, you will lose a body part, starting with your fingers. We know you'll regenerate, so how many times you lose said body parts is limitless. Bring back memories?"

Xenos' teeth clenched and he concentrated on keeping his mind focused, something he'd learned during his studies in meditation on Tydepth. Tydisians were masters of their own minds and his teacher had passed priceless knowledge on to him.

Re Torley's knife sliced through the webbing between his thumb and index finger, just a hint of what was to come if he ignored their questions.

Let the bastard cut him. Every slice was a nail in Re Torley's proverbial casket.

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Weak from blood loss, Xenos allowed his eyes to close halfway. He was tired of the questions, tired of looking at his own fingerless hands and tired of playing this game. By now his tormentors must know they would learn nothing from him. Across the room, Re Lord sat in a chair, looking rather bored. The interrogator stood near him, an almost pleased look on his face. No doubt he was glad Re Torley hadn't succeeded where he'd failed.

"Tell me about your plans and this will stop," Re Torley said. "My next step will be to remove your ears. Incredibly painful, considering how deep I'll have to dig to locate them."

"Do that outside of a controlled operating room and you run the risk of damaging my brain," Xenos said with calmness that even impressed himself. "You could kill me

and that would put me out of my misery, however it will ruin the Chief's plans for a public trial and execution."

"Leave his ears alone, Re Torley," Re Lord said, annoyance in his voice.

Re Torley leaned closer to Xenos. "What is wrong with you? Don't you feel anything? Or is that some Tydisian trait you've managed to keep hidden from us?"

"If I don't feel, then you have yourself to thank for that." Xenos opened his eyes fully, staring into those of the medic. "There is nothing you can do to me now that you haven't done in the past. All you can do now is strengthen my resolve. If I had any secrets, I would take them to the grave."

Re Torley curled his lip, slashed Xenos' cheek with his sharp little blade and turned to Re Lord.

"I can see you won't tell us anything," Re Lord said. "But I'm sure there are people who do know your secrets, Xenos. A man may defy his enemies, but leaves himself vulnerable to those he loves."

"Are you sure about that, Chief Re Lord?" Re Torley asked. "I doubt this particular specimen is capable of love."

"Return him to his cell and prepare a shuttle," the Chief ordered. "Re Torley, once you've tended the prisoner's injuries, you're free to go. Interrogator Re Moreyle, you will come with us."

Re Torley began scrubbing, suturing and binding Xenos' wounds. He bore the bastard's touch, almost wishing Re Lord had left him to heal on his own instead. Medic Torley was the least of his worries, however. Re Lord's words plagued him. *He leaves himself vulnerable to those he loves.* Re Torley was right. Xenos didn't love anyone. The problem was, Re Lord seemed to think he did. He wondered who the Chief planned to mistakenly try using against him.

Chapter Ten

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

Since Xenos' arrest, Moonlight could scarcely think of anything else. Nights of broken sleep followed days of worry and self doubt. Her family didn't understand her position, and while Re Halina understood it, she couldn't agree with it. Still she kept Moonlight informed about any news regarding Xenos from the Laetez home word. Unfortunately, it was little. His case was being treated with the utmost secrecy and his trial date had yet to be given.

Her job at the interrogation office that she had once found moderately stimulating now sickened her, as it reminded her of what Xenos must be going through. The office where she was employed only handled minor criminals and torture was not used. Still she knew other offices didn't have as many restrictions. The Laetez in particular were known for their cruel methods, such as the ones ordered by Xenos himself, the ones that had killed Jola's husband.

When she thought about that, part of her was glad to know he suffered while another part grieved for him.

It was near the end of the week and she trudged into her office, glad she would have tomorrow free. Maybe she could catch up on the sleep that had eluded her. In her office, she found her supervisor and a well dressed woman she didn't recognize waiting for her. Something told her that woman meant trouble.

"Moonlight, this is Agent Nealy with intergalactic affairs," the supervisor stated.

The agent extended her hand, which Moonlight shook.

"Ms. Santos Gama, an interrogator from the Laetez government would like to speak to you regarding former Supervisor Xenos Nineteen," said Nealy.

Moonlight's stomach tightened. "Am I in some kind of trouble?"

The agent offered a cool smile. "Nothing like that. We know that you've recently spent some time with Xenos Nineteen and the Laetez would like to know a little more about the nature of your relationship with him. Considering our alliance with them and the accusations against him, we've agreed to allow them to question you."

"I'm guessing I don't have a choice?"

"It will be easier all around if you cooperate. Otherwise we'll have to take legal steps—"

"No. I have nothing to hide," she stated. "When and where would you like to do this?"

"Right now." Nealy glanced from Moonlight to her supervisor. "We've arranged to use this facility for the interrogation and you may, of course, have legal representation. We've already arranged for someone, if that is acceptable?"

"Yes," Moonlight said a bit numbly.

"Good. Follow me, please." Nealy stepped out of the office and Moonlight followed her down the familiar corridors and into the elevator.

A short time later, she found herself in a fifth floor interrogation room in the company of Agent Nealy, the legal rep, a Laetez guard and a slim, dark-haired interrogator, Re Moreyle.

"Moonlight Santos Gama, please explain your relationship with Xenos Nineteen," Re Moreyle asked without preamble.

"We have no relationship to speak of. I knew him two weeks."

"You make a habit of moving in with men you just met?"

She resisted the urge to shift uncomfortably, but not because of the man's cool stare. Compared to Xenos, this interrogator wasn't the least bit intimidating. The idea of discussing her private life with strangers unsettled her.

"No, I do not," she stated.

"Then why him?"

"I'm not sure."

"Not sure about why he was an exception or not sure about the question?"

"Not sure about why he was an exception."

"Really? Could it have anything to do with the fact that he got your mother an early release from her prison sentence?"

"What do these questions have to do with Xenos' arrest?"

"How long did you say you knew him again?"

"Two weeks," Moonlight said icily.

"And during that time did he say or do anything out of the ordinary?"

"How would I know what's ordinary for him when I've only just met him?"

"Did he ever talk in his sleep?"

"I wouldn't know. We had separate rooms."

"You're to have me believe that you spent two weeks with a man known for his many encounters with escorts and you didn't have sexual relations with him?"

"I never said we didn't have sexual relations. I said we didn't sleep in the same room."

"What did he tell you about his plans?"

Moonlight's brow furrowed. "What plans?"

"You know what plans. We know what plans. It's only a matter of putting this on the record."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Moonlight stated. She glanced at her legal rep, wondering why the bitch sat there without offering advice of any kind. Maybe she should have refused questioning, at least until she could find a rep of her own. Yet she had done nothing wrong. She had no idea what plans they were talking about.

The questions continued for several hours, then Re Moreyle switched on the monitor across the room. Xenos, bound in shocker cuffs, sat in a cell that Moonlight recognized as one from this office. Though he carried himself with his usual dignity, he had obviously suffered during his captivity.

His pale blue face bore several cuts and bruises. Glancing at his hands, she saw his fingers were in various stages of regeneration. A sick feeling washed over her when she thought about what he must have endured.

"He's here?" she asked.

Re Moreyle's lips curved upward in the slightest smile. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Laetez mercy," Re Moreyle extended his hands. "We thought you might want a few moments with your lover before he is tried and executed. Come."

He stood, and after a moment's hesitation, she followed, her legal rep behind her. They walked to the end of the corridor where two guards stood outside Xenos' cell.

At a motion from Re Moreyle, they opened the door and Moonlight stepped closer. The legal rep followed.

"I think they should be alone," Re Moreyle stated.

"This is highly irregular," the legal rep said, her expression revealing her disapproval. "We have agreed to allow you to employ your unconventional Laetez methods of interrogation, but I will accompany my client inside."

"It's all right," Moonlight said.

"Ms. Santos Gama, I don't recommend —"

"I'll be fine. As I said before, I have nothing to hide."

She stepped into the cell and found herself separated from Xenos by a barred wall.

Their gazes met briefly, but his expression remained unreadable.

"Santos Gama," he said after a moment, his voice rougher than usual.

"Xenos Nineteen."

"They seem to be under the impression that we mean something to each other."

"I tried to set them straight."

"As I did."

She was amazed at how calm she sounded. Seeing him up close, the effects of abuse were even more noticeable. Patches of his Tydisian skin looked red and enflamed, obviously painful. His mutilated hands rested on his knees. Shredded webbing dangled between the stubs where his fingers had been. These were visible signs of abuse. No

doubt there were others well hidden beneath his baggy prison uniform. She wanted to offer him some comfort, but knew that would only make their situation worse.

For several moments they remained, gazing at each other in silence, then the door creaked open and Re Moreyle stepped in, pausing so close to Moonlight that she could feel the heat from his body.

"He's extremely stubborn," the interrogator said. "The Laetez methods of questioning are harsher than what you're accustomed to. Not that we're naïve enough to think humans don't use torture, but I'm sure you've never been exposed to it in an office such as this. When we leave Earth, we will continue questioning him until we discover what he's hiding. If you have any feelings for him at all, any compassion, you can save him weeks, perhaps months, of agony. Just tell us what you know."

"I don't know anything," Moonlight stated.

"He means nothing to you?"

"It's what I've said."

"Are you willing to answer our questions under the influence of truth drugs?"

"You do not have to agree to that, Ms. Santos Gama," her legal rep said from the doorway.

Moonlight sighed deeply. Truth drugs. Then they'd know she did feel something for Xenos. However, they would also know for certain she knew nothing about any plans.

"All right," she said, turning to Re Moreyle, not bothering to keep the disgust from her face or voice. "I'll take your drugs."

"Excellent."

They returned to the interrogation room where a medic was summoned to administer the drug. Within seconds of receiving the shot, Moonlight felt thoroughly relaxed and a bit dizzy.

"What is your name?" Re Moreyle began.

"Moonlight Santos Gama."

"What is your relationship to Xenos Nineteen?"

"Lovers."

"How long have you known him?"

"Two weeks."

"During the time you spent in his apartment, did you have separate bedrooms?"

"Yes."

"Why did you enter a relationship with him?"

"He freed my mother from prison."

"That's the only reason you stayed with him?"

"No," Moonlight whispered, hating what was about to come next.

"What other reason?"

"I wanted..."

"What reason?"

"I wanted him for sex." She admitted that much and prayed it would be enough. If they asked about love, she was doomed.

The guard gave a snort of disbelieving laughter and the legal rep curled her lip in disgust, but quickly caught herself and resumed her look of cool professionalism.

"And he told you nothing about the Drapers or ACT?"

"Only that he was involved in the negotiations for private labs."

Re Moreyle questioned her for nearly an hour before Moonlight was dismissed. Her supervisor suggested she take the rest of the day off, since it would take several hours for her system to fully expel the drug. One of her coworkers kindly offered her a ride home, which she accepted.

She couldn't stop thinking of Xenos. Seeing those beautiful blue eyes, so strong and determined in spite of his obvious pain, made her realize that she could not, would not, allow him to die in the company of hateful little shits like Re Moreyle. There had to be some way to save his life and she needed to find it. Fast.

* * * * *

Xenos sat chained in the back of the prison shuttle. Behind the electrically charged wall, two armed guards waited. The only other inhabitant of the shuttle was the pilot. Re Lord and Re Moreyle traveled ahead in the Chief's private shuttle.

Closing his eyes, Xenos leaned his head against the wall. While he should focus completely on his impending rescue, he couldn't stop thinking about Moonlight. Seeing her again had stirred such unfamiliar feelings – gladness and an emotional ache that he sensed could be more dangerous than any physical punishment. Spending any more time with her than he already had might have proved dangerous.

Now he wouldn't have to consider it. That was the last time he'd ever see her and it was best for both of them.

The shuttle lurched so abruptly that Xenos was tossed out of his bench and landed hard on the floor. He just managed to avoid smashing his face by using his bound hands to break the fall.

Muffled movements outside the cell door made him wonder what was happening. He was about to shout to the guards, not that he expected an answer, when the door slid open. For a moment he thought he was hallucinating from all the drugs Re Moreyle had used on him over the past week.

Moonlight, dressed from head to toe in black, her hair bound tightly at her nape, carried a stun pistol in one hand and the remote key for his shocker cuffs in the other.

"Come on," she said, her face tense with anxiety. Her dark eyes gleamed, and if he hadn't been so uncertain about her presence, he'd have taken more time to appreciate how sexy she looked when she was doing something illegal.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked, not taking a step toward her.

Exasperated, she approached him and placed the remote key against his cuffs. "What does it look like? I'm helping you escape."

His first reaction was to laugh in her face, then he realized the situation was too bizarre. The woman was up to something. The question was, should he play along or remain here? Unless he returned to the Laetez home world, his rebels' plan to rescue him would be thwarted. No matter what Moonlight's purpose, he knew he could handle her. Curiosity got the better of him and he decided to find out what she was up to.

She pressed several buttons on the remote key and a jolt shot through Xenos that nearly knocked him off his feet.

"What the hell are you doing?" he growled. "Hit the blue one first two times, then the green."

"Sorry," she murmured, trying again.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Xenos. I risked my life just to hijack this shuttle and shock you."

The cuffs loosened and he slipped them off and tossed them aside, flexing his fingers that were almost completely regenerated.

"Come on," she said.

"First of all, how did you get here? Second, what's your plan?"

"Human! Move it!" roared a masculine voice from the boarding tunnel.

Moonlight and Xenos approached the tunnel that joined the shuttle to what he assumed to be Moonlight's getaway craft. A Butchcade pirate, by the tattoo on his leathery cheek, stood halfway down the tunnel. This pirate was of the TriRoot species, complete with thick muscles, horned face and an extra arm growing between his shoulder blades. He carried a sack in one hand and a stun pistol in his other, while the third dangled freely.

Butchcade pirates were among the worst scum in the universe but they rarely failed in completing any loathsome task they set out to do.

"Hurry or I leave without you," the pirate said, his snout twitching wildly. "We have only moments to get out of here before the Laetez realize their prison shuttle has been attacked. You paid me to break out this mongrel, not get killed in the process."

"Let's go," Moonlight said.

She and Xenos hurried across the tunnel.

"You hired a Butchcade pirate?" Xenos murmured to her. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

She turned to him, a wild and confused look in her large, dark eyes. "I think so."

No sooner had they stepped onto the pirate's shuttle than the tunnel withdrew behind them and they flew off at a frantic pace.

Xenos noted the ship seemed rather small, more like a shuttle belonging to a larger craft. It probably was, for he doubted Moonlight could afford to pay for an entire ship of Butchcade pirates. This one was most likely working alone for some extra cash.

"How many others are on this craft?" Xenos asked.

"Just us," Moonlight told him, a bit breathlessly. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I can't believe we made it."

"We're not safe yet. Not until we get out of space beyond human-Laetez reach. Did you happen to plan for that?"

She curled her lip. "Of course I did. Our pirate is taking us to the Delilah Sector. I have some money left and we can live off that for a while. Not that it's much. The pirate was expensive."

"No doubt," he said, humoring her. Either this woman was completely naïve or else, as he suspected, not exactly what she appeared to be. He would find out soon enough, but what he wanted right now was water.

He strode across the cargo bay toward the cockpit where he stood behind the pirate.

"Do you have a latrine on this heap?"

The pirate turned to him with a snarl. "Do you think I shit in my hand?"

"Smells like it."

Growling, the pirate said, "Have you smelled yourself lately, mongrel?"

Actually, he had. Other than the desperate need to hydrate, scrubbing himself clean was the main reason he wanted a shower.

"Do you have a place to wash or not?" Xenos demanded, his growl as menacing as the pirate's.

"In the back."

He turned around and nearly bumped into Moonlight, who held out a bottle of gel, a towel and clothing. "It's not medicated, but it's scentless," she said. "I have an antiseptic spray for your skin."

"Thanks anyway, but it will only dry it out more. Once I'm able to hydrate regularly again, I'll be fine." He took the wash from her and headed to the back of the ship, where he found a rather grubby latrine.

He rinsed the shower several times, not wanting to pick up any infections from the stinking pirate, then stepped under the water. At first it hurt so much that he gave a low groan. Slowly the pain faded and he closed his eyes, releasing a breath of relief.

Xenos stepped out of the shower, dried off and dressed in the clothes Moonlight had brought him — black socks, gloves, boots, trousers and a white T-shirt. The shirt was a bit snug, but other than that the clothes fit well.

He stepped into the cargo area and Moonlight smiled at him from where she sat on a bench.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Yes. Thank you." He returned her smile and approached her. He gently caressed her face with a gloved hand. "You're a brave woman, Moonlight Santos Gama."

"Not really. Doing this was better than accepting the alternative."

"Mmm," he purred, still smiling. He wondered exactly what she meant by that. What had she been threatened with if she didn't dive into this foolhardy plan? Or maybe she had been part of it from the time she came to beg him for her mother's release.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, searching through her bag. "I have some nutritional packs."

"You hate those."

"But they pack well."

"Yes." He caressed her hair, then walked to the cockpit. A glance at the controls told him they were halfway between the Laetez home world and the Delilah Sector.

Convenient.

"What is our destination?" Xenos asked the pirate.

"You'll know when we get there. My deal and its details are with the human. Not with you."

"I paid him half up front and half when we land at Port Cetta," Moonlight explained, coming to stand nearer to Xenos. She placed a light hand on his back and he resisted the urge to shrug off her touch. It had been a long time since he'd met such a bitch who looked absolutely innocent. He noticed she had left her weapon on the bench and she looked more relaxed than before. Was it because she thought they were out of danger or because she believed he now trusted her?

"Fine with me. After all, the lady saved me from a death sentence," Xenos said amiably. He leaned over the pirate. "This is quite a shuttle. Nice modes. I bet it didn't come like this, however."

"No," the pirate said warily. "It's special design."

"Did you get it done at Wormhide?"

"How does a Laetez soldier know about Wormhide?"

Xenos grinned. "I know a bit about the Delilah Sector and its hidden jewels."

"What's Wormhide?" Moonlight asked.

"A place for scientists and engineers who don't want to wait for government approval for their prototypes," Xenos replied.

"That's why we're usually a step ahead of the soldiers." The pirate smirked.

"So tell me," Xenos continued, "Does this craft have advanced stun mods?"

"Something similar," the pirate said, turning toward a gray lever to his left.

Using this moment of distraction, Xenos reached around and snapped the pirate's neck.

Moonlight gave a shout of shock and horror. She stared at the pirate's limp body draped across the controls and watched as Xenos hauled him off and kicked him aside.

"Are you crazy?" she shouted. "You killed our pirate!"

"Observant, Santos Gama. Do you get that in interrogation training or is it something that comes naturally to all spies?"

"Spy? What the fuck are you talking about?" She turned away, but he caught her arm and shoved her into the empty copilot's seat.

Moonlight kicked him, but he caught her leg. She kicked with her other and he caught that too and jerked her out of the seat. Landing on the hard floor, she grunted.

"Sit still and let me plot a course before this heap crashes," he growled.

He was right. With the pirate dead and Moonlight unable to fly this particular shuttle, she had no choice but to let Xenos take over.

Let him? As if she could stop him anyway.

Keeping her in his peripheral vision, he quickly plotted a course and set the shuttle on autopilot.

Moonlight pushed herself to her feet and inched her way toward the bench where she'd left her stun pistol.

"Don't even think about it, Santos Gama," he said softly, stood and reached her in a single long stride. He grasped her arm, twisted it behind her back and forced her face down against a storage trunk.

"Xenos, what the hell are you doing?"

"Who do you work for?"

"What?"

"Is it Yashel or Re Lord? Are you from the Earth government and the Laetez are borrowing you or do you work directly for the Laetez?"

"I worked at the interrogation office. Now I'm unemployed and a fugitive, thanks to you!"

He leaned closer and spoke directly into her ear, "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying!" she said, trying to remain calm, though hysteria threatened to overtake her. Gods, her family and Re Halina had been right. She should have forgotten about him. He was a dangerous, violent bastard and she was out here, alone, on the run and at his mercy.

"Then how did you manage to arrange my escape?"

"I had a friend when I was in transfer school who had connections to the Butchcade pirates. I had him arrange a meeting for me with this one."

"Where did you get the money to pay? Butchcades are very expensive."

"I emptied my bank account. What do you think I did?"

"I think Re Lord paid for this entire setup from the beginning. You. The pirate. Everything. You are here to gain my trust and report back to the Laetez."

"Oh Gods, Xenos, listen to what you're saying. Do I look like a fucking spy? I'm ready to piss myself right now. What the hell kind of spy would admit that?"

"Drop the innocent act, Santos Gama. It didn't work back at the residence and it won't work now. The only way for you to save yourself is to tell me the truth." He tightened his grip on her and she gave a sharp cry of pain. That affected him more than he wanted to admit, but he forced himself not to soften toward her.

"Go ahead and kill me then, you heartless bastard. It's what you do best," she screamed. "I deserve what I get trying to help you. You killed Jola, go ahead and kill me too. But before I die, let me tell you that for a big, important ACT warrior, you suck at sniffing out the enemy, because it's not me!"

"Then why did you do this?" he asked calmly.

"Because I didn't want them to kill you." She struggled against his grip, but the motion only made her gasp in pain. "I wish I had. Now I see they were trying to do the world a favor."

Sighing, he reached for her stun pistol and stuck it in his trousers. Then he dragged her to a standing position.

"Put your hands against the wall," he said.

Trembling, she did what he ordered, but glanced at him over her shoulder. Tears streaked her face and her eyes gleamed with hatred and fear, yet she still managed to look defiant. He had to respect that.

"What are you going to do now? Rape me, you fucking animal?"

"No. I merely want to see if you have any other weapons." He frisked her quickly, trying to ignore the sensation of her warm curves against his hands. This woman was a greater danger to him than Re Lord had ever been.

"You may sit," he told her.

She spun and glared at him, wiping her tear-streaked face on her sleeve. "What are you going to do with me?"

"First I'm going to prove whether or not you're telling the truth."

"How are you going to do that? Cut off *my* fingers this time?"

"Nothing like that. I'm meeting with associates soon. You'll join us and we'll question you using truth drugs. Then I'll be satisfied."

"More drugs," she sighed, dropping onto the bench.

"Do you have any idea what's in these storage tanks?"

"My belongings are in this one." She kicked the tank he'd held her against. "The pirate's money is in the one to your right. I have no idea what's in the others."

Xenos nodded and used the pistol to destroy the locks on the tanks. As he suspected, they were filled with currency and weapons. Excellent. He and his rebels could use them.

"Join me in the cockpit," he said to Moonlight.

"Must I?"

"Unless you'd prefer to be tied up. I want you where I can see your pretty face, Santos Gama."

She curled her lip in disgust, but followed him to the cockpit where she sat in the copilot's seat.

"What are we going to do with him?" She jerked her head toward the dead pirate.

"I'll dispose of him later."

"Once you learn the truth, will you even care that you killed an innocent man for nothing?"

"If you're referring to the pirate, none of them are innocent. And if you are telling the truth, I saved both our lives by snapping his neck."

"What do you mean?"

"Butchcade pirates don't make deals. They steal booty. When you arrived at your destination, he would have taken the other half of his payment along with the rest of your money. Then he would have held us for ransom. Either way, he would kill us in the end."

"You don't know that."

"I do know that."

"How? Are you a mind reader too? Is that another mystical Tydisian trait?" she said, her voice dripping sarcasm.

"I know because I was once a Butchcade pirate."

"Don't..." She turned her head away and lifted a defensive hand. "Don't even tell me. I don't want to know."

They fell silent and Xenos set a course for a station he knew on the outer rim of the Delilah Sector. He didn't want to use the ship's spec in case they were being traced. At the station he could contact Judson, let him know where he was and tell him where they should meet.

Actually, regardless of whether or not Moonlight turned out to be a spy, her method of escape was an improvement over the one he had planned. At least his rebels wouldn't need to endanger themselves breaking him out of Saber Island. They would soon enough face other perils more important to their cause.

Though Xenos disliked the idea of killing Moonlight, he almost hated her for getting under his skin. No one had ever managed to reach his heart. The only thing that ever mattered to him was the cause. And that was as it should be.

It would be so much easier if she was a spy. He wasn't sure he could handle the idea of someone putting her life on the line for him. During battle, soldiers risked their lives for each other all the time. They were trained to watch each other's backs, but this was entirely different. Moonlight stood to gain nothing by helping him. In fact, she had lost everything—her money, her job, her freedom. No one had ever done anything like this for him before. It wasn't the sort of debt easily repaid and Xenos loathed the idea of owing anybody anything.

At the port, he docked, took some of the pirate's currency and left the shuttle, a reluctant Moonlight beside him. He purchased a wrist spec, wiped its memory and reprogrammed it easily. Then he contacted Judson, who agreed to send two of their crewmen to meet them at Neam Blue, a planet deep in the Delilah sector. Medic Trissa would accompany them so she could administer the truth drugs to Moonlight.

Back at the shuttle, Xenos stuffed the pirate's body into an empty storage bin, then he set a course for Neam Blue. Moonlight remained silent through the entire ride. He couldn't tell if she was terrified or furious. Most likely she was both.

The pale azure glow of Neam Blue shone in the distance and Xenos felt slightly anxious. Soon he would know the truth about his lovely human hostage. One way or the other, it wouldn't be good.

Chapter Eleven

Nameless

On Neam Blue, Xenos landed the shuttle on the shore of an island that, according to readings, was uninhabited. Another shuttle had already landed there.

On the beach, two young men, one black-haired the other blond, greeted them.

"There are storage tanks in the shuttle," Xenos told them. "Load them into ours, except for the one containing the body."

"Yes, Sir," the men replied in unison.

Moonlight had to admit she found it a bit disturbing that they didn't even question his mention of a body in one of the tanks.

"Is Medic Trissa aboard?"

"Yes. She's waiting for you," said the blond.

"Excellent. Santos Gama, come with me." Xenos placed a hand to her lower back and pushed her toward the shuttle.

The sleekly lined, spotlessly clean shuttle appeared new. In the cargo section, a tall, attractive woman who looked in her early thirties awaited them.

"Glad to see you, Sir," she said with a surprisingly warm smile.

Though still upset from Xenos' unexpected reaction to her rescue, Moonlight didn't fail to notice the fondness in the woman's eyes when she looked at him. However, when she glanced at Xenos, Moonlight saw no spark of interest beyond professional. Why she felt relief over this was beyond her. She should loathe him more than ever for how he was treating her.

Of course, she could be wrong about his interest in the medic. He was usually impossible to read and she knew his sexual appetite first hand.

"Medic Trissa, good to see you as well. This is Moonlight Santos Gama."

"Yes." The medic's smile faded and her gaze swept Moonlight. "If you're ready, Sir, we can begin now."

If he was ready. What about Moonlight? Apparently she didn't matter. She had rescued his sorry blue ass from torture and this was how he repaid her.

"The sooner the better, Medic."

"This way," Trissa said, guiding them toward a smaller room at the back of the shuttle. She motioned for Moonlight to have a seat.

Xenos closed the door.

Though Moonlight had nothing to hide, her pulse raced and she had never been more terrified in her life. Without fully realizing it, she had allowed her feelings for

Xenos to lull her into a false sense of familiarity and certainty around him. Now she feared that mistake might prove fatal.

She watched the medic prepare the drug. As she administered the injection, Moonlight closed her eyes and sighed. Soon she relaxed under the influence of the drug.

"Open your eyes," Xenos ordered.

She did as she was told and met his gaze as best she could through the medicated fog.

"Ask your fucking questions," she murmured.

"What is your name?"

"Moonlight Santos Gama."

"Who do you work for?"

"No one. I resigned from my job as translator at the interrogation office."

"Who is your real employer?"

"No one."

"Who sent you to spy on me?"

"I am not spying on you."

"Do you work for the Laetez?"

"No."

"What is Re Lord to you?"

"A Chief in the Laetez government."

"Have you had contact with him, direct or indirect?"

"No."

"How long have you known S-Master Yashel?"

"I met him for the first time when I stayed with you."

Xenos stepped closer, his blue gaze fixed on her. "Why did you rescue me?"

"Because I didn't want you to suffer anymore."

Xenos and the medic exchanged glances, but Moonlight felt too hazy to guess what that meant.

"Did you have any other reason for rescuing me?" he asked, his voice detached.

"Because I was afraid they would kill you."

"Did you ever have plans to kill me?"

"No. Never," she said.

"Medic, leave us, please," Xenos said, his gaze still locked on Moonlight.

Trissa nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"I'll ask you again, Santos Gama. When you came to me, hating me for the death of your friend, did you have any intention of killing me?"

"No." Moonlight's jaw tightened. "Why don't you ask if I think you're paranoid?"

"I'm getting tired of people saying that," Xenos muttered.

He stared at her for several moments and she had the feeling he was going to ask her another question. Instead he stood and summoned Trissa.

"See that she's made comfortable," Xenos told the medic.

"Xenos," Moonlight called.

He paused, his spine rigid then turned to her. "Yes?"

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Don't worry, Santos Gama. I have no intention of harming such a loyal servant."

Even through the drugged-out fog, anger sparked inside her. "Part of me hates you again."

"Perhaps you should have clung to that feeling earlier."

He left the room and Moonlight closed her eyes, leaning against the back of the bench. The heavens only knew what would happen now.

* * * * *

A short time later, the shuttle left Neam Blue and headed for an asteroid belt just outside the Delilah Sector. The tricky maneuvers required to navigate the belt had the ship rocking and bouncing as if avoiding a lazar attack. Xenos' pilots had been among the best in the ACT Corps, until they had joined his crew of rebels who now awaited them aboard their new home.

As a Superior, Xenos had been paid handsomely and he had sunk most of his money into investments, some perfectly legal and others involving Wormhide that would have long ago seen him stripped of rank and imprisoned. His sizeable fortune now financed this battle against ACT and its violent twisting of nature itself.

The shuttle landed on a large asteroid where their ship awaited them. Under the watchful eye of Xenos, Judson and several highly skilled techs on their crew, the ship had been built in the Delilah Sector and could compete with the Laetez and Earth governments' most sophisticated top secret crafts.

Judson greeted them at the docking bay.

"Sir." He smiled. "Welcome aboard."

"Judson." Xenos also smiled, his gaze meeting that of his secretary—now his first mate.

Glancing from Moonlight back to Xenos, Judson asked, "Is she coming with us, Sir?"

"For now at least."

"Will someone please tell me exactly what is going on?" Moonlight asked more calmly than she felt. "Interrogator Re Moreyle was right after all, wasn't he? You are a ship of rebels?"

"If you'd like to get some rest, your quarters are prepared," Judson told Xenos.

In truth, rest sounded good. He had scarcely slept since his captivity.

"I'm here, so I already know something is up," Moonlight continued. "You know I'm not a spy, Xenos, and I risked my life to help you, so the least you can do is answer me."

Medic Trissa, who had come to stand beside Judson, glanced at her coolly, then turned to Xenos. "Sir, I think it's best to get rid of her as soon as possible."

"What do you mean get rid of me?" Moonlight demanded.

"We will discuss this later," Xenos stated with no room for argument. "Give me a few hours, then I will address the crew. Moonlight, you will come with me."

Walking through the ship, they passed several men and women who glanced curiously, though respectfully, in Xenos' direction. He acknowledged them with nods, careful not to appear as tired as he felt. Repelling the interrogators hadn't been easy, but he had endured worse in his lifetime and could never let his crew view him as weak, no matter what.

Out here, they depended on each other and while he was the Captain, their leader, this was no longer a military setting. The rebels weren't required to stay aboard. They were entitled to voice their opinions and he had a responsibility to listen.

His quarters were fairly spacious with a private washroom.

"Xenos, what are you going to do with me?" Moonlight asked again once he closed the door behind him.

"Right now we're going to get some sleep." He pulled off his shirt and kicked off his boots, then reached for her arm and tugged her toward the bed.

"Get your hands off me!" She shoved him hard in the shoulder and he grinned.

He's always liked how strong she was for her size and species.

"I am not sleeping with you," she snapped.

"You wanted to the night before you left my apartment. You asked to. Remember?"

"You mean before you threw me out?" She glared at him.

"I had good reason, Santos Gama."

"You always have a reason, don't you? At least in your own twisted mind."

"I have done what's required. If someone doesn't take matters to hand, ACT will continue to grow, becoming less regulated and more despicable. Didn't seeing those creatures in the lab mean anything to you? Hell, didn't you even learn a thing from your bleeding heart activist mother?"

"I agree with you." She held his gaze and braced her hands on his chest. The sensation felt so good that he covered her hands with his gloved ones, trapping them against him, her bare skin pressed against his. "I can even understand this rebellion. That's what it is, isn't it?"

"Yes. We are ACT products on this ship, but we are no longer Laetez property."

"You were already free."

"But for how long? The way the laws are changing to suit the Drapers or whomever else our government tries to ally with, we could have our freedom taken away at any moment."

"Any of us could."

He gritted his teeth, trying to control his temper. "How can you, a pure-blood, possibly understand? You were never property of a lab. You were born into freedom. We had to fight for it. Pure-bloods don't consider us equals. We're experiments. Machines. Tools to work for their benefit."

Moonlight's eyes darkened. "This pure-blood risked everything for you."

Sighing, he removed her hands from his chest and stepped away. "Moonlight, did anyone beside your friend and the pirate know what you've done?"

"My friend didn't even know. All I told him was that I wanted to meet with a Butchcade pirate."

"Then if I release you, you can return to your old life. Say I forced you to come with me."

"Xenos, what about the truth drugs?" She held his gaze. "Even if I wanted to go back, which I don't, they would learn the truth from me whether I want to tell them or not."

"Then tell me where you want to go and I'll take you there."

Moonlight began pacing the room slowly, her expression thoughtful. Finally, she stopped and her gaze locked on his. "I'm where I want to be."

He smiled without a trace of humor. "Oh no, no. No."

"Yes."

"You have no idea what you're asking. This is not a game, Moonlight."

"Don't talk down to me, Xenos. I hate it when you do that. If not for me, you'd still be sitting in a Laetez prison awaiting your trial and execution."

"Are you truly that naïve? Love, my escape was planned long before you decided to put yourself on the galaxy's most wanted list."

She blinked. "What?"

"My imprisonment was planned as well. Do you think I would deliberately go against the law unless I was trying to get arrested?"

Moonlight stared at him in disbelief. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking so deflated that he longed to take her in his arms. Confused by his feelings for her, he stood for several moments, considering what he should do or say.

Finally, he sat beside her. "Santos Gama, I do appreciate what you did."

"You mean you appreciate how I made an ass of myself? How I ruined my life along with your plans?"

"Actually, your rescue worked out better than mine."

She snorted. "Thanks for small favors."

Lying on the bed, he pulled her beside him.

"I said I don't want to sleep with you."

"Quiet," he ordered, draping an arm and a leg over her. "We'll figure this out when I wake up."

"I won't be quiet until you let me go."

"You will be quiet or —"

"Or what?" She turned as far as she could, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

"Or else I will tickle you to death." His gloved hand fluttered along her ribs and belly while he nuzzled her neck.

In spite of herself, Moonlight squirmed and laughed. "Stop it!"

"Only if you shut up long enough for me to get some sleep."

"All right! All right!"

He stopped tickling and she settled closer, her bottom squirming seductively against his. If he hadn't been so tired, he'd have fucked her before going to sleep. He'd have to wait until later.

The last thing he noticed before falling asleep was the sweet, floral scent of her hair.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Xenos, refreshed from sleep and the first decent meal he'd had since his capture, sat behind the desk in his quarters, Moonlight beside him. Judson and Medic Trissa stood in front of them.

Before calling this meeting, he had spoken privately to Judson and Trissa and learned that before fleeing with the rebels, they had uncovered important information regarding the ancient Tydisian bacteria Xenos had been infected with. This knowledge would have great affect on their future plans. At the moment, he had another matter to deal with—Moonlight.

"I agree with you, Sir. Ms. Santos Gama should leave as soon as possible," Trissa stated.

Moonlight curled her lip. She would think that. One had to be blind not to see that the medic felt more for Xenos than professional interest. The woman was hot for him.

"I will arrange for transportation for her immediately," Judson stated.

"Wait," Xenos said, his voice commanding. "I said she should leave, I did not say she was going to."

"Sir," Trissa continued, "This is not the place for civilians. We are trained soldiers on this vessel. Each of us fully understood the risks when we signed on and we have training that contributes to our cause."

"Do you have a translator here?" Moonlight asked softly.

"Of course we do," Xenos told her.

"Our translator is highly skilled," Trissa added. "He was among the best in the ACT Corps."

"I'm sure." Moonlight held her gaze with an ultra-sweet smile. "However, I can communicate in over a thousand languages with the capacity for more. Can he do that?"

Judson raised an eyebrow and even Xenos glanced at her, impressed.

"How is that possible, Santos Gama?" he asked softly, a dangerous look in his slanted blue eyes.

"When I was a transfer student, I accepted the prototype of a translation implant. It allows me to translate far more languages than most human or Laetez brains alone can process. It also has the capacity to learn and store more languages."

"Such implants were not government approved," Trissa said. "They were dangerous. Have you suffered side effects?"

"Only migraines if I tap into the implant's knowledge for too many hours. Other than that, I scarcely know it's there."

"Very interesting," Trissa said, her annoyance replaced by keen interest. "I would love to study this more."

"Fine with me." Moonlight shrugged. "But I can't do that if I'm kicked off the ship. Unless our Captain thinks this feeble, pure-blooded civilian might serve a useful purpose after all."

She and Xenos exchanged taunting glances.

"Her skills would come in handy, Sir," Judson stated.

"Agreed," Xenos said. "There are rules to signing aboard this vessel. You must swear an oath, Santos Gama."

"I will."

"A blood oath."

Moonlight's eyes widened and she asked, "Excuse me?"

He removed a knife from his belt and took her hand.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" Moonlight asked warily.

"Primitive as it is, we all did take the oath," Trissa told her.

"All right," she said, drawing a deep breath. "Go a—" She gasped as he used the tip of the blade to make a shallow cut on the fleshy part of her palm.

"Moonlight Santos Gama, do you swear on your blood to never willingly betray our cause and pledge yourself to it?"

"I do."

"Do you agree to uphold the rules of this ship, to speak your mind and contribute when asked, but to ultimately obey my word as Captain?"

Her brow furrowed and she glanced at Judson and Trissa, then back to Xenos. "Will you listen if I speak my mind?"

"This is my vow to you and everyone aboard this vessel," Xenos stated, tugging off a glove and placing his bare hand on the table. He raised the knife.

"Don't cut anything off," Moonlight said quickly. "I've already seen enough of that."

The slightest smile flirted with Xenos' stern lips before he cut his palm. He held it up to her, "My vow to you, Santos Gama. I will listen when you speak. Our cause will always come first. After that, the lives of those who call this ship home. Now. Do you agree to uphold the rules of this ship, to speak your mind and contribute when asked, but to ultimately obey my word as Captain?"

Taking a deep breath, she released it slowly and said, "I do."

"Welcome to rebellion," he said, his smile broader and more wicked than she'd ever seen it. "Now it's time I address this crew. Judson, come with me. Santos Gama, accompany Medic Trissa so that she may begin her studies on your translator implant."

The women cast each other wary glances, but followed orders.

They had just arrived in sick bay when Xenos' voice carried over the inter-ship spec.

"This is Xenos Nineteen," he said, "Today we begin our journey aboard this ship dubbed *Nameless*. We have banded together against common enemies for the same cause—to not only spread intergalactic awareness about ACT victims, but to prevent the repetition of past mistakes. We are outlaws, yet freer than we have ever been under Laetez rule. We were soldiers, so we realize that we will be hunted. There is a good chance that eventually we will be caught, but that will not prevent us from making a permanent mark on the civilized universe. *Il task. Il siw.*"

Moonlight nodded slightly, understanding the Tydisian words that closed his speech. *One cause. One soul.*

And she'd signed on for it.

For the next several hours, Moonlight underwent tests with Medic Trissa. The woman asked many questions about her implant and Moonlight replied in detail. It was actually welcome after so many years of keeping her secret to talk to someone about the implant.

Though the women spoke to each other civilly, a barrier of wariness hovered between them.

"How long have you known Xenos?" Moonlight asked.

"I met him five years ago when I entered the ACT Corps. I had just finished my medical training and he'd suffered a minor injury on assignment. Obviously, being an ACT product myself, I had specialized in care of mixed breeds. When I saw Xenos, I

was fascinated by his case. I've spent most of my career studying him and probably know more about his physiology than the scientists who created him." Trissa flung a rather taunting look in Moonlight's direction.

She kept her cool, for she had absolutely no intention of giving this woman the satisfaction of provoking her. "He's very lucky to have you, Medic."

"I'm the one who is privileged to work with him," she replied. "He's very special."

"I know," Moonlight said.

"It's easy to be seduced by a man like him," the medic continued, glancing at Moonlight with a knowing expression. "But his background prevents him from reacting like most men."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Moonlight said, though she understood exactly that Trissa was hinting at. Let the jealous bitch come out and say what was on her mind instead of playing games.

"It's no secret Xenos has a healthy sexual appetite. Some women might confuse his physical desires for emotional attachment, but Xenos is exempt from the latter."

"Did you learn this from personal experience, Medic?"

"No," Trissa said coldly and Moonlight couldn't help smiling. "I have always been his medic. I have never been his escort."

"Yes," Moonlight smiled more sweetly, "but you would have preferred the latter, am I right?"

Trissa's eyes flashed. "I believe our tests are concluded for the day." She turned to her spec and contacted the bridge. "I'm finished with Ms. Santos Gama, Sir. Where would you like her to report now?"

Though Moonlight couldn't see the spec screen, she heard Xenos' smooth voice reply, "Please direct her to Crewman Birch's office. He will begin her orientation."

"Yes, Sir." The medic switched off the spec and glanced at Moonlight. "Crewman Birch is our translator."

Trissa proceeded to give her directions, then Moonlight left sick bay, glad to be away from the medic. She hoped Crewman Birch would be more amiable. Perhaps everyone on the ship would feel that she, a civilian and Xenos' lover, didn't belong there.

At Birch's office, she pressed the chime and the door opened.

A pleasant-looking man with ultra-short brown hair and green eyes greeted her with a smile. "Moonlight Santos Gama? I'm Birch. Pleased to have you aboard."

"Thank you." Moonlight smiled and accepted his handshake, relieved to see a friendly face. "Pleased to be here."

"Come in." He extended his hand toward the office where two desks stood, complete with computers and built-in specs.

"That's your station." Birch pointed to the desk to the left of a portal through which she saw the jagged landscape of the asteroid. "And the latrine is just across the corridor. I'll show you the mess hall later."

"Thank you." Moonlight sat at her desk and turned on the computer.

"Excuse my curiosity, but I'd like to hear about your implant." Birch dragged a chair near her desk and straddled it backward. "I've been interested in translator implants for years, but the only place I know of where we can legally get one is by joining a special unit. Just before we left the ACT Corps, I finally got on a waiting list."

"Don't be too eager for an implant," Moonlight warned. "Not that I regret getting it, but if I use it too long, I get killer migraines. I'm sure the implants have improved since I got mine, but—"

"I'm not sure how much," Birch said. "It doesn't seem to be a major point of interest."

"Most people are happy with portable translators that aren't stuck in them permanently."

"But they lack the feelings and inflections living beings pick up in conversation."

She smiled. "That's my feeling exactly."

"I had been next on the list of implant volunteers but now... Well, at least we have you aboard."

"How many languages do you speak?" Moonlight asked, curious about this seemingly pleasant, easygoing soldier. He was so unlike Xenos, and while Moonlight liked him, he didn't provoke the all-consuming attraction she felt for Xenos. Leave it to her to fall for the crazy mongrel when perfectly nice men like Birch were around.

"Fifty, and I'm studying more. I was genetically coded for language aptitude. For languages I don't speak, I use that old portable translator you mentioned."

Moonlight and Birch spent several hours discussing languages. He also told her about various projects they would be working on and what Xenos expected of them. Later he introduced her to other members of the crew who seemed friendly enough.

By the end of the day, Moonlight began to feel as if she had made the right decision. This wasn't a ship of vicious criminals, but people genuinely concerned for products of a study that, in many ways, had overstepped its bounds.

She was seated at her desk, working on several files, when Xenos contacted her.

"Santos Gama."

"Yes?" she said, a bit distracted.

"Come to my quarters immediately."

She glanced toward the spec and saw that his face was as unreadable as ever.

Her stomach fluttered with a combination of anxiety and arousal at the thought of seeing him again.

"Be right there," she said, switched off the spec and computer and left the office.

She hurried to Xenos' quarters and rang the chime. The door opened and she found herself facing him. Though his mouth remained in its usual sullen line, a mischievous expression gleamed in his eyes.

"What?" Moonlight asked a bit breathlessly. "It sounded important on the spec."

"It is important." He grasped her upper arm, tugged her inside and closed the door. Wrapping his arms around her from behind, he nuzzled her neck.

"Wait." She grasped his wrists and tried to look at him over her shoulder. "You called me to make love? That's what's so important?"

"Urgent." He nibbled her ear, sliding his hand over her belly and between her legs. Gently cupping her soft mound, he kneaded, stirring her desire.

She felt his stiff cock pressing against her from behind. The marvelous sensations overtaking her body convinced her that this was an urgent situation after all.

With a soft moan, she surrendered to him completely. She arched her neck back, leaned her head against his shoulder and thrust her backside against him.

Growling with lust, he grasped the bottom of her shirt and pulled it upward. She raised her arms so that he could easily pull off the shirt. After tossing it onto his desk, he deftly unfastened her bra and she shrugged it off, letting it drop to the floor.

Xenos cupped her breasts and lifted them, squeezing gently. His thumbs brushed her nipples, stirring them to firm peaks.

"Please," she whispered. "Take your gloves off. I want to feel you."

Before he could respond, she took one of his hands and tugged off the thin black glove. He allowed her to remove both gloves, then he took them from her hand and threw them beside her shirt. Again he cupped her breasts and Moonlight closed her eyes, sighing with pleasure at the sensation of his bare hands on her flesh. Using his thumbs and forefingers, he tugged and rolled her nipples. Little waves of pleasure rolled through her and she wanted to make him feel as good as she did.

She reached up and caressed his face and neck.

