

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**

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Ménage
À Trois

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Ménage à Tasia

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MÉNAGE À TASIA

Kate Hill

Chapter One

Tasia blocked two blows aimed at her head and countered her opponent with a jab and a well-placed kick to his midsection.

The timer buzzed and the fighters stepped apart.

“Nice improvement, Re Max,” Tasia said then turned to the group of men and women standing across the room lit only by glow lanterns. “Class dismissed. See you here tomorrow morning at the same time.”

Her students—all fellow slaves—nodded and dispersed, talking among themselves. Some continued practicing the new self-defense moves she had taught them in class while others headed out of the room.

The slaves had been digging these underground rooms and tunnels for decades. Their parents and grandparents had started them as a retreat where they could pass on knowledge forbidden by their captors, a race called Drapers.

Tasia and most of the other slaves had been taken as prisoners of war twenty-eight years ago when the Laetez had their first violent encounter with the Drapers. She had been five years old at the time. This colony had once been owned by the Laetez with only a small population of Draper scientists living among them. During battle, the Drapers had sent troops and taken over.

As part of a peace treaty, the Laetez had agreed to forfeit their colonists to the Drapers. Tasia’s father had been a Laetez security guard and her mother among the few humans working at the Laetez colony. Though the Earth government had tried to step in and rescue them, there was little they could do unless they wanted to fight both the Laetez and the Drapers. So few people simply weren’t worth the risk of an intergalactic war.

Due to her mixed heritage, Tasia enjoyed characteristics of both her Laetez and human parents. Like humans, she functioned as a complete individual rather than coping with the duality of the Laetez.

Each Laetez consisted of two beings—the Re and the Er. The external being, called the Re, appeared almost human and communicated directly with others through speech. The internal being, called the Er, was an organism that lived within the brain of the Re, virtually a living conscience. It governed the Re’s emotional state and usually possessed a higher intelligence than the Re.

Tasia preferred her human individuality and had luckily not inherited the violent temper possessed by many human-Laetez hybrids. Yet in spite of her pride in her human heritage, it was sometimes lonely being a half human in a predominantly Laetez colony. If not for her strange eye color, she could have passed for Laetez completely.

She had learned much from her Laetez father, such as the art of fighting, both with her hands and with weapons. The slaves had little access to weapons and were closely watched by overseers stationed at the colony. Still, people like her father believed one day the slaves would have the opportunity to escape. He and several others had passed on their knowledge to future generations with the hope that when the chance for them to take back their freedom presented itself, they would be ready.

After so many decades, it seemed they would finally have that chance.

Tasia sighed and made her way out of the underground chamber. Soon the slaves would be free again. Yet she needed to remain focused and not let excitement get the better of her. Now that their chance for escape loomed closer, they would need to be more cautious than ever not to give themselves away.

A short time later she stepped into the living quarters she shared with her lover, Re Stafford, or Staff as his friends called him. She grinned. From a human standpoint, that name conjured some interesting thoughts, especially after seeing Staff naked.

She heard water running in the lavatory and guessed Staff was preparing for work. Tasia walked to the kitchen area and got a drink of water. Their rooms were fairly decent for slave quarters. They had their own private lavatory – probably the best perk for slaves of their class – a sleeping area and combined kitchen and living area.

Though in different work categories, Tasia as a guard and Staff as a medic were allowed to share quarters and even interbreed if they so desired. Though mating was encouraged by the Drapers who wished to keep up their slave population, neither Tasia nor Staff had any desire to create another life while under Draper rule. They had plans for a family, but it would have to wait until they secured their freedom.

Strangely, the Drapers in general weren't cruel masters. Structured, yes. Even among their own kind, rules and regulations were strictly followed and emotional displays kept to a minimum. They allowed the slaves adequate housing, good food and recreational time. Punishments were swift and harsh, but rarely unwarranted, at least in the eyes of the Drapers.

Compared to many other civilizations, being a slave to the Drapers wasn't a horrible life, yet to a human hybrid such as Tasia it was practically intolerable, especially if an overseer decided to abuse his position. Most of the overseers were fair however, in accordance with the structure encouraged by their species.

Their lifestyle wasn't the only difference between Drapers, humans and Laetez. There were also physical differences that all three species found unsettling. Though Drapers were on the average taller than Laetez or humans, their bodies were structurally similar. Their faces, however, differed greatly.

Their thin, pale skin stretched tightly over skeletal features and their noses were so flat as to be virtually imperceptible when viewed in profile. Their deep-set eyes were usually black or gray and looked like multifaceted jewels. Drapers had keen vision and hearing, but a poor sense of smell.

What Tasia found strangest of all was Draper sexuality. Although mated pairs copulated when they wanted to conceive, their sex organs scarcely responded to pleasure or pain. Oddly their most sensitive part was their hair, which was considered an organ in itself. Drapers had eyelashes, hair on their heads and pubic area. The hair on their heads grew until they reached puberty and could never be cut due to a high concentration of nerves. Draper warriors wore special helmets to protect their hair in battle and during the mating process hairplay was their equivalent of foreplay. Most Drapers had very beautiful hair, even by human standards.

The water stopped running in the lavatory and Tasia smiled mischievously. She knocked on the door and called, "Staff?"

Laetez names were generally preceded by Re or Er, yet among close friends and family, the prefix was sometimes dropped. Tasia preferred the human habit of calling her lover directly by his nickname.

"Yeah?" Staff called.

Tasia stepped in and he glanced sharply in her direction. A ripple of desire shot through her at the sight of him naked, his tight ass thrust toward her from where he stood bent over and drying his long, hair-dusted legs with a towel. Moisture beaded on his sinewy arms and trickled down his broad shoulders and back.

Though Staff was a medic, ruled by his highly intellectual Er, he was also a damn fine male specimen. He enjoyed working out in his free time and when it came to hand-to-hand combat, he could more than hold his own. Her father had instructed them since they were children and while they had always been good friends, Tasia's feelings for Staff had grown deeper. She'd spent most of her teenage years sulking over him in private while keeping up their buddy act in public. It wasn't until their mid-twenties that she learned he'd had a crush on her for most of his life.

In spite of his pleasant disposition, Staff was protective of his innermost feelings. He needed to trust a person implicitly before revealing his heart so Tasia considered herself lucky to be among the few in his confidence.

"I was hoping to catch you before you washed up," she said, pulling off the sweaty black shirt clinging to her body. "I just finished my class and thought we might share the shower."

Staff straightened, a sexy gleam in his dark blue eyes, and flung his towel aside. He stepped toward her, his gaze on her deep cleavage, enhanced by the durable bra that secured her full breasts snugly in place. A sheen of perspiration made her golden tanned skin glow.

"I still have time before I have to get to the lab," he said, his voice huskier than usual. He placed a hand on her hip and used the other to cup the back of her neck as he lowered his mouth to hers and spoke against her lips, "How about if I help you wash?"

His hand swept from her hip to the slight curve of her belly. His warmth seeped into her and when he gently massaged her stomach, her heartbeat quickened with

anticipation. Her clit buzzed. She felt heat flood her pussy and a tingling sensation in her nipples as they hardened to stiff peaks beneath her bra.

"I like that idea," she whispered.

A roguish little smile touched his lips before he kissed her.

Tasia moaned softly and slipped her arms around him. Her hands roamed over his shoulders and back and she relished the way his muscles rippled beneath his damp skin. The sensitive pads of her fingers detected the ridges of old scars that crisscrossed his otherwise smooth back. Feeling them once again reminded Tasia of why he found it difficult to trust people.

His hand moved slowly up her stomach. He tugged down half her bra, freeing one breast to his touch. It felt so good when his thumb caressed her pebbly nipple that she moaned again.

Staff broke the kiss and again spoke against her lips. "Are you sure you have time for this?"

"Oh yeah." She grinned, clutching the back of his head and playfully nipping his lower lip. Staff's tongue swept across her mouth then he sank lower, pressing tender kisses down her neck and across the tops of her breasts. "My patrol doesn't start for another hour. I'm on wilderness patrol...so I..." her voice faded into breathless moans since he'd taken her nipple into his mouth and gently raked his teeth over it. He sucked on the tight little nub and swept his tongue over it again and again.