With another soft growl, he nipped and licked her shoulder while pulling down her trousers and panties. She quickly tugged them down the rest of the way and kicked them off. She was about to remove her socks and boots, but he lifted her in his arms and kissed her.

Moonlight wrapped her arms around his neck and enthusiastically returned his kiss. He placed her on the bed and leaned down, capturing one of her stiff, pink nipples between his lips. He sucked it and lashed it with his warm, wet tongue. A quiver of raw need rolled through her and Moonlight instinctively clutched his smooth head, pressing him closer.

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest and he worried the sensitive, budlike flesh with his teeth.

Releasing her nipple, he gazed at her with a hot, yet teasing, look in his slanted blue eyes. "You like this, do you?"

"Gods, yes," she breathed.

"So do I."

He took her other nipple into his mouth, sucking it even harder until she gave a sharp, needy cry. Heat flooded her pussy and she wished he'd fill her with his thick, purple erection.

Right at that moment, she wanted to see his cock, feel its smoothness over hard muscle. Xenos seemed to have no intention of leaving her breasts at any time soon, though. He licked, sucked and teased them with his teeth until she thought she'd go mad from the pleasure. His tongue circled her areola and she gave a little moan and squirmed against him.

Xenos stood abruptly, his eyes practically glowing with blue fire, and undressed. Moonlight's pulse raced faster and she tingled all over at the sight of his gorgeous bare chest. His long, lean, rock-hard legs were even better, but best of all was his gorgeous cock, so long and thick, the head dark bluish-purple. A droplet of creamy pre-come beaded at the little eye and Moonlight couldn't resist the urge to taste it. Licking her lips, she moved off the bed, knelt on the floor and reached for him.

Her hands curved around his shaft, feeling its pulse and twitch beneath the warm flesh. Leaning closer, she inhaled his wonderful, subtly musky scent then rolled her tongue over the crown of his erection.

Xenos moved even closer and buried his hands in her hair. His fingers tightened a bit as she began licking and sucking him with a vengeance.

"*Gashuk*," he murmured, his fingers tensing on her scalp. "Moonlight."

In spite of the pleasure of the moment, the translator in her couldn't help wondering about that unfamiliar word he'd just used. Even accessing her translator implant provided no reference. She nearly asked him about it, but by the rhythm of his breath and the stiffness of his cock, she didn't want to ruin the moment.

Making a mental note to ask him later, she continued swirling her tongue over his cock head and using her hand to stroke his cock. Her other hand moved around to squeeze and stroke his gorgeous ass. She trailed her finger between his taut cheeks and he tensed, groaning with desire.

After several moments, he pulled her head away and stared into her eyes, his chest heaving with passion. Moonlight squirmed a bit in an attempt to appease her lust. Pleasuring him had turned her on so much that she felt ready to explode at the slightest touch.

Fortunately Xenos now seemed as ready as she was. He grasped her arms and guided her onto the bed. She lay on her back, spreading her legs for him, and he covered her body with his, filling her with a long, frustratingly slow thrust.

Buried to the hilt inside her, he once again stared into her eyes. Beyond the passion, she couldn't quite read his expression. Confusion? She doubted he felt that particular emotion very often. Affection? Now that was too much to hope for.

Before she could ponder any more, he began thrusting and she lost all reason. She could only feel the lust coursing through her, the wonderful rubbing of his flesh against hers, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

Then he hurled her over it. Delicious waves of pleasure broke over her and Moonlight clung to him, her eyes closed as she cried out in ecstasy.

Chapter Twelve

Duties

Moonlight gave a soft sigh of pleasure and snuggled closer to Xenos. He tightened his arm around her and stroked her shoulder, the delicate webbing between his fingers tickling her flesh.

"What was that word you used a few moments ago?" she asked.

"What word is that?"

"*Gashuk*, I believe."

"Ah." He chuckled softly. "*Gashuk*. That's quite vulgar. Not a word I especially care for, but I wasn't thinking about vocabulary when your lovely mouth was wrapped around me."

"Glad to know I have some affect on you." Moonlight turned and kissed his chest. She trailed her fingertips over his belly. "Now what does *Gashuk* mean?"

"It's Tydisian for copulate. Sex. Lovemaking —"

"You mean fuck?" Moonlight said with a teasing smile.

"I believe that's the English equivalent." Xenos took her hand and sucked on her index finger. His tongue swept the pad and grazed it ever so gently with his fangs.

Moonlight's eyes closed halfway as her passion stirred again. Then she recalled another topic that needed discussion.

"One more thing, Captain," she said, tugging her hand from his mouth and raising herself onto her elbow to gaze down at him.

"Yes, translator."

"What did you mean on the shuttle when you called me your savant?"

His brow furrowed.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Why bring it up now? When we had that conversation, emotions were running high."

"Emotions? You?"

"Moonlight, I'm not going to deal with this. I have too many other pressing issues that require my attention. I need you to help keep my thoughts clear, not cloud my mind with nonsense."

"Nonsense?" She sat up abruptly, not caring that the sheet fell to her waist, baring her breasts. His blue gaze riveted to them. Folding her arms across them, Moonlight continued, "Is that what you meant by me being your servant? Now that you're on the run, away from your precious escorts, I'll be your sex slave?"

"Moonlight, think rationally," he said with an impatient sigh. "If I want escorts, the Delilah Sector is crawling with them."

"Yes," she snorted, "and they're crawling with every disease in the galaxy."

"That's what contraceptive tablets are for."

Moonlight curled her lips in disgust. "You are impossible. I am a translator, not an escort."

She stood and took a step toward her desk to retrieve her clothes. Xenos moved so quickly that she gasped in surprise when he grasped her arm and hauled her close to his chest. "You'll do what I tell you to do."

"Sinking to rape, are we?" she snarled through clenched teeth.

"I've never raped you," he said close to her ear, his voice frustratingly smooth and calm. "And if you deny that you've enjoyed our encounters, you are a liar."

"I've enjoyed them, but I'd enjoy a little respect even more."

He released her and sighed, shaking his head. "I've always said personal relationships are a distraction. Let's just sort this out now, Moonlight. You've made it clear you want to be aboard this ship."

"Yes, I do."

"Do you or do you not want to copulate with me?"

"Copulate?" She wrinkled her nose, stepped closer to him and tilted her face up, staring at him hard. "I don't want to copulate with you. I want to make love."

"You're splitting hairs."

"At least I have hairs to split."

"What is your answer, you irritating female?" he growled.

"Now is a bad time to ask because I don't want to look at you at the moment."

"Then don't. I refuse to play games, Moonlight." He pulled on his clothes. "I have to get back to the bridge. When I return tonight, I want you here."

"And if I'm not?"

He cupped the back of her head and covered her mouth in a deep, possessive kiss. He gently bit her lower lip, then swept his tongue over it.

In spite of herself, Moonlight leaned closer to him. He released her abruptly and left his quarters.

Frustrated, Moonlight clenched her fists and stared after him. Part of her wanted to avoid him tonight, but she doubted she would. Already she could scarcely wait to be in his arms again.

* * * * *

Yashel stood in Re Lord's office, furious at Xenos and still in a state of semi-disbelief that Zale had apparently been affected by his madness as well.

The Chief's gaze fixed on Yashel and there was no mistaking the anger in his expression.

"You requested this meeting," Re Lord said.

"Sir, I know a task force is seeking Xenos and the alleged rebels. I volunteer to head the mission."

"You are now Superior of the ACT Corps, You can't do that and lead the task force."

"I am best qualified to lead it. No one knows Xenos better than I do."

"If that was the case, why didn't you predict his treason?"

A muscle twitched in Yashel's cheek, but he remained outwardly calm. "It was an uncharacteristic move for him. I credited him with being too intelligent to believe he could get away with this."

Re Lord looked thoughtful. "You were right about Xenos and that woman, Santos Gama. There is still no word about her, either. Nor of Zale."

"I cannot believe Zale would abandon his duty to join Xenos on this suicide mission."

"Two thirds of your elite units have turned traitor. Why should I believe you haven't been asked to lead the task force because you're their contact here and that you intend to protect them by thwarting the mission of the task force?"

"Believe me, Sir, no one wants to see Xenos brought to justice more than I do."

"Why is that, I wonder?"

"I was trained to respect this Corp and our government. Without ACT, I would not exist. Neither would Xenos and Zale. If Xenos wanted to change the law, then it was his duty to work within it. Give me this assignment, Sir, and I will see that he gets exactly what he deserves."

For a long moment, they stared at one another, Re Lord coolly calculating and Yashel simmering with anger and the desire to capture Xenos. Maybe Xenos despised what he was and hated the ACT program, but Yashel did not. His headstrong behavior endangered everything Yashel held dear. Worst of all, his attitude had nearly convinced the likes of Re Lord and Re Vic that he shared Xenos' narrow-minded beliefs.

Finally Re Lord said, "The task force is yours. Know that your progress will be monitored closely."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you."

Re Lord glanced away from Yashel and studied his computer screen. "Dismissed."

Drawing a breath of anticipation, Yashel turned on his heel and left. He had much to do if he intended to find Xenos before he did any serious damage, for he had no doubt the bitter blue bastard had countless horrors planned.

* * * * *

After leaving Moonlight in his quarters, Xenos met with Judson in the docking bay. He intended to take a shuttle to meet Zale.

"If all goes well, Zale and I will be back within the hour. If we're not back by then and you don't hear from me, you will follow the orders I gave earlier."

"You want me to take *Nameless* out of here and go ahead with our plans."

"Yes."

"If you doubt Zale's loyalty, perhaps you shouldn't—"

"I believe his loyalty lies with us. However, until I am absolutely certain, I won't bring him aboard."

"Yes, Sir."

Xenos boarded a shuttle, and a short time later, arrived at the place where he'd arranged to meet Zale.

He'd been pleased that Zale had passed his test by only revealing the information Xenos specified. He had kept Oren'Da secret.

Still, that didn't mean Yashel and Re Lord trusted Zale. They could have him bugged or followed. Once Xenos was certain Zale was entirely alone, they would be free to return to *Nameless*.

He landed the shuttle in the dock outside a bar located on the smallest planet in the Delilah sector. The bar was known for good liquor and a fine selection of multi-species whores. In his youth, Xenos, having inherited the powerful Laetez sex drive, had spent his share of time here. It was during those years away from the lab that he learned exactly how abhorrent most pure-blooded females found him, yet he also learned that just about anything could be bought for the right price.

During his time as a Butchcade pirate, he had spent a good deal of his booty right here. While he wasn't proud of his experiences with hired women, he didn't regret it either. Or at least, he hadn't until meeting Moonlight. She certainly wasn't as experienced as the whores, but for some reason, he found her far more arousing.

Stepping into the dimly lit bar, he glanced around. Patrons of many species, including a few humans, mingled at the game tables or hung around by the bar. From the upper floors drifted the aroma of heavy perfume. Half dressed whores, both male and female, paraded around the balcony, hoping to attract customers.

Xenos caught sight of Zale seated at a table in a corner of the room. His gaze was already fixed on Xenos and he nodded slightly. Xenos made his way across the room, and when he reached the table, Zale stood.

"Glad to see you, Xenos." Zale extended his hand and Xenos took it firmly in his. Zale also tightened his grip, his dark eyes meeting Xenos'.

"You, as well. Were you followed?"

"Not as far as I can tell, but I was careful. I almost didn't decipher your message in time. Is everyone else safe?"

"Yes. I suggest we go now."

Zale left some currency on the table, then he picked up a travel bag and left the bar with Xenos.

"I sold my shuttle to the bartender," Zale explained. "Better than just abandoning it in case Yashel comes looking."

"In case?" Xenos snorted. "You know he will. I wouldn't doubt if he's heading the task force in search of us."

"Yashel isn't as bad as you think he is."

A slight smile twisted Xenos' lips. "You think he's worse?"

Zale shook his head slightly. Outside the bar, Xenos stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You don't mind if I search you and your bag," Xenos said, tugging a scanner from his pocket and reaching for Zale's bag.

"Still don't trust me?"

"You or your belongings could have been tagged without you knowing it, either with a tracker or a hidden spec."

"Doubtful, but I understand your caution." Zale allowed Xenos to search through his belonging and scan the bag. Then he stood still while Xenos searched his person.

Finding nothing suspicious, Xenos pocketed the scanner and embraced Zale tightly. Zale returned the gesture, though Xenos sensed he was surprised by it, and with good reason. Xenos rarely indulged in any sort of physical affection outside of the bedroom and Zale certainly never had any reason for contact with him there.

They boarded the shuttle and Zale joined Xenos in the cockpit.

"Once we get to the ship, I suggest you get settled in fast," Xenos said. "Tomorrow, you and I will leave early to make arrangements on Tydepth."

"Do you really think they'll offer us sanctuary?" Zale asked, a skeptical look in his calm, dark eyes. "Tydisians abhor violence. Why would they allow us to stay there, knowing the Laetez and Earth governments, and most likely their allies, are after us?"

"It can't hurt to ask."

"They could turn us in."

"They won't," Xenos stated. "We do have some leverage."

"I just think it's a little crazy believing the most peaceful species in the galaxy will help a ship full of rebels."

"The Tydisians were one of the only species strong enough to not only win a war against the Laetez, but also avoid succumbing to a treaty with them. They have remained completely independent."

"And they've done that for so long by avoiding contact with other species. You know what purity means to them. Xenos, they wouldn't even give you permission to reside permanently on Tydepth. There's no way they're going to—"

"You giving up before we even try isn't going to help our cause."

"All right. I said I would go with you and I will, but I still think it will be a waste of time."

"Your concerns are noted," Xenos said dryly.

A short time later, they arrived on *Nameless*. After Xenos gave Zale a tour of the ship, they spent a couple of hours going over their plans for the following day, then they went their separate ways. Xenos went to the bridge where he had a few words with Judson.

It was late when Xenos finally made his way to his quarters. Though tired, excitement churned inside him. Tomorrow he and Zale would return to the motherland. Tydepth. The one place in the universe where he felt "at home." Yet it wasn't his home. It would never be. Because of ACT and his mongrel blood.

He had been allowed to train there and was even allowed to return to visit, but despite the fact that genetically he was *mostly* Tydisian, he was not accepted as a citizen. Though he was loathe to admit it, this rejection hurt him more than any other in his life. He tried to tell himself it didn't matter, but deep inside, in that place he kept buried, it mattered very much.

The return to Tydepth wasn't the only reason for his underlying excitement. Knowing that within moments he would once again be with Moonlight stirred him. Already his cock ached for her and he could almost feel the scented softness of her warm, human flesh against his.

He stepped into his quarters and found the lights on their lowest setting. A strange, yet pleasant, feeling tightened his gut at the sight of Moonlight lying in bed, just as he'd requested.

Gazing at him with her large, dark eyes, she said, "I was starting to wonder if you ever planned on coming."

Giving a low growl, he pulled off his shirt and unzipped his trousers. "I definitely plan on coming, Santos Gama."

She smiled and sat up, letting the sheet fall to her waist and exposing her full, bare breasts to his hungry gaze. Her long, dark hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back. Xenos' cock twitched to life and he kicked off his shoes, then removed his trousers. Naked, he strode to the bed, cupped her chin and tilted her face toward his.

"I'm taking a shower. Don't move."

"I won't," she whispered, her eyes so lustful that he couldn't resist bending and pressing a kiss to her full, moist lips. As he did, she slipped her arms around his neck. Her hands cupped his bare scalp and massaged gently.

Xenos' eyes slipped shut and he sat on the edge of the bed. Gathering her close, he thrust his tongue between her lips, loving the way her tongue met his stroke for stroke.

When the kiss broke, they held each other's gaze. Her warm, sweet breath fanned his mouth and he kissed her again. As much as he wanted to fuck her right then and

there, he needed to hydrate as well. Not only that, he wanted to wash since he planned to have her suck him to the point of explosion.

"I'll be back," he said, disentangling himself from her soft yet strong limbs and standing.

"Don't be long," she said, her husky voice just above a whisper. Those deep, dark eyes of hers seemed to devour him. Amazing she could be innocent one minute and a total seductress the next. This was a much warmer reception than she'd given him earlier.

A warning signal went off in his brain. He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head slightly to the side, studying her carefully.

"What?" she asked. There was that innocence again, but he wasn't stupid enough to fall for it.

"What are you up to, Santos Gama?"

"Excuse me?"

"You weren't so malleable this afternoon. Why the sudden change?"

Curling her lips, she sighed and tugged the sheet up over her breasts. "Xenos, you could spoil just about any moment."

"I'm not trying to spoil anything. I want to know what's going on."

"You want the truth?"

"That would be nice."

"I want you to make love to me."

"And?"

"And that's it," she said with a disgusted look. "Not everything is some great conspiracy, you know. I am a woman."

"I've noticed that," he said with a hint of sarcasm.

"And I have needs just like you do. Having to explain this is so un-romantic, I'm not sure if I want to do it anymore."

"What?" He wrinkled his nose.

"You heard me."

He sat on the bed again, grasped her arms and leaned so close his long, raptor-like nose touched the tip of her slightly snubbed one. "Are you deliberately being a tease?"

"A tease?" She raised her eyes to the heavens and sighed with obvious exasperation. "Xenos, if anyone is a tease, it's you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Are you going to constantly question everything that is said and done between us? Can't you ever just live for the moment and enjoy what comes?"

He stared at her, weighing what she'd said. Regardless of whether or not she had an ulterior motive, he could still enjoy making love to her.

"I will be out soon," he said, standing. He walked to the bathroom and paused in the door where he turned and glanced at her. "Masturbate while I'm gone."

She looked both taken aback and amused. "Huh?"

"You heard what I said. Masturbate, but don't come. When I join you again, I'll complete the task."

"You plan on a quickie, then?"

"Not at all. I just think you should be as aroused as I am. Now do as I say and *don't come yet.*"

He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. A smile tugged at his lips as he turned on the water in the shower. Already he was so aroused that his cock stood at almost full mast, aching for her soft lips and wet tongue or her slick, hot pussy.

Stepping beneath the water, he closed his eyes and curled his fist around his staff, giving it a few teasing strokes. Tonight he and Moonlight would definitely, as she said, live for the moment.

He washed and dried off quickly then returned to his room.

Moonlight lay on the bed, atop the covers, her knees bent and one hand rubbing the delicate pink flesh between her legs. Her eyes were closed and her full, rose-colored lips slightly parted. The sexy sound of her panting floated softly through the room.

The sight of her pleasuring herself aroused him so much that his cock swelled even more. His pulse quickened and he drew a sharp breath of desire.

"Santos Gama," he said.

Her eyes flew open. She jerked her hand from its beautiful nest and an endearing blush rose in her face.

Xenos walked to the bed and sat on the edge of it. He cupped her soft mound and kneaded gently. Pushing first one, then two fingers inside her, he found her warm and wet, already stimulated from her caresses.

Their gazes locked, and for a moment, the intensity of their silent exchange touched him more deeply than he'd imagined possible. He shouldn't have allowed her to remain on the ship. If he wasn't careful, this woman could be a dangerous distraction.

While he continued exploring her with his fingers, he slowly rolled his thumb over her the soft, delicate flesh of her clit.

"You're very beautiful, Santos Gama," he said softly.

A smile flickered cross her lips. "You just complimented me, Xenos Nineteen? That's so rare that I don't know what to say."

"That's a first."

Her nose wrinkled and she gave a little sound of disbelief. Before she could speak, he leaned down and kissed her. She moaned softly and caressed his head. Her

fingertips stroked his scalp, then traveled down the back of his neck, stimulating his sensitive Tydisian skin.

He covered her body with his, carefully bracing most of his weight on his forearms.

"Xenos," she whispered, staring into his eyes. She stroked his face and used her fingertips to trace the flesh around his eyes. Ever so gently, she touched his lashes.

"You have such beautiful eyes, Xenos."

Deep down, he enjoyed flattery as much as anyone, yet he felt skeptical of any directed at his physical appearance. Insults were far easier to deal with.

To avoid replying, he kissed her again. The taste of her and the feel of her moist lips soon drove off any thoughts except ones of pleasure.

Using his knee, he spread her legs farther. The tip of his engorged cock pressed against her damp nether lips. As he slowly filled her, pleasurable sensations almost overwhelmed him. She was so hot, soft and wet. Growling with lust, he pumped into her while thrusting his tongue between her lips to the same rhythm as his rocking hips.

Little mewls of desire escaped her and she locked her strong, lithe legs around him.

He had intended to have her suck him, but the need to plunge into her had overtaken him. Now they clung to each other, their bodies writhing in a frantic rhythm.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he panted and thrust faster. Moonlight's hot, slick pussy pulsed around him as she came.

"Xenos! Oh, Xenos," she cried, holding him even tighter.

He moaned, his heart pounding, and thrust several more times before exploding inside her.

Gasping, he rolled onto his back. Moonlight cuddled close and rested her cheek against his chest. He languidly stroked her shoulder.

"Tomorrow, Zale and I will be taking a shuttle trip to Tydepth. I have a meeting with some old friends there," he said. "We'll probably be gone a few days."

"Zale is here?"

"He arrived earlier today."

"Tydepth," she said softly, lifting her head to meet his gaze. "May I go with you?"

He studied her for a moment. Though he wasn't certain the Tydisians would give him sanctuary, he was confident they would not turn him over to the Laetez.

"Yes," he said. "You may."

"Good. I've always wanted to see Tydepth and I couldn't have imagined a better guide."

"Of course, there might be some danger involved."

"Danger? With you? I don't believe it," she teased and bent to kiss him, but he grasped her upper arms and held her away.

"I'm serious, Moonlight."

"I know you're serious," she said, holding his gaze. "You're *always* serious. Xenos, I knew when I broke you out of the prison shuttle my life would be at risk."

"I'm still trying to figure out why you made that choice."

"I already answered that question under the influence of truth drugs, remember?" Bitterness laced her voice and he couldn't exactly blame her for that. Still, he had done what was necessary to learn the truth. If he'd followed his blasted emotions and she'd turned out to be a spy –

"Why exactly are we going to Tydepth?"

"Hopefully to arrange for sanctuary in case we're desperate and can't make it to our hideout."

"That is dangerous," she said, concern in her eyes. "They're not allied with the Laetez, but that doesn't mean they'll want to harbor intergalactic fugitives."

"They'll see reason and do the right thing."

Her brow furrowed. "I've never heard you sound so trusting."

"You don't know the Tydisians like I do."

"I've heard they're very contradictory. Supposedly lovers of peace, yet at the same time great warriors."

"It's true. They'll never provoke a fight, but defending their home and family is most important to them. What the Laetez stole from their war prisoners was an affront to their beliefs that cannot be overlooked."

"You mean the DNA they stole."

"Yes."

To the Tydisians, ACT experiments using stolen DNA were sinful and against their strict religious beliefs. While they considered Xenos' creation evil, they didn't hold it against him and had even allowed him to study on their world. Yet he could never be one of them. He had only been allowed a taste of his Tydisian heritage.

In some ways, their semi-acceptance was worse than the blatant rejection from other pure-blooded species. He felt a connection to Tydisians, yet he could never truly belong to them, no matter how much he wanted to.

In his youth, when he'd left the Laetez, his destination had been Tydepth. There, in the clear Tydisian seas, he had felt a sense of belonging he'd never experienced before. For a short time he had almost forgotten the horrors of the private lab. Almost.

Those years would never fully leave him and he was glad of it. They served as a reminder of the importance of the rebels' cause.

"Xenos?" she asked quietly, placing a hand to his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Good night, Santos Gama."

"Good night." She brushed his mouth with a kiss and settled against his side.

He knew by the evenness of her breathing when she'd fallen asleep. It took him longer to drift off. When he did, his nightmares were filled with distorted memories of

the private lab. Cold, calculating faces staring. Gloved hands prodding. Needles and knives pinching, slicing, stabbing. Blood, pain, extreme cold and heat. Dryness that destroyed Tydisian flesh. Loneliness. Hopelessness. Death.

He jerked awake, panting, his heart pounding so fiercely that his chest ached.

"It's all right," Moonlight said, taking him in her arms and caressing the back of his neck. "You were having a nightmare. It's all right."

Disgusted by his childish reaction, yet still trembling in the aftermath, he removed her arms from his neck and moved to the edge of the bed, where he sat, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked, kneeling beside him and placing a hand on his knee.

"No."

"You might feel better if —"

"I said no," he growled, glaring at her. She looked taken aback, but didn't move away. Some of his anger drained and when he spoke again it was in a soft, calm voice. "Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine. I shouldn't have lost control like this."

"You were asleep."

"Tydisians are able to control their dreams."

"You mean like lucid dreaming?"

"Yes. Usually I can do it, but —"

"Well, you're not all Tydisian. That kind of control isn't as easy for humans, especially when they're frightened or upset. And you are partly human, Xenos." She grasped his chin gently and tried to make him face her, but he refused to move.

"Only a very small part," he said coolly.

"Is being human so distasteful to you?"

"I am mostly Tydisian."

"But you still have a human side and a Laetez side."

He turned to her, his jaw visibly taut and eyes narrowed. "I have no desire to talk about this in the middle of the night."

"All right," she whispered and lay down. "It's late. Let's go back to sleep."

Sighing, he stretched out on his back. Moonlight's hand brushed his and he took it, allowing their fingers to entwine. After a moment she moved closer, rested her head against his shoulder and caressed his face and neck with gentle sweeps of her small, soft hand. Strangely, he welcomed her nearness. It drove his anger and hatred into hiding and allowed him rare moments of total contentment. A short time later, he fell into a deep sleep, unhindered by memories of the past.

Chapter Thirteen

Motherland

The following day, Xenos, Zale and Moonlight took a shuttle to Tydepth. Though both men seemed calm and collected, tension on the shuttle ran high. Or perhaps it merely seemed that way to Moonlight since this was the first time it truly struck her that she was a rebel.

If caught, she would face execution right along with Xenos and Zale. Though she wanted to be with Xenos and believed in his cause, she sometimes wondered if she'd lost her mind by joining him. Then she recalled the creatures she'd seen in the lab and the haunted look in Xenos' eyes when he'd awakened from the nightmare and knew she'd made the right choice.

Not that his cause was her entire reason for joining the rebellion. All her life she'd craved excitement and adventure, but hadn't experienced any since transfer school. Not that any of the "wild" things she'd done back then could compare to what she was doing now.

When they'd awakened that morning, Xenos had explained that he'd contacted the man who had educated him while he'd lived on Tydepth. Through the leader of his colony, he had arranged for Xenos and Zale to meet with the Tydisian Council of Colonies, explain his position and ask for sanctuary, if necessary.

She prayed Xenos was right in his belief that the Tydisians would not turn them over to the Laetez. She'd never seen him so trusting of anyone.

"We're approaching Tydepth," Zale stated. "I'll send a signal for permission to land."

"Excellent," Xenos said.

"May I see the planet?" Moonlight asked, standing in the doorway of the cockpit.

Xenos stood, took her hand and guided her into the copilot's seat he had occupied. Squatting beside her, he pointed to one of the monitors that displayed a planet almost completely covered with water. A few dots of land scattered the surface.

He reached out and ran his fingertips over the controls. Large red areas appeared over the planet.

"The red indicates populated areas, including aquatic settlements," Xenos told her, "which of course, is most of them."

"You're sure this shuttle is waterproof?" she asked warily. "Because unlike my present company, I can only hold my breath for something like a minute."

"You will be perfectly safe in the shuttle," Xenos said. "And the aquatic settlements have entire sections that can support mammalian life."

"Yeah, but how deep do you need to dive to reach them?"

Zale gave a snort of laughter. "Pretty deep. You'll like Tydepth. It's a beautiful planet."

Sure, if you're a fish, she thought, but refrained from speaking that observation aloud – not with two Tydisians mixed breeds present.

"We've received the signal to land," Zale said.

"Moonlight, return to the passenger seat," Xenos ordered.

She did as he told her and buckled herself into the seat. Excitement coursed through her. Soon she would see Tydepth – the place that the mere mention of brought light to Xenos' eyes. She wanted to see the place that meant so much to the man of ice.

Soon the shuttle descended, cutting through the atmosphere. It landed on an islet.

The shuttle hatch opened and she heard the rumble of rolling waves and the soft roar of the wind.

Zale stepped out first, followed by Xenos and Moonlight. She narrowed her watering eyes against the wind and wrapped her arms around herself. Though it was a warm wind, it was stronger than any she'd ever felt, short of a storm.

Five male Tydisians stood on the sandy shore. They were the first pure-blooded Tydisians Moonlight had ever seen in the flesh, so at first she tried not to gawk. Only when she realized they were staring at her with equal interest did she relax a bit and study them more carefully. She couldn't help noting the similarities and differences between them and Xenos.

Like him, they had multihued flesh, except their entire bodies appeared to be covered in it. They ranged in color from silvery blue to dark bluish-green. Hairless with elongated facial features, they had round, black eyes, rather fish-like, completely different than Xenos' slanted, thickly lashed, expressive blue eyes.

They were also much taller than him. Zale was more comparable to them in stature. Four of them appeared to be guards of some sort. They wore silvery net vests, dark blue loincloths and carried weapons – both traditional knives as well as modern stun pistols. The fifth, who appeared to be the eldest, carried no weapons and wore only a black loincloth.

"*Swein*," said the eldest. Moonlight recognized the traditional Tydisian greeting.

"*Swein*, Tepidat," Xenos said.

Tepidat smiled and embraced first Xenos, then Zale. When he spoke again, it was in the generic Laetez tongue. "It is good to see you again, but I wish it was under better circumstances."

"As I do," Xenos replied, glancing at the guards.

"Formality, as you know," Tepidat explained about the guards. "Our leader wants to make sure you pose no threat."

"By all means." Xenos opened his arms wide in a submissive gesture.

The guards approached. Two boarded the shuttle while the other two scanned Xenos, Zale and Moonlight. They had left their weapons on the shuttle and when the guards stepped off, they carried them.

"We will hold these until it's time for you to leave Tydepth," one of the guards stated.

"Of course," Xenos said.

"When you are ready, we'll accompany you to the leader's dwelling."

"We won't keep you waiting," Tepidat told them. He turned toward Moonlight and Xenos introduced her.

"Ah yes," Tepidat said, shaking her hand gently with his enormous webbed one. "There is a galaxy-wide alert for you, as well. Don't look so nervous, Moonlight. You are safe here. We Tydisians follow our own laws. No one dictates to us. Xenos, you're to meet with our leader, DrkMari, right away, so I suggest we go now. Afterward, I invite you, Zale and Moonlight to stay with me while you're on Tydepth."

"Thank you. It will be our honor to accept." Xenos bowed from the neck and Moonlight began to realize just how formal the Tydisian people were in spite of their lack of "proper" attire by human and Laetez standards. But as she'd come to realize long ago, there were countless cultures and none could be judged by any single standard.

Xenos leaned close to Moonlight and spoke in her ear, "The Tydisians will be swimming to the colony, and out of respect, I must accompany them, however Zale will take you in the shuttle, as they fully understand human limitations in the water."

"Thank the gods for that," she whispered.

Moonlight tried to watch discreetly as Xenos undressed to his tight black swim shorts, difficult when she was still so enraptured with his beautifully proportioned body.

He handed his clothes and shoes to Moonlight. "Take these in the shuttle please."

She accepted them, noting they still felt warm from his body.

"I'll see you below," he said, his gaze sweeping her and Zale before he turned and joined Tepidat and three guards. One of the guards remained behind to accompany Zale and Moonlight.

She watched Xenos and the others walk toward the edge of the sea and stride in. Moments later they disappeared beneath the frothy waves.

"You ready?" Zale asked her.

"Yes." She turned to him and the guard, who was still studying her with interest.

"You've never seen a human before, have you?" she asked in Tydisian.

"I have seen images," he replied.

"But it's not the same as seeing one in person." She smiled. "That's how I feel."

"We should go," the guard stated, motioning toward the shuttle.

They boarded and Zale guided the craft below the surface of the water. Moonlight had gone snorkeling once on Earth, but that experience didn't compare to this one. The shuttle plunged beneath the depths of the clearest, bluest ocean she'd ever seen. Various aquatic life surrounded the shuttle – some beautiful and others frightening.

Moonlight stared, transfixed, out the round shuttle window. Soon they traveled alongside Xenos, Tepidat and the guards. Again, Xenos' diving abilities astounded her. She couldn't imagine swimming so deep, even with gear.

She admired his strong, yet elegant, motions as he swam. Anyone who considered Xenos ugly had obviously never seen him in the water. The pure-blooded Tydisians were also beautiful to watch, though they appeared more animalistic with their elongated faces and bulky musculature. It amazed her that such powerfully built creatures swam so gracefully.

Of course, there were much larger creatures in the Tydisian seas. Several times, beasts of gargantuan proportions swam by, dwarfing the shuttle.

They passed what she thought to be a greenish mountain, but it moved, lifting an angular head and turning in the direction of the shuttle. Moonlight gave a sharp gasp.

Zale grinned and said, "Don't worry. It's harmless, unless it sits on you."

"We're approaching the colony now," the guard stated.

Staring out the window in wonder, Moonlight observed the Tydisian settlement. Tall, dark green reeds sprouted from the sandy floor, as did a variety of aquatic flowers in bright pink, orange and blue. Streets were paved with polished stones of black, silver and gray. Dark green domes of assorted sizes were positioned throughout the area. Many Tydisians mingled, going about their business. They turned in the direction of the shuttle, watching with interest.

Zale followed Xenos and his party to the largest dome located in the center of the colony.

"Our leader's residence," the guard explained. "Please slow the shuttle. Security will scan it as we land and then board."

Zale did as ordered and Moonlight shifted in her chair, both excited and apprehensive. What would happen to them in this aquatic world? Would the Tydisians be as receptive as Xenos believed or would they imprison them and send them to the Laetez?

They landed on a large black plate outside the dome. The plate sank into the sand, then tilted, sending the shuttle speeding down a dimly lit corridor. A moment later, they found themselves in a spacious docking bay. Several armed Tydisians, also wearing silver net uniforms, approached the shuttle.

"We're in the dome now," Zale said to Moonlight. "You'll be able to breathe easily."

Zale lowered the hatch and the guards boarded. After scanning the shuttle and exchanging brief words with Zale and the guard who had accompanied them, they allowed them to leave the shuttle.

Xenos and Tepidat awaited them outside, drying off with towels supplied by the guards.

Moonlight noted Xenos didn't seem the worse for wear after such a deep dive. If anything, the gleam beneath the cool blue surface of his eyes that told her he'd thoroughly enjoyed the swim.

"That was one trip I won't forget any time soon," Moonlight said.

Xenos glanced at her, a slight smile on his dark blue lips.

"DrkMari wishes to see you immediately," one of the guards said as he stepped off the shuttle. "Follow me, please."

They walked down another corridor, this one brightly lit, and entered an enormous hall with clear walls that gave a perfect view of the surrounding ocean.

"This is unbelievably beautiful," Moonlight said, staring at a school of pink and black fish swimming by. A group of Tydisian children who had been swimming in the reeds outside the window stared at the guests. Several waved and Moonlight waved back. Xenos' hand on her elbow nabbed her attention and she realized their group was moving toward another room.

They stepped into a large sitting room decorated elegantly in pale pink and white. Tables were carved from stained and polished driftwood and two enormous lion's paw shells holding satiny cushions made unique and comfortable-looking chairs. A long, narrow tank filled with the multicolored sea flowers stood at the back of the room and antique paintings depicting Tydisian history adorned the walls.

A male Tydisian with pale blue skin and wearing a silver tunic fastened at his trim waist with a belt of polished gray stones stepped into the room and greeted them.

"*Swein*. I am Rakdat, the butler. Please wait here. DrkMari will be with you soon," he said in the deep, soft tones that seemed common to most Tydisians. Now she understood from where Xenos got that scrumptious voice that turned her on almost as much as his kisses.

Directly after Rakdat left, a Tydisian female swept in. Though shorter than most of the males they had seen thus far, she still towered a head over Xenos. She was slim, yet muscular, with impressive breasts that swelled above a jeweled bra. A sheer blue cloak draped her shoulders and her lips were painted with a glittery silver gloss. She smiled broadly, revealing gleaming white fangs, and approached Xenos, placing her hands on his shoulders in a gesture of familiarity that annoyed Moonlight.

"Ah! It's the little Tydisian with the big tusk," she said, her seductive gaze trailing down Xenos' body and lingering on the front of his black shorts. "I was beginning to think we'd never see you again."

"Shaloe. It has been a long time." Xenos smiled slightly and removed her hands from his shoulders. To further Moonlight's annoyance, he held her hands for several moments.

"And you brought Zale." Shaloea approached him, folded her arms across her chest and sighed. "Such lovely proportions, but unfortunate skin."

"Shaloea," Zale nodded.

Her attention turned to Moonlight. "A human girl?" Glancing at Xenos over her shoulder, she smirked. "Didn't think they were your type."

"Princess Shaloea, this is Moonlight Santos Gama." Xenos came to stand behind Moonlight and placed his hands on her shoulders. "One of my translators."

Moonlight's gut tightened and she shot him a murderous look.

"Of course she is." Shaloea chuckled. "Would you like refreshments while you're waiting for my father?"

So that's where the big green bitch got her attitude. She was the colony leader's daughter. Obviously she and Xenos had some history. So much history that he didn't even want to admit Moonlight was his girlfriend.

"No. Thank you," Xenos said.

"Oh well," Shaloea met his gaze with a seductive look in her beady black eyes. "Maybe later."

She turned and left the room.

Moonlight tugged away from Xenos and walked across the room, pretending to look at the flowers floating in the tank. Inside she seethed. A moment later, Xenos joined her.

"Something wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Why should there be? After all, I'm only your translator. Were you afraid of making Filet-o-Princess jealous?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "I was thinking of you, Moonlight."

She turned to him with a look of disbelief. "How naïve do you think I am?"

"I thought you would prefer to be presented as a crew member rather than my lover."

"At least you're not calling me an escort anymore."

"Moonlight, this is neither the time nor the place for another silly argument. I couldn't care less who knows we're lovers."

"Well neither do I, so you don't have to *protect* me from anyone. Even your old girlfriends." She folded her arms across her chest and cast him a sidelong glance. "By the way, what did she mean by calling you the little Tydisian with the big tusk?"

"Tusk is Tydisian slang for penis. To answer your question, the average Tydisian male is seven feet tall with a four-inch cock."

Moonlight lifted her eyebrows. "Really? Lucky for me you're a mixed breed."

"Yes, the additional six inches comes in handy," he said.

She shot him a skeptical look, since she knew full well that while he was quite endowed, he certainly didn't have ten-inches. The playful gleam in his eyes dissolved any remaining anger and she gave a little snort of laughter.

Rakdat entered the room and stated, "Please follow me. The colony leader will see you now."

Entering the colony leader's sitting room, Moonlight first noticed the dark green and brown décor. An enormous high-backed chair carved from polished rock stood in front of what, at first glance, resembled an old-fashioned earth fireplace. Rather than burning wood, red-hot rocks glowed inside it.

An especially tall, silver-blue Tydisian male wearing a black tunic stood from the chair and approached their group.

"*Swein*," he said in a deep, stern voice.

"Thank you for granting us this meeting," Xenos said, bowing from the neck.

"Only you would have the audacity to ask a world government to grant you, a criminal, sanctuary," DrkMari said.

"Because I know only the Tydisian people can fully understand our cause," Xenos replied.

"Tomorrow evening the Council of Colonies will hear you out and decide what is to be done about you and your cause, Xenos. I hope for your sake you are convincing." DrkMari glanced at Zale and Moonlight.

"You know Zale," Xenos said. "And this is Moonlight Santos Gama."

She bowed and DrkMari nodded in acknowledgement.

"I will see you at the meeting. Until then, you are in the custody of Tepidat. Your actions reflect on him," DrkMari said and returned to his chair.

Moonlight glanced at Xenos in question and he motioned for her to keep silent.

The butler showed them out of the room and a guard escorted them back to the dock. On the way, Moonlight whispered to Xenos, "What did DrkMari mean about us being in Tepidat's custody?"

"He's responsible for us, so if we don't behave, he'll suffer the same punishment we will."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Tepidat must think highly of you to place so much trust in us, considering we are criminals."

Tepidat fell into step beside her and said, "It's not so much trust as knowing Xenos well. If he didn't want our help badly, he wouldn't be here. He won't risk inciting the Council's wrath."

Moonlight smiled a bit sheepishly. "I keep forgetting Tydisians have very good ears."

"Understandable, considering a human such as yourself is accustomed to actually *seeing* ears. It must be quite painful having one's ears outside one's head."

"Not really," Moonlight said, amused. "Human hearing isn't nearly as keen as Tydisian, I'm afraid. If you're talking about diving, though, water in the ear isn't fun. How exactly do you and Xenos know each other?"

"He didn't tell you?" Tepidat glanced at Xenos, who cast him a sidelong glance. "I'm not surprised. He can be clam-lipped."

"I'm not referring to how he kisses," Moonlight teased. For some reason she felt comfortable enough with this pleasant alien to try a bit of humor.

It wasn't wasted. Tepidat gave a snort of laughter and Xenos stiffened visibly.

"You've never complained before," he said in a deadly soft tone.

"It was a joke," she said.

"Was it?"

"Xenos has a sense of humor, but it gets lost in his usual grimness," Tepidat said.

"He did tell me you were his teacher when he lived here on Tydepth," Moonlight said, guiding the conversation back to its original subject. She noticed Xenos didn't seem happy with the turn it had taken and at the moment she'd prefer not to upset him. He had enough on his mind. Still, Tepidat seemed to know him well, including his tendency to take everything in life seriously.

"Xenos was one of the best students I ever had. Not to say he was perfect —"

"I found Tydisian mind control difficult to master," Xenos said.

"You found your Laetez side difficult to master," Tepidat corrected. "But master it you did, for the most part. Xenos was such a good student because he always dedicated himself completely to a task. There is no halfway with him."

"I've noticed that," Moonlight said.

"Of course, that can be both good and bad," Tepidat said.

"That's Tydisian philosophy for you," Xenos observed. "Contradictory."

"But wise," Tepidat stated.

When they reached the dock, they boarded one of DrkMari's planet pods. They sped down the long, winding corridors that connected all the domes in the colony. The pod dropped them off outside Tepidat's dwelling—a small, but cozy, dome modestly decorated with furniture made from driftwood and oversized shells. Zale and Xenos would sleep on the living room floor while Moonlight was shown to the guest room.

"My wife is out shopping for dinner," Tepidat said. "Perhaps you would like to rest until she returns?"

"Thank you," Moonlight said and remained standing until her host left, closing the door behind him. Once alone, she sat on an enormous cushion resting directly on the floor. Apparently, Tydisians didn't use traditional beds. She gazed out the window at a school of fish swimming by and could scarcely believe she was here in an underwater village.

At least the Tydisians hadn't taken them into custody and shipped them back to the Laetez. Not yet anyway.

Someone tapped on the door.

"Come in," she called.

Xenos stepped inside, closed the door and approached her.

"How are you?" he asked.

"All right. Fascinated with this world, actually."

"It is beautiful."

"Xenos—" she began, then paused.

"Yes?"

"You did want to keep our relationship secret from Shaloe, didn't you?"

"No."

"Being here...seeing this world and how much you seem to belong to it—"

"I do and I don't," he said curtly.

"What I mean is, would you be happier with a Tydisian lover? You would, wouldn't you?"

He sat beside her and held her gaze. "I'm happy with the woman I have."

Warmth spread through her and she desperately wanted to believe him, yet how could she compete with a female who shared his physical abilities?

"I know you're not keen on your human side," she said.

"I never said that."

"But you believe humans are inferior."

"As are the Laetez."

She smiled slightly, knowingly. "And Tydisians have no flaws?"

"Of course they do, but relatively less compared to other species. However I'm not sleeping with an entire species. I'm sleeping with you. Human or not, you're quite satisfying."

"Well, thanks a lot," she said with a sarcastic chuckle.

"After all, I'm not the one who said you kiss like a clam."

This time she laughed aloud. "I told you, that was a joke."

"I fail to see the humor." He stood and headed for the door. "I'll leave you to your rest."

"No." She followed him and grasped his hand. His piercing gaze turned to her and her heartbeat quickened. "Will you stay for a while? Unless you're busy."

He walked back to the cushion and stretched out on it, tugging her close.

Sighing with pleasure, Moonlight rested her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes, listening to the slow, steady rhythm of his heart. "What do you think will happen at the meeting tomorrow?"

"I'll go before the colony leaders and tell them why we've chosen rebellion. Then I'll ask if our ship may dock here if we're unable to reach our home port. The leaders will discuss the case in private and give their decision."

"Xenos, what if they don't give permission? What if they hand us over to the Laetez?"

"They won't do that."

She took his hand and kissed his palm. "You're always so sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will."

"Good policy," she whispered and ran her tongue along his webbing. Draping a leg over him, she felt her knee brush his semi-erect cock. She smiled slightly and continued teasing his webbing with her tongue. For some reason, that always got a "rise" out of him.

Moonlight lay on top of him and kissed him. He responded enthusiastically until a knock on the door disturbed them.

"Xenos, are you in there?" Zale called.

"Yes," he replied coolly but raised his eyes to the heavens.

Moonlight grinned.

"Tepidat and I are going diving before dinner. Want to come?"

He and Moonlight exchanged glances.

"Go ahead," she told him. "I know you want to."

He narrowed his eyes, then walked to the door and opened it.

"We're taking a shuttle to an islet on the surface," Zale said, glancing in Moonlight's direction. "You might like to come."

"All right." Moonlight stood, preferring to remain in Xenos' company. Besides, she'd like to be above the surface again for a while. Though this underwater village seemed pleasant enough, something about being so far underwater made her a little uneasy.

"You might want to put on a swimsuit," Zale said. "The beaches here are few, but beautiful."

The men left her alone and she changed into the bathing suit she'd packed in her overnight bag. One thing she'd learned very quickly about having a Tydisian mixed breed lover. Always plan on being ready for a swim.

Less than an hour later, their shuttle docked on a small islet. Lush vegetation covered the center of it and pale pink sand gleamed beneath the intense rays of the sun. A tall cliff, perfect for diving, stood on the east side.