"Staff, that feels so good," she breathed. He groaned in reply and continued tugging on her nipple until it was so sensitive his touch almost hurt. Then he moved to her other nipple.

Tasia's pussy ached and her clit begged for caresses. Her heart pounded and she surrendered to him completely. One thing about Staff, he'd refined lovemaking to an art, at least to her. He seemed to know what she wanted even before she did.

Kneeling in front of her, he tugged down her trousers and underpants while she pulled off her bra. Staff licked and kissed her stomach, taking his time as if to savor every inch of her. The tip of his tongue teased her navel and his slender fingers stroked the thatch of hair covering her soft mound. After a moment he rose and turned on the shower faucet.

She and Staff stepped into the shower and she tilted her face up toward the stream of warm water. A moment later she felt his arms slip around her from behind. He ran a cake of soap over her breasts and down her stomach.

Smiling, Tasia closed her eyes and allowed him to wash her. She sighed with pleasure when he ran the soap along her back and buttocks then squeezed her ass and ran his sudsy finger along the indentation. He dropped the soap and covered her clit with his hand, kneading gently while his fingers slid into her pussy and explored. His thumb rolled over her clit, stirring her passion.

Tasia turned and met his gaze. Desire gleamed in his sapphire eyes, turning her on even more. Grasping handfuls of his thick chestnut hair, she kissed him deeply. Staff's

tongue plunged into her mouth and hers met its every fierce stroke. They moaned, tasting each other deeply, their bodies pressed close beneath the soothing stream of warm water.

Wrapped in his arms, she imagined they were not standing in the small shower in the slave quarters but somewhere else—a home of their own on another planet or maybe their own ship so they could travel anywhere, anytime. No matter what her fantasy, in it they were always free.

Her thoughts soon turned away from anything except pleasure. Staff again knelt in front of her, gripped her buttocks and covered her clit with his warm, wet mouth. His tongue and lips teased her, making her quiver and squirm. She wove her fingers through his hair then clutched his shoulders, her entire body weak with desire.

Teetering on the verge of orgasm, she moaned his name. Several more flicks of his tongue and she burst in ecstasy. Luckily he held her upright as wave after wave rolled over her, making her tremble and nearly collapse from the pleasure.

When her orgasm waned and she was able to stand unsupported, Staff rose to his feet, his tall, hard body sliding up hers. Grasping her waist, he turned her abruptly to face the wall.

“Let me guess?” she purred, bracing her hands against the water-slicked tile.

“No need. I’m showing you.” He nipped her earlobe, his hair-dusted chest warm against her back and his rock-hard cock pressing against her from behind.

Tasia’s pulse raced and she closed her eyes, arching backward. Ever-so slowly he filled her with his thick erection then he began pumping in a steady rhythm that soon had her gasping and writhing on the verge of another breathtaking orgasm.

“Tasia, all pleasuring,” he breathed and she knew by the tone of his voice and the way his body trembled and strained against hers he was about to come as well. She smiled slightly at his words. To the Laetez “all pleasuring” was the ultimate compliment. It meant the sex was so fucking good the Re and the Er were excited beyond control.

At first, to a complete individual such as herself, she found it a bit strange knowing she was technically making love to two men—Re Staff and his living conscience, Er Pace. Over the years they had grown so close that Staff had sometimes allowed her to communicate with Pace through his translation. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to have an Er, another being so close that you couldn’t live without them.

Her thoughts broke, pushed aside by pleasure as Staff quickened his thrusts, reached around her and fondled her clit. His motions hurled her into another orgasm and this time in the midst of the intense pulsations she felt him come. Bracing both hands over hers against the wall, he thrust hard, pushing her closer to the tile. For several moments they stood, her body tingling in the aftermath and his breath rasping in her ear. Then he released her and stepped away.

Tasia turned and glanced at him. They exchanged smiles before she reached for the fallen soap.

Staff rinsed off quickly and left her to wash in private.

By the time she finished dressing, he had prepared breakfast and they sat at the small table built into the wall of the unit.