Outside the shuttle, Xenos stood barefoot in the sand, relishing the sensation of it against his flesh. He closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply, enjoying the salty aroma of sea air.

It was a pity he wasn't revisiting this incomparable planet under better circumstances. Even worse, his pleasure each time he visited Tydepth was tainted by bitterness because he had been denied permanent residence here. He was allowed to visit and had been given permission to have his ashes scattered in Tydisian waters after his death. Despite the deep connection he felt to the water, he would never belong to it as a pure-blooded Tydisian and they would not let him forget it.

It was funny that Moonlight had assumed a Tydisian female would want him. They generally shared the same undesirable opinion of him as Laetez and human females. However, there were exceptions, such as Princess Shaloea and Moonlight herself. Not that he could compare the two.

Shaloea wanted him because she was rebellious and knew her father didn't approve of him, not to mention she had been curious about fucking a mongrel. Fortunately for both of them, she'd been thoroughly pleased by the experience. Shaloea had a preference for large cocks and she wouldn't find any among pure-blooded Tydisian males.

Sex with Shaloea had been physically satisfying, but lacked the complete fulfillment he experienced with Moonlight. Moonlight had a deep and beautiful soul, something neither he nor Shaloea shared. Perhaps he was better suited to a woman like the Princess, yet he didn't want her. In spite of how he tried not to, he craved Moonlight's company.

"This is unbelievably gorgeous," Moonlight said, stooping to pick up handfuls of the dazzling pink sand.

The sight of her enjoying the richness of Tydepth pleased him. Oddly, he'd *wanted* her to appreciate it. Perhaps in a way, it further confirmed her acceptance of him.

He growled deep in his chest. Since when had he cared whether or not a pure-blood, in particular a human or Laetez, accepted him?

"We'd better start diving," Tepidat said. "My wife won't be happy if we're late for dinner."

"Are you diving from that cliff?" Moonlight pointed toward the tall, rocky structure.

"Yes," Xenos said.

"Good. I'll be able to watch from here."

"If you get bored, there's a freshwater pool about half a mile inland," Xenos told her. "No large predators, so you'll be safe."

They exchanged glances before he followed Tepidat and Zale toward the cliff.

A short time later, they were diving into the deep, warm sea.

At first, Xenos was so taken by the pleasure that all he noticed was the thrill of soaring over the cliff and the joy of swimming. Then, as he positioned himself on the edge of the cliff for another dive, he caught saw Moonlight watching from the beach and warmth spread through him. She lifted her hand and waved to him and he returned the gesture before leaping into another exhilarating dive.

For a man like him, this was as close to perfect as life could get. Pity it would only last a short time before duty called yet again.

Chapter Fourteen

Heart of the Sea

When they returned to Tepidat's home, his wife, Siwsleeka, had arrived and was preparing a meal in the kitchen. She stepped out when her husband called to her. She was about Xenos' height and pale green. Even her eyes were dark green, rare among Tydisians. The introductions passed quickly, since the women only had yet to meet. Moonlight noticed that in spite of Siwsleeka's polite words, her expression remained cool.

"Siwsleeka, we appreciate your hospitality," Xenos told her, inclining his head slightly in her direction.

If possible, her look became even colder, but she acknowledged him with a slight nod before returning to the kitchen.

Throughout the meal, the men talked about the upcoming meeting with the Council while the women scarcely spoke at all. They seemed to observe each other as well as the males carefully. When the meal ended, Moonlight volunteered to help clean the mess. The others had excused themselves to continue their discussion in Tepidat's private training hall. Usually he instructed classes in Tydisian martial arts, but he had cancelled them due to the arrival of his guests.

In the kitchen, Moonlight and Siwsleeka piled dishes into the cleaning receptacle.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion on your privacy," Moonlight said, feeling that someone ought to acknowledge her discomfort at her obviously unwanted guests.

Siwsleeka looked at her sharply, then must have noticed Moonlight's sincere expression, because she seemed to relax a bit.

"My husband has always been fond of Xenos," she replied.

"But you're not," Moonlight said.

The Tydisian woman lifted her chin. "I don't like this favor he has asked of Tepidat or the leaders of Tydepth. He has no right to make our already poor relations with the Laetez even worse."

"I didn't think the Tydisians were interested in an alliance with the Laetez."

"There is a difference between not wishing an alliance and inciting another war by harboring intergalactic criminals."

Moonlight sighed. The woman had a point.

"I don't know how long you've been with Xenos, but heed this warning. He's dangerous."

Moonlight chuckled. "Thanks for the advice."

"I'm serious. He might have some external Tydisian qualities, but he cannot embrace our philosophy."

"If he's so bad, why does your husband accept him?"

Sighing deeply, Siwsleeka closed her eyes for a moment. "Xenos was very young when he came to Tydepth. He had nothing, except a stronger will than any creature should possess. He wanted to learn, and at first my husband was hesitant to teach. Xenos lived on abandoned islets and the open seas, depending on his skills as a hunter to sustain himself. No one would hire him or give him residence. "

"I thought Tydisians were supposed to be peaceful and understanding?" Moonlight said, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"We are, but he was strange to us—not simply another species, but something created against the will of nature, through DNA stolen from our warriors."

"That's not his fault."

"I know, but we weren't sure why he was here or to whom he was loyal. For all we knew, he could have been a Laetez spy."

"Then why was he allowed to stay?"

"The court allowed him a temporary pass. Every week he would come here to ask if Tepidat would change his mind about taking him as a student. Finally, my husband accepted him. Xenos was a very diligent student. Eventually Tepidat allowed him to move into our home."

"Is that why you don't like him? Did he do something to betray your trust while he was here?" Moonlight asked, almost hesitantly.

"No. He was quiet and spent most of his time in the training hall. He pulled his weight around the house and became Tepidat's assistant. It wasn't his actions that upset me, but his look. The way he looks at you with those alien eyes."

Moonlight cast her gaze aside. It hadn't occurred to her that anyone would consider Xenos' eyes alien. Yet they would be to most species outside of human and Laetez.

"He's cold," Siwsleeka said. "Colder than anyone I've ever met. And his actions after he left here proved I was right about him. He made an ideal soldier for the Laetez and completely disregarded my husband's teachings by choosing a life of violence."

"It's the only life he knew," Moonlight said. A month ago, she could never have imagined defending the man responsible for Jola's death. Life often played strange tricks on a person.

"I know about his unfortunate past," Siwsleeka said. "But Tepidat offered him a new life. He tried to tame Xenos' hatred, but it's impossible."

"He has good reason to hate."

"There is no good reason to destroy lives."

"The Tydisians fought a war."

"To protect our way of life. We have mourned the lives taken on both sides. All we asked was to be left in peace, but the Laetez don't know the meaning of the word. Nor do humans. That's why they make such perfect allies for each other."

"Not all humans are like that," Moonlight said, a bit offended.

A sad smile touched Siwsleeka's pale green lips. "Strange words coming from a woman who has joined the most wanted criminal in the galaxy. You wished to know what I have against Xenos. I don't want his hatred to harm our people, most of all Tepidat. He has taken advantage of my husband's friendship and I do not appreciate it."

Moonlight nodded, placing the last of the shell-shaped dishes in the receptacle. "I understand." She turned to leave the kitchen, hating the idea of staying, even for a short time, where she wasn't wanted.

"Moonlight."

She paused in the archway leading to the dining room and turned back to Siwsleeka. "Yes?"

"Be very careful. Bitterness such as Xenos carries will only end in destruction and sorrow."

"He's not only doing this out of bitterness. Each day, more ACT products are created. The Laetez no longer want to acknowledge those lives, at least not as equals."

"I have sympathy for those sad creatures, however I cannot condone any plan formed by Xenos. He's like a plague."

Funny she should mention that when at tomorrow's meeting he would be informing them about the Laetez involvement with the Tydisian bacteria thought to be extinct.

* * * * *

The following day, Xenos' small group took Tepidat's shuttle to the Council City. Ambassadors from each colony resided there, reporting to colony leaders and making many interplanetary decision. Council meetings were held in a main hall located in the city center.

Though Moonlight managed to outwardly control her nerves, inside her stomach churned. If Xenos and Zale were worried at all, they didn't show it, either.

Shortly after arriving in the city, they assembled in the meeting hall—a vast room with bluish-green walls and a polished stone floor. Moonlight sat among the witnesses while Xenos spoke to the colony leaders who sat around a large, semi-circular table.

After he explained the reason for the rebellion and his hope for the outcome, the leaders questioned him and Zale carefully. By the sound of the questions, they disliked his rebellion and his request for sanctuary as much as Siwsleeka.

A few times when Moonlight glanced at Tepidat's wife, who sat beside her, she noticed a slight, approving smile on the female's lips. Moonlight's stomach tightened.

The woman's hatred of Xenos overcame her desire to see the Laetez pay for what they had stolen from Tydepth.

Most of the interrogation focused on Xenos and Moonlight credited him with remaining cool and collected even as his hopes for aid from Tydepth faded.

"Before the Council takes a recess for discussion, I must once again remind you of what the Laetez stole from you for use in their ACT program. I am living proof of that. The offspring of unwilling Tydisian warriors. I also remind you that I have proof that the Laetez have been experimenting with bacteria that specifically targets aquatic species."

"We must check that information more carefully before trusting its accuracy," DrkMari said.

"Of course you must, however, you know I'm speaking the truth. My rebellion will prove that ACT products are no longer slaves and that there are species who will not accept Laetez theft of their very blood. We are prepared to give our lives for this cause. All we ask from you is sanctuary in cases of extreme need."

"We believe your intentions are good," said Clana, a female leader from a Northern colony. "However, a rebellion such as you propose is impossible to launch without the loss of innocent lives, something Tydisians cannot condone."

"We must discuss this matter privately now," stated DrkMari.

A guard called for Xenos, Zale and the witnesses to clear the room while the leaders made their decision.

* * * * *

Two hours later, the Council had the matter settled.

Back in the hall, Moonlight waited anxiously for their response, though she guessed what it would be. Xenos had been so certain of Tydisian support, but it seemed he had a love-hate relationship with the species he most respected in the universe.

DrkMari called Xenos and Zale to stand before the Council and said, "You are aware Tydisians only give aid to outsiders who are defenseless and unfairly condemned. You are seeking danger. However, if you prove yourselves worthy of your Tydisian heritage, we will agree to grant you the privileges of citizens of Tydepth, including sanctuary."

"There will be stipulations," Clana added. "Sanctuary will only be granted on a case-by-case basis. If we feel you have acted responsibly, we will help you. However, if you show unjust force in your cause, we will close our borders to you."

"How are we to prove ourselves worthy?" Zale asked.

How indeed. Xenos had spent years on this planet, studying their ways, yet they had denied him residence. Now the colony leaders would have them believe they would support their cause if he and Zale proved they were worthy of their Tydisian blood?

"You will complete the tests given all Tydisian warriors for the past six thousand years," Clana said.

Oh brother. Here it comes. The twelve labors of Hercules, Moonlight thought, recalling her studies an ancient Earth history.

"There are two tasks," DrkMari continued.

Great. Just two. Not twelve.

"The first is a three-round battle with masters of Tydisian martial arts. The second is a dive to capture a *Wush ta Mari*," said Clana.

Moonlight's brow furrowed. *Wush ta Mari* was Tydisian for Heart of the Sea. She whispered to Siwsleeka, "What's that?"

"*Wush ta Mari* is a type of jewel only found in our ocean's deepest depths," the woman replied. "Even full-blooded Tydisian warriors have failed and sometimes died trying to procure such a treasure. Your cross-breeds will not succeed. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," Moonlight said, feeling slightly sick. Why would the Tydisians mock Xenos, Zale and their rebellion by making demands of them that couldn't possibly be met?

* * * * *

On the way back to Tepidat's home, the group discussed the upcoming challenges that would take place the following day.

"They didn't give you much time to prepare," Moonlight said.

"It shouldn't be required," Xenos told her. "If we weren't prepared when we made our request, then we shouldn't have come at all."

"Just starting to realize that, are you?" Moonlight muttered.

Xenos shot her a quelling look. "So little faith, human."

"She might have a point, Xenos," Zale stated. "We're not full-blooded Tydisians. Those tasks are meant for the strongest of their kind."

"Our kind."

"You are both right," Tepidat said. "The tasks are difficult, even for trained warriors of pure-blood, however, the Council has been lenient in that they split the tasks between you. It is possible that even with your cross-breed weaknesses you can complete the tests."

"I have Tydisian strength," Zale admitted. "And I have been trained by Xenos in your martial arts, so I might be able to beat three of your masters, but there is no way I can dive as deep and stay under as long as necessary to get one of those Hearts of the Sea."

"You needn't beat the masters," Tepidat said. "All you must do is complete the rounds with them."

A slight smile tugged at Zale's lips. "That's it?"

"It won't be as easy as you think," Xenos said.

"My jaw isn't made of glass," Zale said. "I can take punishment for three rounds."

"It's not the jaw we aim for in Tydisian tests," Tepidat said.

Zale's eyes widened a bit. "Ah, I see." He leaned closer to Xenos and whispered, "If I'm going to get my balls crushed for this cause, you better be damn sure you can make this dive and get one of those jewels."

"I will procure a *Wush ta Mari*," Xenos stated with his usual confidence.

Moonlight glanced at him and their gazes met before she turned away. Siwsleeka's words echoed in her mind. *Even full-blooded Tydisian warriors have failed and sometimes died trying to procure such a treasure.*

* * * * *

That afternoon, Xenos and Zale spent alone with Tepidat, preparing for the tests through meditation. They joined Moonlight and Siwsleeka for a light dinner, then disappeared again behind the closed doors of the training hall.

Moonlight retired to bed early. Though she wasn't sleepy, she wanted to perform a protection ritual for Xenos and Zale. Their fate was in the hands of the gods, yet an extra prayer couldn't hurt.

She felt a bit guilty because over the past few weeks she had neglected her religion, but now seemed as good a time as any to return to it. As she often did, she had packed candles into her travel bag. She had received permission to light them from Siwsleeka, who assured her the air filter system in the dome would clear the smoke. As a devout practitioner of *Siw Maris Marin*, the Tydisian woman seemed to understand the comfort a ritual would bring.

Moonlight had nearly finished the ritual when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," she said, and was a bit surprised when Xenos stepped inside. She hadn't expected to see him until the morning.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly, closing the door and leaning against it.

"Ritual. Asking for protection for you and Zale tomorrow."

He looked as if he was trying to control an amused smile and her anger stirred.

"That strikes you funny?"

"The only thing that will protect us tomorrow is strength, skill and maybe some luck, if you believe in that sort of thing."

"So you're annoyed about the ritual?"

His brow furrowed and he knelt beside her. Gods, she couldn't help staring at his long, sleek thighs, the muscles straining against his black trousers. What the hell was wrong with her? He could die tomorrow and she was getting turned on looking at his legs.

"Why would that annoy me?" He caressed her hair and cupped the back of her head, drawing her closer. Bracing her hands on his thighs, she accepted his deep, possessive kiss. His tongue thrust between her lips and her tongue met it with long, wet strokes.

Moonlight tugged away and smiled, shaking her head.

"I'm disturbing your ritual. Sorry," he said, though he didn't look or sound the least bit apologetic. He looked like he wanted sex. Badly.

For that matter, so did she.

"Shouldn't you be resting for tomorrow?" she said weakly.

"I'm having some trouble sleeping. I think you could relax me."

Moonlight smiled, leaned closer and kissed him again. "Let me finish here. It will just take a moment."

"I'll wait for you in bed." He stood and pulled off his shirt as he walked to the sleeping cushion. Moonlight stared at him for a moment, watching him unzip his trousers. His thick purplish cock, already semi-erect, popped through his open fly, making a striking contrast to the black material.

Moonlight's heartbeat quickened and she turned back to the candles. Closing her eyes, she drew a deep breath, trying to focus, but it wasn't possible.

A moment later, she snuffed out the candles and turned to the cushion where Xenos lay, sprawled on his back, one arm poised languidly over his head. By now she'd seen him naked so many times she'd lost count, yet the sight of his long, sleekly muscled body never failed to arouse her. She'd even gotten to like the look of his webbed hands and feet.

Staring at her through half-open eyes, he somehow managed to look lazy and lustful at the same time. He watched her undress, his gaze becoming more intense and his cock swelling to greater proportions.

Moonlight climbed onto the cushion and straddled him. She sat back on his thighs, loving the sensation of their warmth and hardness against her bottom.

"We should be back by early evening tomorrow," Xenos said. His gaze followed his webbed hands as they slid up her ribs and cupped her breasts.

"Can I go with you?" she breathed, her eyes closing partway as he used the tip of his finger to circle her areola. She wasn't sure she could stand the suspense of sitting home, not knowing if he was dead or alive.

"I didn't think you'd want to. There's nothing you can do there."

"I would like to go."

"Why?" He held her gaze, as if goading her. Most likely he wanted her to admit her tender feelings for him so he could mock her as he'd done when she'd rescued him, calling her a servant. This time she wouldn't give him the opportunity.

"Curiosity," she replied. "I'd like to see these Tydisian tests up close and personal." She punctuated her last words by tightening her fist around his cock and stroking.

"I think that might be a good idea," he said, his eyes closing for longer than a blink as his physical pleasure grew. Then they opened wide, his expression fierce, and he grasped her shoulders, reversed their positions and pinned her body beneath his. He slid two fingers into her damp pussy and explored while using his thumb to caress her clit. "It will teach you not to underestimate me."

"I never underestimate you, Xenos," she said, trying to keep her voice steady—difficult when he was teasing her so skillfully.

"No?" he said in a sexy, yet mocking, tone that never failed to both arouse and annoy her.

He took her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked on it, then pricked it gently with his fangs—not drawing blood, but still hard enough to make her gasp. The sensation sent a thrill of passion through her and she clutched his head and arched against him. By now his touch had stirred those delightful, pre-orgasmic thrills. If he kept this up much longer, she'd come before he even filled her with his magnificent purple cock.

Just when she hovered on the brink, he braced a hand on either side of her head and filled her with a swift thrust.

"Oh, Xenos!" she gasped, clinging to him tightly, her internal muscles clamping around his thick, hard shaft.

He growled and licked her ear, then nibbled the lobe. Moonlight closed her eyes, relishing the sensations bombarding her. Murmuring his name over and over, she hung on tightly while he filled her with thrust after thrust.

Each time she hovered on the edge, he slowed his motions. Finally, he stopped moving and remained buried deep inside her.

"Look at me," he said, his voice husky with desire.

She stared into his eyes and he began thrusting again. Their gazes locked, he pushed her into a breathtaking orgasm. In the final seconds, her eyes closed involuntarily and she clung to him hard, her pussy throbbing around him.

Somewhere in the midst of her own pleasure, she felt him come. For several seconds, he lay on top of her, his body nearly crushing hers, but she loved every moment.

Finally, he rolled onto his back and she knew by the rhythm of his breathing he was nearly asleep, if not asleep already.

Moonlight rolled closer and he lifted his arm, drawing her near.

She sighed, listening to his heartbeat.

Please let him survive tomorrow's tests.

Please.

* * * * *

Early the following morning, they left Tepidat's home and traveled to the ancient arena where Zale's battle with the masters would take place. Located on a tropical island, the arena was a large, square pit surrounded by a high stone wall. DrkMari, several colony leaders or their representatives had come to witness the challenges. They sat beneath a canopy that shaded part of the wall.

"This weather stinks," Zale muttered, squinting toward the blinding sun.

Moonlight found the day uncomfortably warm and humid as well. Neither Xenos nor the Tydisians seemed to mind, however.

"It's your human-Laetez chemistry," Xenos told him. "Ignore it."

"Simple advice coming from a guy who's mostly Tydisian."

"I'll be repaid during the dive," Xenos reminded him.

"Right. It's in cold water, isn't it?" Zale glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

"Challenge is good for the soul." Xenos grinned wickedly. While Moonlight and Siwsleeka joined the witnesses on the wall, Xenos, Zale and Tepidat entered the arena through an underground tunnel.

Again, lessons in ancient history flashed through Moonlight's thoughts. This reminded her of the games in the golden age of Rome. It had seemed exciting to her when she'd read about it. Now it made her feel slightly sick.

The Tydisian masters had already assembled in three corners of the pit. Two were quite tall, while the third looked slightly shorter than Zale. All three were well-muscled, and from what she could see of their warm up exercises, incredibly flexible and quicker than cats.

Xenos and Tepidat spoke to Zale, who looked calm and focused. He warmed up and Moonlight relaxed a bit. He seemed limber and she didn't doubt his power. He might have human-Laetez skin, but his proportions were more Tydisian and, according to his record, he possessed their incredible strength. The humidity would hinder him more than a full-blooded Tydisian, but with proper hydration, he should be fine.

The battle consisted of three seven-minute rounds, quite long by human standards, but not unreasonable for Laetez or Tydisians.

At the sound of a gong, Zale and his first opponent, the shortest of the three masters, moved to the center of the arena and circled each other. For several moments they traded blows. As Tepidat had warned, the Tydisian master was quite adept at targeting the genitals. A couple of times Zale had some near misses that made Moonlight tense in her seat. Just when she thought he might make it through the round unscathed, his opponent's bare green foot struck him squarely between the legs.

Zale groaned in pain and instinctively leaned forward, clutching himself. The Tydisian's fist smashed across his face, sending him crashing to the sandy ground.

"Watch your face!" Xenos shouted.

Somehow, Zale managed to block another kick and knock his opponent onto his back. Both staggered to their feet.

"How much longer?" Moonlight whispered.

Siwsleeka glanced at her wrist spec. "It's almost over. Thirty seconds."

It was the longest thirty seconds Moonlight had ever experienced and she wasn't even the one fighting.

When the gong signaled the end of the round, Zale and the Tydisian master faced each other and bowed respectfully. Moonlight noticed Zale was still limping from the nasty blow and she hoped he hadn't been seriously damaged.

Tepidat and Xenos blocked the witnesses' view as they checked him. A Tydisian medic also joined them to assess the situation, but when the gong signaled for the next round, Zale was well enough to continue.

His next opponent, a tall, rangy Tydisian with skin such a dark blue it almost appeared black, fought differently than the first master, but was just as dangerous. About a minute into the round, Zale knocked him to the ground, but the Tydisian hung on tightly and the two began a grappling match that lasted until the sound of the gong. They broke apart and bowed to each other, their chests heaving. Sand stuck to Zale's heavily perspiring body. Even sitting still, Moonlight was sweating, so she didn't want to think about how the heat felt during exertion such as Zale was enduring.

At least he only had one more round to go.

* * * * *

"Just one more challenge," Xenos told Zale, offering him a drink while Tepidat placed a cooling pack against his neck. "You're doing well."

Panting, Zale shot him a fiery look and growled. "I hope you freeze your nuts over during your dive."

Xenos chuckled. "Good. You still have attitude. That means you have a chance."

Before Zale could reply, the gong sounded again. Drawing a deep breath, he rose to his feet and walked to the center of the arena to meet the last master.

Xenos' stomach tightened. If Zale could get through this last round, they would be halfway to meeting their goal. As much as he wanted sanctuary for his rebels, he also wanted to prove that the Tydisians had been wrong about him and Zale. They were crossbreeds, but they were worthy of their Tydisian heritage.

He watched Zale and the powerfully muscled, silver-blue master attack and defend. Their strikes and kicks were fluid, yet incredibly strong. Though Xenos was far stronger than a human or even a Laetez, he had to admit lacking Zale's physical power. He almost felt a twinge of envy, but he had other compensations that would be required during the second test.

The master landed a blow between Zale's legs and this time the crossbreed grunted in agony. Xenos gritted his teeth and shook his head. That had to hurt. Zale's nuts must still be sore from the first round.

Don't wimp out, Zale, he thought. Stay strong.

Just a few more seconds and the round would be over.

The master had now pinned a nearly unconscious Zale onto his back.

Everyone waited in silence, expecting Zale to either pass out or signal that he'd given up.

With an almost supernatural heave, Zale managed to reverse their positions—for all of ten seconds. Then the master pinned him again, just before the gong struck.

Xenos sighed with relief. Zale had passed.

Now it was his turn. If he didn't procure a *Wush ta Mari*, he would not only have failed himself and the rebels, but Zale would most likely castrate him personally. With a snort of masochistic laughter, he went to assist Zale, who staggered painfully toward his corner.

* * * * *

A few hours later, Tepidat's shuttle landed on the island designated for the start of Xenos' test. Even from inside the shuttle, Moonlight heard the howl of the wind and knew by the readings on the monitor in the cockpit that it wasn't warm out there.

While most of Tydepth had very hot weather, the western portion of the planet was so cold that it was mostly uninhabited, except for a few species adapted to the weather. One of Tydepth's largest predators lived in these waters. Depth Dragons lived far below the surface, yet rose often to hunt the seal-like creatures that lived on the western islets. Siwsleeka had told Moonlight about the Depth Dragons, saying that if the cold water didn't kill Xenos, those deadly sea creatures probably would. Unless he stayed clear of the underwater caverns.

"Explain to me the reason why you can't use one of the Tydisian wetsuits that allow the skin to breathe, but keep you warm?" Moonlight said.

Xenos didn't reply, merely tossed her an annoyed look and continued undressing.

She shivered just thinking about diving in that cold water, especially as deeply as Xenos would be forced to go in search of the *Wush ta Mari*.

"It is tradition," Tepidat said with his usual patience. "This is a test of will, not just skill."

"More male stupidity, if you ask me," Siwsleeka muttered.

"No one asked you, wife." Tepidat cast her a good-natured smile.

Siwsleeka returned the smile with an ultra-sweet one. "Tonight you might ask me something, husband, and it shall be refused."

Zale raised an eyebrow.

If Moonlight hadn't been so worried about Xenos, she would have found humor in Siwsleeka's comeback.

"He is allowed a homing device," Tepidat told Moonlight. "If he requires assistance, he can signal. Of course, that means he fails the test, but at least he'll have his life."

This provided little comfort. Moonlight knew Xenos well enough to realize he might prefer death to failure.

"And if he doesn't surface in five hours, guards will be dispatched to search for him. Usually the diver is allowed seven hours to search for the *Wush ta Mari*, however, due to Xenos' breathing limitations, the colony leaders have agreed to reduce the danger time."

"But he can only survive five hours underwater," Moonlight said, not bothering to hide her concern. She turned to Xenos. "Can't you only stay under for five hours?"

"Give or take a few minutes," he said.

"Xenos!" she snapped. "This is —"

"Required."

"Damn right it is," Zale muttered.

"You can't possibly still be sore," Xenos said, raising his eyes to the heavens in disgust. He pulled on a blue robe and boots. "You do have moderate regenerative powers."

"Why don't you let three Tydisian masters kick you in the nuts? Then tell me how sore I should be."

"The other witnesses and the colony leaders' shuttles have arrived," Siwsleeka said.

Moonlight glanced out the window and saw she was right. She felt slightly sick and her head ached. Within moments, the test would be underway.

"Are you ready?" Tepidat asked Xenos.

"Yes."

"You sound confident," said his old teacher.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't be."

"Would you like me to remind you of a few?" Siwsleeka asked with feigned innocence.

The bitch was probably enjoying this, Moonlight thought bitterly.

"No, thank you," Xenos said with his usual nonchalance. He led the way out of the shuttle.

Outside, the wind was so strong that Moonlight could scarcely plow through it, even with Zale's hulking form to shield her.

DrkMari and a guard were the only witnesses to leave their shuttle. They stood outside it as Xenos and his party approached.

"The rules have already been explained to you," DrkMari said. "You will have five hours to seek a *Wush ta Mari*. If you require assistance, you may use this device." He gestured toward the guard, who offered Xenos a gray bracelet with a single red button.

Xenos took the device and fastened it on his wrist.

"Use of the device means failure of the test," DrkMari continued. "Do you have any questions?"

"No," Xenos stated.

"Then we shall begin. My guard will follow you to the point of departure and make sure you have no equipment when you dive."

Xenos nodded, then turned to Moonlight. "You might prefer to wait in the shuttle with Siwsleeka, where it's warm."

"I'm going with you," she stated, meeting his gaze.

He nodded and headed up a rocky slope toward a cliff nestled between two mountains that cut the wind, making a dive easier. When they reached the top, Xenos removed his robe and boots.

The lashing wind cut across his bare flesh. Even bundled in a coat, Moonlight was cold, so she couldn't imagine how he must feel.

The guard searched him quickly using a scanner, then gestured for him to begin his test.

Moonlight's heart pounded mercilessly as he walked to the edge of the cliff and made a perfect dive into the deep, fierce sea.

When Xenos struck the water, the cold shocked his system so much that for several seconds he couldn't think clearly. Then years of training kicked in and he glanced around at his surroundings, deciding which way to go.

With his limitations, there was no way he could dive far enough to claim a *Wush ta Mari* in the deep caverns where they rested. His only hope would be to swim to the nearer caverns where the Depth Dragons made their home. The oversized creatures were known to collect the *Wush ta Mari*, storing them in their dens. If he was caught, he had scarcely any chance of escaping a Depth Dragon, so he must be cautious.

The deeper he swam, the colder the water became. Finally reaching the vast caverns, he began a den-by-den search, hoping to avoid meeting a Depth Dragon head-on. There were so many caves that he began to wonder if he would run out of air or slip into hibernation due to the cold before finding one housing a collection of *Wush ta Mari*.

He shivered violently as he resisted hibernation. The cold was becoming almost unbearable. His fingers were so numb he could barely sift through the rocks to locate a gleaming *Wush ta Mari* amidst the dull stones in the den he'd just entered.

Looking up sharply, he saw a Depth Dragon that must have been close to seventy feet long swim into the den. His stomach lurched and he swam behind a tall rock. Apparently he was so cold that his usually sensitive flesh hadn't picked up the ripples in the water that told him when creatures approached.

He glanced toward the floor, considering his next move, when a glistening red stone caught his eye. Reaching out, he took it in his trembling hand. A smile tugged at his lips as he closed his fist tightly around the *Wush ta Mari*.

Chapter Fifteen

The Death Dinghy

Moonlight shivered and wrapped her arms more tightly around herself, her gaze fixed on the rough waves crashing against the island's pink sand shoreline. For the first time since arriving on Tydepth, she didn't notice the beauty of the planet and she paid little attention to the icy chill that permeated her very bones. Her main concern was Xenos. He'd been submerged for nearly five hours, and if he didn't appear soon, he probably wouldn't at all.

She glanced at Zale, who appeared calm as usual, yet his steadfast gaze toward the sea hinted that he was also concerned.

"It's been too long," she said, glancing from Zale to Tepidat.

"Not yet," Tepidat stated.

"He can only stay under five hours. Wait any longer and there will be no chance of finding him alive." She glanced desperately toward the shuttles, then back to Tepidat, who placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. A horrible realization struck her and she murmured, "That's the point. He's not supposed to survive this."

"Moonlight, you should go back to the shuttle," Zale suggested. "It's cold."

After Xenos dove off the cliff, she'd spent a couple of hours in the warmth of the shuttle. Then she'd stepped outside to wait with Zale and Tepidat.

"No, I'm fine," she said, though in spite of her protective clothes, her fingers and toes felt numb and her face ached from the cold. She couldn't bear to think about how Xenos must feel—unless he'd already slipped into hibernation or worse. A full-blooded human or Laetez could never have survived, exposed, in such conditions and she didn't doubt Xenos' human-Laetez traits, no matter how few, were troubling him.

"If he had no chance, he wouldn't have accepted the challenge," Tepidat said softly.

No doubt he *believed* he had a chance, but she realized Xenos' stubbornness, as well as his arrogance, knew no bounds. It seemed this time it would be the death of him.

Her worst fears seemed to be confirmed when the Tydisian guards stepped out of their shuttle and approached the water. Zale quickly stripped to the Tydisian wetsuit he wore beneath his clothes. Panic clogged Moonlight's throat. Then Xenos' head popped above the waves.

"He made it," Zale said, a glimmer of relief in his usually unreadable eyes.

Moonlight took several steps toward the water, but Tepidat's hand tightened on her shoulder and she remained standing.

As Xenos made his way to the shore, DrkMari also stepped out of his shuttle and joined their small group.

Xenos emerged from the water, the pale blue color of his body visible proof of his frigid state, as was his unusually slow and unsteady gait. He was obviously battling hibernation and starting to lose. It took all of Moonlight's self-control not to help him, but she knew it would only incite his anger and quite possibly diminish his respectability as a Tydisian warrior.

His chest heaving, he paused in front of DrkMari and held out his trembling hand to reveal a glossy red stone resting on his silvery palm.

DrkMari drew a long, slow breath, met Xenos' triumphant gaze and inclined his head slightly before trudging back to his shuttle.

Zale tossed his own coat over Xenos and slipped a supportive arm around him. Moonlight took that as a sign that it was safe to approach.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

He glanced at her and nodded, appearing too numb to speak.

"You better get on board the shuttle," Zale said.

Once on board, one of the Tydisian guards, also trained as an assistant medic, treated him with medication to combat the effects of severe cold. Within moments, he began shivering violently. Moonlight, who was helping him dress, must have looked as concerned as she felt, because the guard said, "It's a normal reaction. All it means is he's coming out of semi-hibernation."

During the journey back to Tepidat's home, they spoke little. By the time they reached their destination, Xenos had almost fully recovered. They were all seated in the kitchen, sipping the warm drinks Siwsleeka had made them, when DrkMari contacted them by spec. The leader confirmed that the crew of *Nameless* would be allowed sanctuary on a case-by-case basis.

"Thank you again for your assistance," Xenos said to Tepidat an hour later as he, Moonlight and Zale prepared to return to *Nameless*. He turned to Siwsleeka. "And for your hospitality."

The woman nodded and Tepidat said, "Are you certain you won't stay the night?"

"We've imposed long enough," Xenos said.

A smile played around Tepidat's dark lips. "You're eager to begin your mission. The council has given you and your crew a great honor by allowing this. Don't betray their trust. Remember that violence isn't always the best way."

Xenos nodded, though Moonlight guessed Tepidat's words of wisdom were going in one proverbial ear and out the other. She knew Xenos would do whatever he believed necessary to support his cause.

A short time later, they were back on the ship. Xenos ordered a crewman to bring their few belongings to his quarters, then he turned to Moonlight. "I'm needed on the bridge, so I'll see you later."

"All right. I'm going to my desk. I'm sure Birch will have lots for me to catch up on," she said.

Xenos nodded, his gaze locked on hers for a moment, before he turned and strode out of the docking bay.

In the translator's office, Moonlight talked to Birch about the trip to Tydepth, then worked until dinnertime. She decided to walk to the quarters she and Xenos shared to see if he might have returned there. To her disappointment, he was still out, but a smooth, circular gray box on the bed caught her attention. Her brow furrowed, she approached and noticed her name written upon it in bold black hand.

She lifted the lid. It was half full of fine, pink Tydisian sand, several pale blue sea stones and two rainbow-colored seashells.

A smile tugged at her lips as she ran her fingers through the sand. She could scarcely believe Xenos would do something this romantic. It was so unlike him that she wondered if this had truly been his idea or if she had secured a secret admirer while on Tydepth. She gave a snort of laughter at such a thought.

After placing the box near her side of the bed, she walked to the bathroom, undressed and stepped into the shower.

She'd just finished washing and was simply enjoying a few minutes beneath the warm water when the door clicked. Her eyes flew open and she gazed at Xenos who stood naked, staring at her with a sexy look in his slanted blue eyes.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Please." She smiled, stepping aside to accommodate him.

He closed the shower door and wrapped his arms around her from behind, pulling her close to his rock-hard body and nuzzling her neck.

"I thought you might have spent enough time in the water today," she said, closing her eyes and squirming her bottom against him. It felt so good to be in his arms and it still amazed her that she'd learned to enjoy being with a man she had once abhorred.

He gave a low growl and ran his fingers through the dark, wiry hair covering her soft mound. Behind her, his stiffening cock pressed against her, stirring her desire. His fingers explored her delicate folds of flesh, teasing her until she squirmed with need. He fondled her clit while at the same time licking the side of her neck. He gently ran his teeth along the sensitive flesh, then dipped his tongue into her ear and swirled it around, making her giggle and writhe. Her water-slicked ass rubbed against his cock and he growled deep in his chest.

Smiling coquettishly, Moonlight reached around and grasped his cock, her hand stroking the velvety flesh and squeezing his hard, throbbing length.

"Thank you for the present," she said. "It's a little piece of Tydepth I'll always treasure."

"I'm glad," he whispered in Tydisian, his breath tickling her ear. "I hoped you'd like Tydepth."

"I did."

Xenos nudged her toward the wall, grasped her hands and placed them against it. Her palms pressed against the wet tile, she trembled with anticipation. Ever so slowly, he filled her.

Panting his name, she arched against him, tilting her head to the side so he could easily lick and kiss her neck. He cupped her breasts and brushed his thumbs over her nipples. Little tremors of passion coursed through her at the sensation of his fangs gently raking her shoulders.

It didn't take her long to come and he joined her soon after. For several moments they stood, his body pinning hers to the wall. She relished the sensation of his smooth, slick flesh against her and the feeling of his heart beating against her back. Finally he stepped away and turned off the water. They dried off quickly. Moonlight dressed in panties and a nightshirt while he pulled on blue shorts. In bed, she curled up beside him.

"I think you surprised the colony leaders when you got that *Wush ta Mari*," she said, smiling slightly and kissing his chest. Her lips lingered over the silky Tydisian flesh.

He laughed softly.

"They shouldn't have underestimated you." She lifted her head and met his gaze, her hand caressing his lean side and trailing down to his hip.

Xenos placed a hand behind her head and guided her face toward his for a kiss. Her eyes closed, Moonlight surrendered completely. When the kiss broke, she rested her head against his shoulder. A short time later, she drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

Moonlight awoke shortly after Xenos. While she was dressing, he said, "I know you've been stopping by the gym before retiring to our quarters, however I want you to accompany me this morning. It's time to start your combat training."

She lifted an eyebrow in surprise and he continued, "Everyone aboard this ship must have at least minimal experience with stun pistols and hand-to-hand combat."

"I was actually fairly good in self-defense class at school," Moonlight said.

"I'll be curious to see," he said, tossing her a look so condescending she took it as a challenge. "Let's go. We can have a workout before breakfast."

Moonlight paused a moment to contact Birch and let him know she'd be late.

In the ship's gym, several other crewmembers were working out on cardio or resistance machines. Others swam in the sizeable tank at the far end of the room. While Moonlight opted for a jog, Xenos dove into the tank. Half an hour later, they joined each other on the mats where Moonlight's first martial arts lesson began.

His roughness stunned her at first and she found herself sprawled painfully on the mat far too often for her taste. Still, she knew that soft handling wouldn't help her. An enemy would, after all, be trying to injure or kill her. While she didn't enjoy being

tossed around by a sinewy part-Tydisian male, she had to admit taking pleasure in the lessons. Moonlight enjoyed the physical challenge and she liked the idea of learning how to fight. What better teacher could she ask for than a former Superior of the ACT Corps?

When the lesson ended, Moonlight stood from where she'd once again landed on her butt and rubbed her sore back.

"And I thought you were rough in bed," she said.

He shot her a rather annoyed look until he noticed her teasing grin.

"How did I do?" she asked deliberately, since she knew getting praise from him was like pulling teeth from a bear.

"You could have been worse. I expect you to practice as often as possible."

"Practice makes perfect." She stepped toward him, a seductive look in her eyes. The gym was momentarily empty, so she decided to take advantage of their privacy and tilted her face toward his for a kiss.

He allowed her lips to brush his, then grasped her shoulders and held her away. "I have work to do and so do you if I recall your conversation with Birch. Save this for later."

Moonlight smiled and tugged away from him.

She returned to their quarters to shower while he used the one in the gym. One thing about Xenos, he rarely mixed business and pleasure.

* * * * *

As much as Xenos would have liked a quickie with Moonlight, he had too much to do. After showering, he made his way to the docking bay to meet Judson while Zale took the bridge.

When he arrived at his destination, Judson had already begun the inspection on their combat shuttle. Though quite small, the shuttle had nearly as much firepower as *Nameless*. Most of the rebel attacks would be launched using the shuttle while *Nameless* remained in safer regions of space.

The pilots fully understood the danger and importance of their mission, so the shuttle could risk everything with each attack. Xenos, Judson and three of their crewmembers had been among the best pilots in the ACT Corps, so they would be depended upon to pilot the shuttle most often, in combination with weapons experts, of which they'd been able to recruit more.

Xenos was also working on a private project in a sealed off section of engineering. In his youth, after leaving Tydepth, he had spent a couple of years in the Delilah Sector where he'd joined the Butchcade pirates, but also worked at Wormhide. There he had perfected his engineering skills that had been nurtured as part of his teachings in the private lab on the Laetez home world.

One thing about his manipulated genes, the Laetez had been certain to provide him with traits desirable for their intended purpose. While most soldiers, even from ACT, excelled in one or two areas, he was from a line of test products that had been designed for many. The free rein medics had taken with the Xenos line resulted in far more failures than successes. He was among their greatest achievements regarding intelligence and prowess.

The Laetez had ventured to create a perfect slave but they had instead engineered their most dangerous enemy, he thought with a wry smile as he joined Judson in the shuttle.

"Everything is in perfect working order, Sir," Judson said. "I was getting ready for a trial flight."

"Excellent. I've arrived just in time, then. Let's do it."

A short time later, the shuttle sped through space. Xenos and Judson tested it to its limits. For the most part happy with the performance, they returned to the docking bay.

Soon they would launch their first attack.

Xenos checked with Zale on the bridge, then spent the remainder of the day working on his private project. It would take him quite some time to complete, however, once finished, he intended for it to surpass the most powerful weapons of the Laetez. This was a project that had been born in his mind during his time at Wormhide and had developed over the years.

It was quite late when he emerged from his workshop. The two men on the nightshift remained behind in main engineering to make certain things ran smoothly while the rest of the ship slept.

Xenos had been shut up working for so long that he'd neglected his needs, so at the moment he felt thirsty all over. Thorough hydration was definitely in order. After that, he planned to unwind with Moonlight.

A smile tugged at his lips when he thought about her.

As if on cue, she stepped into engineering and approached him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I was looking for you and ran into Zale. He said you were still down here. Is this off limits?"

"No, but I was just leaving. I need to make a stop at the docking bay before returning to our quarters."

"I'll go with you." Moonlight fell into step beside him and they took the elevator to the docking bay where Xenos boarded the combat shuttle, Moonlight behind him.

"This isn't a normal shuttle," she observed.

"No," he said absently, removing the engine hatch and making a minor adjustment.

Like most people, Moonlight could pilot a regular transportation shuttle, but the control board on this one was like nothing she'd ever seen before. "Looks like lots of firepower."

"Most of our missions will be carried out in this. It will keep *Nameless* and her crew relatively safe. And a shuttle this size is much easier to maneuver."

"This much firepower on a shuttle this size seems almost suicidal."

"Not exactly."

This disturbed her and she knelt beside him, watching his gloved hands move deftly over the engine. "What's that supposed to mean? Tell me this isn't for suicide missions."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Not specifically, but those who board this shuttle know the completion of their mission is more important than anything, even their lives. This type of firepower can therefore be used in every attack."

Moonlight narrowed her eyes, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"You knew there would be danger when you joined us, Moonlight."

"I know. I just..." She shook her head and thrust aside her feelings of weakness. He was right. If she wasn't prepared to accept the consequences, no matter how painful, she shouldn't have taken part in a rebellion. "What are you doing to the engine?"

"Making a slight modification to give us smoother turns," he said. "I thought it could have been a bit better during our test run earlier."

"You intend to pilot this death dinghy?" She tried to sound nonchalant, yet the thought of anyone, especially Xenos, flying this thing on a one way trip shook her to the core.

A slight smile touched his lips. "Death dinghy. Let's hope not. To answer your question, I'm one of five pilots on *Nameless* with the skill to fly her to our best advantage. So yes, I'll be piloting her on rotation." He closed the hatch and stood. "Let's go. I'm starving."

* * * * *

The days fell into a pleasant routine for Moonlight. She spent most of her time working with Birch or accompanying crewmembers when they bargained for supplies, since a translator was often necessary.

Though Xenos worked almost constantly, he took some time nearly every day to train Moonlight. She rather enjoyed firing stun pistols in the ship's shooting range and she loved martial arts practice, except she soon grew tired of Xenos tossing her around. While she knew he restrained himself—otherwise he would have caused her serious harm—his purpose was to make certain she could defend herself against an attacker. That wouldn't be accomplished by treating her like a lover instead of a student. Still, it frustrated her beyond reason.

"If you don't like it, then stop me," he'd goad, often inciting her to attack with force and skill she'd believed beyond her capability. Not that she was any match for him, but her technique had certainly improved. She'd also talked Birch into practicing with her.

While he wasn't as skilled as Xenos, he was a patient teacher and she learned much from him.

"Fighting is as much in the mind as it is in the body," Birch told her one afternoon when they had some extra time after lunch and decided to have a short workout before returning to their office. "Think about what you can use to your advantage."

Moonlight nodded, shifting into a fighting stance and circling Birch. They traded several blows, then he caught her fist and trapped her body close to his.

"Think about what you can do from this position," he said close to her ear.

Funny that here she was, caught in the arms of an attractive human-Laetez crossbreed, yet she felt no arousal whatsoever. If Xenos had her in this position, her concentration would be torn between fighting practice and sex.

"Yes, Moonlight. Why don't you tell us what you can do from that position," Xenos said, striding into the gym.

Speak of the devil.

Birch released her and stepped aside. Xenos' icy blue gaze fixed on Birch, who looked slightly uncomfortable, yet Moonlight credited him with not fidgeting. She knew from experience it wasn't easy facing Xenos when he had that particular expression in his eyes.

"We were just practicing," Birch explained.

If Xenos had eyebrows, one would have been cocked.

"I need all the help I can get," Moonlight said. "I know you're too busy to give me extra lessons, so —"

"No explanation necessary," Xenos said. "What you do with your free time is your business."

"We should be getting back to work," Birch said, apparently eager to escape Xenos' presence.

"Unless you require her assistance, I'd like to continue her lesson," Xenos said.