"I'm on a double shift today," he said. "So I won't be home until late."

"I'll miss you." She smiled, reached across the table and took his hand.

"Just keep the bed warm until I get home. Oh, and be careful on your patrol."

"I'm always careful."

He snorted in disbelief then stood. "I need to get to the lab. See you tonight."

Staff bent and kissed her. She locked her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, wishing he wasn't working a double shift. Already she missed him and could scarcely wait for them to be alone together, cuddled in bed or maybe taking a leisurely walk through the fields.

Reluctantly he stepped away, caressed her cheek and said, "I love you."

"You too."

He turned and left the unit.

Tasia finished her breakfast then cleaned the dishes. It was still a bit early but she headed to the guardhouse so she could check in before leaving on her patrol.

* * * * *

The farming colony where Tasia and the other slaves worked was located on a vast oasis in the desert region of the planet Shandbha. The colony specialized in developing new and improved fruits and vegetables that were not only the Drapers' chief food supply, but also their main export. The colony was almost completely self-sufficient with its own fuel and water supply, med labs and communication center.

As a guard, Tasia's job was to keep the peace among slaves as well as patrol the grounds and beyond to see that no unauthorized visitors entered the colony. Guards also checked the area to make sure the wild animals that inhabited the desert didn't break through the barriers.

Usually two guards patrolled the wilderness together but today Tasia's regular partner was ill so she decided to go alone. A peaceful morning in the desert appealed to her. It gave her time to think. After checking the supplies and weapons on her patrol shuttle, she logged in with the overseer on duty to have the shock mechanism on her security chip temporarily disabled.

All slaves over the age of twelve had a security chip embedded in the back of their neck. It kept track of where they went, and if they passed beyond certain barriers, a painful shock was administered, gradually building in strength until the slave either returned home or was rendered unconscious.

Approaching the main gate, she was glad to see the overseer on duty was Viv, a favorite among the slaves. He was pleasant for a Draper and Tasia had never seen him abuse his position. Unfortunately he was as ugly as the rest of his kind.

“Going on wilderness patrol, Tasia?” Viv asked when she stopped her shuttle by the office at the main gate. Though his black and silver uniform shirt was unbuttoned at the throat, his helmet was secured in spite of the morning heat.

The hard black material covered his head and encased his long hair in a cylindrical attachment, called a hair sheath, made of silvery metal molded into the shape of a thick braid. Glancing behind him, she noticed two other overseers seated at a table eating breakfast and listening to the newscast on a spec.

“Yes. There were a couple of reports last night from guards who thought they heard animals just outside the northern gate. There might be another defective barrier.”

“Maybe you should bring a partner for backup,” he suggested.

“I’ll be all right and if I see anything suspicious I’ll call for help.”

“That’s fine. I’ve disabled your shocker for three hours.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded and pressed the button that raised the gate for her shuttle to pass.

She drove for about three miles before the green oasis faded into the barren desert. According to the shuttle monitors, the temperature had already risen to uncomfortable heights.

For nearly an hour she coasted over the sand, pausing only at certain checkpoints to see that the barriers were working properly. So far so good.

She was about to turn the shuttle around when her monitor detected an animal approaching the barrier. It picked up speed and she saw what looked to be a man in the distance. He waved and shouted.

Tasia’s brow furrowed. She wondered who would be wandering around the desert alone. Obviously he was in some kind of trouble.

She stopped the shuttle by the barrier and watched him approach.

“Hey, wait,” he called breathlessly.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

He slowed his pace to a jog and as he neared, she saw he wore a Draper helmet. His white shirt was torn and dirty with sweat and dark gray Draper blood. Sand streaked his black trousers and boots. Slave clothes. She knew them well since she’d worn them every day of her life since the age of five.

Tall, lean and muscular, he had the kind of body that would turn even the most discerning woman’s head. His face was another story. By his skeletal bone structure he was obviously of Draper origins, but his longish nose and subtle pinkish undertone of his skin told her he was mixed with another species. Maybe human or Laetez. At least that explained the slave clothes.