"Of course. Take all the time you need, Moonlight." Birch nodded to her and hurried out of the gym.

Moonlight smiled slightly, her stomach tightening with desire as her gaze swept Xenos. Was it actually jealousy she saw in his eyes? Not that she wanted to see Birch on his bad side, but she rather liked the idea of him knowing that other men noticed her. A little competition never hurt anyone, particularly a man as self-confident as Xenos.

He removed his dark blue jacket and carried it to his locker across the room. Moonlight's appreciative gaze traveled from his broad shoulders and chiseled arms in his blue tank top to his tight ass filling out his snug, yet easy-to-move-in, black trousers. At the locker, he hung up his jacket and removed dark blue hand wraps that he wove around his thin black gloves. Then he kicked off his boots and tugged off his socks before approaching her.

Just looking at him was enough to make Moonlight's pulse race. Maybe that was why she was able to absorb more from Birch's lessons than Xenos'. She was too busy thinking about *other things* when faced with the big purplish-blue stud. Whoever would have thought she'd be so turned on by a man with canine teeth and webbing?

On the mat, they faced each other, eyes-on-eyes. They attacked almost simultaneously, but predictably, moments later Moonlight landed hard on her butt. She recalled Birch's advice — *think about what you can use to your advantage*.

"Get up," Xenos ordered.

Moonlight hesitated, feigning injury. She struggled, then dropped back on her elbows, panting. "I can't."

"I said get up," he growled, his steely gaze fixed on her.

This wouldn't be as easy as she thought, particularly when she wanted to tell him to go to hell.

She shifted her position, moaning softly and pretending to be near tears. "Xenos, I've had enough."

An annoyed look passed over his face. "Don't be weak, Moonlight. It could get you killed."

"I can't get up," she hissed through clenched teeth.

Raising his eyes to the heavens, he lowered his hands and strode toward her. Just as he bent to examine her, she kicked his legs out from under him. Fueled by a buildup of frustration, she had lashed out with all her strength and he landed surprisingly hard on his back. Excitement darted through her. Still on the ground, she lifted her leg and drove the heel down toward his face, not even caring at the moment that if he didn't block it she'd probably do him serious injury.

He deflected the blow with his crossed arms. Right then she knew she'd lost the match, yet she'd had a shining moment and had been awarded by the look of pure shock on Xenos' face when she'd knocked him down.

Rather than give up, Moonlight continued striking out at him, inspired when she heard him grunt as several blows met their targets. Then he pinned her to the mat in an unbreakable grapple hold. She listened to the pounding of her heart in her ears and felt the heat of his body around hers.

"Finished?" he asked calmly.

"I'm not sure," she snapped, still fighting to reverse their position, yet it was impossible. Finally she went limp. Panting and sweaty, she closed her eyes and muttered, "Now I'm finished."

He loosed his hold, but didn't let her up. Instead he rolled her onto her back and covered her body with his, pinning her wrists on either side of her head.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to kill me," he said, his eyes glowing with arousal.

"Not kill you, but hurting you was at the top of my list," she said fiercely.

Her nipples stiffened and she felt a sexual ache deep in her belly. Her clit tingled, longing for the caress of his hand, or better yet, the rub of his shaft.

This almost reminded her of the first few times they'd made love. There had been an incomparable ferocity. While she no longer hated him, he was still able to stir her anger and that in itself was a major turn-on.

As if reading her mind, Xenos ran his sharp teeth along the side of her neck, then licked her ear. He shifted position slightly and Moonlight wrapped her legs tightly around his lean waist. The hard bulge in his trousers pressed against the aching, desperate place between her legs and she clung to him even harder, moaning softly at the sensation of his lips and teeth teasing the sensitive flesh on her shoulder.

"Xenos, we can't do this here," she murmured, cupping the back of his smooth head. "What if someone walks in?"

Growling, he lifted his head and stared into her eyes with a combination of annoyance and lust. He stood swiftly and adjusted the front of his trousers. "I need to get back to engineering."

"Right this second?" She stood, her legs a bit shaky with desire. It would be horrible going back to work feeling like this. With a coy smile, she cupped his crotch and squeezed gently, then ran her fingertips over the outline of his erection.

He allowed her to tease him for several moments, then drawing a deep breath, he reached down and pushed her hand away. "Moonlight."

"All right," she sighed with disappointment and headed for the showers.

No sooner had she stepped beneath the warm stream of water than she heard the door open and close, then the familiar beep as it locked.

"Xenos?" she asked, feeling a hint of apprehension. Wiping water from her eyes, she peered out of her stall down the length of the narrow shower room.

"Who else would it be?" he said, his voice husky and his eyes aflame as he strode toward her, discarding his shirt, hand wraps and gloves on the way.

Moonlight smiled, a shiver of pure desire racing down her spine. She should have known a man as lustful as Xenos wouldn't be able to resist a midday interlude.

He removed his trousers and stepped into the shower. Taking her in his arms, he covered her mouth in a deep, tender kiss. His tongue stroked hers and Moonlight slid her hands up the damp, silky flesh of his back, relishing the hard muscles rippling beneath.

When the kiss broke, Moonlight whispered, "What if someone wants to use the shower room?"

"Then they'll have to wait." He kissed her again, this time pushing her back against the wall.

He reached down and caressed her inner thighs, then slipped his fingers inside her. Still aroused from their teasing in the gym, she was already slick and aching for him to fill her.

Xenos tore his mouth from hers and began licking and nibbling her ear. Little ripples of delight coursed through her and she kissed his shoulder. The tip of her tongue teased and tasted the pattern of multihued flesh.

Using his knee, he nudged her legs farther apart, then slowly filled her with his rock-hard cock. Inch by marvelous inch slid into her and her pussy clenched around it.

Moonlight closed her eyes, moaning with pleasure and clinging to him hard. With a savage grunt, he grasped her buttocks and lifted her, using his powerful arms to pump her against his shaft, while at the same time thrusting his hips. Heat built inside her, the friction of his hard, yet silken, flesh against hers sending thrills of passion through her.

"Xenos, oh gods," she panted, embracing him tightly and giving herself over to him completely. His soft growls and ragged breathing turned her on even more. Within moments she came, her pussy throbbing around his cock. Soon after he joined her in ecstasy, the force of his orgasm causing him to stagger slightly against the wall. He released her buttocks and she dropped to the floor, clinging to him for balance until he finished coming. They stood, locked in each other's embrace, enjoying the feel of their skins pressed close and the warmth of the water pouring over them.

Chapter Sixteen

Family Matters

Two days later, before Moonlight and Xenos left their quarters to begin the day, he pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with an especially passionate kiss. Somehow it seemed beyond lustful, possessing an almost desperate edge. This disturbed her, because while Xenos could at times be paranoid, he was never an alarmist regarding emotional affairs.

The kiss broke and he said, "I have off-ship business today."

A sinking feeling struck her. "You're going in that death dinghy, aren't you?"

"Is that its unofficial name now?" he said archly.

"It's not funny. What are you going to do?"

"I don't have time to explain."

He headed for the door, but she grasped his arm and snapped, "Xenos!"

Pausing, he shot her a quelling look. Moonlight dropped her hand from his arm, but didn't avert her gaze. She'd long ago hardened to his King Cobra looks.

"We'll talk more when I get back," he stated.

"What if you don't come back?"

"As I've said many times, those are the risks of signing aboard and I dislike repeating myself, Moonlight.

"Haven't you learned by now I don't care what you do and don't like?" She knew that was the wrong thing to say, but her emotions overcame her and she didn't care—for all of two seconds. If possible, his look became so icy that a shiver ran down her spine.

"Affairs of the heart are always second to duty. Never forget that, Moonlight." He left abruptly and this time she didn't try to stop him.

She deserved what she got regarding him. Only a complete fool would fall in love with Xenos Nineteen.

"What the hell does he know about affairs of the heart anyway?" she muttered. "He's never had one."

She was so hurt and frustrated that she considered fleeing *Nameless* and returning to the safe, predictable life she'd left behind.

After taking a few moments to collect herself, Moonlight met Birch in their office. He seemed to sense she was upset and, like the good friend he was becoming, tried to cheer her up. Though she enjoyed his company and trusted him, she didn't feel comfortable discussing her relationship with Xenos.

At lunchtime they ate a quick meal, then had a workout in the gym before returning to duty. She worked later than usual, hoping it would keep her mind off Xenos, who had yet to return. Finally she went to their quarters, showered and dressed in her old, comfortable sleeveless shirt and soft cotton pants. Sitting on the bed, she turned on her personal computer and her stomach lurched at the newsflash.

A resource building on the Laetez home world, containing DNA samples intended for use in ACT, had been destroyed by an unmarked combat shuttle. Fortunately the building had been empty at the time, except for a security team that evacuated before the building collapsed. Two guards were seriously injured during the evacuation, however, and the shuttle was damaged by an ACT security vessel.

Moonlight's pulse skipped.

Damaged.

Had Xenos been hurt? Had the damaged vessel crashed? Were he and his copilot captured? The news provided no more information.

Not only was she concerned about Xenos, but his tactics deeply disturbed her. While she firmly believed in his cause, the idea of attacks such as this, with the possibility of innocent people being hurt, rested heavily on her heart. Some might consider such acts cowardly, yet so were the actions of people like Chief Re Lord and Prime Re Vic, using stolen DNA to create and torture living beings for the sake of political gain.

And she knew Xenos was not a coward. He had spent his life fighting a losing battle through the "proper" channels. What had it got him? He believed the Laetez government was on the verge of taking back the freedom he and other ACT products had worked so hard to achieve.

She knew there was no way she would relax until Xenos returned. With a sigh, she closed the computer and stood, slipping into her shoes. She shrugged on her jacket, walked to the elevator and, a moment later, arrived at the docking bay. At this time, when most of the ship was asleep, she had expected to find it empty, but to her surprise, Judson was there, tinkering with the engine on a small cargo shuttle.

"Moonlight, what are you doing here so late?" he asked when she called a greeting.

"I had some things on my mind and wanted to go for a walk," she said, approaching the shuttle. "Am I disturbing you?"

"No. Actually, would you mind handing me those gears by my feet?"

He was stretched out on his back, his head and hands inside a small hatch.

Moonlight climbed into the shuttle and did as he requested.

"I'm sure you heard about the resource building," she ventured.

"Yes. We haven't had any communication from Xenos yet, but we should soon."

"You've known him a long time, haven't you?" she asked the redhead.

"Ten years."

"You must respect him a lot to have joined him on this venture."

"Everyone aboard this ship respects him or, like you said, we wouldn't be here. You must feel the same way."

"He has a lot of admirable qualities," she said truthfully. "But some that leave much to be desired."

Judson gave a snort of laughter. "He can be difficult, that's for sure. When we first met, I thought he was going to exercise his right of execution on me. I hated him on sight."

Her brow furrowed. "And now you're his second in command? How did that happen?"

"I learned it was a mistake to judge by appearances. When I was younger, the idea of being an ACT product—let's just say I wasn't especially proud of it. Someone like Xenos seemed to embody everything I hated about the program. Not to mention he's the biggest hardass in the known universe."

This time Moonlight chuckled. "Can't argue there. But what changed your mind about him?"

"It was during the Laetez-Draper War. We were on this swampy hellhole of a planet and separated from our unit for recon. I got hit in the back with a stun pistol. Xenos carried me through a good twenty miles of swamp, then swam us to safety across a lake that was rougher than some oceans. He swam all night. As fast as he swims, he probably could have made it in half the time if he wasn't hauling my ass. If that doesn't earn respect, not much else can."

Moonlight remained silent for a moment. So much for the coward theory.

Not that she needed Judson to reaffirm Xenos' admirable qualities.

"Xenos doesn't do anything that isn't necessary." Judson pushed himself out of the hatch and sat up, meeting Moonlight's gaze. "There is danger with the Laetez and the Drapers. All ACT products have their DNA stored in resource buildings. I don't know about anyone else, but there's no way in hell I want a son or daughter of mine subjected to life in a private lab."

"I don't blame you," Moonlight said.

"And who's to say whose DNA samples they have? Everyone who travels back and forth to the planet—just about any planet—undergoes disease control testing. Theoretically, they could steal samples from anyone they want."

Moonlight's brow furrowed. She hadn't thought about that. Somehow she had automatically assumed the governments would be fair and honest when they tested travelers.

"If that's true, Doug, then no matter how many resource buildings Xenos destroys, it won't really matter. There is an endless supply of samples."

"We know we'll never shut down every lab in existence. The point is to make people aware. Let them know everyone has a right to life as free beings."

"I don't know about other species, but that's a battle the human race has been fighting for thousands of years."

"And it must be one you believe in or else you wouldn't be here."

Their gazes met for a significant moment before a beep from Judson's wrist spec interrupted their conversation. He glanced at it, then spoke into it, "Got it. Thanks." He looked back at Moonlight. "Xenos and Dario are about to dock."

Moonlight closed her eyes for a moment and breathed a sigh of relief. She followed Judson out of the shuttle and hurried to the safety of the control pit where they watched the bay doors open and the death dinghy swoop in for a landing. Part of its side was burned black from the shot it had taken from the ACT security vessel.

Once it was safe to approach, Moonlight and Judson hurried toward the shuttle as Xenos and the crewman named Dario alighted. Xenos' gaze flickered in her direction and her stomach clenched. She longed to throw herself into his arms, but she doubted he would appreciate that response at the moment. Both he and Dario, a slender, black-haired man, looked tired. Moonlight knew by the appearance of Xenos' skin he needed hydration.

"This shuttle needs more adjustments," Xenos said to Dario, his voice as calm and steady as usual. "However, it did stand up quite well to a rather heavy attack."

"I thought we were goners," Dario muttered.

Xenos cast him an annoyed look. "That's only because it took us a while to rid ourselves of the tracking device the security vessel hit us with. We eluded them in the asteroid belt, but we didn't feel it was safe to return earlier. Better to wait than lead three ACT security vessels directly to *Nameless*. And there could have been more in unmarked shuttles."

"You're both all right, though?" Moonlight asked, trying to sound aloof.

"Just tired," Dario said.

"I'll see to the shuttle, Sir," Judson told Xenos.

Xenos nodded and dismissed Dario, then he turned to Moonlight. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Sorry if my presence annoys you."

He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. "Don't. Not now."

Moonlight wasn't quite sure how to react to that. She had jumped to the conclusion that he didn't want her around, but apparently she'd been wrong. He surprised her even more when he took her hand and squeezed it gently as they walked toward the elevator.

"You look like you need water," she said.

"I should have brought more. We were on evasive maneuvers longer than expected. I'll have to remember to increase the supply for the next flight."

Back in their quarters, Xenos undressed and showered while Moonlight prepared a quick meal.

"Hungry?" she asked when he stepped out, wearing only loose black trousers. His skin had regained its usual silky appearance and silvery luster. She couldn't resist running her hands over his chest and shoulders as she accepted his kiss.

"Yes," he finally replied, sitting at the small table built into the wall. Moonlight joined him and shared the meal. They talked only of trivial matters and she wondered if he'd choose to discuss his mission. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know the details or not and decided to leave it up to him how much he wanted to disclose. He didn't mention it, so neither did she.

Afterward, she brushed her hair while he sat on the edge of the bed, his expression pondering.

"Moonlight, I want to ask you something."

His contemplative tone caught her interest and she placed her brush aside and sat near him, their thighs touching. "Yes?"

"Do you believe someone raised in a lab, without family connections of any kind, can ever connect to those with more traditional origins?"

Her brow furrowed. While he sounded more curious than sorrowful, the question itself touched her more deeply than she wanted to admit. Was he asking if he could belong or if he would always remain alone, forever deprived of the common link shared by all other creatures in the known universe?

She took a moment to reply. Finally, she said, "Studies have proven that human children, in their formative years, need to bond with others of their kind to truly connect."

He turned to her and, for a brief moment, an almost vulnerable expression passed through his eyes, only to fade so quickly it might not have been and she once again faced the cool, thoughtful Xenos familiar to her.

"But you're not fully human, Xenos," she said. "And for once I don't mean that as an insult. I know I'm always saying you should try to get in touch with your human side, but in this case, it might be detrimental. Maybe humans need to bond in their formative years, but Tydisians are different. It's a proven fact that their brains are different than human or Laetez and their philosophy and temperament are different as well. Emotionally, I wouldn't doubt if they could do what humans can't. I guess what I'm saying is, regardless of where you were raised, you've been able to make a connection to me."

"You think so?" He narrowed his slanted blue eyes.

"Yes, I know it."

He nodded slowly, then climbed beneath the sheet. Moonlight cuddled beside him, her cheek resting against his chest and her leg draped partway over him. He turned off the light and, for the first time she could recall, he fell asleep before her.

* * * * *

The next morning, Moonlight had just settled into her work when Birch interrupted her.

"You better see this," he said, standing from his chair and motioning for her to take it so she could better view his spec.

Her brow furrowed, she walked to his desk and drew a sharp breath upon seeing the newscast. Her mother and sister, both looking concerned, stood with two security officers — one human, one Laetez.

"Moonlight, all we ask is that you contact us if you can," her mother said.

"If you are involved with Xenos Nineteen, please turn yourself in," her sister added. "The Earth government will not turn you over to the Laetez if you contact us now. It doesn't matter if you're a victim or have simply made the wrong choice. It's not too late to do the right thing."

The screen cut to a human reporter who stated, "While the Laetez government searches for proof that Xenos Nineteen and his alleged rebels were behind yesterday's attack on an ACT resource building, the former Superior of the ACT Corps remains the primary suspect in this violent act. Moonlight Santos Gama, a thirty-three-year-old translator and Xenos Nineteen's lover, disappeared on the same day he escaped the prison shuttle transporting him from Earth to the Laetez homeworld.

The Laetez have been pressuring Earth to locate her and have asked for her mother and sister to be transported to their home world for questioning. The Earth government has not sanctioned the transport, but have allowed Laetez representatives to question Lillian and Sunny Santos Gama here on Earth. In other headlines, a Draper pilot won yesterday's annual Comet Race on —"

Birch switched off the spec and for several seconds Moonlight sat, stunned. She should have realized how much her criminal act would affect her family. While it went against Earth law to punish a person's family for their crime, the Laetez weren't quite as fair. She knew how ruthless they could be.

"Are you all right?" Birch asked softly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"No, actually, I'm not," she admitted.

He sighed and pulled a chair over to his desk so they sat side-by-side. "I know this is difficult. Some of the other crewmembers have family too, but most of them moved them to safety before we left the home world. You came here unexpectedly, so you didn't have the chance to plan as well as the rest of us."

"I don't know what I was thinking," she murmured. "I just...What the hell have I done, Birch?"

As if unsure of how to respond, he simply stared at her with a sympathetic expression. Moonlight stood abruptly. "I need to leave for a while."

He nodded and she hurried out of the office and took the elevator to the bridge where she knew Xenos was on duty.

No sooner had she stepped onto the bridge than Xenos approached and guided her back into the elevator.

"I'm assuming you saw the newscast?" he said once the doors closed.

"Do you think the Laetez would do harm to my family?" she asked bluntly.

"You're upset. I suggest waiting until we arrive at our quarters to discuss —"

"Fucking right I'm upset! This is my family we're talking about."

He waved his hand over the control panel and the elevator stopped between floors. His frigid gaze met hers, but she was in no mood to be intimidated.

"Would the Laetez harm them to get to me?" she demanded.

"If they are taken into Laetez possession, they'll do anything for our return or information on how to find us. However, your Earth laws protect them."

"Even from your sleazy Laetez spies?"

"Human spies are known to be just as sleazy."

"I should have planned ahead. I should have warned them about what I intended to do," she murmured, more to herself than to him. Not that it would have mattered. Her decision to rescue Xenos and join his rebels had been so sudden she'd scarcely had time to think about it. She glanced up at Xenos again. "How important do you think the Laetez believe my family is?"

His brow furrowed. "Santos Gama, when you signed onto this ship, you couldn't have believed the Laetez wouldn't do everything in their power to stop this rebellion. I've told you, individual lives mean nothing when confronted with a greater —"

"Good?" she snapped, hating him again and despising herself even more. "I don't know which is worse, you or the Laetez government."

Pure rage sparked Xenos' eyes and his voice roughened, "I do."

"You might hate the Laetez because of ACT, but they taught you well. You might look Tydisian, but your soul is Laetez."

She knew her words enraged him, but she didn't care. She had once sold her very skin to save her mother from a Laetez prison sentence, now she had put both her mother and sister at risk of an even worse fate because she had fallen in love with the leader of a fucking rebellion.

Xenos' eyes narrowed even more, becoming gleaming blue slits in his multihued face. "You're not thinking of turning on us, are you, Santos Gama?" he asked softly.

"I'm talking about my mother and sister!"

He backed her against the wall, cupped her chin in his hand a bit too roughly and forced her to keep meeting his gaze. "You swore a blood oath."

"What about my blood ties? The ones to my family. I was wrong last night. You can't understand something like this after all, can you? Maybe it's your human side, Xenos," she said bitterly. "How can you comprehend what I'm feeling when you've never loved anyone in your life?"

Rather than the flare of temper she'd expected, he seemed to calm down and even loosened his hold on her face. "I do understand your desire to protect them, however I can't let that interfere with our cause."

His composure infected her and she also regained a semblance of self-control. She placed both her hands over his and said, "Xenos, if I could only contact them to let them know I'm all right and make sure they're all right. "

"That's exactly what the Laetez want. They and the Earth government are hoping for you to contact your family so they can put a tracker on you." He gently caressed her face. "I don't want to restrain you physically, Santos Gama, but if you're thinking of contacting your family, I will have you secured. In fact..." He grasped her arm and removed her wrist spec. "For the time being, you will not be allowed access to any spec or computer aboard this vessel. I will confiscate your personal computer as soon as we reach our quarters."

Her eyes widened and she resisted the urge to kick him in the shin, but realized that wouldn't get her anywhere.

"Your other crewmembers had time to warn or protect their families," she stated. "This isn't fair."

"Neither is life."

"I should have left you to the Laetez."

"Yes. You should have. I said that from the beginning. My escape had already been planned. I didn't require —"

"Shut up!" she shouted. "Just shut up!"

"Hysterics," he sighed and stepped away, waving his hand over the controls. "This is my own fault for allowing a civilian on board. I will do what I can for you, Santos Gama, but I can't make any promises."

"What do you mean, you'll do what you can?" she demanded, her heart racing.

Was he going to be reasonable after all? Deep inside, she realized *she* wasn't being reasonable. If she contacted her family or turned herself in, she put their entire rebellion at risk. While common sense told her she had no right to do that, her heart drove her toward the human need to protect the people she cared about. Unfortunately, she also cared about the rebels, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, she was in love with Xenos.

If she contacted her family, everyone on *Nameless* might face execution. If she didn't, then her family might be at the mercy of the Laetez. And what about the lives taken by the rebels? Maybe no one had gotten killed at the resource building, but next time the attack might not go so well. If Xenos was prepared to risk his own life for his cause, then surely no one else would get in his way.

"Just try to exercise a bit of self-control, Santos Gama, and give me some time to think this through."

"All right," she took a moment to regulate her breathing, though her thoughts still spun frantically. The elevator stopped, and before she stepped out, she said, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," he stated. Not bothering to glance in her direction, he swept out of the elevator and strode toward their quarters.

Moonlight managed to keep her temper as she watched Xenos change her security level on the ship's computer system and take her computer for safekeeping.

"You needn't bother returning to your work area. I will let Birch know you're suspended from duty until further notice. Wait here. I'll return later."

"So I'm back to being your prisoner?"

"You were never my prisoner, Moonlight. Everything has been your choice."

"I'd argue that point if I thought it would make a difference."

"At least you've learned that much," he said and left abruptly.

Worried and frustrated, Moonlight lay on the bed for want of anything better to do. The sensation was disturbing, as she recalled making love with Xenos and sleeping here beside him. Now they were back to being strangers.

Hour after hour, her fear built regarding her family and her own position aboard this ship. Xenos might very well lock her up if he felt she was a threat. Each time she thought they had made progress in their relationship, he found a way to remind her exactly how unreachable he was.

* * * * *

Xenos *hated* the thoughts clouding his mind and the feelings plaguing his heart. Right now his full concentration should be on his rebellion, not the pretty little female who warmed his bed.

If she had been anyone else, he'd have either killed or imprisoned her for such rash behavior. She had known when she signed on there would be risks. If she wasn't prepared to live up to her end of the bargain, then —

None of that mattered now. He had no intention of killing her, and even if he imprisoned her, she wouldn't see reason. Moonlight was on a rebel ship, but she was a civilian and a law-abiding citizen at heart. An average human female who had a craving for adventure, but wasn't willing to take serious risks for it. Her heart was with her family and he knew she wasn't alone in that. Several crewmembers who had families had seen to their safety before leaving on *Nameless*.

The best way to deal with Moonlight would be to set her free. *Nameless* would be changing position soon. Moonlight knew nothing of their future missions and never had high enough security clearance to view important files. Even if she was questioned by the authorities, she could tell them nothing of importance.

The solution to the problem was simple enough. What bothered him was the uncomfortable and unfamiliar feelings twisting his gut. He knew she *needed* to go, but

he didn't *want* her to. That was another reason it was best for her to leave the ship. He had become far too attached to her for no logical reason. For the first time in his life, his emotions had nearly overruled his good sense.

* * * * *

Moonlight stood outside the hotel on the outskirts of the Delilah Sector, feeling sick inside. She carried two travel bags, and in her pocket were currency plates containing her lifesavings, which Xenos had promptly returned to her before she left *Nameless*.

Their parting had been swift, without so much as a brushing of lips to signify they were anything more to each other than casual acquaintances. Leaving him was painful to Moonlight, yet she kept her emotions in check, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he meant to her.

She hadn't wanted to leave the rebellion, only confirm that her family was unharmed and let them know about the choice she had made. With Xenos, there was no room for reason, however, so here she stood, once again on her own with the choice of surrendering to the authorities or contacting her family, then living a life on the run.

Birch had volunteered to shuttle her to her destination. He stood beside her now and stared into her eyes, as if unsure of what to say.

Finally he kissed her cheek and said, "It was nice working with you, Moonlight. You'll be missed."

"I'll miss you too," she admitted. "I learned a lot."

"So did I. I hope you and your family will be safe." He turned and walked away.

Before he disappeared into the docking bay, she called, "Wait!"

He turned and walked back to her. "Yes?"

"I have an idea, Birch. I'm not sure Xenos will like it, but once I have a chance to talk to him—"

"Moonlight, what are you talking about?"

"If I ask you to do something as a friend, would you?"

"Is it going to incite Mr. Blue to bite my head off?"

She gave a snort of laughter upon hearing his nickname for Xenos. "Maybe, but I'll owe you a big favor if you help."

Grinning, Birch stepped even closer. "Are you sure you want to dangle promises of a feast in front of a starving man? What's this plan of yours, Moonlight?"

* * * * *

Xenos shifted irritably on his bed. Growling, he kicked off the sheet and stared at the ceiling for a moment before standing and pulling on his clothes.

Since Moonlight left nearly a week ago, he had scarcely slept. Through a brief news report, he had learned that Moonlight had indeed contacted her family, but hadn't returned home. Authorities had been seeking her, but she managed to elude them. No doubt she had help with that. Birch had not returned to *Nameless*.

He had sensed something between them. Now it seemed they had both played him for a fool and it infuriated him. That's what he got for allowing himself to develop feelings for the woman. Like the Laetez, humans could not be trusted. In particular human females.

Making his way to the bridge, he nearly knocked aside two crewmen, but he didn't care. Lately, his Laetez side was proving most problematic. Anger constantly simmered beneath his cool veneer, but since the issues with Moonlight, he'd scarcely been able to keep his temper under control. It had been years since this had happened. Even meditation hadn't helped.

Years ago, when he'd left the Laetez home world for Tydepth, he'd been dependant on the medication used by most Laetez mixed breeds. Tepidat had weaned him off them, believing he had enough Tydisian characteristics to keep control of his Laetez side. Years of behavioral therapy had finally worked, now all that was threatened by his *feelings* for a useless human female.

When he reached the bridge, Zale glanced at him from the Captain's post. "Couldn't sleep again?"

Xenos shook his head slightly and approached the navigator to glance at his controls. "Any change up here?"

"There's been no word from Birch, if that's what you mean," Zale said. "And nothing new on the news."

Two days ago, the rebels had destroyed a private lab on a base between Laetez and Draper territory. Security had escalated all over the galaxy and this attack had been even more difficult than the last. The rebels had plans for one more, then intended to lie low for a time.

"Sir, we're getting a communication from Birch's shuttle," said Anita, the crewmember monitoring the main spec. Xenos strode toward her and glanced over her shoulder at the spec that showed a black screen randomly lit by colored dots and lines. Birch was sending his message by code.

"Scans in the area show he's not being followed," Anita said, glancing at him. "He's asking for permission to dock."

"Granted," Zale said and waved his hand over the spec by the Captain's chair, most likely signaling to the guard stationed at the docking bay to allow Birch's shuttle on board.

"Unless he needs to report to sick bay, I want to see him immediately in my ready room," Xenos stated.

It seemed Birch hadn't deserted them after all. However, he would be curious to hear the man's explanation for why he had disappeared for a week.

In his ready room, Xenos stood, staring out a porthole into space without really seeing it. Moments later, the guard at the docking bay contacted him by spec.

"What is it?" Xenos demanded.

"Birch is ready to see you, Sir, but Moonlight Santos Gama has returned with him. Did you want to see her as well?"

Chapter Seventeen

Captain Nemo's Revenge

A rush of—could it be excitement?—darted through Xenos, quickly followed by annoyance.

"Yes, I want to see them both," he told the crewman.

"They're on their way."

Xenos switched off the spec and paced the room. Moonlight was back. He should be furious, but deep inside he wanted to see her again. And at least he knew she wasn't imprisoned by either the Earth or Laetez governments. But *why* had she returned? How thick-headed could the woman be? Xenos rarely gave anyone a second chance and she had completely discarded the opportunity he'd given her to leave *Nameless*.

He was seated at the table when Moonlight and Birch arrived. Both looked as if they were headed to their own execution. At least they were intelligent enough to comprehend the seriousness of the situation.

"Xenos, let me expl—" Moonlight began, but he cut her off abruptly.

"Silence, Moonlight. Birch, explain."

"We were unable to contact the ship because security vessels from Earth and the Laetez home world were tracking us."

"How is that possible? I know you dropped Moonlight at her destination because she contacted her family. Why have you taken her back to *Nameless*?"

"I was trying to tell you that," Moonlight stated calmly, though her dark eyes flashed with annoyance. "None of this is Birch's fault. It was all my idea."

Xenos closed his eyes for longer than a blink and drew a deep breath, willing his temper under control. "All right, Moonlight. Speak."

"I never wanted to leave this ship or the rebel cause, Xenos. All I wanted was to make sure my family was safe."

"And did you do that?"

She sighed. "I contacted them. My sister told me the Laetez had been given permission to use truth drugs on them, so they know neither she nor my mother know anything about the rebellion or my whereabouts. At the moment, they're in protective custody on Earth, so they are safe. I told them I would not be returning, no matter what. And I did not mention you or the rebellion."

"You wouldn't have to. I'm sure they've already guessed with whom you're residing," Xenos stated.

"I asked Birch to wait while I contacted them. The call I made was tracked. That's how we were chased by security vessels stationed close to the Delilah Sector. I promise I will not contact them again. None of this was Birch's idea. I take complete responsibility."

"So you held him at stun pistol point and hijacked his shuttle?" Xenos demanded.

"No, Sir," Birch said.

"Both of you realize you left *Nameless* without a translator for a week."

"Xenos, you're the one who wouldn't listen to reason," Moonlight said. "I told you I didn't want—"

"I couldn't care less what you do or don't want, Santos Gama. My top priorities are our rebellion and the safety of this vessel, not catering to your whims about whether you do or don't want to be part of our cause."

Moonlight glared at him, yet she held her tongue. Something told him he'd be hearing more from her at a later date. At least now she had the common sense to realize she had nearly pushed his temper to the limit, mostly because he had the crazy desire to pull her into his arms and lick every inch of her.

"You're the only translators aboard and we require your skills, so you will be allowed to continue your usual work, however, Birch, you will work from the brig where you will be confined for two weeks. Santos Gama, you will work from your quarters where you will be confined for two weeks as well." He used his spec to call for guards to escort them out.

When they arrived, he instructed Moonlight's guard to show her to a room down the corridor from his. She looked a bit surprised, since she had probably assumed they would again be sharing their room, but Xenos now realized that was a bad idea. Living together had nurtured familiarity and that proved dangerous.

Her sentence would punish him as much as her, for he had no intention of indulging in his desire for her. He should put her off the ship, but he didn't want to. There were reasons to keep her on. It was good to have two translators, in particular one with Moonlight's implant. Also, she could satisfy his sexual needs.

Xenos shook his head. Those reasons seemed weak. The truth was, he enjoyed having her around, but if he wasn't careful, Moonlight Santos Gama could end up being the death of him.

* * * * *

Moonlight's new quarters weren't as large as the ones she shared with Xenos, but still comfortable. At least it was far better than staying in the brig for two weeks like poor Birch.

She was allowed a spec and computer, both with limited access, therefore work was all she had to keep her occupied.

During the next several days, imprisoned in her quarters, Moonlight's emotional battle took a toll on her. She ate little and had trouble sleeping as she leapt from hurt to worry to rage.

Though crewmembers visited her daily to bring her meals, Xenos didn't see her once. If his purpose was to prove that she meant nothing more to him than any other crewmember, then he succeeded.

It seemed once again she had sacrificed everything for a man who refused to share himself with her. She was a fool regarding him, but at least she found comfort in the fact that she truly believed in the rebel cause.

She'd been confined for six days when Medic Trissa came to ask for another scan of Moonlight's implant for her research.

"I tried to tell you Xenos wouldn't get attached to anyone," the medic said once she'd completed the scan. "Are you surprised he punished you?"

"Not knowing him," Moonlight replied.

"I'm actually shocked he was so lenient in his punishment for both you and Birch."

"Well," Moonlight smirked, "maybe some of us mean more to him than others."

The medic gave a snort of contempt.

"Trissa, if you're so interested in Xenos, why don't you let him know?" Moonlight asked with feigned innocence. "Or have you already and he turned you down?"

"I told you before, my interest in him is strictly professional."

"Of course it is."

"A word of warning, Moonlight. It's not a good idea to make an enemy of the only medic aboard this ship." Trissa stood and approached the door, then paused. Without turning to Moonlight, she asked, "Before I go, is there anything you need?"

"No, but thank you for asking," Moonlight said with the same forced courtesy she'd heard in the medic's voice.

Trissa exited the room, once again leaving Moonlight alone with her thoughts.

The following evening, Moonlight's dinner had just arrived and she was about to eat when Xenos entered her quarters.

She'd tried to convince herself it was over between them. If he didn't care for her, she refused to care for him. In spite of this, her heart beat faster just from seeing him again. Still, she regarded him coolly as he stood across the room, staring at her with an unreadable expression in his piercing blue eyes.

She noted that, in spite of how he carried himself with his usual military posture and confident aura, he looked as tired as she felt. Rather than the usual purplish tint, his skin was distinctly blue.

"Santos Gama," he said quietly and began circling her table.

Moonlight followed him with her gaze until he disappeared behind her back. "Came to gloat, Xenos?"

"I wouldn't waste my time."

"Then why are you here?"

His hands settled onto her shoulders and she jumped slightly at the unexpected touch. Not that it was unwelcome. Quite the contrary. It seemed like forever since she'd felt the weight and warmth of his hands on her.

"How is Birch?" she asked and felt him stiffen a bit before he removed his hands. A hint of triumph shot through her. If Birch still roused his jealousy, then he might still feel something for her after all.

"He's fine. You've both made more progress in solitary than at your regular work stations. That tells me much."

"What it tells you is we're so bored, all we have to do is work day and night."

"Or perhaps it means you're ill-matched as work partners because you're indulging in personal interests."

A smile tugged at Moonlight's lips and she turned in her chair to meet his gaze. "Xenos, there is nothing between me and Birch except friendship."

"In all his years in the ACT Corps, he never made such an irresponsible decision as he did in assisting you last week."

"Maybe he felt it was better for *Nameless* to have two translators."

"So he left us with none?"

"Xenos, I realize I took a risk to be here, but that should tell you something."

"Such as?"

"Such as I have chosen you and your cause over my family and my freedom. There is nothing more I can do to prove myself to you. If you don't want me aboard, tell me."

"I thought I did."

"No. You said you couldn't accommodate me in checking on my family's safety. Now I've tied up my loose ends and I have made my decision. The real question is, do you want me?"

For a tense moment he held her gaze, then he cupped her chin in his hand, his thumb gently caressing her face. "The problem is I want you too much, Moonlight Santos Gama."

She could scarcely believe what she'd just heard. Was he actually admitting he had feelings for her? It was almost too much to hope for. Her stomach tightened with excitement, but she kept a firm rein on her emotions and said, "How do you mean that, Xenos Nineteen? Is it your infamous appetite talking or something deeper?"

The slightest smile curved his lips. In a motion so swift he made her gasp in surprise, he jerked her chair away from the table, bent and swept her into his arms. All she could do was cling to him as his mouth captured hers in a deep, possessive kiss. His tongue explored her mouth and she thrust her tongue against his. The sensation of being trapped against his lean, hard body sent a thrill of desire through her.

Xenos carried her to the bed and placed her upon it. He kissed her again and her hands roamed over his head, relishing the feel of his silky Tydisian skin. His gloved hands deftly unbuttoned her shirt and parted it, exposing her flesh to his caress. Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he slid his hand inside her pants and cupped her soft mound, kneading gently. Moonlight's body responded to him. Heat flooded her and she arched against his stroking hand.

"Xenos," she murmured, her eyes closed and body tingling with pleasure.

"Do you want my interest in you to be purely sexual, Santos Gama?" he asked against her lips.

Her eyes opened and she met his gaze. So many feelings seemed to pass between them that, for a moment, she was too overwhelmed to reply. Finally, she whispered, "No."

An unfamiliar expression shone in Xenos' eyes and his next kiss was so tender and passionate that she knew he was telling her through touch what a man like him could never say in words.

He pulled off her trousers, then stood and removed his clothes. While he undressed, Moonlight shed the remainder of her clothes, though her gaze remained fixed on him. After a week without him, she could scarcely wait to see his luscious body again. She'd even missed the look and feel of his webbed hands and feet against her and the gentle rake of his sharp canine teeth on her flesh.

Moments later, Xenos stretched out across the bed and hauled her legs over his shoulders. His warm, wet mouth covered her clit and Moonlight gasped with pleasure.

He lapped her thoroughly, his tongue rolling over her clit. He used the very tip of his tongue to tease the ultra-sensitive side of her swollen nub, then he licked with rhythmic upward strokes that soon had her teetering on the edge of orgasm. Just before she climaxed, he thrust his tongue deep inside her pussy and swirled it around. He grasped her buttocks. His fingers slid along the indentation and pushed gently against her sphincter. Fondling her ass, he again began lapping her clit.

Overwhelmed by sensation, Moonlight came hard, her legs trembling and belly clenching with each fierce, orgasmic wave. Her sphincter and pussy pulsed rhythmically and she moaned with pleasure. He continued licking and teasing her, pushing her toward another climax just moments after she'd descended from the first.

When she was about to explode again, his sleek body covered hers. His thick, velvet-skinned cock filled her and he fucked her with a desperate edge. She met him thrust for thrust until they burst in ecstasy.

"Moonlight, *Gashuk*," he panted into her ear.

She smiled and clung to him tightly, her entire body tingling with delight.

He rolled onto his side and held her close. Moonlight smiled and closed her eyes, enjoying their nearness.

After a moment, he began stroking her shoulder, his webbing tickling her ever so slightly. "You can't mean more to me than the cause," he said, so softly she wasn't sure if he was talking to her or simply musing aloud.

"I know that," Moonlight replied, her voice just above a whisper. She lifted her head and met his gaze. For a long, poignant moment they stared at each other, then she broke the uncomfortable silence by asking, "How have the missions been going? I haven't had access to the news and no one has given me any information."

"We've destroyed two more labs. The chief engineer and I have made adjustments to the combat shuttle's shields, and while they've repelled heavy attacks, there is a slight problem."

"What?" She raised herself onto her elbow.

"The shield blocks most attacks effectively, but drains all systems, including life support. This week we lost a pilot after a chase. The human-Laetez aren't strong enough to function on limited life support for extended periods of time."

Moonlight's stomach tightened. "That means only you and Zale are able to fly that fucking death dinghy?"

"I've been taking the flights. Zale isn't skilled enough to pilot the shuttle during these attacks."

"That explains why you look tired," she said. "Can't you do anything about the shield?"

"The chief engineer is working on it as we speak. Hopefully the problem will be rectified soon. However, I'm sure the ACT Corps will soon find weapons to penetrate the shield, considering we basically stole it from them before we left. Other engineers who remain loyal to the Laetez will have had access to our Chief's notes. When we started, I said we would eventually be caught. You should have turned yourself in when I gave you the chance, Santos Gama."

Moonlight smiled affectionately, took his face in her hands and kissed his cheek. "And miss all this?"

A flicker of amusement shone in his eyes and he pushed her onto her back, nuzzling her neck. Finally he stood and sighed, reaching for his clothes. "I can't shorten your sentence, Santos Gama. It wouldn't be right."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She smiled again and raised her eyes to the heavens. "I'm not expecting any special treatment—outside of bed, of course."

He walked to the bathroom and emerged moments later, fully dressed. After kissing Moonlight goodnight, he left. Smiling, Moonlight rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. For the first time in a week, she sank into a deep, refreshing sleep.

Over the next week, Xenos visited Moonlight often. Each time, she was relieved to see him and hear that he hadn't gone on another flight in the death dinghy. She learned that the shield had finally been adjusted so it no longer drained life support to dangerous levels. Unfortunately, that also meant the missions resumed. While the

rebels had managed to keep casualties to a minimum, several scientists, guards and ACT products had lost their lives during attacks on the private labs.

This weighed heavily on Moonlight as well as Birch and other crewmembers she spoke to. While they kept their fears and guilt quiet, Moonlight sometimes wondered if they had done the right thing. She also wondered if Xenos felt any remorse for what he was doing. She doubted it, but he had been raised in a hellish private lab and had more reason to hate than most of the people aboard *Nameless*.

At times she wondered if he was even capable of guilt. He had been bred and trained to complete his missions at any cost. The Laetez had expected his single-minded nature to serve them, but he had broken free of them and that incorrigible determination now focused on destroying those who had created him. Unfortunately, anyone who got in his way was also in danger.

At least the rebels had already gotten part of what they wanted. The entire galaxy was talking about ACT. Due to the rebel attacks, problems had sprung up between the Laetez and the Drapers who felt the Laetez should be doing more to control the rebels spawned from their project.

The day after Moonlight and Birch's sentences ended, they returned to work in their office. Birch had arrived first, and when Moonlight walked in, they exchanged uncomfortable smiles.

"How are you?" Moonlight asked.

"Fine. You?"

"I'm all right." She sat at her desk and shook her head. "Birch, I'm sorry about everything."

"Hey. Don't worry about it. I knew there would be trouble when we got back here, but I still say it's a good idea having two translators aboard." His smile faded and he sighed. "It's not just that. I like having you around."

Moonlight was a bit taken aback. While Birch had been a good friend and flirted occasionally, he'd never come out and admitted having feelings for her.

"Birch, I—"

"You don't have to say anything. I know you're with Mr. Blue. Can't exactly figure out why, but I guess that's how it is."

"Birch, I consider you a friend."

"Good. That works for me, because I helped you avoid the Laetez government, but there's no way in hell I'd fight Xenos for you." He grinned.

She chuckled softly. "I guess he is worse than the authorities."

"I guarantee it. Why do you think I decided to fight on his side?"

* * * * *

That night Xenos asked Moonlight to join him in his quarters, where she spent the night. Life returned to as close to normal as possible on a rebel ship. *Nameless* once again headed deep into the Delilah Sector to purchase supplies.

One afternoon, Moonlight had just joined Xenos on the bridge and was filling him in on the details of a transaction with Sacchite traders when he received an emergency call from the docking bay.

"The combat shuttle has returned, Sir," said the crewman on duty. "The pilot has secured the prisoner you requested."

Xenos' eyes flashed and he said, "Have him brought to the interrogation room. I'm on my way." He contacted sickbay on the spec. "Trissa, meet me in the interrogation room and bring truth drugs appropriate for an average size Laetez male." He switched off the spec, then stood abruptly and strode to the elevator, Moonlight on his heels.

"Xenos, what's going on?" she asked once the elevator door closed. "What prisoner?"

"Return to your office, Santos Gama."

"Why won't you tell me who it is?"

His gaze met hers and a shiver coursed down her spine. She did *not* like the expression in his eyes. "Would you like to see?" he asked.

She drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "Yes. I would." Something told her this wasn't the time to hide with her proverbial tail between her legs.

"Suit yourself." The elevator stopped. He stepped off and strode purposefully down the corridor so that Moonlight was almost forced to jog to match his long, quick strides. A guard stood outside the interrogation room along with another man whom Moonlight recognized as one of the pilots qualified to fly the death dinghy.

"He is unharmed, as requested, Sir," the pilot said.

"Excellent. And you weren't followed?"

"No. As you ordered, stealth was of the utmost priority."

"Dismissed," Xenos said, nodding curtly. He motioned for the guard to open the door to the interrogation room.

Moonlight's heartbeat quickened as she followed Xenos inside.

The interrogation room was small, the only furnishings a gray table and chairs. In one of the chairs sat a man of medium build, a black hood covering his face. His hands were bound behind his chair and he trembled visibly.

A guard stood behind him, and at a motion from Xenos, the guard removed the prisoner's hood, revealing his angular face etched with fear. His salt-and-pepper hair stuck up in wild disarray from the hood and his gray eyes widened slightly as he focused on Xenos.

"I knew it was you," the man whispered. He glanced at Moonlight. "And your whore."