The Drapers' main reason for finally allying themselves with the Laetez was to gain access to the ACT program. ACT or Alien Conversion Testing was a project developed by the Laetez to create crossbreeds in labs, combining the best traits of a variety of species. Though interbreeding wasn't new to the universe, the Laetez had perfected the technique and had the highest success rate of crossbreeding many species.

It was through ACT that Tasia's parents had been able to conceive her. However she knew many ACT products, in particular those grown in artificial wombs with no real parents, weren't allowed the same privileges as those brought up in an interspecies marriage.

It was only in recent history that the Laetez had acknowledged the rights of ACT products and recognized them as free individuals. The Drapers didn't treat their ACT products with such respect. They used the knowledge from the program to create lab-grown slaves used to serve in a variety of fields from farming to the military.

Finally reaching the barrier, he stopped and stood, panting. Sweat trickled down his face and streaked his gorgeous chest visible in his unzipped shirt. She noticed bruising on his ribs and a jagged wound on his arm.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"My pod crashed a few miles away. It's wrecked. I'm lucky to be alive. The pilot's dead."

"Where were you headed?"

"To the Shandbha Colony. If my calculations are correct, this is it."

"You're right." She studied him for a moment. Gazing into his strange, exotic face, she thought that while he was ugly as sin, there was definitely something intriguing about him. Maybe it was those jewellike gray eyes that stared into hers, calm yet unreadable. There was strength in those eyes. Slave or not, this wasn't the kind of guy who took shit from anybody.

"Are you going to let me in or not?" he asked. "If you don't, things are going to get ugly. My security chip is due to reactivate in a little less than an hour, so I need to reach the overseers as soon as possible."

Tasia removed her stun pistol and punched the code on the barrier.

He stepped inside and she aimed her weapon at him. "Remove your backpack and put it down slowly then turn and put your hands against the fence."

He did as she ordered and she saw dark blue marks on the back of his right hand. A Draper ancestral tattoo. Usually only pure-blooded Draper children were marked in such a way as part of a family rite.

Tasia stepped closer and frisked him. Though she tried to remain impartial, it was pretty damn difficult. This guy's body was as tight and hard as it looked. He had broad shoulders, lean sides and legs like long, shapely steel. Heat emanated from him and he had a sexy scent—musky and virile yet slightly herbal. It was funny how Drapers had a deficient sense of smell, yet they usually smelled great.

She slid her hands up his waist again, thinking it would be nice to see him out of these clothes.

"Satisfied?" he asked, turning his head to stare at her with those intense gray eyes.

"What?" she demanded.

"Are you satisfied that I'm unarmed?"

"Oh." She felt heat rise in her face and stepped away. "Yeah. You can turn around, but keep your back against the wall."

Tasia squatted, keeping him within sight, and searched through his backpack. There was a change of clothes, a container of water that was nearly empty and a medical kit containing needles and a drug she didn't recognize.

"What's this?" she demanded.

"I require it to equalize chemical imbalances due to crossbreeding."

That was a common problem with Laetez ACT products since usually only Re characteristics could be used for crossbreeding and it was the Er who controlled the intense emotions of the Laetez. The main purpose of ACT was to find way to breed with a species that would allow the Er to function as an individual. The alliance with the Drapers was so important to the Laetez because they believed the Drapers were the only species capable of crossbreeding with Ers. Unfortunately, all attempts so far had failed.

"I've never seen a drug such as you described look like this," Tasia said, once again examining the purplish liquid.

"It's experimental," he explained. "But has worked well so far."

She replaced the contents of his backpack, stood and handed it to him. "Come on. It's cooler in the shuttle. I can take a look at those injuries. Once we get back to the colony, I'll take you right to the med lab and let the overseers know about your shuttle. They'll need to send someone for your pilot's body. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"No. I'm just thirsty."

Inside the shuttle, she offered him a container of water. He held it to his lips and drank enthusiastically. Tasia watched his sexy throat move with every gulp then shook her head and turned away to retrieve the first-aid kit. This was insane. She never imagined being attracted to a Draper, but she reminded himself he wasn't *all* Draper.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Drago. And you?"

"Tasia. Are you an ACT product?"

"Yes." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're human?"