"Charming as always, Medic," Xenos said with feigned pleasantness. Without taking his icy stare from the prisoner, Xenos said, "Moonlight, this is Medic Re Torley. He is the man who made me what I am. I never had the chance to thank him properly. Until now." Xenos pulled out a chair and Moonlight sat in it. He then took the seat across from the medic.

Moonlight's stomach tightened. In spite of Xenos' calm veneer, she could almost feel the rage emanating from him. Apparently this was the medic who created him, tested and tortured him in the private lab.

"I warned them not to let you out of the lab," Re Torley said. "But they didn't listen to me. You've proven yet another of my theories correct. You are nothing more than an animal."

A wicked grin spread over Xenos' face. "I'm much more than that. Though we spent many years together, Medic Re Torley, I never had the privilege of learning about you as you learned about me. Tell me, did you enjoy your work?"

"What do you want from me, Xenos Nineteen?"

"Just some information. After all, you're the closest thing I have to family."

"You have no family. You were grown in an artificial womb."

Xenos' brow furrowed and he sighed. "That hurts, Re Torley. After all we shared together, won't you answer a few simple questions out of the goodness of your heart? How about if I offer you a reward for your cooperation?"

"You have nothing I want."

His smile vanishing, Xenos leaned forward and growled, "How about your life?"

Re Torley jumped in his seat and drew a sharp breath. Moonlight started a bit as well.

"Xenos," she said softly and Re Torley shot her a pleading look.

"Quiet, Moonlight," Xenos stated, his gaze still fixed on the medic. In fact, he had scarcely blinked since entering the room. It was as if he was trying to will the man's death through the sheer hatred burning in his eyes.

"What exactly would you like to know?" Re Torley asked in a softer tone.

"Did you enjoy your work? Did you like torturing your creatures?"

"I did my job. Surely you understand duty. You were bred to..."

"Go on."

"As you said, I made you what you are. You should be thanking me. In some ways, you are...a superior being."

"In most ways, I'm superior to most Laetez and in *every* way I'm superior to *you*." Xenos glared.

"What is your problem, exactly?" Re Torley demanded. "Is it because of the testing? How else were we supposed to learn about you and improve the Xenos line?"

Moonlight could scarcely believe what she was hearing. The Xenos line. As if he and the other ACT products were vehicles. Objects without feeling.

"How many times did you have to cut off my limbs before you knew I'd regenerate?" Xenos asked.

"As many times as it took to learn everything about you."

"And you enjoyed every moment, just as you enjoyed interrogating me after I was arrested."

"Do you plan on killing me?" Re Torley demanded, unable to keep the waver from his voice.

"Yes."

Moonlight's gaze riveted to Xenos.

"But not before making sure your scientific curiosity is fully satisfied," Xenos continued. "You should experience life in a private lab from the victim's point of view. That way you can fully understand your work before you die."

"Xenos," Moonlight said.

"Yes, my dear?" he said almost too sweetly and looked at her for the first time since they'd entered the room. The unnatural gleam in his eyes terrified her. Xenos always seemed in control of himself, but something told her he was on the edge of losing it.

"Why don't you put him in the brig and decide what to do with him later?" she suggested.

"It has already been decided." He turned back to Re Torley. "I'd love to do it myself, like the animal I am, except I don't want to soil my teeth on your rancid flesh." Xenos drew his lips back and growled, flashing his sharp, gleaming canines.

He pulled a knife from his boot and leapt. He landed on top of the table in a squat, grasped Re Torley's throat in one hand and placed the tip of the dagger beneath his chin.

"Xenos!" Moonlight said.

"Don't do this," Re Torley said. "Do you want information? I'll tell you everything I know. Lab locations. Security passwords. Everything."

"We'll get that from you anyway."

"Do you want an apology?" the medic asked. "Because I am truly sorry for any harm you were caused."

Xenos laughed long and loud. He was still chuckling to himself when Trissa entered the room. Moonlight watched as she administered the drugs. Xenos questioned his prisoner thoroughly and recorded his replies.

Then he dismissed Trissa as well as the security guard.

"Moonlight, go with them," he stated when she remained behind, her entire body tense with impending doom.

"Xenos, whatever you're about to do, think carefully."

"She's right," Re Torley said.

"Shut up," Xenos growled at him.

"Don't do this," Re Torley begged. "Please don't do this."

"This is such a familiar scenario," Xenos said, staring hard at Re Torley. "Except how I remember it, ACT products were begging you to show mercy. I never recall begging personally, however, I can't remember my earliest years. Did I beg, Re Torley?"

Tears of sheer terror sprang into the medic's eyes since the truth drugs were still in his system, forcing him to answer with total honesty. "Yes. You did."

Xenos used his dagger to trace the shape of Re Torley's face, though he didn't draw blood. "Did that make you happy, hearing a helpless child beg?"

"Yes," the medic whispered.

Moonlight felt slightly sick. "Xenos, what the hell is this going to prove?"

"She's right," Re Torley said, his voice trembling with hope.

"Shut up you perverted bastard," Moonlight snapped. "Do you think I give a fuck about you?" Re Torley closed his mouth and his eyes and sat trembling. Moonlight turned back to Xenos and touched his arm, but he jerked away. "Xenos, don't do this. Not this way. You're better than this."

He stood for a moment, his breathing unnaturally quick and his hand tight on the dagger handle. Slowly he sheathed it and Re Torley opened his eyes, an expression of relief on his face that turned to sheer horror as Xenos pulled out his stun pistol and said, "No, I'm not."

He fired.

The medic, his eyes still open wide, slumped dead in the chair.

Xenos flung a look of disgust at Re Torley, then strode out of the office, instructing the guard to dispose of the corpse. Moonlight hurried after him.

On the elevator, he contacted Zale. "Take the information we got from Re Torley and put it to use immediately. Once the Laetez realize he's been abducted, most of the security information he provided will be useless."

"I'm right on it," Zale replied over the spec.

"Xenos, what the hell was going on back there?" she demanded.

"What part of it didn't you understand, Santos Gama?" he sneered.

"The part about personal vengeance," she stated. "And all the bull you've been slinging about separating your emotions from your duty."

He growled and stopped the elevator between floors. "I suppose you think I should have let him live?"

"It has nothing to do with the medic, but with you. You had me and the rest of the fools on this ship convinced you're all about the cause. This whole rebellion isn't about freedom for ACT products. It's about you getting even."

"Just getting with the program, are you, Santos Gama?" he said, his gleaming eyes fixed on her. "Re Torley deserved to die. Re Lord and Re Vic deserve to die. Anyone involved with those fucking private labs deserves to die!" He roared and Moonlight winced as he smashed his fist against the wall, leaving a dent in the steel. Panic almost overtook her. She'd never seen his Laetez temper before and for the first time wondered if he shouldn't be on the meds after all.

"Calm down!" she shouted.

"I am calm!" He rasped, his teeth flashing.

"All these attacks, people losing their lives, is any of it for the cause?"

"What do you think?" he bellowed.

"I think you're a fucking monster!"

He froze for a moment and drew a deep breath, then backed her against the wall. He placed a hand on either side of her head and spoke against her lips, "Boo."

"Xenos, tell me the truth," she said, refusing to be cowed by fear. "Is this just about payback or do you really believe you can help ACT products with this rebellion?"

He held her gaze, and when he didn't reply, she said, "All right, Captain Nemo. I think I finally understand."

"What?" he wrinkled his nose. "Who the hell is Captain Nemo?"

"A character from human literature. Something I'm sure you haven't bothered to learn anything about. He turned against mankind and took to the sea with his followers. You've turned against people as well. It's not just about helping ACT products or putting private labs out of commission. You don't care who you hurt in the process."

"All this over a torturer like Re Torley."

"It's not about Re Torley. It's about you. I'm afraid for you, Xenos. Afraid the rage and hatred will kill you and others for no good reason."

"To answer your question, Santos Gama, I do believe in this rebellion. I won't lie. I did want revenge on Re Torley. I did gain personal pleasure from what happened today, but my main objective is still the cause."

"Let me get this straight, Nemo, you won't love me because it might interfere with the cause, but you can indulge your hatred and think *that* won't interfere?"

"My hatred and the cause have the same objective."

"Love doesn't?"

"Love is detrimental when dealing in something as dirty as rebellion. The sooner you realize that, Santos Gama, the better off we'll both be."

Chapter Eighteen

Bittersweet, Deadly Blue

For the next two days, Moonlight slept in her private quarters and Xenos made no attempt to join her or invite her to his. They met in the gym for training sessions, but other than that saw little of each other. On the third night, she sat in her quarters, reading, but unable to concentrate. Her stormy relationship with Xenos upset her in spite of how she tried to keep her feelings under control. It was possible he felt the same way, but was too stubborn to admit it.

She placed her computer aside and made her way to the bridge where he was taking a late shift. At this time of night, only two crewmen were on the bridge with Xenos.

"Moonlight." Xenos inclined his head slightly in greeting and motioned for her to take the seat next to his. "What brings you here at this hour?"

"Just thought I'd say hello."

Their gazes met and the sheer intensity of his expression made her stomach clench with desire.

"I'm glad you did. It's been a quiet night."

She smiled. "For this ship, that's a good thing."

"Can't argue." His lips curved upward the slightest bit and he gently brushed aside a wisp of hair that had caught near the corner of her mouth. "How are things going in the translation office?"

"Good."

"It's possible we'll be needing a translator's skill soon. Tomorrow our research shuttle is heading for Phanteppe."

"Isn't that dangerous? Both the Laetez and the Cuthtez have research labs there. As do several other species."

"Which is why we need to go. Remember the bacteria? I want to see exactly how much more damage the Laetez have caused. According to the information extracted from Re Torley, the Laetez have been testing all over Phanteppe. There are secret labs focusing specifically on aquatic species. That explains why they tried to destroy our unit. They no longer needed us. I want to see exactly what kind of ACT products they've developed."

"Are you concerned that if they breed a species powerful enough, they'll try to take over Tydepth again?"

"It's possible. Not to mention other planets ruled by aquatic species. Tydepth and planets like it are rich in natural resources the Laetez would love to get their hands on."

That's why they started the war with the Tydisians so many decades ago. No doubt the Laetez would still prefer to conquer than negotiate."

"With all the Laetez and Cuthtez science projects on Phanteppe, won't it be impossible to avoid getting caught?"

"Not with a skilled pilot. The research shuttle has also been fitted with a shield comparable to that of the death dingy—" He paused and shook his head. "Now you've got me calling it that."

"Still sounds risky."

"You needn't concern yourself too much. I intend to have Birch accompany us. Not you."

"I'm just pointing out—"

He tossed her an irritated look. "I feel like I'm back in front of the judges at the negotiation meetings."

Moonlight was about to apologize, then her brow furrowed and she said, "Didn't the blood oath say I was to speak my mind and contribute when asked? Well, I'm just speaking my mind."

He smiled slightly. "Your concerns are noted."

"Just one last question."

"Go on."

"What good will it do to find out what tests the Laetez are conducting? There's no way you could stop every single one of them. What are you going to do? Destroy the whole planet?"

He glanced at her sharply, but spoke with his usual calm. "We could at the very least warn Tydepth."

Moonlight sighed. He had a point. If the Laetez were creating aquatic super-soldiers and experimenting with deadly poisons, the rest of the galaxy deserved to know about it. But would they believe the rebels or think they were merely trying to discredit the Laetez and make themselves look like crusaders?

"One more question."

"I thought you said that was the last?" He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and she hesitated a moment before he said, "Ask."

"It's not actually a question, but I would like to volunteer for this mission. Would you take me instead of Birch?"

Xenos glanced at her for a long moment. She waited, her stomach clenched. Something told her he would deny her request.

"Permission is granted," he said.

Moonlight's eyes widened a bit. "Thank you."

"Judson will be relieving me in a couple of hours," Xenos leaned closer and spoke close to her ear. "Want to join me for a late night snack?"

"Your quarters or mine?" she whispered.

"Your choice."

"See you in yours." Moonlight brushed her fingertips across the back of his gloved hand, then stood and left the bridge.

Moonlight stopped at her quarters, packed a few necessities, then settled into Xenos' quarters for the night. Not that she felt certain she would be spending the night there. They could have yet another argument and not speak for another two days.

After showering, she dressed in a red silk nightgown and left her hair loose. She prepared a meal using some of the food he'd purchased before leaving Tydepth. Though she didn't mind Tydisian food, it ranged from salty to bland, with little variance in between. Other than some leftover items from when she'd shared his quarters, Xenos' personal food supply consisted mainly of nutritional packs and Tydisian food.

When he arrived at his quarters, Moonlight was seated on the bed rubbing edible chocolate-scented lotion on her arms.

"Umm." Xenos smiled and inhaled deeply. "Delicious. You made Tydisian sea salad."

She curled her lip. "Sea salad. I'm rubbing chocolate scent into my skin and all you can smell is sea salad."

"I never did see the big fuss about chocolate. Humans and Laetez talk about it as if it's ocean paradise."

Moonlight raised her eyes to the heavens. Ocean paradise was a blue, salty-sweet fruit that grew in the southwestern oceans of Tydepth. Tydisians considered it a delicacy and while Moonlight enjoyed the taste, it could in no way compete with the sweet, rich flavor of chocolate.

"You can really destroy a moment, Xenos." She folded her arms across her chest and pouted deliberately. "Here I was feeling sexy with this edible lotion and you put a damper on it."

"Didn't mean to." He sat beside her, drew her into his arms and nuzzled her neck. "How could I possibly resist chocolate served on such an irresistible dish?" His tongue flicked over her neck.

Moonlight closed her eyes and slipped her arms around him. Growling softly with pleasure, Xenos lapped and kissed her neck while his hands caressed her ribs and back. He slid down the thin straps of her nightgown and kissed her shoulder.

He gently guided her onto her back and placed her legs across his lap. Pushing her nightgown up to her waist with one hand, he reached for the lotion and squeezed some onto her calves. He tugged off his gloves and massaged the lotion into her legs. Moonlight loved the feel of his bare hands upon her, the feathery sensation of his webbing and the slight tickle of his sharp, midnight blue nails.

He stroked her inner thighs and tugged off her red silk panties. He brushed them slowly across his cheek and lips. His eyes closed briefly and a lustful half-smile softened his usually harsh expression. A twinge of delight tightened Moonlight's belly. He so rarely displayed any vulnerability, yet when he made love, something in him seemed to surrender for a short time and she relished every moment.

He tossed aside her panties, stretched out on the bed and guided her legs over his shoulders as he covered her sensitive feminine flesh with his mouth.

"Oh, Xenos," Moonlight gasped and cupped his head. While he lapped and used his firm, moist lips to tug at her swollen nub, she caressed his scalp and ran her fingertips over the slight bumps concealing his internal ears. Since meeting him, she'd been reading as much as she could about Tydisians and discovered the reason for those well-protected ears. Not only did their positioning shelter them from irritation in the water, but their hearing was so sensitive that if their ears were external, loud sounds to most species would be painful to Tydisians.

In the midst of pleasure, she smiled, considering it odd that she'd think about his ears while he was giving her such keen oral stimulation.

Then Xenos began lapping with rhythmic upward strokes that flung her into a soul-shaking climax. Panting and moaning, she probably would have writhed off the bed if he hadn't held her fast, his hands tight on her bottom as he licked until she lay, limp and thoroughly satisfied.

Xenos moved from the bed and her eyes opened halfway. He stood, running his tongue over his lips, his intense gaze upon her.

"I'm taking a shower," he said, his voice rougher than usual.

"Fuck me first," she said. In spite of the fantastic orgasm she'd just experienced, she wanted more.

He growled softly and she knelt on the bed and glanced at the enticing bulge in the front of his pants. Damn, he was the sexiest man she'd ever met. To think she'd once considered him a monster. She slipped her fingers into the waist of his pants and tugged him closer.

Xenos stepped near the bed and allowed her to unfastened his pants. His gorgeous purple cock sprang free and she wrapped her hands around it, pumping the warm, sleek shaft. Unable to resist, she took the bulging head into her mouth and teased the velvety flesh until she tasted the first salty droplets, telling her he was close to his peak.

With a low growl, Xenos tugged her off the bed and onto the floor. He quickly pulled off his pants and joined her, positioning her on her hands and knees. Moonlight's heart pounded with excitement and her fingers gripped the cool, steely floor as he slowly filled her from behind, then began thrusting. Her soft cries of pleasure mingled with his animal growls as he drove them both to ecstasy.

* * * * *

Early the next day, the research vessel left *Nameless* and headed for Phanteppe. With Xenos piloting, the small crew included Moonlight, Trissa and Dario. They entered through territory patrolled by the Sacchites, a species whose language Moonlight spoke flawlessly. They were given access with unexpected ease and landed on a barren islet in the Re Chet Sea. From there, Xenos would swim into Laetez sea space and gather samples.

Moonlight watched Xenos don a protective suit that would keep him safe from any bacteria or poisons he might encounter.

"I *hate* wearing this thing," Xenos muttered, staring at his sinewy arm covered in the skintight blue material.

"It's better than dying from a dread disease," Trissa reminded him.

"True, but it almost completely masks sensations on the skin. I won't be able to sense anything."

"You have an aquaspec with a scanner," Moonlight said.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "I trust my own skin more."

"Just put some faith in technology for once," the medic told him. "The scanners pick up anything in the area, in particular vessels."

"I'm more concerned about aquatic life," he said, accepting the bag of sample containers Moonlight handed him.

He reached for his helmet while Trissa double checked his air tank.

"I'd rather breathe through my own skin too," he muttered.

"The tank gives you an extra couple of hours of air if you're under longer than you can hold your breath, so that's equivalent to the amount of oxygen you would gain through your Tydisian skin."

"I've got her hovering, Xenos, if you're all set," Dario called over the inter-shuttle spec. While Xenos was diving, Dario took over as pilot.

Moments later, Xenos dove out of the shuttle hatch and disappeared beneath the churning waves. Moonlight couldn't help worrying about him and everyone aboard the shuttle. They were intergalactic criminals playing around on a planet partially controlled by the very species who most wanted to destroy them.

About four hours later, Moonlight was helping Trissa with some scans taken on the shuttle when Dario announced that he'd picked up an emergency signal from Xenos.

"He's swimming fast," Dario announced. "Two unknown life forms right on his ass. Prepare to take off as soon as he boards."

Moonlight and Trissa opened the hatch and waited anxiously for Xenos to surface.

"Whatever they are, they're gaining on him," Dario said.

"Are you sure they're life forms and not vessels?" Trissa demanded. "Few species swim faster than Tydisians."

"I know the difference between a life form and a vessel," Dario barked. "Hang on. I'm moving closer. He's about to surface."

The shuttle swooped lower and sped across the ocean. Suddenly, Xenos' head popped into view. Moonlight lowered the ladder and he grasped it. Partway up, a clawed, dark-blue hand reached up and grasped his leg.

Xenos' growl of pain echoed above the sound of the engine and roaring waves.

"Give me a stun pistol!" Moonlight shouted to Trissa. "Give me a fucking pistol!"

Xenos slid down the ladder as the clawed hands pulled harder.

"Here." Trissa tossed her a stun pistol and Moonlight leaned out the hatch.

"You're sliding!" the medic shouted, lunging forward and grasping Moonlight's feet.

Moonlight scarcely noticed as she aimed the stun pistol and fired. The hands loosened on Xenos and he pulling himself up the ladder. Moonlight flung aside the pistol and grasped his arms, hauling him inside.

"Get out of here, Dario," Trissa ordered and the shuttle rose, but not before an ape-faced creature covered in dark blue scales caught the ladder and began climbing up. Xenos released the ladder and it fell into the ocean along with the creature. Moonlight closed the hatch and turned her full attention to Xenos, who was practically breathless from his race through the ocean. She helped him remove his helmet and he sprawled on his back, his chest heaving.

Trissa examined his left leg that was gouged from his attacker's claws.

"What the hell was that?" the medic demanded.

At the moment, Xenos was panting too hard to speak.

Finally he choked out, "Looked like—Searilla crossbreed. No wonder—Re Lord didn't—need our—unit anymore."

The medic held up her gloved hand. A curved, dark blue claw dangled between her bloody fingertips. "I'll be able to tell you for sure."

"There was a school of them," Xenos said, his words more connected now that he'd caught his breath. "Ran out of ammo. Nice shooting, Santos Gama."

A slight smile flickered across her lips. "You're the one who taught me. Those lessons came in handy after all."

"Hey back there," Dario said. "We've got trouble. ACT security shuttles are closing in on us. I don't think I can break the planet's atmosphere."

"I'm on my way," Xenos said.

"Don't move! I'm still cleaning your leg," Trissa snapped. "Remember the bacteria that could be in that water."

"Stay still!" Moonlight ordered, lying across him.

He pushed her aside.

"I'm nearly finished," Trissa said. "I just have to seal the wounds."

"Seal them in the cockpit." He limped toward his destination, Moonlight and the medic on his heels.

He dropped into the copilot's seat.

Dario glanced at him and said, "I'm turning the controls over to you, Sir."

"How the hell am I supposed to work in here?" Trissa demanded, seated on the floor by Xenos' feet as she attempted to finish sealing his injuries.

"Work fast, if you know what's good for you," Xenos told her. "Moonlight, strap yourself in. Medic, I suggest you do the same ASAP."

Moonlight made her way to a passenger seat, nearly stumbling when the ship jerked forward as Xenos increased speed. Moments later, Trissa buckled herself into the seat beside her.

"He flies like a fucking maniac," Moonlight said.

"I just hope he can get us out of here," Trissa added.

Dario slammed his hand against his chair arm. "Great. Just wonderful! A warship is headed straight for us."

"We've got the luck of Tonga, all right," Xenos muttered.

"Who the hell is that?" Moonlight didn't bother trying to keep the panic from her voice.

"An ancient Tydisian king who always had bad luck."

"Well, honey, I think the ACT program got hold of his DNA and used it to make you," Moonlight said.

He gave a snort of laughter and continued flying at breakneck speed.

"There's nowhere to go. We're out of airspace," Dario shouted. "Damn it, they've pushed us under a docking bay."

"Thanks for the newsflash," Xenos snapped.

The ship rocked beneath fire from the warship.

"This shield is good, but it's not going to hold up against another blast or two like that," Dario warned.

"I know," Xenos said and waved his hand across the spec. He stared at it and shook his head. "It's Yashel."

Yashel's voice sounded on the spec. "Xenos, we know it's you. There is no way out. Your choices are surrender or die."

* * * * *

Yashel stood on the bridge of the Laetez warship. Though he forced himself to remain outwardly calm, tension raged inside him.

He had been on Phanteppe questioning a security guard who had been present during one of the rebel attacks when he received word of a strange shuttle hovering on

the border of the Laetez-Sacchite territory. Scans revealed the inhabitants included two Laetez-human mixed breeds, a full-blooded human and a Tydisian mixed breed. Yashel knew without doubt he finally had Xenos, Santos Gama and two other rebels.

He had immediately taken command of the warship that had transported him to Phanteppe and pursued the rebels' shuttle, finally cornering them beneath a docking bay near a Laetez research station.

"Sir, they're responding to your message," said the officer controlling the main spec.

"Let them through," Yashel ordered.

A moment later, Xenos' face appeared on the spec. A jolt of anger, excitement and a hint of sorrow shot through Yashel. Almost since the moment they'd met, he and Xenos had clashed. Not that some measure of respect didn't exist between them, but deep inside Yashel had always known there would one day be a serious confrontation between them. Still, he hadn't imagined it would end with Xenos becoming an outlaw.

"We will not surrender," Xenos stated. "We have the power to blast through the docking bay. Stand down, Yashel."

This was too arrogant, even for Xenos!

Yashel snorted, "You're in a research shuttle, Xenos. Only a fool would believe you can blast through a docking bay."

"Stand down," Xenos repeated. "Or else evacuate the docking bay so no innocent victims need lose their lives. You have ten minutes."

Yashel ground his teeth and his Laetez temper nearly overcame him. Xenos was the one trapped like a desperate animal, yet he dared make demands? How stupid did he think Yashel was? He had worked with Xenos for too many years not to read him well.

"Sir, scanners indicate they do have weapons," said a member of the bridge crew.

"Of course they have weapons," Yashel snapped. "But none that will blast through a docking bay. He's bluffing."

"We can destroy them," said the officer on weapons. "Their shield is strong, but a few more blasts from our warship and —"

"And they will be blown to bits," Yashel growled. "We need them alive so we can locate the other rebels. No. Trust me. If Xenos was able to blast through the docking bay, he'd have done it by now and not bothered giving us a chance to evacuate. Mercy is not in his nature. Open communications."

The crewman did as ordered and Yashel spoke to Xenos. "Make this easy on your crew, Xenos. One way or the other, you will be taken."

"You should be evacuating," Xenos said calmly. Even through the monitor his piercing blue eyes seemed to bore into Yashel.

Xenos had once been a great warrior. Now he had lost everything and become an insane zealot. Though Yashel didn't like the idea, he knew eventually Xenos must die for his crimes.

What a waste, Yashel thought. The man could have done so much for ACT products while working within the law.

* * * * *

Moonlight sat, every muscle taut as she stared toward Xenos, listening to the exchange between him and Yashel. Dario and Trissa also stared in tense silence.

"Do we actually have the firepower you claim?" Trissa asked.

"I fitted this shuttle with weaponry similar to the death dinghy," Xenos stated. "So, yes, if I briefly divert full power to weapons, we can blast our way out."

"There are hundreds of people on the docking bay," Dario said. "I don't see any change in pattern to indicate they're evacuating. If we blast, there will be casualties."

"Xenos—" Moonlight began.

"I want private labs, Santos Gama, not civilians," he said softly, as if trying to contemplate another way out of the situation. She hoped he could find one, because she saw no alternative. It was either their lives or the innocent victims above.

The minutes trickled by as the shuttle remained wedged beneath the docking bay, security shuttles and the great warship blocking their exit.

"They still haven't evacuated, Sir," Dario said.

"All right. Dario, turn weapons control over to me."

"But—"

"Do what I say!"

Dario nodded. Moonlight and Trissa exchanged concerned glances and braced themselves for the explosion to come.

Xenos tilted the shuttle to his desired position and said, "Diverting all power to weapons."

The lights dimmed and the hum of life support ceased. Funny how it seemed unnoticeable until it stopped. Hopefully life support wouldn't be off long enough to harm the shuttle's inhabitants.

Xenos fired and a portion of the docking bay crumbled. The ship jerked as debris struck it, but luckily the shield held.

A sick feeling washed over Moonlight as she wondered how many people had just lost their lives. Glancing at Xenos, she noticed his expression was unreadable, though something told her this incident hadn't been meaningless to him. Dario was their weapons expert, yet Xenos had fired the fatal shot himself. She saw none of the pleasure in his eyes as when he'd killed Re Torley and realized he had committed this act for a very different reason. Civilians had been involved—innocent victims, and he would not ask one of his crewmen to perform an act of evil he was not willing to commit himself.

The shuttle rose at tremendous speed and soon they were shooting through the darkness of space.

"We're being followed," Dario said. "Two security shuttles and the warship. Should we head for the Delilah Sector?"

"No. The White Zone," Xenos ordered.

The White Zone was a solar system filled with debris from an old war that had destroyed nearly every planet in it. Beyond that was unknown space.

* * * * *

Nearly twelve hours later, when the research shuttle finally returned to *Nameless*, Zale met it at the dock.

"We heard about the docking bay," Zale told Xenos as soon as he stepped off the shuttle. "What happened?"

"I'll explain on our way to the bridge," Xenos said, leaving Dario to inspect the shuttle while Moonlight assisted Trissa in transporting the samples from Phanteppe to sick bay. Even using the shuttle's relatively limited resources, she had already detected traces of several dangerous bacteria in the samples Xenos provided.

Zale and Xenos strode to the elevator and Xenos gave him an account of what happened on Phanteppe, including the discovery of more bacteria and the Searilla mixed breeds.

"Searillas are stronger than Tydisians," Zale said. "But not nearly as fast as you say these mixed breeds are."

"Trust me. They were very fast. They appeared to be wearing some sort of collar, though, similar than the kind used on me in the private lab."

"For tracking?"

"I assume so."

"What's up with the adjustment you made to the shuttle's weapons?" Zale asked. "I didn't think a research shuttle was capable of that kind of firepower."

"With the proper adjustments, anything is possible."

"I know weapons and engineering have always been personal interests of yours, but it looks like you've made more progress than I realized. I hear you've been working on a private project in engineering."

Xenos shot him a stern look. "Just like the ACT Corps, we must constantly find new ways of attack and defense or else our equipment will become obsolete and we might as well just call it quits and turn ourselves over to Yashel."

"He's only doing what he thinks is right. Just like we are."

Curling his lip, Xenos said, "You're defending a man who, in spite of a clear warning, refused to evacuate hundreds of civilians from a danger zone?"

"He probably didn't believe a research shuttle had that much firepower."

"Well, his assumption cost dozens of lives and hundreds of injuries."

"He didn't fire the weapon, though," Zale said quietly.

"What would you have me do? Surrender? Self-destruct? Point them at *Nameless* and end our rebellion prematurely?"

"You did what you had to. I realize that, Xenos, but don't deny this rebellion has come at a price."

"Everything comes at a price."

"Out of curiosity, what exactly are you working on in engineering?"

Meeting Zale's dark brown gaze, Xenos stated, "When the time is right, I'll let you know."

* * * * *

Early the following morning, Xenos, Moonlight, Zale and Judson stood in Medic Trissa's office. She explained the results of her research.

"All right," Trissa began, "the creatures who chased Xenos—or at least the one who left behind a claw—were definitely Searilla in origin, but also epikgalan."

Epikgalan. Dark blue beasts, much like oversized crocodiles.

The medic continued, "That explains why it lost its claw. Epikgalans shed their claws often in order to grow new, stronger replacements."

Moonlight's brow furrowed. "Searillas I can understand. They're an intelligent species. But epikgalan?"

"It seems ACT has now progressed—or sunk to—blending intelligent species with...well, animals," Trissa sighed.

Moonlight curled her lip in disgust. Her expression reflected on Judson's face.

"We knew they'd eventually go too far," Zale said.

"They went too far decades ago," Xenos stated.

"Like Tydisians, Searillas don't believe in programs like ACT, so it's doubtful they provided their DNA freely," Zale said.

"We'll send them an anonymous warning and DNA samples," Xenos said. "And we'll send the Tydisians samples of the bacteria. Give them a chance to develop defenses against it."

"One more thing," Trissa added. "If these creatures are swimming unprotected in the water on Phanteppe, then they're most likely immune to the bacteria."

"Understood," Xenos said.

When the meeting ended, Moonlight made her way to her office and was surprised when Zale approached.

"Moonlight, we need to talk in private."

Her brow furrowed. "Is something wrong?"

"Maybe."

A twinge of fear shot through her. On this ship, anything could go wrong. She wondered what the latest crisis was.

They stepped into a small lounge, which was fortunately empty at the time. Zale locked the door. He motioned for Moonlight to take a seat, then dragged a chair across from hers and straddled it backward.

"Do you know anything about the private project Xenos has been working on in a sealed off section of engineering?" Zale asked.

"I know he's been working on something, but he hasn't told me the details."

"I got inside his workroom without him knowing and saw what he's doing."

"And?"

"I'm not quite as savvy about these things as Xenos, but from what I could tell, he's creating a new weapon powerful enough to destroy a good portion of an entire planet, maybe even a whole planet, depending on the size."

Moonlight closed her eyes, as if doing so could block out the knowledge she'd just absorbed. "Oh gods."

"I believe in our cause," Zale said. "But I'm afraid Xenos might be going too far."

"Zale, we don't even know what he plans to use that weapon for."

"What do you think?" He held her gaze and when she didn't reply, he said, "We need to talk to him."

Moonlight stood, drawing a deep breath. "That won't go easily."

"I'm not intimidated by Xenos."

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she turned to Zale again. "He doesn't take pleasure in destroying innocent lives."

"I know. But he isn't the kind of guy who feels tremendous loss either. That makes him dangerous. He'll do what he thinks he has to and won't take emotions or even life itself into account. He's probably the best soldier I've ever met."

"And you don't necessarily mean that as a compliment?"

"I respect Xenos. And if you believe it, I care about his welfare, but a man like him can go too far."

"I agree we should talk to him," Moonlight said.

* * * * *

The following day, Zale and Moonlight confronted Xenos in his ready room. Zale initiated the conversation and when he'd finished speaking, Xenos gazed at him with a thoughtful expression.

"So you took it upon yourself to intrude on my private project?" Xenos said, his voice so disarming that Moonlight nearly shivered.

Whenever he sounded like this, he was at his most dangerous. She glanced at Zale, who appeared calm, as always. At times he was harder to read than Xenos.

"I've been worried about you," Zale admitted. "In particular since Re Torley came aboard."

"Re Torley is dead. Out of sight and out of mind."

Zale's large, dark eyes stared at Xenos. "I don't believe that."

"Neither do I," Moonlight said softly.

"We don't have time for this nonsense," Xenos stated. "What exactly is your problem with my project?"

"Am I right that it's a weapon powerful enough to destroy part of a planet, maybe even an entire small planet?"

"Possibly."

"Do you intend to destroy our home world? And I'm talking about the Laetez home world, not Tydepth."

Xenos' gaze became icier than usual. "Is that what you think?"

"We know how you feel about the cause..." Moonlight began, then let her voice trail off at the expression he turned on her.

"You too, Santos Gama?" His lips curved into a wicked smile. "You both know me so well it's...unsettling."

His words disturbed her, mostly because she couldn't tell if he was mocking them or speaking the truth.

"Xenos, I'm sorry for all you've gone through," she began carefully, "but that doesn't give you the right to destroy countless lives. Not even for our cause."

"Our cause, human?"

For a moment fury nearly blinded her and she stood, walked toward him, leaned against the table and glared in his face. "I gave up everything to be here, so I'd say that makes it as much my cause as it is yours. And even though you don't like to acknowledge the fact, *you're* human too."

"Is that the part of me you prefer?" He grasped the back of her head and pulled her so close their lips almost touched. "Or is it the beast in me you like?"

"Compared to the peaceful Tydisians, I thought humans *were* the animals," she said bitterly.

"All we want to know is what you plan to do with the weapon," Zale said.

Xenos' slanted eyes narrowed even more as he glanced in Zale's direction and released Moonlight, who stood and walked across the room. Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she stared out the portal and tried to calm her temper. While she didn't want to believe Xenos would commit mass destruction, she knew him well enough to realize he was capable of just about anything.

The beeping of Xenos' wrist spec interrupted them.

"Yes," he said.

"Sir, the prisoner has arrived," Judson said over the spec. "Dario has brought him to the interrogation room."

"Excellent. I'll be right there."

"Another prisoner?" Zale asked.

"Our special units are getting quite good, aren't they?" Xenos said, his tone once again pleasant. "A medic from the private lab on Tildon Base. I believe he's of Sacchite descent, so your translation skills will be helpful, Santos Gama."

He strode out and headed for the interrogation room, Moonlight and Zale behind him.

"Let me ask you, Zale," he said as the elevator sped through the ship. "If I told you I wanted to destroy a planet, what would you do?"

"Destroying planets isn't the answer."

"Even if that planet is Phanteppe because it's infested with deadly bacteria that could destroy almost every life form in this galaxy?"

Zale drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "I'd have to think about this more."

"Exactly," Xenos admitted. "Which is why I don't intend to do anything until we've discussed it with Judson and Medic Trissa and conclude it's our only option."

"That sounds..."

"Reasonable," Moonlight finished, glancing from Xenos to Zale.

Zale nodded.

Chapter Nineteen

The Dragon's Belly

When they arrived at the interrogation room, the Sacchite medic, looking as frightened as Re Torley had, sat bound in the chair.

Moonlight greeted him in the Sacchite language, hoping to put him at ease. Though she detested private labs, she couldn't help feeling compassion for almost any medic in Xenos' clutches. His anger regarding private labs and those employed in them was understandably blinding. Though she had been unable to calm his rage when he'd confronted Re Torley, she prayed she could keep this interrogation civil. She was already getting tired of watching people, even enemies, die.

"I speak Laetez," said the medic. "My name is Patlou."

"You were the chief medic on Tildon Base, were you not?" Xenos asked.

"Yes," Patlou said, his jaw visibly tense. Anger sparked his yellowish eyes. "Until your rebels destroyed it. Years of research."

"Years of torture," Xenos stated. "How many products did you create and kill or, even worse, force to endure a living hell?"

"Our purpose was not to torture anything. Tildon Base was researching cures for Rell's Disease."

"I know what the purpose was."

"Then it doesn't matter to you that thousands will continue to suffer because you destroyed our research? We were making excellent progress—"

Xenos' brow furrowed and he sat on the edge of the table. "I care as much about that as you cared about your victims. Tydisian mixed breed victims, correct?"

Patlou hesitated a moment before replying, "Yes. For the most part. But many were deliberately bred so that they lacked sensitivity and felt little or no pain."

A humorless smile touched Xenos' lips. "How considerate of you. I'm surprised you bothered, considering how most medics in private labs seem to relish watching others suffer."

"I don't like watching anyone suffer," Patlou said. "That's why I'm trying to find cures for illnesses like Rell's Disease."

"I have questions for you about your job and private labs in general."

Again, anger sparked Patlou's eyes. "I won't willingly tell you anything."

"I assumed as much. Our medic is on her way and has drugs to loosen your tongue."

"And after you get what you want?" Patlou asked, sounding admirably calm when Moonlight knew he must be terrified.

"Xenos," Moonlight said softly.

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?" Patlou asked. "You don't even want to hear that there might be good reasons for —"

"There are no good reasons for what you do," Xenos growled, baring his fangs.

Patlou closed his eyes and sighed.

"Xenos," Moonlight said a bit louder.

He glanced at her. "What is it?"

"Can I talk to you for a moment in private?"

"Now is not the time."

"It's urgent."

An annoyed look on his face, he led the way out of the room and Moonlight followed him to a small office down the corridor.

He closed the door and held her gaze. "What's so important it couldn't wait?"

"You have no reason to kill that man," she stated. "You can let him off somewhere after he tells you what you want to know."

"You're a translator, Santos Gama. You don't tell me what we can and can't do."

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded. "Why won't you even listen to what he has to say?"

"I have spent my entire life listening to excuses from people like him. Now I no longer have to listen."

"You don't care about his reason for working in research, but you expect people to understand your motivations for destroying labs and blasting apart docking bays? What the fuck is up with that?" she demanded, once again overcome by annoyance.

"Why am I even listening to this?" he muttered, grasped her arm and dragged her toward the door. "Go to my quarters, Santos Gama, and wait for me there. Open your mouth or disobey me and my indulgence toward you is over."

"Your indulgence, you arrogant son-of-a-bitch?"

"What part of what I just said don't you understand? Keep quiet and —"

"I'm going," she snapped, jerking away from his grasp and heading down the hall.

* * * * *

Yashel stood at the main gate of the ACT Corps headquarters on the Laetez home world, facing a noisy crowd. Several guards kept control, yet Yashel couldn't blame the people for their anger. When word got out about the incident on Phanteppe, many people throughout the galaxy had expressed fury at his decision not to evacuate the

docking bay. Guilt plagued him over the lives lost and he knew some people blamed him as much as they blamed Xenos.

He made a public apology, then took several questions from reporters before the guards dispersed the crowd while Yashel returned to his office.

Once alone, he sat behind his desk and closed his eyes, resting his head in his hands for a long moment. He'd known when he took control of the task force that the rebels, Xenos in particular, would be difficult to capture. Still, he hadn't expected them to last this long.

Sola tapped softly on the door, then stepped inside. "Are you all right?"

"No," he sighed. "I won't be all right until Xenos is brought to justice."

"I warned you not to underestimate him," she said.

"Please," he said through clenched teeth, anger simmering inside him. "Do not say I told you so. Those deaths are on my head. I don't need to be reminded yet again."

"Yashel," she said, approached him and took his face in her hands, her lovely eyes fixed on him. "You didn't destroy the docking bay. Xenos did that all by himself."

"He warned me."

"Who would think Xenos would give anyone a chance to evacuate? I would have thought he was bluffing as well."

"That's no excuse."

"No," she whispered, stroking his cheek. "I know it's not. I came in to tell you Chief Re Lord is on the spec."

Yashel nodded and turned on his desk spec. Re Lord's face filled the screen and Yashel noted he looked particularly vicious today.

"The Drapers have put our treaty on hold," the Chief began without preamble. "And several of our allies are beginning to question us as well."

"I'm aware of that, Sir."

"Bring me Xenos Nineteen," Re Lord said in a deadly voice. "I don't care what you have to do to get him. Life as we know it could very well depend on whether or not you bring us that murdering blue bastard. Do you understand?"

Yashel's stomach tightened and his fists clenched. "Yes."

Re Lord curled his lip in disgust, then disappeared from the screen.

Grinding his teeth, Yashel leapt up, grasped his chair and hurled it across the room.

Sola flinched and backed away. "What the...Yashel, did you take your meds today?"

"Yes!" he growled, pacing the room like a caged animal. "Leave me alone for a while, Sola."

"I don't want to leave —"

"I said get out!" he bellowed.

She shot him a half angry-half worried look, but hurried out of the room.

Yashel closed his eyes and willed his pulse to slow. He had to think, find a chink in Xenos' armor. The man didn't care about anyone or anything except his rebel cause.

Suddenly an idea struck Yashel. It was almost too horrible to consider, yet he was running out of options. One way or the other, he had to stop Xenos.

* * * * *

Xenos strode into his chamber and Moonlight glanced at him from where she lay on the bed, reading from her personal computer.

"Is Patlou dead?" she asked.

"You'll be glad to know the medic is alive and well. Zale is taking him to safety."

Moonlight smiled slightly. "You made the right choice."

"I don't need you to tell me that. The medic will carry a warning to Yashel, telling him we want to see some effort by the Laetez government to protect ACT products and remove private labs."

She closed her eyes momentarily and shook her head. "I should have known you'd only let him live if he could somehow serve the cause."

Ignoring her, he removed his shirt and changed into one he often used on missions.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To put the information provided by the medic to use before the Laetez figure out where he's been."

"The death dinghy again?"

"Yes." He approached the bed and their gazes met. Xenos saw anger in her eyes, but also love. Before meeting her, love was an emotion he would not have recognized. Until Moonlight, no one had ever looked upon him with love, nor had he wanted anyone to.

"Kiss me," he ordered.

A hint of longing shone in her eyes, but also stubborn refusal. It made him want her even more. Each time he left on a mission, he risked death. Everyone aboard *Nameless* risked death, yet he knew Yashel and Re Lord would relish his capture and execution most of all.

Briefly he thought how Moonlight deserved a better life than this, but so did ACT products stuck in labs.

"Kiss me," he repeated more firmly.

Moonlight placed her computer aside and stood. She slipped her arms around his neck and touched her lips to his. He held her closer and opened his mouth to her gently probing tongue.

When the kiss broke, she whispered, "Please be careful."

He cupped her cheek and nodded slightly. Why had he allowed her into his heart? He couldn't afford to care for someone as deeply as he cared for Moonlight. Now he was past the point of reining in his emotions. Things between them had gone too far. All he could do was remind himself she was secondary to his cause.

"See you soon," he said and kissed her again before leaving his quarters and heading for the docking bay.

Dario was already aboard the combat shuttle when he arrived. They spoke little as they headed toward their destination—a new private lab on an off-planet base close to the Laetez home world.

They were nearly into Laetez space when three security shuttles swooped upon them and fired. The death dinghy's shield held and Xenos turned toward the Delilah Sector.

"We're picking up a message," Dario stated, adjusting the spec while Xenos focused on piloting the shuttle.

"Xenos, this is Yashel. I know you can hear me, so listen very closely. You know you and your rebels will be caught. Stop this unnecessary violence and surrender."

Xenos curled his lip. "He's got to be joking."

"I am in contact with Lab 1A. Unless you surrender, I will issue an order to euthanize the previous products in the Xenos line."

A sick feeling twisted Xenos' gut. Every time he thought people could do nothing more to surprise him, something like this happened.

"Hasn't there been enough killing already?" Yashel said. "Don't force me to do this."

Dario glanced at Xenos and said, "What should we do?"

"Exactly what we're doing. Evasive maneuvers. I'm heading for the asteroid belt in the Delilah Sector. We'll lose them there."

"Do you think he'll actually kill the products in your ancestral line?"

"Yes."

"And—"

"Open communications."

"Yes, Sir," Dario said and did as Xenos ordered.

"Glad you've seen reason," Yashel said. "Slow your ship and drop your shields."

"Unless the Laetez government intends to outlaw private labs again, I have no intention of surrendering," Xenos stated.

"Don't play with me, Xenos Nineteen," Yashel's voice had an angry edge. "I will have the Xenoses destroyed."

"Then do it," Xenos said with far more calmness than he felt. Strangely, moisture welled in his eyes, but he blinked it back and quickly regained his self-control as he continued, "You'll probably be doing them a favor. Death is better than life in a lab."

He maneuvered the ship so swiftly that two of the Laetez shuttles nearly crashed in their attempt to herd him. The third shuttle fired, nearly breaking through the death dinghy's powerful shield. Xenos would need to concentrate on improvements when they returned to *Nameless*.

"Xenos, this is my final —"

"Empty threats, Yashel, mean nothing to me."

There was silence on the spec for several moments as the ships sped toward the Delilah Sector. As they entered the asteroid belt, Yashel stated, "You've just killed your own kind, Xenos." Then the spec went dead.

Xenos quickly lost the Laetez shuttles in the asteroid field. Hidden in a cave, he and Dario intended to wait until they felt certain their pursuers had gone.

"Sir, I'm sorry about your ancestral line," Dario said softly.

Xenos held up his hand in dismissal of the comment and shook his head. "What's done is done. Right now we need to concentrate on getting back to *Nameless*."

* * * * *

On the flight back to ACT headquarters, Yashel tried to convince himself he had no choice but to destroy Xenos' ancestral line. Still, he couldn't help wondering if it had been the right thing to do. He needed to stop the rebels, but was it worth the cost of stooping to their level of violence? Unfortunately, he believed that was the only language Xenos understood.

He landed his shuttle in the docking bay at headquarters and no sooner had he stepped off than Sola approached, her face tense.