"Half human. Half Laetez." She smiled. "It's nice to see another ACT product. There's only a few of us at the colony. None of Draper blood so I'm afraid you'll be the only one. Are you Laetez as well?"

"Yes."

“I thought so. You speak our language flawlessly.”

He smiled slightly and continued studying her. A strange, unsettled feeling darted through her. She almost felt as if he could see right through her.

“However,” she continued, “You’re a little old to be an ACT product, aren’t you? Laetez and Drapers have only been interbreeding for the past couple of years.”

“Officially, yes. I was the result of unsanctioned testing around the start of the Draper-Laetez war.”

“I see. Take off your shirt so I can see how bad the damage is,” she said, pulling on gloves.

He did as she asked and Tasia’s mouth went dry. Like all Drapers, his chest and arms were hairless, fully exposing every chiseled muscle. Similar to Staff, he was very athletic without being overly bulky. So perfect. This guy’s body was fucking beautiful. She could hardly wait for Staff to get a look at him.

Though she would bet anything Staff had never cheated on her since they’d decided to mate permanently, she knew his taste encompassed both males and females. Something told her he’d appreciate this Draper crossbreed as much as she did.

Snapping herself out of her horny reverie, she once again noticed dark blue marks on the back of his slender, long-fingered hand.

“I didn’t think slaves were tattooed,” she commented.

He glanced at his hand. “I was created using the DNA of a Draper warrior who requested his offspring be marked. It made no sense to me either but I didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“I see.”

Clearing her throat, she tried to appear passive as she began cleaning first the wound on his arm then the small scratches on his ribs. His black-and-blue side looked pretty sore but until they arrived at the med lab there was no way to tell if he’d broken anything or was just badly bruised. She ran her fingers gently over his side and watched his taut belly muscles contract. Her own belly clenched and her clit and nipples hardened with desire.

“Well, we might as well drive back to the colony,” she said. “Do you want more water?”

“No. I’m fine. Thanks.”

Tasia climbed into the driver’s seat and turned them back toward civilization.

Chapter Two

A short time later, Tasia's shuttle approached the gate at the colony. Viv was still on duty and he instructed Tasia to take Drago to the med lab while he checked with main control on the Draper home world to verify his story.

The med lab, located just outside the slave quarters, was a mid-sized white building dwarfed by the enormous produce development lab that stood behind it. The gardens and orchards stretched for miles around, kept alive by pipelines spread throughout the oasis.

Tasia led Drago into the waiting room at the med lab. A few other slaves, some with obvious wounds, sat in chairs. The nurse behind the desk looked up as Tasia and the new slave approached. Her gaze lingered over Drago for several seconds and Tasia noticed an expression of astonishment in her eyes. Draper crossbreeds were quite rare.

"Re Iva, this is a new slave, Drago," Tasia said to the nurse. "He was in a shuttle accident and needs to see a medic. Is Re Stafford available?"

"I'll check." She turned to the desk spec. Staff appeared on the monitor and the nurse said, "Tasia is here with a new slave. He was in a shuttle accident."

"Serious?"

"Doesn't seem to be, but he has some visible injuries."

"Bring him to examination room four."

Re Iva turned off the spec and stepped from behind the desk, "Follow me please."

"I have to go with him," Tasia said. "Overseer's orders until they can verify his identity."

In the examination room, Drago sat while the nurse took his information and vital signs.

"To be honest, I'm not familiar with Draper crossbreeds," Re Iva admitted. "I'm not sure if these readings are normal or not. For a Draper they would be perfect, but for Laetez they're a bit low."

"May I see the chart?" Drago asked.

Re Iva glanced at Tasia, who shrugged and said, "Why not? They're his readings."

The nurse turned the handheld computer toward him and he glanced at it.

"Those readings are normal for me," he told her. "I'm more Draper than Laetez."

"I can see that," Re Iva said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" Drago stared at her with those intense gray eyes and the nurse glanced away.

Bad move. Tasia knew never to let a guy like this think he's intimidating you, even if he was.

"Medic Re Stafford should be in soon." The nurse opened the door to leave just as Staff walked in. She handed him the chart and hurried off.