The destruction of the Xenoses in Lab 1A was top secret information, known only Yashel, Re Lord, Sola and certain personnel on the rebel retrieval task force.

"No luck?" she asked.

Yashel sighed and shook his head. "But we'll get him. It's just taking longer than I expected."

"Did you have the Xenoses killed?"

Their gazes locked. "Yes. He refused to surrender."

"So you really executed helpless creatures trapped in tanks?"

He glared at her. Why the hell did she have to put it that way? The idea to euthanize the Xenoses might have been his, but everyone on the team, Sola included, had agreed it was a reasonable plan. When dealing with a man like Xenos, one didn't have many options. There was very little he cared about. Yashel had believed he'd felt some connection to the creatures who had come before him, but apparently he'd been wrong.

Was there anyone or anything that stirred him other than his hatred of ACT? What could they possibly use against him?

"Sola, you know as well as I do you can't bluff with a man like Xenos or he'll destroy you."

"It seems like he's already doing that, at least as far as you're concerned."

"You agreed we must do anything necessary to capture him. Did that change now that it's gotten really ugly?"

"Don't give me that crap, Yashel!. I've seen plenty of ugly during my years in the ACT Corps." Sola closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. "I understand why you did what you did, but I just can't look at you right now."

He reached for her, but she turned and stalked off.

Yashel cursed softly and clenched his fists. This was becoming an even worse nightmare than he'd imagined.

His spec beeped and he glanced at it only to see Re Lord. "Medic Patlou is alive. Zale is with him. He's refusing to speak to anyone except you. As you know, the truth drugs don't affect him."

Both Yashel and Zale had enough Laetez blood to resist truth drugs. Excitement darted through him. If Patlou was alive, maybe Zale was ready to negotiate.

Moments later, he found himself in an interrogation room facing Zale. The towering Tydisian mixed breed was seated in a chair, his expression calm though he was surrounded by guards, bound with stunner cuffs and had already endured questioning.

Yashel felt a twinge of inexplicable emotion. For years he, Zale and Xenos had trusted each other with their lives. Now that trust had been shattered. The question was, could it be repaired, at least for Zale and Yashel?

"You asked for me," Yashel stated, sitting in the chair across from Zale.

"Yes. May we speak in private?"

Yashel motioned for the guards to leave.

"Our conversation is still being recorded," Yashel reminded him.

Zale nodded.

"Why did you do it, Zale? Senseless violence isn't your style."

"Not all of it is senseless. Xenos has a valid point."

"I agree, but he's handling it the wrong way."

"He didn't get very far the legal way."

Yashel sighed. "Did you come here to waste time? What do you want?"

"I believe Xenos might be going too far."

"Ya think?" Yashel bit out, his anger stirring.

"He is right about the private labs and there is danger in what the government plans, but he has no right to become judge and jury for so many people. I think what he went through in the private lab has affected him, and no amount of medication or meditation is going to undo what's been done. I'm afraid he might become irrational unless we stop him now."

"You mean stop the rebellion."

"I mean stop *him*. If you work with me, I will bring you Xenos, but only him. I won't turn traitor a third time. The other rebels are your problem."

Yashel's heartbeat quickened, but he sat back and made a point to appear relaxed. Xenos was the heart and mind of the rebellion. Once he was taken out, the others would soon follow.

"Why should I trust you?" Yashel asked, always cautious. "You committed treason once. Why should I believe you'd work for us now?"

"Because you and the Laetez government have something I want. Something only you can give me."

"And what is that?"

"I want out of this war, out of the ACT Corps and I want off this planet for good."

This surprised Yashel and he raised an eyebrow. "Where do you intend to go?"

"Tydepth."

A slight smile touched Yashel's lips. "You think they'll take you? They never allowed Xenos permanent residency and he's more like them than you or me."

"I've already been given permission to reside there, but only if my criminal record is wiped clean. Do this for me, Yashel, and I will bring you Xenos."

* * * * *

Moonlight lay in Xenos' bed, knowing that in spite of the late hour, she would not relax until he returned from his mission. She wasn't sure exactly how much time passed before the door opened and she saw his silhouette.

She sat up, her heart pounding, and said, "Xenos."

"Santos Gama," he spoke softly and closed the door, not turning on the light. He approached the bed and sat on it, pulling her into his arms, his embrace so tight it bordered on painful.

Burying his face against her shoulder, he drew a deep breath and released it slowly, his hands caressing her back. She sensed something was very wrong and this worried her.

"What is it?" she asked, tightening her arms around him. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine, Xeno—" Before she could finish, he covered her mouth in a hot, desperate kiss. This wasn't like him at all. Still, she responded, making herself pliable in his arms. Her mouth opened to his probing tongue and she closed her eyes, accepting the emotion he was pouring into her and meeting it with her own. In his touch and kiss, she could almost hear him telling her he needed her, though she doubted he'd ever say it in words.

His mouth still on hers, he pushed up her nightshirt and slipped his hands inside her panties, stroking her soft mound. Moonlight pulled off her underwear and kicked it aside. A guttural sound, something between a growl and a groan, escaped his throat and he pushed her onto her back.

Still stroking her pelvis, he pushed her nightshirt up farther, exposing her breasts. He took a nipple between his lips and sucked it, intermittently flicking his hot, wet tongue over it. The pleasure was so keen that Moonlight moaned softly and arched against him, clutching his smooth scalp.

She felt heat and moisture flood her pussy and Xenos slid first one, then two fingers inside her. He withdrew them and stroked her clit, pushing her quickly toward orgasm. When she nearly reached her peak, he stood, tore off his clothes and covered her body with his. He filled her with his thick, steely cock. All the while, his beautiful blue gaze fixed on hers.

For the first time she could remember, raw emotion gleamed in his eyes as he thrust again and again, his breathing ragged, his gleaming canine teeth visible through his parted lips.

"Xenos," she gasped, clinging to him as her orgasm struck so forcefully it stole her breath.

With a ragged cry, his hips jerked several times and he exploded, his rock-hard muscles straining and his breath harsh in her ear. He collapsed atop her, pinning her beneath his warm, satin-skinned body.

Moonlight stroked his shoulders and the back of his neck. "Xenos, please tell me what's wrong. Did something go wrong on the mission?"

"In a way."

A sinking feeling overcame her. "How many were killed this time? Our side or theirs?"

"Ours."

"Who?"

"No one aboard this ship. It's...complicated."

"Oh gods, it's my family, isn't it?" Panic nearly overcame her and he raised himself from her and took her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him.

"Moonlight, listen to me, I swear to you it wasn't your family."

"Then who?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's no one who would affect you." He stood abruptly and headed for the bathroom.

She followed him, jerking on his arm until he faced her.

"If it affects you, then it affects me," she stated, her gaze fixed on his.

The slightest smile curved his lips. "That's...touching, Santos Gama."

Did he actually just say what she thought he said?

"Oh gods, now I know something is dreadfully wrong." She placed her hands on his chest. "Xenos, will you talk to me?"

"There's nothing to talk about. You've been helpful. I need to hydrate. Be out soon." He removed her hands from his chest, stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Moonlight's brow furrowed and she stared after him.

A short time later, he joined her in bed. They didn't speak, but fell asleep in each other's arms.

When Moonlight awoke, Xenos had already left to start the day. She washed, dressed and met Birch in their office.

She'd been working only a few hours when Zale stepped in.

"Zale, how did things go delivering the medic?" she asked.

"No problems there," he replied. "I got sidetracked following a lead on a lab, though. Just talked to Xenos about it and I need to go out again to gather more info. I could use a translator who specializes in Sacchite."

She glanced at Birch. "Mind if I go? I could use some time off this ship."

"Be my guest. I'm really involved in a project right now anyway."

Moonlight slipped her personal computer into her shoulder bag and followed Zale to the docking bay.

"What kind of lead are we following?" she asked as the shuttle headed out of the docking bay.

"I'll tell you about it in a few minutes."

She shrugged and settled back to enjoy the ride.

After a few moments, she said, "You've got me curious, Zale. I'd like to know a little more about what we're doing, if you don't mind."

"All right. Remember that talk we had a little while ago, about how Xenos might be going too far for the cause?"

"Yes."

"Do you still agree with me?"

"I'm not sure."

"He's working on a weapon powerful enough to possibly destroy planets."

"But he doesn't intend to use it, except as a last resort on Phanteppe."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "You really believe that?"

"Contrary to the rumors, Xenos does not take pleasure in killing."

"I never said he did, only that he has an unnatural hatred for anything to do with private labs."

Anger tightened Moonlight's stomach. How could Zale, an ACT product himself, possibly say such things about Xenos, especially knowing what he had suffered? "Zale, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying I'm sick and tired of the violence. My entire life has revolved around battle. I've had it, Moonlight, with greedy governments and crazy rebels forging ahead with their own agendas without regard for anyone else. Do you like what's going on in the galaxy?"

"No, but I don't like the idea of the Laetez making biological weapons or torturing ACT products to suit their purposes. Something has to be done."

"But is it worth killing hundreds, maybe thousands, to stop them? They're killing. We're killing. It has to stop."

She sighed, closing her eyes. He was right. So was Xenos. For that matter, so was Yashel. Sometimes she wished she'd never set eyes on a certain blue-skinned crossbreed.

"You're right," she said. "But I don't think this is going to end any time soon, Zale. We're already involved."

"I know a way."

She glanced at him sharply. "What?"

"Do you agree Xenos is a little crazy for the cause?"

This conversation was making her squirm in her seat.

"Moonlight, tell me the truth. Please. This is important."

"He can be overly enthusiastic at times," she admitted cautiously.

"He's becoming a monster, as bad as the Laetez. I'm going to stop him and I would like it if you'd help me."

Moonlight's pulse quickened and panic nearly overcame her. "There is no lead. You brought me here to betray Xenos, didn't you?"

"I won't force you into it, Moonlight, but it will go a lot easier all around if you help me."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I've made a deal with Yashel. I'm going to turn Xenos over to him."

Her head spun from sheer horror and she turned to stare at him in disbelief. "Zale, if you do that, they'll execute him."

He drew a very deep breath and a strained look passed over his usually calm features. "I know. I don't like the idea of it any more than you do—"

"Want to fucking bet?" she practically shouted.

"You know as well as I do the sooner this rebellion ends, the more lives will be saved."

"Unless the Laetez turn their biological weapons loose on whatever planet they want to steal resources from!"

"I doubt that will happen."

"Then you're stupid. Turn this ship around, Zale. I will *not* help you kill Xenos." She unfastened her safety strap and stood, but he had already placed the ship on autopilot.

"Let me go!" She fought hard, but her strength was nothing compared to his. Though she managed to get in a hard shot to his groin, it mattered little. He was the one who had endured the challenge with the three Tydisian ball wreckers.

He bound her in the cargo area so she couldn't see the direction in which they flew. A short time later, they landed on a planet covered in mountains and thick forest.

"Sorry about this, Moonlight," Zale said as he dumped her in a cave. He left her a survival kit and several blankets. "I'll be back for you as soon as I can. Probably within the next day or two. I'll let you go and make sure you get back to *Nameless*."

Tears of frustration and fear for Xenos' life sprang into her eyes. "Zale, please don't do this. You'll regret it."

He gave a snort of laughter. "Are you going to see that I do?"

"I won't have to. Your guilt alone will do it because you know in your heart this is wrong."

"No. For the first time I know in my heart it's the right thing to do. I'm going to seal you inside the cave, Moonlight. Once that's done, I'll deactivate your bonds so you can be comfortable."

"Comfortable? Are you kidding? You're sending the man I love to his *death* and you expect me to be fucking comfortable?"

Zale's brown eyes softened the slightest bit and he said, "I am truly sorry, Moonlight. Xenos didn't know how lucky he was to have a woman like you."

"Zale!" she shouted as he left the cave and used a feature on his stun pistol to seal the opening. "Zale!"

She screamed until her throat ached, but it did no good.

Xenos was about to lose his life and there was no way she could warn him of the danger.

* * * * *

Xenos was working on improvements to the death dinghy when Zale's shuttle, badly damaged, arrived at the docking bay. He hurried to help Zale who, other than a few cuts and bruises, appeared unharmed.

"What happened?" Xenos demanded, glancing toward the shuttle. "Where's Birch?"

Zale shook his head. "When we landed to follow the lead I told you about, we were attacked by ACT soldiers."

Glancing over Zale, Xenos' instincts kicked in and he felt strangely wary of his story. "But you managed to get away?"

"Barely. The shuttle will need heavy repairs, but that's not the problem."

"The problem is Birch. What the hell happened to the translator?"

"Birch didn't come with me. I thought it would be better to have —"

"Don't say it," Xenos said through clenched teeth. He grasped Zale's shoulders, not caring that his sharp blue nails sank into the other man's flesh.

"It's Moonlight. She was hurt badly. I left her in the Delilah Sector. We managed to elude the Laetez shuttles, but when I left there, they picked up on me again. We need to go back for her."

Every muscle in Xenos' body tightened with rage. For the first time in his life, he didn't trust Zale. His story wasn't making sense, but he had no time to think about it. If Moonlight had actually been hurt —

He used his wrist spec to contact Judson on the bridge. "Judson, do a ship-wide scan for Santos Gama. If she's aboard I want to know where."

"Yes, Sir," Judson replied, then a moment later said, "Moonlight is not on board."

"Scan the vicinity. Send out a signal for her to contact us."

"Xenos, I told you where she is," Zale pressed. "We're wasting time."

"Shut up," Xenos growled, his pulse racing. He paced anxiously while awaiting Judson's reply.

"She's nowhere in the area, Sir, and she's not responding to our signal," Judson said.

"I'm leaving with Zale immediately on the combat shuttle."

"What's wrong?"

"Santos Gama is allegedly injured in the Delilah Sector. Once we're gone, I want you to change *Nameless'* position. We will find you. No matter what, do not try to contact or search for us without a direct order from me."

"But —"

"No matter what," Xenos repeated with no room for argument.

He turned to Zale and their gazes locked.

"She'd better be alive, Zale," Xenos growled. "For your sake."

Chapter Twenty

Darkest Dusk

During the flight to the Delilah Sector, Xenos' internal danger alarm screamed, telling him this rescue mission was a mistake. He most likely wouldn't have acted so impulsively if it had been anyone else missing. He had tried to curb his emotions toward Moonlight and knew that if he didn't they would kill him faster than stun pistol fire to the heart.

On the way, he questioned Zale again about the alleged lead he had been following. While his replies were consistent, Xenos didn't have complete faith in his story. Upon entering the Delilah Sector, Xenos scanned the area carefully for any signs of Laetez ships, but none appeared. Still, he wouldn't relax until they had Moonlight back and were safely aboard *Nameless*.

They landed at one of the rather unconventional medical facilities that specialized in untested and illegal procedures, such as Moonlight's translation implant. Their scanners indicated several humans within the building.

"I told you she's here," Zale said as Xenos glanced at the scanner a second time. "She'll be fine, but trust me, we were lucky to escape with our lives."

"I believe it. After what Yashel did to our ancestral line, I wouldn't put anything past him."

Zale's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"That's right. You weren't around to hear about it," Xenos said, checking his stun pistol before holstering it. "He had the products in Lab 1A euthanized as a pressure tactic."

An unreadable emotion flashed across Zale's dark eyes. "When was this?"

"Probably around the same time you were learning about that new lead."

They headed for the shuttle hatch and just before they stepped out, Zale placed a hand on Xenos' arm. "I'm sorry."

"About?"

"The ancestral line."

Xenos had already hardened himself to their loss. "Don't be. They're better off."

Without further conversation, they left the shuttle.

They had nearly reached the entrance when pain exploded in Xenos' head and everything went black.

* * * * *

Yashel stood in Re Lord's office, his gaze fixed on the Chief and Zale, who sat in the chair across from his desk. Now that Xenos was caught, he felt both relief and a hint of disappointment, rather like the letdown after a much anticipated event. Part of him still respected Xenos greatly and sympathized with his cause, yet his methods could not be tolerated by civilized people. Of course, lately he had been feeling less and less civilized himself. Some of the acts he'd committed to reach this point disgusted him, yet they had been necessary and had certainly paid off.

"You have redeemed yourself for your foolish act of treason," Re Lord said to Zale. "And we will honor your request to leave our home world for Tydepth. You realized that you must never set foot on Laetez soil again."

"That's an acceptable tradeoff," Zale said quietly.

"Yashel will see to the arrangements for you and you can expect to leave the planet today."

Zale nodded and Re Lord glanced at Yashel who summoned a guard to show Zale to his room.

Once he and the Chief were alone, Re Lord held his gaze. "You have done well. Better than expected, I admit. Now you may prove yourself even more by delivering the other rebels."

"That will be simple enough now that Xenos is in custody."

"The arrangements have been made for his execution. He will die tomorrow at dusk."

"So soon?" Yashel asked.

"Why wait?" Re Lord shrugged. "We already know we can't force any useful information out of him. Execute him swiftly to let the Drapers and anyone else who questions us know we mean business. I have suggested, and Prime Re Vic agrees, we must make a clear example of him. Our Prime has authorized an Elite Execution."

Yashel's brow furrowed. Elite Executions were from an archaic time when Laetez rulers could order cruel deaths for certain criminals, in particular those guilty of treason. Like most of the civilized universe, the Laetez generally used fast and painless methods of execution. Yashel couldn't help feeling this decision was based on the Chief and the Prime's sense of personal vengeance. Re Lord had always made his dislike of Xenos plain.

"Won't that archaic method make us look uncivilized?" Yashel said.

"We're dealing with an uncivilized creature," Re Lord stated. "You know as well as I do Xenos is not like other men."

"No ACT product is."

"But he is rare among the rare. Prime Re Vic has already decided. Tomorrow at dusk, Xenos Nineteen's hands and feet will be removed and he will be tossed into the Torren sea. His regenerative powers will not work quickly enough for him to swim to safety and he will drown."

Yashel's teeth clenched and he resisted the urge to close his eyes in revulsion.

"If you ask me, it's a fitting death for him. At least he'll get to die in the sea he so loves," Re Lord said.

"He was the first independent Tydisian mixed breed produced by ACT. He survived when many other products of his type died before reaching maturity and he helped revolutionize the treatment of ACT products. He has an outstanding military record and was the finest Superior this ACT Corps has ever seen. He lived through the Laetez-Draper War and dozens of battles and skirmishes. Now he's going to die. Mutilated by the same people whom he served for most of his life. With all due respect, Chief Re Lord, this is not an execution, but a mockery."

Re Lord's expression turned icy. "He is a traitor and deserves to die for his crimes. He deserves to suffer. But what I think or you think doesn't really matter. It's our Prime's decision, and as I said, he has already ruled. Don't ruin your heretofore excellent performance, Yashel, by making me wonder where your loyalty lies."

"My loyalty is and has always been with the Laetez."

A slow smile spread over Re Lord's face. "I know, but I thought you might need a reminder. I understand this has been difficult for you. Xenos was once your mentor. And I agree, he was once an excellent soldier. It's a pity he turned down the wrong path. As for him being the finest Superior the ACT Corps has ever seen, it is my belief you will far surpass him. Once the rest of the rebels are captured, your rank will be restored and the ACT Corps will once again be in your hands."

At one time, Yashel would have relished this news, but his victory was tainted. While he believed Xenos deserved to pay for his crimes, he could not agree with the cruel and degrading execution planned for him. Yet it was out of his hands.

"Thank you, Sir," he said.

Re Lord nodded. "Dismissed."

Yashel left and returned to ACT headquarters, where he went directly to the high security prison where Xenos was being held.

The guard allowed him into Xenos' cell. The former Superior was seated on his cot, his wrists and ankles secured by shocker cuffs. His cool blue gaze remained fixed straight ahead, as if he was completely oblivious to Yashel's presence.

After a long silence, Yashel asked, "Do you want some water? You look like you can use it."

"I'll be getting enough water tomorrow," Xenos stated.

"You've been told about the execution then?"

"Re Lord delivered the message personally. Considerate of him, don't you think? So tell me, how long has Zale been working for you?"

"Only a matter of days. He does believe in your rebellion, Xenos, but not your methods."

"And Moonlight Santos Gama?"

Yashel's brow furrowed. "What about her?"

"How long has she been on your side?"

"What are you talking about?"

Xenos finally turned to him with a scathing look. "Give me some credit. Or maybe you shouldn't. I've certainly been a fool. I should have followed my own advice."

"Xenos, we have had absolutely no contact with Moonlight Santos Gama. If she had anything to do with your capture, I know nothing about it."

Xenos turned his gaze back to the wall.

"I know you had plans to have your remains brought to Tydepth," Yashel said. "I will see that happens."

A seething grin twisted Xenos' dark lips and his rage was almost tangible. Yashel hadn't intended to anger him, but thought such a promise might offer him some comfort. He should have realized he was dealing with Xenos. He would neither want nor require compassion, even at this dark moment.

"Get out of my sight, Yashel. At least let me spend the last night of my life in peace."

Yashel walked toward the door, then paused and glanced over his shoulder at Xenos. "I didn't want it to turn out like this. You gave me no choice."

"You chose to be Re Lord's bitch. I didn't force you into that."

Irritation knotted Yashel's stomach, but he saw no point in arguing with a dead man. He left the cell without looking back.

Xenos' questions about Moonlight Santos Gama incited his interest and he went to Zale's room to ask him about it.

"Moonlight took no part in Xenos' capture," Zale stated. "Let me talk to him, Yashel."

Yashel snorted. "You think he wants to see you?"

"No, but he needs to know the truth about her. Not just for his sake, but for hers."

"Loves him that much, does she? It's hard to believe. He's not the loveable type."

"She gave up her freedom and her family for him. And if you want to talk about who feels one way or the other, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Did you destroy the products in Lab 1A?"

"I'm not going to apologize for doing what had to be done. You understand duty, Zale, or at least you used to."

"I was sure turning Xenos over to you was the right thing to do. Now I'm wondering if you're not as bad as he is."

Yashel's anger stirred and he growled, "I am not a traitor!"

Unaffected by his outburst, Zale held his gaze and asked calmly, "Will you let me see him or not?"

Yashel sighed. "All right. For a few minutes Come on."

* * * * *

Xenos sat, bound, on his cot. Rage festered inside him, mostly at himself for allowing his feelings for an insignificant woman to thwart his mission. Worse than the rage was the inconsolable ache deep inside him because she had most likely betrayed him. If she hadn't, then where was she? Why had she left the ship without a word?

The cell door opened and, to his disgust, Zale stepped inside. Behind him he caught a glimpse of Yashel, who remained outside as the door closed with a resonant clang.

"Your impudence knows no bounds, Zale." Xenos forced his most wicked smile.

"I came to tell you about Moonlight."

"I couldn't care less about her."

"I tried to get her to help me with your capture, but she refused."

Xenos remained silent. He wanted to believe Zale, but he didn't intend to be fooled again. Not that it mattered one way or the other. Tomorrow he'd be dead.

"She would have warned you if she could, but I made sure she couldn't," Zale continued. "She loves you, Xenos."

Anger and disgust washed over him. This traitorous bastard dared stand there talking about love? He had the audacity to mock him on top of everything else?

Zale stared at him for a long moment, as if expecting some kind of response. Xenos refused to give him the satisfaction. Finally, Zale left the cell.

Closing his eyes, Xenos tried to clear his mind. Yet no matter how he tried, he couldn't banish the image of Moonlight Santos Gama.

* * * * *

Moonlight sat in a corner of her stone prison. Wrapped in blankets, she glanced around in the dim light Zale had left for her and tried to figure a way to escape. Earlier she had tried to dig her way through the rocks, but Zale's weapon had sealed the exit well, and without a specialized stun pistol, she couldn't hope to burrow her way out in a reasonable amount of time. Even now her hands were stinging and bloody from her useless efforts.

She tried to comfort herself with the thought that she could be worrying for nothing. Xenos was cunning enough to elude his captors, even if Zale had turned traitor. Maybe she was being unreasonable. After all, he was only a man, not a magician. He admitted himself that eventually they would be caught.

Moonlight wasn't sure how much time passed before she heard Zale calling to her from outside the cave.

"Take cover, Moonlight. I'm coming through!"

She ducked behind a rock, closed her eyes and covered her head. The cave walls trembled and she heard stones crumbling. Moments later, cool air flowed into the cave and she rose.

Zale approached. "Come on. We don't have much time."

"Time for what, you bastard?" she snapped.

"Moonlight, you have to trust me."

She laughed sarcastically. "You've got to be kidding. What happened to Xenos?"

"He's scheduled for execution in a matter of hours. That's why we need to hurry."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Zale." She glared at him. "If you plan to turn me in as well, you can forget it. Shoot me here and now."

"There is no time for this," Zale said, his voice uncharacteristically edgy. "If we have any chance of saving Xenos' life, we need to go now."

"He's speaking the truth," Tepidat said, striding into the cave.

"I only wanted to end the violence." Zale held her gaze. "I didn't expect them to order an Elite Execution. I don't think even Yashel thought Re Vic would do that. And when I turned Xenos over, I had no idea what Yashel had done to the products at Lab 1A."

"Zale, I have no idea what you're talking about," Moonlight said.

"We can explain on the way," Tepidat told her. "Are you coming with us or not, Moonlight Santos Gama?"

Moments later, she found herself on a Tydisian shuttle speeding toward the Laetez home world.

"What kind of shuttle is this?" she asked, glancing around the dark blue interior.

"It's a prototype from DrkMari's private collection," Tepidat stated. "Scarcely detectable underwater."

"We're going underwater? Will someone tell me exactly what's going on?"

Moonlight listened as Zale explained about Xenos' execution.

For a moment she sat, numb with horror.

"The only chance we have of getting him back is to wait until he's submerged," Zale explained. "This ship will hopefully go undetected long enough for me to retrieve him and even then we'll probably get caught trying to escape the planet."

"After what Xenos has done in this rebellion, I'm surprised DrkMari let us use his shuttle," Moonlight finally murmured.

"He didn't," Tepidat stated quietly.

Moonlight glanced at the elder Tydisian sharply.

"I have merely borrowed it for a while," Tepidat continued.

Moonlight forced a slight, tremulous smile. "What did Siwsleeka think of that?"

"I would rather not repeat the kind of language she used, however she agrees that the Laetez's Elite Execution is uncivilized and unwarranted, even for the likes of Xenos."

"The biggest problem is once his limbs are removed, he'll most likely be unable to survive underwater for as long as usual," Zale said. "There's no telling how long—or rather how short—we have before he drowns. If he's alive, we'll head for *Nameless* where he can recover."

"And if he is not, I will take his remains back to Tydepth," Tepidat said.

As they neared the Laetez home world, all three fell silent. Tepidat broke the planet's atmosphere in an unsettled area to the North and ran into no difficulties since security in that sector wasn't especially tight. The shuttle sank beneath the frigid waters, submerging deeper than a Laetez craft and traveling quickly.

Finally protected by a thick sea cave known to repel scanners, they waited.

Zale turned on the spec, and though the reception was poor, they were able to make out the broadcast of Xenos' execution.

"I can't believe they're showing something like this," Moonlight whispered, her entire body tense. Her pulse raced and when she made out Xenos, bound between a group of guards who escorted him to an island cliff above the Torren sea, she thought she might be sick. Somehow she controlled herself. If Xenos could walk, so straight and proud, to such a horrible fate, she would be just as strong for his sake.

She scarcely listened to the reporter. Though Xenos wasn't dead yet, grief nearly overcame her. The very idea of what he was about to suffer was unbearable to her.

Even though he had the ability to regenerate, he felt pain just as anyone else. The thought of losing four limbs at once, without anesthetic, then being tossed, writhing in agony, into water miles deep, was almost too much for her to contemplate. And Xenos had no idea they planned to help him. What if he gave up before they reached him? What if the pain made it impossible for him to survive underwater long enough for Zale to find him?

No. She would not think that way.

Somewhere beyond her horrible thoughts, she heard a guard ask Xenos if he had any last words.

"*Il task. Il siw*," he stated simply, clearly, without a waver in his voice. A final message to his rebels.

Moonlight's belly clenched.

Four guards pushed Xenos onto his back and bound him, spread-eagle, while a third, carrying a long, sharp blade in an ancient style, approached.

"Disgraceful," Tepidat murmured. "That a species could still exercise punishment such as this."

"The Laetez allowed it to be broadcast, but most planets in the galaxy have censored it," Zale said. "In spite of what Re Lord and Re Vic believe, this will not work in favor of the Laetez."

Moonlight's hands clutched the arms of her seat so tightly several of the cuts on her hands started bleeding again, but she didn't care. She stared at the screen, and in spite of the poor reception, she saw the pale blue color of Xenos' flesh and the rapid rise and fall of his chest. He made no motion to struggle and somehow managed to keep his dignity, yet she knew he must be frightened. How could he not be?

"Don't watch, Moonlight," Zale said, yet she was unable to tear herself away.

The first swipe of the blade severed one of his webbed hands at the wrist. He jerked convulsively, his eyes squeezed shut. The second hand was removed just as swiftly. This time she saw blood staining his mouth and chin from where his fangs undoubtedly sank into his lips.

Tears sprang into Moonlight's eyes and, for a moment, dizziness almost overcame her.

With the next blade swipe, Xenos screamed.

A strangled sob escaped Moonlight's throat and Tepidat's hand rested firmly on her shoulder. "*Ni towa*, Moonlight," he said. *Be strong*.

The blade-wielder finished his gruesome task, then the guards removed Xenos' bonds, dragged him to the edge of the cliff and hurled him over. Seconds later, he disappeared beneath the churning waves.

"Let's go!" Moonlight shouted to Zale.

"We must wait until the crowd disperses," Tepidat said. "It will be safer."

To her, it seemed like forever before Tepidat moved the shuttle. They sped toward the island from which Xenos had been dumped.

"We've got him," Tepidat stated.

Zale nodded and Moonlight watched him disappear into a separate compartment. Moments later, on Tepidat's monitor, she saw Zale swimming away from the shuttle.

"I believe that's Xenos," Tepidat pointed to a green dot on the screen. "If I could get closer, I could tell for sure, but the nearer we get, the more apt we are to be detected by scanners from the Laetez security shuttles on the island."

Zale finally returned to the shuttle, hauling his cargo. Moonlight's heart pounded and she trembled with anticipation. *Please let Xenos be alive!*

Tepidat left the controls and entered the diving compartment. A short time later, the door opened and Tepidat hurried to the controls while Zale carried Xenos into the passenger area and placed him on a cot. Moonlight grabbed the first aid supplies and joined him, her stomach flip-flopping at the sight of Xenos' badly bleeding limbs. He was unconscious, which by the look of his injuries, was a good thing.

"All we can do right now is seal the wounds," Zale told her. "Certain meds interfere with regeneration, so I don't want to do anything else until we get him to *Nameless*. Trissa will know more about how to help him."

"Hang on," Tepidat called from the cockpit. The shuttle once again tore through the water. "If you can believe it, I don't think we've been detected yet."

Moonlight scarcely paid attention. Her main focus was on helping Zale seal off the stumps before Xenos died from fluid loss. Had he been full-blooded human or Laetez, he'd have been dead long before now.

They left the planet without hassle and this frightened Moonlight. They usually didn't have good luck. Could this fortunate escape mean Xenos might die after all?

Once they had done what they could for Xenos' injuries, Zale joined Tepidat in the cockpit and directed him toward the Delilah Sector, into the asteroid field where they checked to be sure they weren't followed.

"Now we need to locate *Nameless*," Zale said.

"I contacted Judson. He is meeting us in Tydisian airspace," Tepidat replied.

Zale's brow furrowed. "I didn't know about that."

"Because I needed to be sure I could trust you," Tepidat stated.

"I can understand that. Does this mean I'm no longer welcome on Tydepth?"

"If you were welcome before, you are welcome now. We do not like your frequent betrayals, but we can understand your reasons. The Laetez are a violent race, as are humans. You were raised among them, yet your philosophy is Tydisian. I believe you will be happier among us. However you will have to earn our trust and you will be watched carefully."

"That's fine by me," Zale stated.

Moonlight sat beside Xenos' cot, half listening to the conversation in the cockpit. She caressed her lover's face, noting he felt a bit feverish. Tepidat had explained that was normal, considering the severity of his injuries. Losing four limbs at once would slow the regeneration process.

After a time, his breathing became a bit distressed and his eyes opened partway.

"Xenos," she said softly, stroking his cheek.

"Santos Gama," he murmured. "What—"

"Zale and Tepidat rescued you. We're on our way to *Nameless*."

He swallowed and closed his eyes. Moonlight sensed he was trying to regulate his breathing, as he must still be in terrible pain. Zale had given him a small dose of a Tydisian anesthetic Tepidat had supplied, but too much would thwart the healing process. Given his mixed blood, even Tepidat wasn't quite sure how much would be too much, so they intended to wait for Trissa's advice.

"Don't trust that...traitor," Xenos rasped, trying to push himself onto his elbows, but he hadn't yet regained the strength.

"Just be still," she said, placing both hands on his chest. "You don't want to break the seals on your wounds, at least until you regenerate enough to keep from bleeding to death. It was Zale's plan to save your life."

"Do I look like I care?" Xenos spat.

"Just try to rest," she soothed.

In his present condition, that was probably easier said than done. Yet he quieted and other than an occasional groan, didn't complain during the trip.

When they reached *Nameless*, Trissa and Judson were waiting on the docking bay. The medic had Xenos brought directly to sick bay. Moonlight followed, leaving Judson behind to tie up any loose ends with Tepidat.

A short time later, Judson stepped into sick bay.

"How is he?" asked the redhead.

"Trissa is still with him, but she said he'll be all right," Moonlight said, wrapping her arms around herself. Emotionally exhausted, she sat and closed her eyes for a moment. This had been one of the worst days of her life, yet also the best. Xenos had survived. "Have Zale and Tepidat left?"

"Yes." Judson glanced at her. "From the first I didn't believe Zale's heart was in this rebellion. I once thought the same about you, Moonlight, but I was wrong. You are admirably loyal."

"I believe in this cause," she said. "I really do. But I must be honest, Doug, my deepest loyalty is to Xenos."

A slight smile flickered across his lips. "I know."

Trissa stepped into the room. "He's improving. In a few hours I can remove the seals, since he'll have regenerated enough to survive without protection. It's a slow process because he lost four limbs almost simultaneously. We're looking at a week, maybe two, before his hands and feet are completely re-grown and functional."

"How is he feeling?" Moonlight asked.

"He's still in a lot of pain, but I gave him some medication to take the edge off. You may see him if you want."

Moonlight nodded. She and Judson stepped into the room where Xenos lay on one of the cots. His gaze riveted to them and Moonlight sensed his loathing at being stuck in such a vulnerable position.

"How are things going, Judson?" Xenos asked.

"Everything is fine, Sir. We're heading into The White Zone and will remain there to reassess our plans."

Xenos nodded, closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. "Where is that traitor, Zale?"

"He has returned to Tydepth."

Xenos' eyes opened and fixed on Judson. "What?"

"He has been..." Judson let his sentence trail off, as if unsure of whether or not he should bring up this subject now.

"Go on," Xenos snapped.

"He has been given permanent residence there."

An icy look crept into Xenos' eyes. "I see."

"I'll let you rest," Judson said. He nodded and left.

Moonlight pulled a chair beside Xenos' cot. "Is there anything you need?"

"Two hands and a couple of feet," he said with a twisted smile.

"Trissa said you'll have to wait a week or two for those," she said.

"For a while, I thought you had joined Zale."

"Betrayed you?" She held his gaze with all the intensity she felt, leaned down and spoke against his lips, "I'd die first."

She couldn't quite place the expression in his eyes and at the moment she didn't care. He was alive and they were together.

Moonlight closed her eyes and kissed him, relishing the warmth of his lips and the moist, silky feel of his tongue against hers.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dangerous Allies

Nearly a week later, Xenos' limbs had regenerated enough for him to leave sick bay and resume several of his duties. The first night after his shift ended on the bridge, Moonlight made dinner in his quarters.

When he stepped in, she greeted him with a kiss. His arms slipped around her and for several moments they stood, savoring the taste and feel of each other.

"Dinner is almost ready," she said. "So if you plan to take a shower first—"

"I'll be quick." He kissed her again and Moonlight smiled, pressing her body close to his. She couldn't adequately express the happiness she felt at having him with her. She had been so afraid of losing him, but he seemed to have the uncanny ability to cheat death. Still, his luck wouldn't hold out forever and she dreaded the day he would not return to her alive.

Now wasn't the time to think about it. At the moment they were safe and together.

"You must be glad your fingers have regenerated enough so you can feed yourself properly," she said.

"I don't know. There was something liberating about plunging my face into a bowl of soup," he said sarcastically and headed to the bathroom. Before closing the door, he glanced over his shoulder and said, "Besides, there were far worse things I needed help with than being fed."

"Let's not go there before dinner," she said, wrinkling her nose.

He chuckled evilly and closed the door. A moment later, she heard the water running in the shower.

While he hydrated, she brought dinner to the table. A short time later, he joined her. Moonlight noted he kept his gloves on while they ate. Strangely, he seemed slightly self-conscious about regenerating this time, probably due to the particularly demeaning situation that had preceded it.

"Next week, after my regeneration is complete, I'm taking a shuttle to Tydepth."

A twinge of fear darted through her. "What for? You're not going after Zale, are you?"

"No, I'm over that. I'd never trust him again, but as you said, he did save my life, after nearly taking it."

She knew by the expression in his eyes that his temper was flaring again.

"Xenos, why don't we forget about Zale?"

"Easier said than done."

"Why do you want to return to Tydepth?"

"I need to see Tepidat about something."

"Because of the civilian lives lost when we blasted through the docking bay, the Tydisians will no longer give us sanctuary."

"I'm not asking about that."

"Then wh—" She paused a moment and their gazes locked. "You want to know why they've given Zale permission to live there."

"I think it's a reasonable question."

"Xenos, I can understand why Tydepth means so much to you and I can understand your anger toward the Laetez, but why do you dislike your human side so much? I'm human and I think it's safe to say you don't think I'm so bad."

"Humans, or should I say *most* humans, present company excepted, pretend to be civilized, but underneath all their talk of freedom and laws to protect 'common' people, they're just as bad as the Laetez. They agreed to ACT. They freely offer their DNA. Do they actually know what's happening to it or where it's going? Do they care?"

"Many people do," she said, trying not to be offended by his attitude. "Just because the Tydisians don't agree to progress as readily —"

"Progress?" he growled, placing his fork aside and standing from the table. She watched him pace, his long strides swallowing the room. "How can you have spent this much time with me and call what ACT does progress?"

"What I mean is, not all research is bad. The Laetez and humans need to be more careful. They need —"

"Regulations? You saw what happened. I spent half my life trying to protect ACT products legally. Those laws are fading as if they never were."

She approached him and placed her hands on his shoulders. Her gaze fixed on his. "I'm on your side, remember? All I'm saying is there are good things about being human. Not all if it is greed and violence."

"There's something. Violence. Is that my human side or does it all come from the Laetez?"

"If humans are so horrible, what the hell are you doing with me? And it seems like we've had this conversation before." She dropped her hands and turned her back to him, wrapping her arms around herself.

"I never said humans are horrible. And I shouldn't have to explain that I don't think *you're* horrible."

Moonlight sighed, closing her eyes. That was true enough. Zale had told her the only way he had managed to catch Xenos was by using her as bait. It seemed she meant more to him than she realized, though she doubted he'd ever admit it. One might argue that risking himself for her sake *was* admitting it, but being a flawed human female, she wanted to hear it in words. She wanted him to love her openly, without feeling the self-

disgust she knew plagued him at the very idea of lowering himself to experiencing a heartfelt *human* connection.

Turning to him, she demanded, "If you're not interested in humans for your sake, then what about mine?"

A flicker of enlightenment flashed across his eyes. He nodded slowly.

"Let's finish dinner." She walked back to the table. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry and sick of arguing."

"Agreed."

"It's a miracle," she whispered under her breath.

"I heard that."

By the time dinner ended, they'd placed aside their differences. Afterward, they joined Birch, Trissa and several other crewmembers in the recreation room to play virtual strategy games before retiring for the evening.

Moonlight climbed into bed and cuddled beside Xenos. She kissed his bare chest and slid her tongue over his nipples.

"Would you take your gloves off?" she asked.

He tugged them off and placed them aside. Moonlight took one of his hands and looked at the fingers that were almost completely regenerated. It had taken him much longer to grow them back this time, but now the process seemed to be picking up speed. She kissed his palm and ran her tongue over his transparent webbing, then stopped abruptly and asked, "It doesn't still hurt, does it?"

"No."

Though it hadn't even been two weeks since they'd last made love, she was starving for him. Yet she didn't want him to feel pressured, since he hadn't yet completely recovered from his ordeal.

"Xenos, do you..." She shifted position to meet his gaze. "If it's too soon, I understand."

Lust gleamed in his slanted blue eyes, then he cupped the back of her head and kissed her.

With a soft moan of pleasure, Moonlight melted atop him so they lay breast to chest. Their tongues stroked and lips moved firmly, yet tenderly, against each other. Xenos' hands roamed over her shoulders and back, then he pulled off her nightshirt and tossed it aside. Her breasts now free to his touch, he took full advantage and sucked her nipple deeply into his warm, wet mouth.

Moaning with pleasure, she cupped his head and held him close. He knew exactly how to touch her and never failed to fulfill her wildest desires. She couldn't have dreamed a more perfect lover. Every swipe of his tongue over her nipple sent a pulse of desire through her. When he gently scraped his fangs over the swollen bud, she cried out and clung to him harder.

He kissed her mouth, his lips moving sensually against hers. Not breaking the kiss, he slid his hand beneath her panties and stroked her soft mound. One finger, then two dipped into her damp pussy. He explored gently, caressing her warm, pulsing flesh, then he withdrew his fingers and rubbed her clit in tender circles that made her writhe and mewl with pleasure.

Moonlight felt his cock harden against her and she wanted to make him feel as wonderful as he made her feel. She slipped her hand up the leg of his shorts and curled her fist around his cock. Caressing each other, they continued kissing, their tongues mating with heated strokes that sent Moonlight's heart beating out of control. Damn, she wanted him so, so badly.

"Let me," she panted between kisses and tried to pull away from his firm grasp. "Please."

He kissed her again and brushed his nose against hers before releasing her.

She rolled off him and removed her panties while he discarded his shorts, then she straddled him. Grasping his steely erection, she guided it into her hot, damp pussy.

Growling softly, Xenos closed his eyes halfway and caressed her breasts, kneading the soft spheres and brushing his thumbs over her pebble-hard nipples.

"I love how you touch me," she breathed, placing her hands over his as he continued fondling her breasts. She grasped his wrists, loving their thickness and strength. When she was with him, she felt more alive than she'd ever imagined possible. He did things to her body and soul, made her feel so feminine and desirable. Xenos could instill fear, yet also provide feelings of security. He was so strong, so confident, so—

"Oh, Xenos!" she gasped as he reached down with one hand and fondled her clit.

The sensation of being caressed in so many sensitive places—breast, clit and pussy, almost overwhelmed her. She rode him faster, feeling her passion build to fevered heights. His cock was so thick and hard inside her. When she forced her eyes open the slightest bit, the look of raw passion on his face told her he was as close to the edge as she was. Eager to reach her peak, she increased her pace. That wonderful burst of pleasure struck her with such force that she cried out, closing her eyes and arching her neck as she rode the marvelous orgasmic waves. Xenos' hips jerked upward and his groans and growls deepened as he joined her in bliss.

* * * * *

The following day when Moonlight stepped into the mess hall for lunch, she was surprised to find Xenos seated alone at one of the tables, his untouched food beside him. His attention was fixed on the screen of his personal computer as he read the rapidly scrolling pages.

"Hello." She sat beside him. "What's so interesting? Must be important."

"Mmm," he said absently, then added, "Jules Verne."

That was a shock. She wrinkled her nose. "What?"

"You know. The storyteller from ancient Earth. You once called me Captain Nemo, so I decided to look up the story." He tossed her a look of both amusement and annoyance. "Fascinating character. I'm flattered."

She raised her eyes to the heavens. "You would be."

"I liked the story enough to read *The Mysterious Island*, *Around the World in Eighty Days* and I'm nearly finished with *Journey to the Center of the Earth*."

"You read all those?"

"It was a slow morning on the bridge."

"You read all those today?" She curled her lip.

"I'm engineered to process information at an accelerated rate. Now, many parts of these stories make no sense, however, on several counts, Verne was very intuitive for a human of his primal era. I've also been looking at the work of one of your contemporary artists, Colestar."

"I have no idea who that is."

He lifted an eyebrow. "From what I've read, he is quite famous in his field. He specializes in paintings of aquatic life, mostly sharks. They are an Earth-based fish that —"

"I know what sharks are. Xenos, why the sudden interest in art and literature?" This truly puzzled her.

"*Human* art and literature. You said I took no interest in humans, *you* specifically, so I'm trying to learn more about them."

"Xenos." She smiled, warmth spreading through her. She kissed his cheek. "That's so —" She was about to say sweet, but had the feeling he wouldn't like that word directed at him, so she said, "Surprising."

"Why?"

"I didn't think you'd actually spend time —"

"On you?" He held her gaze. "In case you haven't noticed, I spend quite a bit of time on you." He touched a button on the computer and turned the screen toward her. "Colestar's artwork."

She looked at a picture of a hammerhead shark. "It's very...interesting."

"You were right. There are some fascinating parts of human culture. I visited Earth several times on duty, but never took the time to explore the planet."

"Maybe someday we can go there together." What a nice little fantasy that was. The way things were going, she doubted she would ever set foot on her home planet again, but it was worth it to be with him.

"Someday." He smiled slightly and touched her cheek.

They ate lunch together, then Xenos excused himself to work in engineering.

Moonlight returned to the office.

They had been flying around The White Zone since Xenos' rescue, and though it was a barren place, she at least felt safe here. Still, she knew all too soon they would be back in danger again. Best to enjoy this time while they could.

* * * * *

Toward the end of the following week, Xenos and Tepidat met on the shore of an islet in the southern seas of Tydepth.