Staff glanced over the readings then turned to Drago with his usual pleasant smile. If he was surprised or intrigued by the appearance of a Draper crossbreed, he didn't show it. That was Staff. Charming and easygoing on the outside, but pulled together on the inside.

"Well, Drago, what happened?" Staff asked.

While he explained the shuttle accident, Staff ran a medical wand over the slave's torso.

"You have two cracked ribs," Staff said. "I'll accelerate the healing, but you'll still need to rest for a couple of days. What job are you assigned to?"

"Security."

This surprised Tasia and she lifted an eyebrow. "Why didn't you say that before?"

"No one asked."

That meant she and Drago would probably be working together quite often. It would give her a perfect chance to get to know him better.

Staff unwrapped the bandage on Drago's arm, cleaned and sealed the wound.

Watching Staff's slender, graceful hands—medic's hands—move swiftly over Drago's powerful body, she tried to avoid sexual thoughts. It was impossible. She imagined Staff touching Drago in a far more intimate manner. In her mind, she saw his chiseled lips press against Drago's misshapen Draper mouth.

Yet there was something about the new slave's mouth that aroused her. The slim, slightly crooked upper lip and the full, pinkish lower one made her wonder how it would feel to kiss him. What was the texture of those lips? They looked a bit rough, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

She wondered if Staff found this newcomer as strangely attractive as she did. Though Staff was very difficult to read, she'd known him long enough to see the almost imperceptible signs that told her how he felt. During the examination he chewed his lower lip a couple of times and as he examined Drago's ribs and sleekly muscled belly she detected a smoldering look deep in his eyes.

A smile touched her lips. Yes, there were definite possibilities for *friendship* between her and Staff and this new slave. If Drago was up for it. If Staff was hard to read, this slave was doubly so. She couldn't tell if he had merely inherited the usual Draper sternness or if he simply had little interest in mingling with others.

He wasn't rude, yet his replies were to the point and he left no room for conversation. Maybe he'd warm up once he was here a while. After all he had just been in a shuttle accident and was stationed on a new colony. He might have had friends, family even, at his old post.

"I would like to examine you for head injuries," Staff said. "Please remove your helmet."

Drago seemed to hesitate for a moment then reached up and unfastened the locks on the side of his helmet as well as on the braided metal hair sheath. He pulled off both, freeing his hair from its confinement. It was black and hung past his elbows in a snug plait.

"The bindings on your braid have metal in them. They'll have to be removed before I take readings," Staff said.

Nodding, Drago began unwinding his hair from the braid. Tasia's heartbeat quickened. He had the most beautiful hair she'd ever seen, even on a Draper. Though unkempt and damp with sweat, it was still spectacular. Very thick and smooth, it draped him like a satin cloak.

Glancing at Staff, Tasia noticed that this time he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and there was no missing the desire that flashed across his eyes.

Still, when he spoke it was with calm professionalism. "I'm going to take some readings now. Please hold still."

He picked up a medical wand from a nearby counter and carefully ran it over every millimeter of Drago's head. When he brushed the crossbreed's hair aside so he could take readings on the back of his neck, his hand lingered for a moment then he pulled away abruptly, as if recalling the sensitivity of Draper hair.

If Drago noticed that slight caress, he didn't show it but continued sitting statue-like until Staff completed the examination.

"No other injuries," Staff announced. "I saw on your chart that you take drugs for chemical imbalances. I'd like to see them."

"Here." Tasia opened Drago's backpack that she had been carrying and handed Staff the medical kit.

He looked at the medicine and ran some quick tests on a sample of it.

"How long have you been on this?" he asked Drago.

"Three weeks. It's an improvement over my last medication."

"It's unusual."

"I'm unusual, medic," Drago said rather coolly. "Even for an ACT product."

Someone pounded on the door and Staff opened it. Another overseer, Than, pushed his way into the room. He was hideous, even for a Draper, with eyes so deeply set that it was almost impossible to discern their color and blubbery lips that dominated his pasty, skull-like face. Than was also one of the nastiest overseers on the colony.

"Is the examination over?" Than demanded.