"When you asked for this meeting, I had hoped you might want to include Zale," Tepidat said, his calm black gaze fixed on Xenos.

"Why?"

"Perhaps to thank him for what he did for you."

A sneer twisted Xenos' lips and he said, "Thank him for ensuring that four of my limbs were hacked off in rapid succession? Sorry, but I haven't developed enough emotionally to thank him for that."

Tepidat continued gazing at him with all-knowing eyes. His old mentor was probably the only person who could match him in a staring contest. "You know what I'm referring to. The fact that he saved your life. Still, knowing you as I do, I should be grateful you haven't decided to hunt him down."

"I have no interest in hunting cowards." Xenos turned to look at the rolling sea, wishing he was submerged and enjoying the incomparable Tydisian tide.

"You know as well as I do he's not a coward simply because he no longer wants to indulge in violence."

"No. He prefers to hide. Pretending a problem doesn't exist won't make it disappear."

"Nor will rubbing dirt into a wound make it heal any faster."

Xenos smiled and shook his head. "I didn't come to argue about the rebellion with you, but to ask a question."

"Go on."

"Why has Zale been given permission to reside on Tydepth?"

This time Tepidat smiled, though not without compassion. That in itself irked Xenos more than if he'd mocked him. For some reason, Tepidat had always known the deepest cravings of Xenos' soul, desires he wouldn't admit even to himself.

"How is that your concern?" Tepidat asked softly.

"I trained on this planet, tried to embrace everything about Tydepth, yet I was denied permanent residence. Zale is more Laetez than Tydisian. He even requires the meds to control his Laetez temper. Why is he worthy of citizenship?"

Tepidat drew a deep breath and released it slowly. He stepped closer to Xenos, gazing down at him from his towering height. "It's not your anger that kept us from granting you residence, but your hatred. I have never doubted your respect for the

Tydisian people, nor has DrkMari. However you have never been able to truly understand our philosophy. Zale has a Tydisian mind."

Xenos stared into Tepidat's eyes for a long moment, anger simmering inside him. Then he turned away. His mentor placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "I don't agree with your choices, Xenos, but I do understand them. And I also know that in the world you inhabit, men like you are needed. Even on Tydepth, warriors are required. All I hope for you is that you don't lose sight of what your true purpose should be."

Gritting his teeth, Xenos shook his head and stepped away from Tepidat. More Tydisian words of wisdom that he couldn't fully agree with.

"Be careful, Xenos. It's a dark path you have chosen."

"I haven't chosen anything," he stated. "It chose me. Goodbye, Tepidat. Thank you for meeting with me."

"I hope we will meet again under happier circumstances."

Xenos turned to him and again their gazes locked. After bowing his head respectfully to his old mentor, he boarded his shuttle and left the planet.

Orbiting Tydepth, Xenos had just signaled to *Nameless* that he would be joining them when a rogue shuttle fired a shot that sent him spinning off his course.

Springing into action, he quickly righted himself and glanced at his scanners.

The shuttle fired again and this time he managed to evade the blast.

"This time I don't want surrender, Xenos," Yashel's voice ground out over the spec. "This time I'm going to kill you personally."

* * * * *

Yashel's pulse raced as if mimicking the speed of his shuttle as he pursued Xenos through space.

When the Laetez had been unable to recover Xenos' dead body from the sea, Re Lord and Re Vic had been furious and Yashel stunned. Some of their advisors had suggested the body had been washed into deeper waters or been consumed by sea creatures. However, several thorough searches revealed not a trace, except for the tracking collar that had been removed from Xenos' neck. Not chewed or bitten off by a sea creature, but *removed*.

No doubt the blue bastard had not just survived, but been rescued.

When reports finally surfaced about a Tydisian shuttle entering the Laetez home world from the Northern sector, Yashel knew for certain that Xenos was alive. His first guess was that Zale had again turned traitor and rescued him or, at the very least, one of Xenos' slimy Tydisian friends had aided him.

Re Lord, in his anger, removed Yashel as head of the rebel retrieval task force, but agreed to allow him the freedom pursue Xenos on his own. Unfortunately he placed a

time limit on this opportunity. Yashel had one month to capture Xenos or else he would be demoted, his record permanently marked with his failure.

The Tydisians had allowed him to search their planet, but he found no sign of Xenos. Yet knowing Xenos' deep love for his Tydisian roots, he guessed sooner or later he would come to the planet, especially if his rescuer resided there. Yashel had remained, orbiting Tydepth in a private shuttle, and now his diligence had paid off.

His communication with Xenos went unanswered as the outlaw maneuvered the shuttle in an evasive pattern that even Yashel found difficult to follow. Not surprising, since both had been designed for piloting, but Xenos' reflexes were more Tydisian than Yashel's.

"Crazy blue bastard," Yashel muttered. Flying like this, both were likely to get killed, but it didn't matter. This time Yashel would make certain Xenos was his.

As Yashel gained on him, Xenos swerved. Both shuttles tapped each other with enough force to spin out of control. When Yashel finally righted his craft, he found himself facing Xenos head-on.

Again Yashel sent a message. "You're not going to lose me this time, Xenos."

"I have no intention of running anymore, Yashel. It's long past time we ended this."

For several seconds, Yashel stopped breathing, then he and Xenos fired at each other simultaneously.

The ships jolted and spun. Blinding light forced Yashel to close his eyes as he gripped his controls tightly, trying to guide the shuttle, but it was hopeless.

The shuttle fell and Yashel's stomach lurched. In the seconds before he crashed on the planet below, a bitter smile twisted his lips. It seemed he and Xenos had finally destroyed each other after all.

* * * * *

When his shuttle finally came to a stop, the nose squashed against the side of a rock formation, Xenos sat for several seconds, stunned from the crash. The side panel had dented into his side and though his ribs were sore he doubted they were broken.

Cursing softly, he unfastened his safety strap, then checked the monitors. Most were blown out but a couple were still working and told him he had landed on a barren planet not far from Phanteppe. Most of the world was desert, with only minimal water since the oceans had all but dried up thousands of years ago.

The shuttle's spec was broken and his wrist spec was useless for long distances.

He went to check the engine and found it beyond repair. Again he cursed and inspected his food and water supplies. The food storage bin was intact, but he'd lost half his water supply.

"This is just great," he muttered. "An aquatic life form stuck in the middle of a desert without adequate water or transportation."

What about Yashel's shuttle? He was bound to have water aboard. For that matter, it would be prudent to find out whether Yashel was dead or alive.

After checking his stun pistol, he stepped out of the shuttle. Squinting against the sunlight that almost blinded him as it reflected off the white sand, Xenos glanced around. Smoke rose above a sand dune in the distance. According to the scanner, that's where Yashel's shuttle had crashed. *Why the hell couldn't he have crashed closer*, Xenos thought with a humorless chuckle. He packed enough water to keep him hydrated on the walk, then made his way toward the dune.

He finally reached it and looked down to several rock formations. The shuttle, dented and smoking, sat wedged against an enormous rock. There was no sign of Yashel, so Xenos cautiously made his way toward the wreck. He rolled his shoulders in an attempt to loosen the sweaty fabric of his shirt that clung to his back. His skin already stung like crazy. Only a mixed breed like himself could feel sweaty and dried out at the same time. It was an annoyingly indescribable sensation.

When he reached the shuttle, he found only one hatch reachable and it was jammed shut. He braced his foot against the side of the shuttle and pulled hard on the hatch. After struggling for several moments, he stood back, panting. He collected himself, then grasped the hatch and again pulled with all his formidable strength. It snapped off and Xenos staggered back a few steps, dropping the hatch.

Carefully he approached the opening and was about to board when Yashel's booted foot lashed out, striking him in the face and sending him stumbling backward. Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Xenos glared at Yashel.

"Thanks for getting me out, you bastard," Yashel snarled, hopping to the ground and aiming his stun pistol at Xenos. Blood ran down his face and matted the hair on the top of his head. From the look of him, he'd taken a worse impact than Xenos, yet it didn't seem to hold him back.

"This is a fine way to thank me," Xenos said with a hint of sarcasm. "Yashel, there is no need for the weapon. We're stuck in the middle of nowhere and —"

"You're not going to talk your way out of this one, Xenos."

"You plan to execute me yourself?"

"To make sure the job gets done this time."

"Yet you haven't pulled the trigger." Xenos took a step closer, then stopped at the vicious look in Yashel's eyes. He had to handle this situation very carefully. "That's because you know we have one chance of getting out of here and that's to work together."

"My shuttle is wrecked. Unless yours is in better shape —"

"That's doubtful, however, perhaps by salvaging parts from both, we'll be able to make one flyable. I'm an engineer. You're not. You can go ahead and kill me, but you're better off waiting until we get away."

Yashel stared at him for several seconds, then said. "Throw down your weapons and we'll talk."

Xenos slowly removed his stun pistol and tossed it at Yashel's feet.

"What else?" Yashel demanded. "I know you, Xenos, and I don't believe for a second all you have is a stun pistol."

Smiling wickedly, Xenos removed the remainder of his weapons – a micro-stunner and a good, old-fashioned dagger. Yashel gathered them, then motioned for Xenos to board the shuttle.

Xenos entered, keeping his gaze on Yashel. "Do you have a good water supply?"

"Yes," Yashel stated.

Xenos inspected the engine and was glad to see that between what was left of both shuttles, he would be able to fix one.

"You should let me check that head injury," Xenos told Yashel. "At this point, neither of us can afford to lose the other. It's going to take both of us to haul these parts back to my shuttle."

Warily, Yashel retrieved the first aid kit, then sat while Xenos cleaned and sealed his wound.

"What about you?" Yashel asked. "No injuries?"

"Nothing serious."

"What about your skin? This planet is bound to be hell on it."

"Thanks for your concern, but I'm fine."

Next they began the arduous task of moving the heavy engine parts across the desert to Xenos' shuttle. It took several trips, during which Xenos was forced to consume more of their water supply than preferable, considering there was no guarantee he could actually fix the shuttle. If that was the case, they might end up stranded on the planet until someone located them.

"I'll get the last of the parts," Yashel said as they sat inside Xenos' shuttle, taking a short rest. Without climate control, inside the shuttle was almost as hot as outside, but at least the sun wasn't beating down on them. "You start the repairs."

Xenos agreed and they went about their separate tasks. Xenos completed most of the work inside the shuttle fairly quickly. By the time Yashel returned, he was working on the outside repairs. Even with hydration, his skin was becoming so irritated from the dry atmosphere that it hurt to move.

"Hey." Yashel kicked his boot and Xenos slid out from beneath the shuttle belly. "I've got the last of the parts."

"Good. Hopefully in a few hours we'll be able to test this."

Yashel held out a container of water and Xenos glanced at it suspiciously.

"It's good. See." Yashel took a long swallow. "You look like you need it."

"Surprised you noticed or give a damn. Wouldn't it be easier for you if I dried up?"

"Not until you finish the repairs," Yashel stated.

"That's fair." Xenos gave a snort of laughter, took the water and drank several gulps.

He returned to work, Yashel handing him parts and tools.

"Hey," Yashel said. "There's a shuttle!"

Xenos climbed away from the engine and glanced skyward. There was indeed a shuttle headed in their direction. The question was, who did it belong to? Would Xenos be rescued or a captive once again?

As the craft landed, Xenos noticed with relief that it was a small transportation shuttle from *Nameless*. When he'd missed his rendezvous with *Nameless* after contacting them, Judson must have authorized a search.

Yashel reached for his weapon. "Come on, Xenos. Get over here where I can keep an eye on you."

Xenos stepped closer. As the shuttle hatch lowered, he used his moment of distraction to leap on Yashel. Using his superior strength, he wrestled him to the ground where they struggled briefly for the stun pistol before Xenos forced it from Yashel's grasp.

"Xenos!" Moonlight shouted, hurrying toward them, her stun pistol drawn.

"Are you going to be still or should I kill you now?" Xenos snarled in Yashel's ear.

"Even if you have me, the Laetez will still catch and kill you."

"I never imagined you were so eager for violence, Yashel."

"It's the only defense against you."

"Maybe it's the only defense against *us*. You were designed by medics. Like me."

"*No one* is like *you*," Yashel spat.

"Xenos, we should be going," Moonlight said. "Are we taking him or not?"

"Get me something to tie him with."

Moments later, they boarded the transportation shuttle and placed Yashel in the passenger area. Xenos sat in the cockpit, Moonlight beside him.

"We're nearly out of fuel. There's not even enough to take off and charge the main spec simultaneously," Xenos muttered. "Moonlight, didn't you look?"

"I was too busy trying to find you to worry about whether or not I had enough fuel."

Drawing a deep breath, Xenos shook his head. "I'll get fuel from my shuttle."

"Do you need help?"

"No, I'll be back soon." He left the shuttle.

While he was transferring fuel into a safety container, Moonlight's shuttle roared. Surprised, he turned toward it and saw it shift position, its stunners aiming in the direction of his shuttle.

"No no no!" Xenos shouted, turning and running as fast as he could. As the shuttle fired, he rolled beneath a small cave in the mountainside. Rubble fell over its mouth, then he heard the sound of the shuttle ascending.

* * * * *

Moonlight sat in the passenger shuttle, her hands twisting futilely in the rope that tightly bound her wrists. She glared toward the cockpit where Yashel sat, guiding the craft. Somehow he had escaped his bonds, taken Moonlight by surprise and hijacked the shuttle.

"I don't understand you, Yashel," she said. "How can you agree with what the governments are doing with ACT?"

"This has nothing to do with whether or not I agree, but with the preservation of the law. Can you imagine what the galaxy would be like without it? Do you really think Xenos' dreams of disorder will make a better life?"

"You don't misunderstand him as much as you pretend. He doesn't want disorder, but equality."

"So he gets it by blowing up docking bays and destroying years of research?"

"You had a chance to prevent the tragedy on the docking bay," she stated, wondering if she should push her captor too far. In many ways, she feared Yashel more than she had ever feared Xenos. His self-righteousness and lemming-like devotion to duty unsettled her, but something told her he was guided by an even deeper and more dangerous emotion—envy.

"This is the only way you can beat him, isn't it?" she continued in a softer voice.

"What the hell are you babbling about?"

"No matter what you did, he would always be a step ahead of you in the ACT Corps. You would spend your entire life following his orders."

Yashel gave a snort of humorless laughter. "I am merely doing my duty. Xenos dug his own grave, lady. People look at our kind as if we're a step up from animals or, worse, machines made to serve pure-blooded races. Xenos has confirmed everyone's fears about ACT products by becoming the most wanted outlaw in the galaxy."

"So he's still getting noticed more than you. He's the criminal who can't be caught and you're the pathetic soldier plodding along his trail. You're like the tail of a comet, Yashel."

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his blue eyes blazing. "Haven't you spent enough time with Laetez mixed breeds to know when to shut up, Santos Gama? We have fearful tempers, you know."

She sighed and shook her head. "Now you're threatening a helpless female prisoner."

"You're anything but helpless."

A slight smile curved her lips. "At least I've learned something from Xenos. One last thing, you have noticed we're nearly out of fuel?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head, Santos Gama. We have enough fuel to land on Phanteppe. One way or the other, you will be accountable for your crimes and your blue bastard lover will soon follow."

"Don't count on it, Yashel. Unlike you and me, he's a superior animal."

Moonlight spoke with confidence, but inside she couldn't help feeling a bit worried. Xenos had once nearly sacrificed his life for her safety. Would he do it again or had he learned that, as he'd always suspected, love was a dangerous emotion that didn't blend with rebellion? Part of her wanted him to be sensible, while another part prayed he would rescue her.

Strangely, now that she was faced with imprisonment and possible execution, she felt calm. She didn't regret joining the rebellion. Her only regret was that she might never see Xenos, her family and friends again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Confession

A relatively short time later, they landed at a small private lab on Phanteppe. There Yashel called the Laetez home world for backup, informing them to send a security shuttle to pick up Xenos as well.

Moonlight was tied in the office loaned to Yashel. Through a window facing a room with holding tanks, she watched several misshapen aquatic life forms drift in greenish water.

Once Yashel turned off the desk spec, she said, "Look at those creatures, Yashel."

"I've seen many like them."

She turned and met his gaze. "And this is the sort of research you're protecting? You sent Xenos to an Elite Execution so that ACT can continue creating and torturing their victims?"

"I had nothing to do with the Elite Execution. I happened to be against it, but my input didn't matter."

"It was the decision of your Prime and also Re Lord. Pure-bloods whose only interest is in gaining more power for themselves."

"You're a pure-blooded human. Why are you disloyal to your kind?"

"My loyalty lies with what is right. What about you, Yashel? Do you even care about what's right? You must if you didn't agree with Xenos' execution."

"I disagreed with the *Elite Execution*. For the pain he has caused, he deserves to die."

"Then I guess you and I do too."

Yashel's jaw tightened visibly. "I can't argue there, Moonlight Santos Gama."

A loud blast shook the room. Moonlight crashed out of her chair and onto the floor. Yashel smashed against the wall.

"What the hell..." He straightened and walked toward the door.

Moonlight lifted her bruised face from the floor and shook her head clear. Purple lights flashed throughout the building.

Again the entire building rocked and Moonlight gasped in terror, certain the very walls would collapse around them.

A nervous male voice echoed over the inter-building spec. "This is Lab Director Phelps. Our facility has been taken over by an unnamed force. No one will be harmed providing Moonlight Santos Gama appears at our dock in three minutes." A twinge of hope darted through Moonlight and she couldn't resist a nervous smile.

She glanced at Yashel, who closed his eyes and murmured, "No. Not now."

"I need to go, Yashel." Moonlight rose to her feet with some difficulty, as her hands were still tied and her ribs ached.

"No fucking way, lady." Yashel grasped her so hard she was certain her arms bruised.

Their gazes locked. "Is this going to be a repeat of the docking bay? As you said, part of Xenos is a beast. You don't give him what he wants and he will destroy this facility. Am I really worth more deaths on your head?"

"Yes."

"Even your own?"

"My life is nothing unless I bring him in."

Director Phelps spoke again, sounding even more frightened than last time. "Two and a half minutes."

Yashel, still grasping Moonlight's arm, strode to the desk and slammed his fist against it before talking into the spec. Like Director Phelps, his voice carried throughout the facility. "Xenos, I have backup on the way. You won't escape."

The building rocked again and screams sounded through the corridors.

Moonlight tried to pull away from Yashel, but his grip tightened even more. "Yashel," she pleaded. "What's going to happen? He'll kill everyone in this facility to get to me."

"Then I'll kill you."

"Then he'll kill you or you'll kill each other. This is pointless. You can stop it. You have to be the one, because *he* won't."

She saw the truth awaken in Yashel's large blue eyes, then anger and rebellion flashed across them. Finally he released the bonds on her wrists, shoved her to the door and ordered, "Run!"

She didn't need to be told twice. Moonlight raced as fast as she could through the empty corridors until she reached the dock and stood, panting and glancing around.

* * * * *

Xenos stood on the bridge of *Nameless*, his heart thumping wildly. Funny, he never felt this anxious when his own life was in danger.

After Yashel had abducted Moonlight, Xenos had hurried to Yashel's broken-down shuttle and managed to repair the spec enough to send out a faint distress signal. Luckily, Dario, who was on the search for him, picked up on it. A short time later, *Nameless* arrived.

His first impulse was to order a pursuit of Moonlight. The thought of her in Yashel's clutches unnerved him more than he wanted to admit. Still, he forced himself to think rationally. Risking his life for Moonlight was one thing, but how could he

justify putting everyone aboard *Nameless* in danger? He had intended to take a shuttle and pursue her on his own, but knew he'd have a better chance with *Nameless*.

Then he realized the Laetez would undoubtedly question her using truth drugs. Any knowledge she had about the rebellion would be exposed. She had been privy to more information since Xenos had gained trust in her.

After ordering the ship into pursuit, he had a brief discussion with Judson and Trissa in his ready room.

Xenos knew Moonlight's shuttle was running out of fuel. Since Phanteppe was the nearest planet between where they had been stranded and the Laetez home world, they had no doubt landed there and Yashel would call for backup.

Sure enough, when they scanned Phanteppe, they picked up a signal from Moonlight's wrist spec. They had landed at a small lab that *Nameless* could have destroyed easily, but at the moment their main priority was getting Moonlight back.

He doubted Yashel would set her free, no matter what the threat. For the first time in his life, he felt deep emotional terror of losing someone he loved.

"Sir, she's just stepped onto the dock," Judson stated. "Birch is taking a transportation shuttle to pick her up."

"As soon as they board, take off," Xenos ordered, sounding calmer than he felt. Until Moonlight was standing beside him, he wouldn't begin to relax.

Moments later, Judson gave the order for the ship to ascend. It rose quickly. Xenos focused on the monitors, but tore his gaze from them when Moonlight stepped onto the bridge and stood beside him.

He offered her slight smile. "Welcome back, Santos Gama."

"Thank you, Sir." She smiled.

He reached out and touched her bruised face. "Did Yashel do this?"

"No. It happened during your attack, but I'd rather have a few bruises than whatever punishment the Laetez were sure to give me."

"Sir! Three warships are approaching," Judson interrupted, his voice tense.

Xenos strode to the captain's station, looked at his monitor and ordered, "Evasive procedures. Fire when and if you get a clear shot."

Nameless tried to break the atmosphere, but the warships drove her toward land.

The ship rocked violently and Xenos would have been thrown to his knees if he hadn't held onto one of the controls. Several crewmembers were tossed to the floor.

"Their weapons are stronger than what we've encountered before," Judson said, glancing at Xenos. "With three warships attacking us simultaneously using that kind of power—"

He was interrupted as once again the ship lurched.

Xenos barked orders and the crew did their best to comply, but the warships were relentless in their attack.

"We're going down," Judson shouted. "Directly into a body of water!"

Xenos managed to make a ship-wide announcement to employ crash procedures just before *Nameless* struck the surface hard.

Lights flickered and the hum of life support shut off, then resumed. Xenos and Moonlight reached for each other. He held her close as they rolled along the floor of the lurching ship.

Nameless sank fast. They descended for what seemed like forever before finally striking ground.

* * * * *

Xenos recovered from the shock of the crash faster than Moonlight. Her head was still spinning when he moved from where his body was half draped over hers and gently touched her shoulder. "Moonlight, are you all right?"

She shakily pushed herself to a sitting position and touched her bruised cheek. "Yeah, I think so."

He stood, glancing around, and offered her his hand. Grateful for the continued contact, Moonlight grasped it tightly and let him tug her to her feet. Walking felt awkward since the ship had landed at an angle. Most of the bridge crew had gotten to their feet or knelt, helping those too injured to stand.

"Judson?" Xenos called, striding to the nearest spec.

"Over here, Sir," Judson called from the ready room. "Penn is stuck behind a monitor that's come loose."

Xenos turned from the spec and strode quickly to the ready room, Moonlight behind him.

Penn, one of the navigators, was unconscious and wedged between the monitor and the wall. Blood tricked from his mouth. Judson strained to move the monitor, but even his Laetez strength wasn't enough. Xenos joined him and moved it with relative ease.

"Moonlight, stay here with Penn and contact sick bay if you can. Judson, come with me."

She did as he ordered, grateful that her wrist spec and Trissa's were both working. The medic said she had calls from just about every deck, but would send one of her assistants to the bridge.

The main spec apparently still worked, since Xenos' voice rang through the ship. "We've submerged in a lake. Damage reports are coming in. All personnel report to your station managers. Emergency procedures are still in effect."

A short time later, the assistant medic joined her. Moonlight put aside any squeamishness she felt for medical procedures and did her best to help stabilize Penn. When they finished, they moved on to the bridge to help others. While working, the graveness of the situation struck her fully when she overheard Judson inform Xenos that the lake in which they were trapped was slightly over seven-thousand feet deep.

"They need an extra pair of hands in the corridor by engineering," the assistant told her, interrupting her frightened thoughts.

"I'll go," Moonlight volunteered.

Xenos stood a short distance away, glancing at a monitor. He turned to her and said, "I'm on my way down there as well. Come with me. Lights are out in several of the main corridors."

"Can you see in the dark?" She forced a smile.

"Better than humans or Laetez," he replied.

They left the bridge and made their way down the corridors and stairs since the elevators were useless in their current position.

Once in the corridor, Xenos sniffed the air, his brow furrowed. "Smell that?"

She inhaled deeply and shrugged. "What?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but something doesn't smell right."

As they neared the bridge, Moonlight understood what he meant. A swampy odor hung on the air. She noticed a sheen on Xenos skin and moisture bleeding through his clothes.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You're sweating like crazy."

He glanced at her. "It's not sweat. I have glands that emit a secretion to protect me from bacteria and excess sea salt. Usually this only happens underwater." He swiped at his forehead. "Something is very wrong here."

They had nearly reached engineering when Dario, the sleeve of his uniform torn and bloody, hurried toward them. "We have a problem, Sir."

"Just one, Dario?" Xenos said with a hint of sarcasm.

"The dock has completely flooded. According to survivors from that section, it's partially sealed off by a collapsed wall. Engineering is flooding now. If we don't do something to stop the leak, the equipment will be completely ruined and there's no way we'll be able to get *Nameless* out of here. As you know, our life dinghies were located on the dock."

Fear shot through Moonlight.

Xenos said, "Then we'll have to fix it."

"The water is nearing twenty feet deep. Considering the length of time it will take to mend the leak and set up drainage, no one aboard this ship can make the dive without gear."

"Then get the gear!" Xenos snapped, annoyed. He paused suddenly and closed his eyes, a pained expression on his face. "The gear locker is just outside engineering. Don't tell me that's the section that's flooded."

Dario nodded.

"I'll have to dive and hope I can fix this myself," Xenos stated. "What the hell is that smell? Do we have a chemical leak as well?"

"No one has reported any such damage," Dario replied.

"Xenos." Moonlight grasped his arm tightly. "The water. We're on Phanteppe."

"Bacteria," he stated. "With the luck of Tonga, we've probably landed in a waste dump for one of the labs." Turning to Dario, he said, "Have a crewman gather a water sample and bring it to Medic Trissa. Also check the air down here."

The pilot nodded and hurried to carry out the orders.

"Santos Gama, you're needed to help the assistant medics, correct?"

"Yes, but Xenos —"

"What?"

"Don't go in the water until you know what we're dealing with — bacteria-wise."

He glanced at her with a slightly annoyed look. "Just go about your work."

Moonlight's stomach tightened and she shook her head. At times the man was impossible.

* * * * *

A short time later, Xenos stepped into engineering where Dario and another crewman knelt in a section that wasn't flooded. They stared down at the rising water level that already partially covered the engines.

"If we don't fix this soon, we're not getting out," Dario said.

"Unless the Laetez send a retrieval vessel," Xenos muttered.

"I doubt they'll hurry to do that," Trissa said.

Xenos turned to the medic who had just crawled into the small space and knelt beside Xenos. She was covered in protective medical gear and her grave expression told him the news wasn't good.

"This water is toxic," Trissa said. "The air smells bad, but most of the worst types of bacteria are in the water and not airborne. The engineers who had to swim out of this when the flooding started are in sick bay. I've started them on a cleansing program and have medicated them, but as of now they're critical. I suggest everyone who might have come in contact with even a bit of the water be treated, just as a precaution. You in particular, Xenos, with your skin. The worst strain I've found in the water is Searilla in origin. That means it's especially dangerous to aquatic-based species. As soon as we get out of here, we'll need to replenish our medical supplies."

"We're not going anywhere until we stop the flood and drain engineering," Xenos said and turned to Trissa. "We have no protective gear or air tanks. Fixing the damage could take a couple of hours. There's a chance I can repair it myself, but —"

Trissa looked horrified. "Xenos, if you dive in that, you probably won't survive. The bacteria in this water is so strong that your natural secretions won't protect you once you're submerged."

Xenos drew a deep breath and stared at the rising water. "And if this doesn't get fixed, we'll all die here."

He felt the gazes of Trissa, Dario and the other crewmen upon him. If he didn't dive, *Nameless* would never resurface, at least not without help from a Laetez retrieval vessel. Either way the crew's lives were over, through drowning and suffocation beneath the surface or through execution above it.

"I have no choice," Xenos said. "I'm going down and try to fix this."

Trissa was about to protest, but Xenos cast her a quelling look and she sighed, shaking her head. "I can give you a dose of meds to help fight off the bacteria. I'm not sure how much it will help though."

He nodded. "Get it."

A short time later, Xenos once again knelt in engineering, noting that the water level had risen substantially.

Trissa had given him an injection and he was preparing himself mentally for what would most likely be the last dive of his life.

"Xenos!" Moonlight knelt beside him, her face etched with worry. "You're not really going to dive in that shit?"

"I have no choice."

"There's got to be an altern—"

"Moonlight!" He held her gaze. "Everyone on this ship does what they need to do."

"I don't want to lose you," she whispered.

Her words made his gut twist, both because he liked having her care about him and because he knew how dangerous love could be. It thwarted duty and made one lose focus.

"Don't," he said through gritted teeth.

She drew a sharp breath and nodded. "All right. What can I do to help?"

"Bring me that bowl of fresh water," he said. "I want my shields down before I submerge."

She did as he asked and sat near him. He took the bowl from her hands, unable to resist brushing her fingers with his. If he was about to die, there was one memory he wanted to take with him.

"Let me look at you, Moonlight."

For a long moment, they held each other's gaze. Then he plunged his face into the bowl of water and felt the protective membranes cover his eyes. When he looked up, she was blurred through a film that wouldn't fade until he was submerged.

"If I'm able to do this, the water level will drop. If I don't resurface within a couple of hours, then I failed," Xenos told them, slinging his tool bag over his shoulder.

Moonlight, Trissa and Dario stared at him silently before the medic said, "Good luck."

Xenos nodded. He drew a deep breath, filling his powerful Tydisian lungs, then turned in Moonlight's direction one last time before dropping into the water.

The poisonous rush seemed to fill all his senses at once and it took a moment before his mind cleared enough for him to make his way through the murky depths.

Within moments of submerging, waves of sickness struck him and he struggled to concentrate on his work. Using his years of Tydisian mind control, he managed to focus on the task at hand, for he knew he hadn't much time before the poisons ravaging his body would render him unconscious.

* * * * *

Moonlight stood with Trissa and Dario, every muscle tense as she stared into the water.

"I need to get back to sick bay," Trissa said softly. Moonlight glanced at her and saw she looked as strained as Moonlight felt.

"I have to wait here and watch the water level," Dario said. "I'll let you know as soon as he resurfaces."

The women exchanged glances, and though neither spoke, they seemed to sense what the other was feeling. Xenos wouldn't be coming back alive. Still Moonlight couldn't let go of that shred of hope that he might survive. He had beaten the odds so many times before, but one day his luck would surely run out. This could very well be the day.

She remained in the area, assisting where she could. Time seemed to pass far too slowly and she tried not to think about Xenos, submerged in the poisoned water.

Finally Dario called, "The water level is dropping! He did it!"

Moonlight joined him, her heart pounding with anxiety as she watched the water drain from the enormous engineering room.

"Where is he?" she whispered, searching for Xenos, hoping he would resurface.

The water had almost completely drained when Dario shouted, "There he is!"

Xenos lay, unmoving, behind one of the monitors.

* * * * *

"Why does he look like that?" Moonlight murmured from where she stood next to Trissa in sick bay. Xenos was submerged from the neck down in a tank of water. Though he had been here only a few hours, he appeared almost skeletal, only bone and muscle beneath skin that was dark purplish-blue from his high fever. His eyes were closed and he breathed through oxygen wires. Since they'd found him after the dive, he hadn't awakened.

"It's the poison," Trissa replied.

"I thought people swelled up from poison."

"Humans and Laetez, yes. Tydisians, no. This is a common Tydisian reaction to poison. It affects them so they rapidly lose their body fluids. Even with the life-tank, we can't replenish his fluids fast enough. If we can't get this under control soon—" The medic paused and closed her eyes.

Moonlight swallowed past the lump in her throat and forced herself to remain in control. Xenos would if he was in her place. If he knew she was falling apart over something like love, she could only imagine how annoyed he'd be.

"How are the other men from engineering you were treating?" Moonlight asked Trissa.

"We lost three already," she replied. "The last two are holding their own. So far, no one else has been affected, so the precautions we took with the meds seem to have worked."

Their conversation was interrupted by Judson's voice on the main spec, "Everyone, prepare for takeoff."

"They got the engines back in working order," Trissa said. "Moonlight, help me secure his tank, then we'd better strap ourselves in. It will be shaky until we break the surface."

Moonlight did as the medic asked. This was probably the first time they had worked together without anger or jealousy and it actually felt pretty good.

Soon *Nameless* lurched, then dragged upward through the depths of the lake.

Within moments of surfacing, the ship picked up speed.

"Purple alert," Judson stated over the spec. "We're being pursued by a Laetez warship. All personnel remain at your stations or in general quarters."

"Can this day get any better?" Trissa muttered.

Moonlight glanced at her. "Don't ask. You'll bring the luck of Tonga upon us."

The medic forced a smile. "Tonga never had luck as bad as ours."

Moonlight couldn't argue there. She turned to Xenos' tank, noting he hadn't stirred. That was probably a good thing at the moment.

Several hours later, *Nameless* had lost the warship and was in hiding at the farthest end of The White Zone.

* * * * *

Xenos drifted through a warm ocean, the sensation so pleasant that he smiled. Opening his eyes, he glanced around into dark water, lit only by the rays of moonlight. He swam effortlessly, peaceful and alone.

Was he dead? Was Moonlight correct about there being an afterlife? He'd never been one for religion, even *Siw Maris Marin*. If something didn't have a rational, scientific explanation, he hesitated to believe it.

This thought seemed to bring him back to reality and he realized there must be another explanation for his presence here. One that made sense.

"Xenos," a soft male voice called.

He turned sharply from the rays of moonlight to the darker water behind him. Who had spoken? Who *could* speak beneath the water? Even Tydisians communicated with grunts and growls below the surface. Never in words.

"This way, Xenos," the voice repeated.

"Who are you?" Xenos also spoke and an inexplicable emotion darted through him. While it wasn't exactly fear, it was something close, yet it also mingled with curiosity.

"I've watched your ship and crew. I know your plight and I can help you in your cause."

"Who are you? Show yourself."

"Swim away from the light. Just a little bit."

He glanced at the moonlight and thought he heard another voice whisper something. A familiar female voice.

"This won't take long and it is the chance you've been looking for," said the strange male.

Xenos swam into darker water and in the distance saw a pale green creature with transparent flesh. Its internal organs and delicate pattern of veins and arteries were visible to the naked eye.

"I'm MaSal," the creature said. "My people live in what corporeal beings consider the world between life and death. My kind can observe you, but we can't communicate unless you're —"

"Dead?" Xenos said, his stomach tightening. Yet why did he still have a stomach if he was dead? Maybe it was an illusion, formed by his mind because he still couldn't comprehend the reality of life after death.

"You're not dead yet," MaSal told him. "You're in that place between. Don't give in, Xenos. If you do and let yourself die, you'll never have the chance to use the gift I'm about to give you."

"Why do you want to give me anything?"

"Because it was a great creation, only it was never used to its full potential."

"What is it?"

"First, you must tell me something. I've watched you and I know you and your crewmembers are considered outlaws in your world, yet you have a noble cause. If you were given the power to continue your fight without the chance of your ship being caught, would you use it wisely or would you become a worse tyrant than those you're fighting?"

Xenos took a moment to think. "Many believe I would become a tyrant."

"But what is the truth? What is in your heart? Do you want mass destruction or do you want selective retribution? Is revenge all you want or would you prefer reform?"

"I don't want mass destruction, but I won't lie and say I don't want payback."

"More than reform?"

"Reform would be the greatest revenge I could extract," Xenos said, hoping this was the right answer. Part of him even hoped it was a truthful answer.

"There is a legendary ship called *Eadna*. She was given a shield that could block any attack, no matter how powerful. This shield was made by an engineer who dedicated his life to creating it. When he found a captain worthy of using his gift—the captain of *Eadna*—he gave the shield freely."

"Why didn't he use it himself?" Xenos asked warily.

"Because such weapons were useless in his world, the world in which I exist. What your kind might call a spirit world."

"Were you the engineer?"

MaSal's thick lips curved into an awkward smile. "You're very perceptive. The problem with the shield was, though it could repel any attack, it placed a tremendous strain on the engines of an archaic ship like *Eadna*. Her engines exploded and she crashed. The shield is still intact, however, and it has been waiting for a new master.

I believe a ship of your modern time—such as your *Nameless*—is powerful enough to use the shield without a threat to herself. If you have this shield, you could use your ship to launch attacks instead of using a shuttle. *Nameless'* weapons are much more accurate and powerful than those of the shuttle, correct? Using her, you wouldn't run the risk of harming as many innocent people."

Xenos felt a rush of excitement, but he kept it under control. This was a crazy experience. He needed to take this slowly.

"MaSal!" snapped a female voice.

Three transparent creatures swam into view.

"KaSan," MaSal said. "What are you doing here?"

"That's the question I should ask you. Don't tell me you want to give the shield to another corporeal? Didn't you cause enough damage the last time?"

"But this time will be different. His ship is strong enough to—"

"We are not meant to interfere in the lives of corporeals. Even if we were, what makes you think he is worthy to possess such a device?"

Xenos closed his eyes and sighed, relishing the sensation of floating effortlessly in the calm, deep water.

"Xenos!" MaSal said with surprising sharpness. "Unless you want to die, don't lose yourself in our world."

Opening his eyes, Xenos once again focused on the creatures, noting they looked more solid than before. A twinge of fear shot through him when he realized these creatures were becoming solid because his life was slipping away.

MaSal glanced at Xenos. "If he doesn't use it properly, I will take full responsibility."

"We won't allow this," KaSan stated.

Ignoring her, MaSal said, "Xenos, you will find the remains of *Eadna* on the planet—"

The water swirled and MaSal and the others faded as another voice called his name. The current grew stronger and the sensations of calm and numbness faded, replaced by pain pulsing through him from head to toe.

He turned and looked behind him. The moonlit water in the distance seemed to beckon him.

"Xenos," called that beloved voice.

Moonlight.

* * * * *

"That's it," Trissa sighed deeply. She and Moonlight stood over the cot where Xenos lay, looking more like the skeleton of some ancient sea beast than the charismatic alien they knew. "The tank wasn't helping anymore. I don't expect he'll survive much longer."

"You're still giving him the meds, though?" Moonlight whispered.

"If he hasn't given up yet, then we can't," Trissa stated. "Zale and Tepidat have returned to Tydepth to get more of their meds. They're strong, but if they don't kill him, they'll probably work better on the bacteria than anything we have."

Earlier that day, Birch had flown to Tydepth to contact Zale to see if he could get some Tydisian treatments.

"I have to check on the other patients," Trissa said and headed for the door.

Moonlight nodded and sat beside Xenos, feeling completely numb. This was even worse than the Elite Execution. At least then she had felt confident about his survival, but this was hopeless.

"Moonlight," Trissa said from the doorway.

She turned to the medic. "Yes?"

"Keep talking to him." Trissa smiled slightly, sadly. "I know things haven't been smooth between you and me and that's mostly because you're right. I did have feelings for him, but I know he never felt that way about me."

"Trissa, I know he respects you."

She nodded. "But it's you he loves. I didn't think he was capable, but I was wrong. Tell him how you feel."

"I don't think it will do any good," Moonlight said softly. "He doesn't think much of feelings like love. I doubt he can hear me anyway."

"Either way, at least you'll have told him. If you don't, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. I know I would if I were you."

Trissa left and Moonlight turned back to Xenos.

She did love him. More than she'd ever loved anyone. The thought of losing him was too painful to contemplate, yet she'd learned from Xenos that everything must be met head-on. Just because you don't like something doesn't mean it's going to vanish because you refuse to deal with it.

Sighing, she moved from her chair to his cot. She rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"I'm going to tell you some things I'd never say if you were awake. Maybe you'll still hear me. Maybe deep down it's what you want to hear and it will get you to wake or maybe it will piss you off so much you'll have to get up and tell me off. You'll think what I'm about to say is weak, but it's not. In fact, it's stronger than anything in the universe. It's something no one can ever steal, destroy or change. I love you, Xenos. No matter what happens, no matter if we're together or apart, I will always, always love you."

Moonlight wasn't sure how long she lay there, listening to Xenos' shallow breathing and feeling the heat of his skin, once silky, now leathery, seep into her. Slowly she realized his respiration had evened out, becoming deep and regular. Hers seemed to match it.

Finally he whispered in a voice so soft and weak that she scarcely made out the words, "Foolish girl."

She smiled and lifted her head, meeting that beloved blue gaze. Caressing his cheek, she said, "I always was when it came to you."

"Moonlight. *Wassda*," he murmured.

Warmth spread through her. *Wassda* was Tydisian for beloved.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Obsession

Six Weeks Later

Moonlight was working out in the gym when Judson asked to speak with her privately. They stepped into an empty conference room at the end of the corridor.

"I want to know what you think about the way Xenos has been acting since recovering from the bacterial infection," Judson said.

She sighed deeply, knowing exactly why Judson asked. During his recovery in sick bay, Xenos had been even more emotionally detached than usual. While he had suffered physically, she doubted that was the reason for his behavior. She had seen him endure agonies that would break lesser beings, yet he had suffered no lingering effects.

As soon as he'd regained enough strength, he'd started working on his personal computer. Once his health had been fully restored, he'd become obsessed with whatever research he was pursuing to the point of neglecting his work in engineering.

Finally he confided in Moonlight, Trissa and Judson about his experience with the creature named MaSal. Moonlight knew by their initial silence and the expressions on their faces they were as stunned by his story as she was.

In spite of their arguments that what he'd experienced might have been a hallucination, he stood by his claim adamantly and made no secret to the entire crew about his new pursuit of MaSal's shield. He made it clear they would not be launching any further attacks for the cause until he located the shield.

Moonlight's worry had increased over the weeks, as he scarcely slept and what little sleep he got was troubled. He was the last person in the universe she would expect to lose his mind, but the crew seemed certain he had and she found it difficult to argue with them until his determination finally paid off.

It turned out the ship MaSal had spoken of, *Eadna*, was mentioned in several obscure fables on planets bordering The White Zone. The ship had supposedly existed in the era when The White Zone, then a thriving solar system, had been destroyed. The ship had been partially responsible for the tragedy that left The White Zone barren.

"He believes he's on to something," Moonlight said.

Judson met her gaze. "Do you believe what he said about creatures living in a world between life and death?"

"I believe in an afterlife. There have been other reports of experiences such as Xenos described."

"Mostly by people from backward cultures."

"Backward? Like humans who believe in spirituality?" she demanded.

"I meant no insult. I can see you believe —"

"Judson, it doesn't matter what I believe. It's what *he* believes. All I meant was it's possible that he did experience something."

"I'm not doubting that. Only the circumstances."

"I know he believes what he saw and heard was real. You know Xenos. Once he's made up his mind —"

"I *do* know him and that's what worries me. In all the years I've worked with him, he's never done anything this —"

"Crazy?" she suggested.

"He's done things as crazy, but with legitimate reasons. This is just —"

"Crazy," she repeated.

Judson looked uncomfortable. "I respect him, but he's become obsessed with looking for this mythic ship. Moonlight, even if it did exist at one time, it could have been laid to rest anywhere. Thousands of planets. Millions. It might even have been destroyed completely during the war. Personally, I have difficulty believing in an impenetrable shield. While we're flying around aimlessly, the Laetez and the Drapers have resumed relations and are once again in meetings for an alliance."

"If Xenos was thinking rationally, he'd never have left the galaxy long enough to allow that to happen. We need to get back on track. Even the crew is gravely concerned about his behavior. I believe there have been discussions about unseating Xenos and securing him for his own good. At least until his mind clears."

Her stomach clenched. "I know they've been unsettled, but they're talking mutiny?"

"They think he's losing his mind. No one wants to harm him, but if the entire ship rebels, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop them."

"I agree we need to talk to him. He's in our quarters doing research. He hasn't even been to the tank for a swim yet today," she said. "Let me take a quick shower and we can go to him."

* * * * *

When Moonlight and Judson arrived at Xenos' quarters, he was seated at his desk, his gaze fixed on the screen of his personal computer.

Without glancing at them, he said, "Yes? What do you want?"

"We'd like to talk to you, Xenos."

"Really? Santos Gama, the last time you and a member of this crew approached me for a private conversation, he turned traitor."

Moonlight glanced at Judson and saw apprehension and annoyance on his face.

"I've never been less than honest with you, Xenos."

Xenos smiled humorlessly. "Whenever you call me Xenos, I know you have a major issue. Come over. Take a seat."

Judson sat in the empty chair across from Xenos' desk and Moonlight perched on the edge of the bed.

"Xenos, we're concerned about your pursuit of this mystery ship," Moonlight began.

"It's not a mystery ship. She was called *Eadna* and she existed."

"Sir, you've placed all our plans on hold," Judson stated. "While we linger here in The White Zone, the Laetez and the Drapers are making plans and opening more private labs without fear of retribution. And I don't believe they've stopped their pursuit of us. Yashel is probably —"

"Of course they haven't stopped their pursuit," Xenos snapped. "Like me, Yashel won't stop until he gets what he wants. That's why we need to have the shield MaSal created."

Moonlight and Judson glanced at each other in concern.

"What's going on?" Xenos asked, observing their exchange.

"The crew is becoming unsettled," Judson said. "They want to move on."

"Are you trying to warn me of a mutiny or are you making a threat?" Xenos asked calmly, yet Moonlight saw the spark of fury in his eyes.

"We're trying to tell you that while we believe you think you saw something, there has been no evidence to show that we can locate *Eda*," Judson said.

"*Eadna*," Xenos corrected, then continued in his softest, most dangerous voice, "You think I imagined it and the crew agrees?"

"Xenos," Moonlight whispered. "Everybody feels that way. It's becoming dangerous to stay here. You know that."

"Our recon pilots have seen Laetez security shuttles in The White Zone. While you've been buried in research, we've been avoiding them," Judson stated.

"As I ordered you to."

For a moment, all three fell silent. Moonlight knew Xenos understood the situation must be grave for Judson to bring the entire crew into the discussion.

"I'm not completely blind to what's been going on," Xenos said. "Nor am I insane. I realize the crew wants to leave and I know there is danger in staying here much longer. However, we won't have to."

"What do you mean?" Moonlight asked, getting to her feet.

"Judson, inform the crew that we will remain in The White Zone for no longer than one more week. If I haven't located *Eadna* by then, we will resume our original plans."

Judson looked a bit reluctant, but nodded.

"You may go," Xenos said, turning back to his computer. Judson and Moonlight headed for the door and Xenos added, "Not you, Santos Gama."

She turned back to him just as the door closed behind Judson.

"Xenos," she said softly and approached him.

"One moment and we'll talk."

"Not in a moment. Now." She grasped his face and tried to force him to look at her. At first he refused to move, then he turned to her, his gaze burning. "Xenos, what has happened to you? I mean, you've always been single-minded, but this is the worst I've ever seen you. You barely sleep or eat. You hardly look at me anymore and you barely talk to anyone."

"Don't you comprehend the significance of what I'm doing? Don't any of you realize that if we have this shield for *Nameless*, she will be almost invincible? There will be no more issues like what happened at the docking bay. We won't lose lives as we did when we sank on Phanteppe. This might be the most important thing that can happen for our cause, except for the end of ACT."

"You have searched everywhere for information about the ship. All you've found are a few legends."

"MaSal was about to tell me where to find it."

"I know. When I called you out of the coma, I ruined everything. You'll never forgive me for that, will you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I was dying. If not for the sound of your voice, I might have surrendered to death."

"*Wassda*. That's what you called me," she murmured, moisture welling in her eyes. She blinked it back, knowing tears would never sway him.

"*Wassda*," he repeated and caressed her face. "I could spend a lifetime searching for *Eadna*, but obviously that won't help us right now. No. There is one other way. I wanted to avoid it, but I see now that I can't."

She didn't like the sound of his voice or the look in his eyes. "What other way?"

"I was near death when MaSal contacted me. If I return to that same location in The White Zone and hover on the brink of death, there's a chance he'll find me again and tell me where to find the ship."

Fear nearly overcame her. She'd had enough of seeing him near death. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"There is a Tydisian drug that will send me to the brink of death. If the antidote is administered within a certain amount of time, it will bring me back."

"Definitely?"

"There's a very good chance."

"Well, that's not nearly good enough for me!" She began pacing the room. "Xenos, no member of this crew will help you with this. They already think you're a danger to them, yourself and the cause."

"I realize that. But what about you? Your religion includes a spirit world. I've observed your rituals. Do you truly believe or are you merely giving lip service?"

Her fear turned to anger. "This has nothing to do with my faith, but with your obsession! I have watched you risk your life before, but the reasons were understandable. Risking your life to save this ship on Phanteppe made sense, but it makes no sense to take such a chance for something that might have been part of a hallucination."

"A hallucination," he repeated softly, his eyes ablaze.

"Listen to me." She knelt by his chair, took one of his hands in both of hers and squeezed it tightly while staring into his eyes. "You were deathly ill. You had a high fever."

"I don't need a recap, Santos Gama." He withdrew his hand from hers and gently cupped her chin. "I'm glad to know how you feel about the situation."

"I'm not going to let you risk your life again. Not for this."

"Don't worry. I'm not eager to risk it. That's why I asked for a week. It will give me time to consider alternatives before I make a decision."

"Xenos—" she began, but he bent and silenced her with a kiss.

She rose and he picked her up. He carried her to the bed and placed her upon it.

"Santos Gama, you're right. I have neglected you. Let me make up for it."

Torn between concern and lust, she watched him undress. Was he lying to her about giving more thought to his idea of initiating another near death experience? In the morning, she would warn Judson of his plan, though she doubted any crew member would help him do it. Maybe the others were right. Some time in confinement where he would be forced to rest would help him after all. Though physically healed, she knew his recent experiences combined with past emotional wounds could make even a man like Xenos vulnerable.

He finished undressing, baring his gorgeous body to her gaze. Moonlight hurriedly removed her clothes and lay on her back, spreading her legs to welcome him. He seemed in no rush, however, and stretched out beside her, one hand fondling her breast while he covered her neck with soft, warm kisses.

A moan escaped her as he dipped his tongue into her ear and teased it with feathery strokes, then he trailed his tongue down her neck and ever-so-gently scraped her shoulder with his teeth. When they'd first met, his animal-like canines had frightened her. She had gotten over that quickly enough when he used them to tease her, never harming her with them. Those teeth could have torn her apart, but instead gave her pleasure, not to mention she found the look of them incredibly sexy. So white and sharp. So—

She gave a little gasp when he began tonguing her nipple and stroking her pussy. His fingers swirled inside her before he began circling her clit. The thin, delicate

webbing between his fingers brushed her ultra-sensitive nub and a quiver of pure desire rippled through her.

"Santos Gama," he murmured. "So beautiful."

"Xenos." She stroked his smooth head and ran her fingertip down the length of his nose. She could never grow tired of touching him, hearing his voice, just being with him.

Xenos moved even further down her body and swirled his tongue over her clit. Stroking her inner thighs, he lapped her, his wet tongue rolling over her soft, sensitive flesh. His hands slid beneath her and kneaded her buttocks. Tilting her pelvis upward, he moved his face down and thrust his tongue inside her.

Moaning again, Moonlight let pleasure overtake her completely. She felt the tickle of his tongue inside her, the way he took his time exploring her. Then he returned to her clit. Slowly he licked it with upward strokes and used the very tip of his tongue to caress the ultra-sensitive side. He lapped while squeezing her bottom and gently sweeping his finger along the indentation of her buttocks. Holding her firmly, he licked her to the edge of orgasm.

Pausing a moment, he let his breath tease her clit.

The pleasure of being with him never ceased to amaze her. Panting his name, she gripped his shoulders hard, her body arching against him.

Chuckling softly, he loomed above her, his warm, silken body covering hers, and kissed her neck. The tip of his swollen cock pushed against her wet pussy. Inch-by-wonderful-inch, he filled her. Gasping with pleasure, she wrapped her legs around his waist and gripped his shoulders, loving the feel of rock-hard muscles beneath his silken flesh. She closed her eyes and relished the nearness of their bodies, the sensation of his lips and tongue on her flesh.

"Oh, Xenos, please," she whispered as he pumped into her. Her legs tightened even more around his sleek body while he thrust again and again.

It seemed like forever since they'd made love like this and her body cried out for his.

Higher and higher she soared, pushed toward ecstasy with every stroke of his big, hard cock.

"Please, please. I'm so close, Xenos. So close," she murmured, her hips jerking upward to meet his frantic thrusts. With a sob of pleasure, she exploded in an orgasm so long and intense it bordered on painful.

As he came, every muscle of his beautiful body tense and straining, he gasped, "Wassda!"

"Oh, my love," she said breathlessly. "I love you, Xenos. I love you so much."

He collapsed on top of her and after a moment rolled onto his side, pulling her close to his chest. Cuddled in his arms, Moonlight drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

Yashel awoke with a headache, his back and neck stiff from where he'd sprawled on the uncomfortable seat in the cargo bin of a transportation shuttle.

Then he recalled the events that led him here. He'd called Sola at her off-base apartment and known immediately something was wrong in spite of how she tried to persuade him otherwise. Upon entering her apartment, he'd been rendered unconscious.

Sola! He glanced around and noticed his lover on the floor a short distance away.

"Sola!" he shouted and tried to spring to his feet, but he was tied in a seat with time release bonds set to open in ten minutes.

The cockpit door opened and Xenos stepped into the cargo bay, wearing a serene smile that somehow seemed evil on his elongated blue face.

"You're awake. Excellent."

Yashel felt his temper rise, almost blinding him. He struggled to control his breathing. "I should have known it was you. What the hell do you want this time, Xenos? What have you done with Sola?"

"She's been rendered unconscious with a drug that might prove deadly if she is not revived in time."

"You fucking bastard." Yashel once again tried to spring from the seat. The bonds creaked beneath his violent efforts. "You can kill us, but the Laetez will never give you what you want!"

Oddly enough, Yashel had lately been wondering if he and Xenos didn't want the same thing. After the incident on Phanteppe, Re Vic had welcomed Yashel back into the fold. Though the rebels had once again escaped, Yashel's order to shoot the ship down over the lake full of toxic waste had proven his loyalties were truly with the Laetez government. His position as Superior had been restored and he had been privy to information and meetings with the Drapers. It was only then that Yashel began to truly understand Xenos' plight.

Yashel had attempted to sway the Laetez and the Drapers toward fair laws for ACT products, but their only interest was in gaining power for themselves. Plans for private labs grew and changes in laws for government regulated labs were proposed.

"I have no desire to kill you or Sola," Xenos continued. "We have little time, so let me explain quickly. I am going to give myself an injection that will kill me. Within the next fifteen minutes, I want you to revive me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Yashel snarled, looking at him as if he was insane.

"Once you revive me, I will revive Sola."

"You'll revive her now, you fucking freak!"

Xenos raised an eyebrow. "What's the old Earth phrase I've heard Moonlight use on occasion? If that's not the pot calling the kettle black."

"It's just like you to abduct a woman!"

This time Xenos looked genuinely shocked. "That's coming from the man who hijacked a shuttle with Moonlight on it?"

"I said a woman," Yashel snarled, "not a rebel whore."

For a moment, anger flashed in Xenos' eyes and Yashel tasted a hint of triumph. Then the outlaw grinned evilly and said, "Time is wasting, so I will say goodbye. The medication to revive me is here."

Xenos pointed to a small black container on the floor. He knelt and gave himself an injection.

"Xenos! Wait!" Yashel growled.

It was too late. The bastard lay on his back and sank into unconsciousness.

It seemed to take forever before Yashel's restraints unlocked. He sprang to his feet and hurried to Sola. Thankfully, she still had a pulse.

He needed to revive her, but where had the blue bastard hidden the meds? Crawling over to Xenos, he did a thorough search, but found no medication on him. The container of meds meant for Xenos was clearly labeled. It would revive a Tydisian, but would kill a full-blooded human or Laetez.

Every muscle tense with rage, he began searching the ship as quickly as he could. There was a locked storage bin. Most likely her meds were in there, but he needed tools. Every shuttle had tools for repair.

The time now seemed to speed by as he tried to find tools. There were none aboard. Xenos might have anticipated Yashel looking for them and put them outside. According to the shuttle monitors, the atmosphere outside could support him. He raced out and glanced around, seeing nothing but barren rocks. A glance at his wrist spec told him he had no choice but to revive Xenos. At least once Sola was safe again he'd have the pleasure of killing the bastard.

He turned so abruptly that his head smashed against the shuttle ramp and everything went black.

* * * * *

Moonlight sat beside Judson in the cockpit of a transportation shuttle, her nerves close to shattering. By now she should have been accustomed to excitement, especially the bad kind, but it seemed she wasn't that jaded yet.

When Moonlight awoke that morning, Xenos had been gone from *Nameless*. He left her a message stating he had a plan for getting the information about *Eadna* and would be back within the day. Frantic with worry, she went to Judson and learned that Xenos had also left him a time released message. When Judson was finally able to retrieve it,

they found Xenos had instructed him to meet him in the asteroid-filled area of The White Zone where he had his near-death experience.

Moonlight knew he had gone through with his crazy plan after all and she'd convinced Judson to allow her to accompany him, unable to wait aboard *Nameless* for him to report back if Xenos was dead or alive.

"I've located his shuttle," Judson said, maneuvering to land.

They hurried out and found the shuttle hatch open, Yashel unconscious on the ground. While Judson stooped to check him, Moonlight rushed into the shuttle.

Terror nearly overcame her when she saw both Xenos and Sola sprawled on the floor. She knelt beside Xenos and checked his pulse. Finding none, she nearly panicked, then recalled that Tydisians could slow their pulse to two beats per minute while in hibernation. Still, she realized he wasn't in hibernation, but had gone through with his plan.

She picked up the container of meds resting near his head and read the label. Thankful for her crash-course in emergency medical training during the crisis on Phanteppe, she administered the antidote. Trembling, she sat and waited for him to react.

"Come on, Xenos," she pleaded, her voice quivering. "Wake up, damn you!"

His eyes opened with a suddenness that took her by surprise and he gasped.

"Thank the gods," she sighed with relief and helped him to a sitting position.

"Moonlight," he said, his voice husky. A smile touched his lips, then he turned toward Sola and pushed himself to his feet. His steps seemed a bit uncertain, as he wasn't yet fully recovered from his stupor. He walked to a compartment at the back of the shuttle, unlocked it and removed another drug that he administered to Sola.

"Xenos, what's going on?" Moonlight demanded.

"What happened to Yashel?" he asked.

Just as Sola began to stir, Yashel rushed in followed by Judson.

"Xenos, you bastard!" Yashel grasped him by the shirt, dragged him to his feet and punched him so hard he slammed against the wall, blood gushing from his lip.

Yashel lunged at Xenos again. Judson reached for him but Yashel elbowed the redhead in the face.

Better prepared for the next attack, Xenos dodged Yashel's fists and kicked him in the stomach, sending him staggering. Once again he moved to attack Xenos, but Moonlight pulled her stun pistol, stopping him mid-step.

Xenos looked surprisingly calm.

"Moonlight, don't do anything you'll regret," Sola spoke softly.

"I won't do anything if Yashel gets control of himself."

"Xenos is the one you had better watch out for," Sola continued. "Do you think he cares about you? He only cares about himself and his cause."

"Sola, you're in no position to argue," Moonlight said. "Get over by Yashel where I can see you."

"He's a criminal, Moonlight," Sola continued, but did as Moonlight ordered.

"No. He's a revolutionary."

"He's crazy. That's what he is," Yashel snapped.

"Well," Xenos grinned, "everyone seems to be in agreement on that."

If possible, Yashel appeared to tense even more and growled, "If Sola had died, Xenos—"

"No one died and you've both served your purpose well," Xenos said. "There is a time set lock on this shuttle's engines. It will release in one hour and you'll be free to go."

Sola narrowed her eyes. "You're not going to kill us?"

"Execution is Yashel's specialty," Xenos stated. He took Moonlight's hand and left the shuttle, Judson behind them.

Once in the shuttle that Judson and Moonlight had arrived in, Xenos said, "Doug, we're moving out of The White Zone today. MaSal has given me the location of *Eadna's* resting place."

* * * * *

As soon as Xenos, Moonlight and Judson returned to *Nameless*, they headed out of The White Zone toward the Delilah Sector.

MaSal had directed Xenos to travel to the planet Lasseh. No one on the ship spoke the Lassen tongue, so Moonlight suggested they travel to the Delilah Sector so she could have her translation implant upgraded.

According to MaSal, Lasseh was a poor, backward world, yet the people had a tight code of honor. Xenos had promised MaSal he would procure the shield peacefully. Direct communication through a living interpreter instead of a portable translator device would improve their chances of gaining the Lassens' trust.

The upgrade took less than an hour, but they remained near the medical facility until the next day to be sure Moonlight recovered fully from the procedure.

During the trip back through The White Zone toward the edge of unknown space where Lasseh was located, Trissa ran more tests on Moonlight's implant to add to her research.

"How does it feel?" asked the medic.

"Great. I'm still practicing the pronunciation and getting the flow of the Lassen tongue, but the implant feels good."

"You must truly believe what Xenos experienced was real."

Moonlight held Trissa's gaze. "I do."

"I hope he's right."

"He is," Moonlight said with confidence. "I just hope the shield is all he hopes it will be."

The journey to Lasseh took nearly two days. When *Nameless* arrived, scans indicated the wreckage of an ancient warship in a cave on an icy island.

"With *Nameless'* lazars, we'll be able to get to the ship easily," Judson said from where he stood near Xenos and Moonlight on the bridge.

"Before we do that, we'll speak to the leader of the main settlement."

"They're signaling us now, Sir," said a crewman. "Using a rudimentary spec."

"Transfer to the main spec," Xenos ordered.

Seconds later, a burly humanoid creature covered in a dense coat of ash brown hair appeared on the monitor. He spoke slowly, in a gruff voice.

Tapping into her implant, Moonlight was able to translate easily.

"He's asking who we are and what our business is," she said.

"Tell him we are travelers from the Laetez home world looking for an ancient ship from our galaxy," Xenos stated.

Moonlight did as he asked and after a brief exchange, the Lassen male, named Prince Rojeerh, gave them permission to land.

Nameless docked on an icy field just outside Prince Rojeerh's city. Xenos and Moonlight agreed to meet with the Lassens while the others remained on board. Lassen guards with primitive rifles surrounded the ship.

A guide had been sent and as they walked through the frigid city, Moonlight realized just how much these people lacked. Their homes were old-fashioned, made from wood and heated by fireplaces. There was a common house in the center of the village that ran by a more advanced generator, as did the stone fortress where the Prince resided.

Once inside a drafty hall, Rojeerh greeted them. He invited them to a meal during which Xenos explained what he wanted.

The Lassens talked business, but also insisted on several hours of festivities, as they preferred to observe their visitors in a social setting before deciding whether or not to trust them.

At first Moonlight rather enjoyed the visit, but as the hours passed, her implant began to cause difficulties. She had never used it for such an extended period of time and developed the worst headache she'd ever experienced. Only when she excused herself to use the lavatory, where she promptly vomited, did she begin to suspect something was seriously wrong.

Finally recovered enough to join the others, she returned to the hall.

"Are you all right?" Xenos asked. She must have looked as bad as she felt, because he actually appeared worried.

"Just a headache."

"Can you continue? I believe the negotiations are almost complete."

Moonlight nodded, even that slight motion nearly making her sick again. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. It felt like a hot band was squeezing her skull.

"Are you certain you can continue?" he asked.

"Yes. Just...let's get on with it."

An hour later, the bargain was complete. Xenos would be allowed to uncover the ship and remove the shield in return for providing the Prince with food and medical supplies for his people.

On the walk back to the ship, Xenos said, "That was excellent work, Santos Gama. If not for you, things wouldn't have gone this smoothly."

Moonlight felt too ill to reply. Her vision turned darker as her headache become unbearable. The last thing she remembered was reaching for Xenos before she toppled onto the icy ground.

* * * * *

Xenos paced in Trissa's office, every muscle in his body tense. He should have realized something was dreadfully wrong with Moonlight, but no. He had been too obsessed with procuring the shield to allow anything to thwart him, even the health of a woman who had risked her life for him on numerous occasions.

If she didn't recover, he would never forgive himself for this.

His gaze turned to the door as Trissa stepped in.

"How is she?" he asked.

The medic sighed. "Recovering. I had to remove the implant, however. Excessive use caused internal bleeding and she had a better chance of survival without the implant."

"But she will survive?" he asked, his stomach clenching even more.

"Yes. She's already improved. All she needs is rest."

"May I see her?"

"Of course." Trissa gestured for him to enter the recovery room.

Xenos strode in and approached the cot where Moonlight lay, her face pale and eyes closed.

Not wanting to disturb her, he pulled a chair beside her and sat, satisfied to watch her breathe. He'd never felt this way about anyone. Love like this was a curse and a gift. He knew he didn't deserve her, that he wasn't capable of providing her with the life and emotional connection she should have, but he did love her.

She opened her eyes and smiled slightly. "Xenos."

"Wassda," he said softly and caressed her cheek ever so gently. "How do you feel?"

"Better. Just tired."

"Rest then."

"Did we get the shield yet?"

"The engineer is installing it as we speak."

"Why aren't you helping him? You're the engineering expert."

"He can handle it. I have a more important duty to my star translator."

She closed her eyes again, but not before he noticed tears gleaming in them. "Not anymore," she whispered. "The implant is gone."

"It doesn't matter."

"But —"

"Just sleep. We'll talk more when you're recovered."

She nodded and again seemed to drift off. Xenos brushed her mouth with a kiss. He sat with her for nearly an hour, then left, ordering Trissa to call him right away with any changes.

When he arrived at engineering, the shield was almost fully installed, and while he was excited over the prospects, it paled when compared to what he felt for the woman in sick bay.

* * * * *

A week later, Moonlight had recovered enough to move from sick bay back to her quarters. She should have been happy about her recovery, since Trissa had said she could have easily died because of the implant. Yet Moonlight couldn't help feeling that something was wrong. Xenos had been uncharacteristically gentle with her, never failing to visit her each day and treating her like she was something fragile. It just wasn't like him to act like that. Her fear grew when she realized that maybe he was preparing to let her go. Without her implant, she was no longer a necessary member of the crew. She was a human and a civilian. Xenos wasn't the sort of man to drag along excess baggage.

She expressed her fears to Trissa and also to Birch, who visited her often. Though they didn't come out and say she was right, she knew they also believed Xenos could very well discard her, not because he didn't feel for her, but because his reason always overruled his emotions.

She prayed they were wrong. She could handle being an intergalactic criminal and she could endure an implant gone bad, but she couldn't bear the thought of leaving the ship that had become her home and the only man she had ever truly loved.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A beginning in the End

Xenos was in engineering, putting the finishing touches on his long-neglected private project when Birch and Trissa contacted him on his wrist spec and asked to meet with him.

"In a minute," he growled. "Come down to engineering."

After making an adjustment on a monitor, he sat back on his heels and sighed. The weapon was now complete and could, if necessary, destroy a planet the size of Phanteppe, leaving behind no debris. No life.

Between the shield and this weapon, they would be virtually unstoppable, yet he knew that would not bring an end to the war of wills. A physical battle would not stop those in power from creating and exploiting ACT products. He could only hope to find some way of making government leaders see reason.

He gave a snort of laughter. That was like asking for a miracle.

A short time later, he stepped into main engineering and found Birch and Trissa awaiting him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We want to talk about Moonlight," Trissa said.

Fear struck Xenos and he demanded, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. She's fine, except she's afraid of being thrown off this ship now that she no longer has a translation implant," the medic said, an accusing look in her eyes.

"Sir, she's an excellent translator, even without the implant," Birch told him. "We can use her skills. This ship needs two translators."

"I don't mean to speak out of place," Trissa said. "But you can't simply discard her."

"Wait a moment," Xenos said, his voice commanding.

They fell silent, their gazes shifting rather nervously.

"First of all, you have both overstepped your bounds."

"But —"

"Quiet, Medic. And secondly, I have no intention of putting Santos Gama off this ship. Where did you get an idea like that?"

Trissa sighed. "From Moonlight. It's what she believes."

"I see," Xenos said quietly. "I will talk to her."

"She's ready to return to her quarters today. You might like to escort her —"

"Thank you, Medic. Is she ready to go now?"

"Yes."

He nodded and headed toward the elevator.

On the way, he considered what Trissa and Birch had told him. The idea of putting Moonlight off the ship had never entered his mind, but this did confirm that in spite of how he had changed because of her, he was still unskilled in expressing his affection to a human female. They weren't very perceptive. He would have to tell her outright how he felt.

In sick bay, Moonlight was dressed and just about to leave in the company of an assistant medic.

"I will escort her," Xenos stated.

The assistant nodded and Moonlight glanced at him with wide eyes. "I thought you were working on your project and we're about to launch the first mission using *Nameless* and her shield."

"Accompanying you home won't take long and we need to talk."

Her face froze. "What do you mean home?"

"I mean our quarters. Come."

He offered her his hand and she took it.

"Are you able to walk?" he asked.

"Yes." She chuckled. "I'm perfectly fine. Trissa said I'll only need another week or so resting in our quarters, then I can resume work. That is, if I still have a job."

"Yes," he said. "I wanted to discuss that."

He felt her hand tense in his and she looked so apprehensive he almost felt guilty. They walked down the corridor toward the elevator. Once aboard, he said, "I'm told you believe I'll send you away?"

"My implant is gone."

"You're still a translator, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I don't know as many languages now. I'm just like anyone else. Nothing outstanding."

"On the contrary, Moonlight Santos Gama. You are the most outstanding woman I have ever known." He stopped the elevator between floors and turned to her, his intense blue gaze on hers. His heart pounded as if he'd swum for miles against the tide. He'd never been this open before and it was more difficult than he'd imagined. Taking her face in his hands he said, "I never thought anything would mean more to me than my cause. Until now."

She smiled, her eyes gleaming. "Xenos..."

"Unless you want to leave *Nameless*, I would never let you go."

"Oh, Xenos." She embraced him tightly and for a long moment they stood, locked in each other's arms.

For the first time in his life, he didn't feel alone. He knew no matter what happened, he and Moonlight Santos Gama would always belong to each other.

* * * * *

Yashel sat behind the desk in his office, his fingers pressed against his closed eyelids in an attempt to relieve his nagging headache. The past several weeks had been worse than any nightmare.

Though it seemed impossible, Xenos had apparently discovered a technology that provided his ship with an impenetrable shield. No warship had been able to breach it, even in combined attacks. Tracking them had also been useless. They could navigate areas such as The White Zone with disturbing ease, knowing the best places to lose those on their trail. The task force assigned to locate the rebels had only begun to chart the areas which Xenos' people called home.

The attacks on private labs were frequent, destroying most of the off-planet labs and several on the Laetez home world. Fortunately, Xenos displayed at least some concern for civilians and often allowed evacuations. Not that Yashel wanted innocent lives taken, but the arrogance and confidence that allowed Xenos to order evacuations frustrated him beyond belief. These rebels should be striking like proverbial thieves in the night and cowering in fear, not calling the shots.

He gave a snort of humorless laughter and shook his head. Right. In the civilized world, all the killing and torture should be done legally.

The Drapers, fearing Xenos would turn his wrath on them, had again publicly cooled their relations with the Laetez.

Yashel knew they still made secret plans. He'd been privy to them and he didn't like what he saw. When it came to creating abominations and torturing for personal gain, Drapers surpassed even Laetez and humans. Though he had always believed in the law, Yashel began to understand Xenos more with each passing day.

Chief Re Lord had ordered heavy defenses around Phanteppe. That little planet had more protection than the Laetez home world itself. Since according to the treaty with the Cuthtez, military wasn't allowed there, all guards were undercover.

The Cuthtez weren't stupid however, and had not only expressed concern about the "toxic waste" in Laetez territory, but had also ordered more "scientists" of their own to be stationed there.

The whole situation reeked of war.

Worst of all, Yashel had accompanied Re Lord to Phanteppe recently and learned the full horror of what was going on there. In combination with knowledge gained from Draper scientists, the Laetez had created an underground lab that now housed biological weapons capable of wiping out almost every aquatic species in the galaxy, as well as humans and Cuthtez. If they could destroy the Cuthtez, that meant they could also destroy themselves.

Yashel had been privy to meetings with Chief Re Lord, Prime Re Vic and several other officials. They soon intended to launch attacks against the Tydisians, the Cuthtez and humans, threatening subjugation or death. This was not something Yashel wanted and he knew it wasn't something most of the Laetez people would want. This complete disregard for life came directly from Re Vic, Re Lord and their followers who happened to be in positions of power.

Soft tapping on the door roused him from his disturbing thoughts.

"Yes?" he said.

Sola stepped in and approached. The concern in her gaze told her he must look as bad as he felt. Endless days of worry and a string of sleepless nights were finally catching up with him.

"Another headache?" she asked, gently smoothing hair from his forehead.

He shrugged. "Did you have something to tell me?"

"More bad news, I'm afraid. There was another attack on Aurora Base. The rebels disabled two warships and destroyed the power supply to the lab. It's out of commission indefinitely."

Sighing, he nodded.

"Yashel, I'm..."

He glanced at her, seeing fear in her eyes he'd never witnessed before. Sola could be soft and gentle, yet she was a warrior through to her soul. Few things frightened her, but he knew Xenos did.

He pushed his chair away from the desk, grasped her waist and tugged her onto his lap. "You're what?"

"What's he going to do when he destroys all the labs?" she said, looping her arms around his neck. "Do you think it's really justice he's after? He's so angry. So...uncontrollable."

"But what if he's right?"

Their gazes locked and she nodded slowly. "I've thought about that too. That's another reason why I came in. Chief Re Lord wants to meet with you again in an hour."

"All right. Sola, take a walk with me outside. We need to talk."

They left his office and walked hand in hand along the beach, gazing at the moonlit sea.

"Sola, I'm going to tell you something I never thought I'd say," he began.

"Yes, Yashel?"

Gazing at her, he noticed a spark of hope in her eyes. No doubt she knew what he was thinking. She usually did. That's why he loved her so much. Their minds and souls had always been one.

"Re Lord and Re Vic are out of control. I fear, and I'm not the only one, that their quest for power will destroy the Laetez. We've never shied away from battle, but never in our history have we wiped out entire species."

"I know," she whispered. "What exactly are you saying, Yashel?"

He paused, sighed deeply and shook his head. "I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I think we need Xenos."

"Xenos," she murmured, closing her eyes for a moment. When they opened again, she looked at him with a determined expression. "I think you're right. His ship is probably the only one with a chance of destroying the lab on Phanteppe. That's what you're intending, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"But the problem is, how the hell can we destroy it without releasing all that deadly bacteria into the galaxy?"

"I have to arrange a meeting with Xenos. Something tells me Zale will still be able to contact him."

"Then you have to do it."

"Tell me the truth, Sola. How do you feel about this? I've just made you part of a conspiracy against the Laetez government."

"I know, but remember, I'm half human. If Earth is destroyed, my mother's family goes with it. I don't want that to happen."

"My mother was human too," he said quietly. "I was raised to be Laetez, but it's only part of who I am. If the Laetez and the Drapers succeed in taking over the galaxy, who knows how far they'll go, not only with ACT, but with—"

"We need to stop this," she stated. "If Xenos is our only hope, then..."

"Then we'll have to cut a deal with the devil, as the old Earth saying goes."

* * * * *

Moonlight's gaze fixed on Xenos' steely blue one as she shifted her stance to avoid his punches and kicks. Seeing an opening in his defenses, she attacked with a sharp roundhouse to his head, but she wasn't quite fast enough. He caught her leg and swept her other foot out from under her. She landed with a grunt and his hot, hard body covered hers.

"Had enough?" he asked against her lips.

"Enough practice? Yes. Enough of you, not yet."

He loosed his hold on her and she slipped her arms around his neck as their mouths met in a hungry kiss.

Closing her eyes, Moonlight enjoyed the warm, wet swipes of his tongue against hers and the sensation of his steely chest pressing against her breasts. His cock stiffened and she shifted her hips upward, rubbing her pelvis against him.

"You are the most distracting woman," he said, nuzzling her neck and covering it with kisses. He slid down the strap of her tank top so he could lick and nip her shoulder.

"I love working out with you," she breathed and wrapped her legs around his waist. He was so lean and hard, perfect to the touch. Everything about him turned her on so much that she could scarcely believe she had once found him ugly.

Taking her lower lip between his sharp teeth, he bit gently and she arched against him, holding him even tighter.

His spec beeped and he cursed softly before answering the call. "What is it, Judson?"

"We've received a message from Tepidat and Zale."

"I don't give a damn about Zale," Xenos growled. "What does Tepidat want?"

"He wants to meet with you. Said it's urgent."

"Meet me in my ready room," Xenos said and turned off the spec. Glancing at Moonlight, he said, "We'll have to postpone this interlude."

"All right." She kissed him twice more, the first time quickly, but the second longer.

His tongue slid between her lips, thrusting tenderly before he broke the kiss and stood.

"What do you think Tepidat and Zale want?" she asked.

"We're about to find out. Come with me."

* * * * *

Several hours later, Moonlight found herself once again seated in Tepidat's home along with Xenos, Zale, Yashel and Sola. To her surprise, DrkMari and two of his advisors were also present. The turn of events was almost too crazy to be true, but so was the report Yashel brought them.

"If what Yashel and Sola tells us is true, then we have no choice but to act," DrkMari said. "The Laetez nearly destroyed Tydepth once. We leaders will not allow that to happen again."

"Humans will be a major ally in this," Zale said. "They might not have the physical strength or aggression of the Laetez, but they are cunning and vicious. Once they find out Re Vic has screwed them—"

"They'll threaten war," Xenos interrupted, "not to mention it will become intergalactic knowledge that the Laetez, and quite possibly the Drapers, are seeking ways to poison entire planets."

"Xenos, your ship is the only one that can get close enough to destroy the lab on Phanteppe. There's security everywhere," Yashel said.

Moonlight studied him carefully, looking for any sign that he was lying or telling the truth. Though she hated the idea of trusting Yashel, something in her gut told her he was actually being sincere.

"And why should I happen to believe this fairytale that you've suddenly seen reason and decided to join us?" Xenos asked, his expression aloof.

"I still don't agree with all your methods, Xenos, but at this point what choice do either of us have? It's one chance to expose Re Vic's corruption and save not only ACT victims, but other planets as well. I thought you wanted to stop the corruption within ACT?"

"I want to stop ACT itself, but I suppose for now this is the next best thing."

"The problem is, how can we destroy the lab without releasing the toxins?" Sola said.

Zale drew a deep breath and released it slowly, his gaze meeting Xenos'. "There is a way, isn't there, Xenos?"

Everyone stared at Xenos in question but Moonlight already knew what Zale was referring to. Xenos' secret weapon. The one that could possibly destroy an entire planet.

"What is he talking about?" Tepidat asked.

"Xenos, if you use your weapon, what will happen to the toxins?" Zale pressed.

After a pause, Xenos said, "If I use the weapon on a planet the size of Phanteppe, there will be nothing left. The biological weapons, as well as everything else on the planet, will be destroyed."

"You have such a weapon?" DrkMari asked, his eyes blazing with anger. "Even when you came to us asking sanctuary, knowing how we feel—"

"Please, Sir," Tepidat interrupted softly. "I realize this weapon is evil, however it is evil we are battling. From what I can see, this is the only way."

Yashel had been staring at Xenos, unfaltering. "If you have this weapon, why didn't you use it on the home world?"

"Why should I do that?" Xenos asked, meeting Yashel's gaze. "It was never my intention to harm innocent people, only expose ACT for what it truly is—a legal method of torture."

"Then will you help us?" Sola asked.

For some reason, that woman got under Moonlight's skin. Turning to her, she demanded, "Stooped to asking a criminal for help, Sola?"

"I thought you said he's a revolutionary, Moonlight?" she asked with equal contempt.

"Ladies, please," DrkMari snapped. "We are talking war here. We needn't argue amongst ourselves."

One of DrkMari's advisors said, "We should speak with the leader of the Cuthtez and the Sacchites. Warn them about what is happening so they can evacuate Phanteppe."

Xenos' brow furrowed in thought before he said, "If I'm to do this, I need to know you're telling me the truth, Yashel, and that this is not some sort of trap."

"How can we trap a ship with an impenetrable shield?" Yashel demanded.

Xenos narrowed his eyes at him and Yashel curled his lips and asked, "What do you propose?"

"During the attack, I want Sola on my ship," Xenos stated.

"Never," Yashel snapped. "I will go with you if I must, but not her."

"No. I realize you would sacrifice yourself if necessary, but you would not allow her to be harmed. When it's over, I'll release her and no one will ever know she was there voluntarily. She won't be accused of treason should our plan fail and Re Lord and Re Vic remain in power."

"I will not let her to go."

"Either that, *Superior* Yashel, or do your own dirty work. You know the lab needs to be destroyed or so you say. Prove it and give me the insurance I need."

"I'm willing to go on Xenos' ship," Sola stated.

"Sola, there is no way —"

"It's my decision, Yashel."

He glared at her. "No. It's not. I am your commanding officer and I order you not to go."

"Think about it," she said. "He's right in saying you won't let any harm come to me, but you would willingly sacrifice yourself. I'm willing to prove to him that we're telling the truth. Besides, when this happens, won't I be safer on a ship with an impenetrable shield?"

Moonlight smiled slightly. She didn't like Sola, but the woman had a keen mind. "Good point."

"Then it's settled. I will go."

"I would go as well, but —"

"You can't, Yashel," Sola told him. "You know what you have to do. Stay behind and order the evacuation of Phanteppe."

"I will do that," Yashel stated. "And it will most likely be my last duty as Superior. Once Re Lord hears the planet has been evacuated, my ass will be thrown in solitary."

"It's not as bad as you think," Xenos said. "I know from experience, Yashel. With any luck, you will be spared an Elite Execution."

"I fought Re Lord on that," Yashel told him.

"Doesn't matter," Xenos said briskly. "It's in the past."

"Then why not let it rest there?" Yashel bit out.

"Gentlemen!" DrkMari looked aghast. "You are a most quarrelsome species. It amazes me how you plan anything, including war, with so much senseless bickering going on."

"Humans and Laetez are highly argumentative," Xenos agreed.

"Yes. You inherited that characteristic in abundance," Tepidat told him, a gentle smile on his lips.

Growling softly, Xenos fell momentarily silent.

"With any luck, all this will be over by the end of the week," Zale said.

"No," Xenos said, his voice just above a whisper. "Regardless of the outcome, this is just the beginning of a very long journey."

"I hope this time it's a good one," Moonlight whispered. She and Xenos glanced at each other and smiled slightly.

They'd already been through so much, but he was right. There was more to do. Whatever tasks lay ahead, they would embark on them together.

* * * * *

The following days passed like a nightmare. Though business on *Nameless* continued as usual, the underlying knowledge that political upheaval was taking place created a tense atmosphere. Xenos and Judson spent endless hours working on his secret weapon, ensuring it would run properly.

Moonlight knew DrkMari and Yashel were involved in secret meetings with the Cuthtez and the Searillas. At this point, they didn't trust Earth not to betray them to the Laetez. Humans were still under the impression the Laetez were on their side, though Yashel gathered evidence against this that he sent to *Nameless* for safekeeping. Once the revolution was fully underway, they could prove to the humans it was in their best interest if Re Lord, Re Vic and most of the other Laetez officials were unseated.

The day Phanteppe was to be destroyed, Moonlight and Judson stood with Xenos on the bridge, flanking him on either side. He stood at the weapons station, prepared to fire the fatal shot personally. Sola also stood nearby, looking outwardly calm, though Moonlight sensed she was as nervous as Moonlight herself.

Her heart pounding, Moonlight glanced at Xenos and saw that he appeared collected, not even a glimmer in his slanted blue eyes betraying any emotions he might be feeling. That was the man she knew, the man she had fallen in love with. Willing to do anything and everything for his cause. Loving him could be painful at times, but not loving him was incomprehensible.

"We've scanned the planet. Most known intelligent species have been evacuated. We're also picking up several Laetez warships headed this way."

"Re Lord must have learned about Yashel's evacuation orders," Sola said and glanced at Xenos. "We're out of time."

"Agreed," he stated. "Ten seconds to fire."

Moonlight's stomach clenched even tighter as she stared at the main monitor—at Phanteppe.

Seconds later, a tremendous explosion forced her to look away from the screen. The ship hurtled backward and spun, as the impact was even greater than anticipated.

When she straightened and again glanced at the monitor, nothing but open space could be seen where Phanteppe had once existed.

She turned to Xenos, whose gaze remained fixed on the screen, then he sighed deeply and said into the main spec, "Head for The White Zone."

* * * * *

The following day, Moonlight stood with Xenos on the docking bay of *Nameless*.

"You're sure you want to do this," she said, placing her hands on his chest and gazing deeply into his eyes. Fear engulfed her—fear of losing him, this time for good.

"It must be done and it's our only chance of once again integrating ourselves in the civilized world. You, Judson and these rebels have done what we set out to do. The galaxy and beyond now know the Drapers, Re Lord and Re Vic cannot be trusted and the true horrors of ACT have been exposed. You deserve to be rewarded for what you've done, no longer hunted."

"What about you?" she snapped, unable to keep tears from springing into her eyes. "Xenos, you know there's a good chance they'll take the information you're bringing them and then arrest you. You're an intergalactic criminal, regardless of whether or not Re Lord and Re Vic are now doing time themselves."

"Everyone on this ship does what needs to be done. You knew that when you signed on. I swore an oath. Now I'm holding up my end of it."

"You've held up your end more than anyone!" she shouted, then embraced him fiercely. "This isn't fair."

"Since when is life fair?" He held her tightly, but all too briefly, before disentangling himself from her and stepping into the shuttle.

Moments later, he was gone, headed for Earth, where he would pass on the evidence supplied by Yashel and possibly negotiate for his rebels' freedom. Moonlight doubted he would succeed. There was a good chance the humans would take the information he brought, jail him and continue hunting down the rebels.

Though they had played the most important part in bringing the Laetez leaders to justice, they had still claimed innocent lives during their attacks. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for people to accept that and Moonlight didn't blame them.

She returned to the quarters she and Xenos shared and sat on the bed, looking at the box of pink sand he'd given her. It seemed like so long ago. A slight, sad smile touched her lips as she ran her fingers through the sand.

Late that night, long after she'd finally drifted into a fitful sleep, she was awakened by Judson contacting her by spec.

"Yes?" she asked, her heart racing. Did he have word from Xenos?

"Moonlight, he's safe."

Her eyes closed and she uttered a prayer of thanks. "Where is he?"

"On Earth. We're to join him in three days. It seems he's negotiating a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

* * * * *

Xenos stood atop a rocky cliff on a tropical islet in DrkMari's territory on Tydepth. He and the crew of *Nameless* were stationed there for several weeks and he had thus far enjoyed every moment.

Several months ago, he and the rebels had been offered a special position by the Earth government—independent ambassadors for ACT. Their public duty was to travel to various planets and discuss ACT with the people, pointing out positive and negative aspects of the program and seeing who might be open to it.

Earth had helped negotiate their freedom with the Laetez and the intergalactic counsel, and though no longer military, Xenos and his people were intricately involved in the ACT program on Earth and the Laetez home world. Their input would help prevent the program from exploiting its products.

While it wasn't Xenos' ideal plan, at least he could now legally defend the rights of people like himself, not to mention he was finally able to provide Moonlight with the sort of life she deserved.

There was also a covert part of his new position—to undergo special missions to which the Earth government wanted no traceable connections. These missions would be accepted at Xenos' discretion and he would take full responsibility if anything went wrong. He had a long discussion with Moonlight and his crew before agreeing to this and they had felt it was the right decision to make. Publicly speaking for ACT, they could make *some* difference, but by selectively choosing their secret missions, they could make a *major* difference for a wide range of planets.

At the moment, they weren't involved in secret operations, but he was working on a private operation of his own. Moonlight was part of the reason he had spent the past few days diving in one of the deepest oceans on Tydepth.

Though the Tydisians would never agree with the ACT program, Earth wanted to keep up good relations with them and had asked Xenos and his crew to spend some time on their planet. While Judson participated in discussions with the leaders of Tydepth, Xenos had taken some time for an important and long-neglected mission.

A planet pod emerged from the water and coasted onto shore. Zale stepped out and shouted, "Hey, Xenos!"

Xenos waved and dove into the water. He went as deep as his crossbreed body allowed and searched through the glittering stones on the cave floor. Not seeing what he wanted, he surfaced and found Zale still waiting on the beach.

While he had never completely forgiven him from turning traitor, he at least understood why Zale had done it. In some ways, the younger man had even made up for it.

"You've been diving for days," Zale said. "Moonlight's getting worried, especially when you refused to stop yesterday when she asked you to. How long do you intend to keep this up?"

"Until I find what I'm looking for."

"What the hell do you want?" Zale snorted. "Water is water...wait a minute." He paused, smiling slightly. "You're not looking for the perfect dive, are you?"

"What's your point, Zale?" Xenos asked, annoyed. "This is personal."

"I know. And it's about time." Zale turned and headed for his pod, then paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Xenos?"

"What?"

"Good luck."

Xenos nodded, then climbed the path to the top of the cliff, where he drew a deep breath, filling his powerful lungs, and dove again. This time, as he ran his hands along the bottom of the ocean, an exquisite stone caught his eye. His pulse leapt with excitement. This was exactly what he'd been searching for. He snatched the stone tightly in his fist and surfaced.

When he returned to *Nameless*, he went to his quarters, showered and dressed. Then he went to Moonlight's office. She and Birch were speaking in Tydisian and he smiled. Her accent had gotten quite good.

"Moonlight, may I speak to you?" he asked.

Sighing, she glanced at him. "I was beginning to think you forgot about me."

Birch stared at them with interest, but a quelling look from Xenos forced him to clear his throat and turn back to his computer.

She stood and approached. Taking her hand, he guided her into the corridor.

"Had enough diving?" she asked.

"I've—" He began, but paused when two crewmen walked down the corridor. Gently grasping her upper arm, he tugged her into an empty lounge and locked the door behind them.

"Xenos, what is it?" she asked, looking concerned. "Is something wrong?"

"No." He drew a deep breath and tried to calm himself. No wonder she thought something was wrong. He was *acting* like something was wrong. Maybe he was crazy to even consider this. Now that the moment had come—

"Tell me." She slid her arms around his neck and cupped the back of his head. Her affectionate gaze met his, warming him in a way he'd never dreamed possible.

"I'd like you to accept this." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the rich brown stone he'd found on the ocean floor. He'd had it polished and threaded with a gold chain.

"It's beautiful," she said, taking it and running her fingertips over it. Her gaze met his again. "It's an ocean stone, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a Tydisian custom for a male to present his mate with a stone the color of her eyes."

Her eyes widened and she drew a sharp breath, then the most beautiful smile lit her face. "His mate?"

"Yes." He cupped her face in his hand and brushed her mouth with a kiss that he hoped revealed the depth of his feelings for her.

"Is this what you've been diving for?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Do you accept it?"

"Are you asking if I'll be your —"

"Wife." His stomach clenched. Never had he imagined something like this happening to him. *Him*.

"Yes." She slipped the chain around her neck and embraced him. "Oh yes."

Closing his eyes, he held her tightly and rested his cheek against the top of her head.

"I love you, Xenos," she said, pulling back just enough to meet his gaze.

For a long moment, he stared at her. Why were lies easier to say than the truth? He did love her, but the words seemed foreign on his tongue.

"You don't have to say it," she said. "I know it's not your style. You've told me in so many other ways."

Yet it wasn't enough. He knew it, and regardless of what she said, she knew it too.

"I love you, Moonlight Santos Gama," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "I never knew the meaning of the word until I met you."

A slight, affectionate smile touched her lips, "Well, words are my specialty."

Leaning closer, he brushed the tip of his nose against hers, then covered her mouth with a kiss deeper and softer than a Tydisian sea.

About the Author

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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