"I just finished."

"Good. We're still trying to verify his identity. Seems to be some kind of stupid mix-up as usual. Those lazy-assed pencil pushers at main control don't know what the

fuck they're doing. Kind of like slave medics." He gave a snort of laughter and flung a taunting look in Staff's direction. The medic ignored him completely while Tasia's stomach burned with rage.

She absolutely *hated* Than and didn't have the self-control Staff did or should she say his Er did. It was times like this her Laetez temper almost got the better of her.

"While Viv is talking to main control, I'm going to familiarize this piece of shit with what's expected of him here at the colony." Than curled his lip, a look of disgust on his ugly face. "It makes me puke, the idea of Draper DNA mixed with other species. It's bad enough the treaty forces us to allow the Laetez access to our DNA, but to think some labs on our own home world do *this*." He pointed a thick finger, tipped with a long, sharp nail, toward Drago. Dropping his hand, he shook his head. "What's the point in talking about it? If you're done, medic, get the fuck out of here."

Staff glanced at the overseer, his expression cooler than ever. Tasia didn't try to keep the hatred from her eyes.

"What are you looking at, ACT slut?" Than growled in her direction. "Speaking of pathetic, there's not much worse than a *human* crossbreed. It's a joke that you're in security."

"I've seen bigger jokes in higher positions," Tasia stated.

"Keep your place, slut!" Than snarled. The back of his hand lashed out at her. She raised her arm to defend herself but the blow didn't land. Drago's gloved hand caught Than's wrist.

A look of surprise flashed across the overseer's face. He tried to jerk away but Drago's grip was firm. With his free hand, he reached for his shocker club and struck the slave in his injured ribs.

Drago grunted in pain and released Than, who raised the club to strike him again.

"He's already damaged," Staff said. "If you injure him further he won't be able to work."

"I told you to get out!" Than roared.

Tasia took a step toward Drago but Staff grasped her arm and said, "Come on."

"But—"

"Maybe you want to taste the shocker club too, slut." Than lifted the weapon in her direction.

Staff pulled harder on her arm and she let him guide her out of the room.

"I'll check Drago again later," Staff whispered in her ear.

"I hate Than. I'd like nothing more than to stick a shocker club up his ass."

Snorting with laughter, Staff said, "Yeah, but he'd probably like it."

She couldn't keep the smile from tugging at her lips. "It's not funny, Staff. Do you think Drago will be okay?"

"He looks tough to me. He'll survive like the rest of us. You know there's something strange about him."

"He's a Draper crossbreed."

"That's not what I mean."

"Is it because of that unusual drug he takes? I got the feeling he wasn't telling the whole truth about that."

"That's bothering me a little. You see, that particular drug is usually used by ACT in the process of providing one species with traits of another, only not through breeding. For instance if a full-blooded human wanted to appear Laetez, they could be altered surgically for a quick, superficial camouflage then they could undergo conversion treatments that would actually give them Laetez traits internally."

"That's what the drug is for?"

"No. The drug that Drago is taking prevents the changes from becoming permanent. As long as the person takes the drug, they can eventually revert to their original form. The only thing is it's a dangerous procedure. The drugs are technically a poison to the invading species. The longer the body is unnaturally split between two species, the higher the dose must be to counteract the effects. Eventually the drug will kill the patient."

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Curiosity to see if it's possible. It could be used on spies so they can gain information from enemy species."

"But why is Drago using it? Do you think he's an unnatural ACT product?"

"I'd have to test him further. From what I could see today, he's a typical crossbreed, but here we know so little about Draper crossbreeds. The drug he's taking could technically be used for the chemical imbalances he describes, as long as the dose is low enough. Draper physiology is vastly different from Laetez or human and they're my specialty. Most likely he's exactly what he says he is. Why would the Drapers waste a spy on a colony of slaves?"

She paused, placed her hands on his shoulders and whispered in his ear, "You know why."

"Not here, Tasia."

She stepped away and sighed. He was right. They had to act with the utmost secrecy regarding their plan or else their entire colony would be stuck in slavery forever.

They resumed walking down the corridor and she asked, "What did you think of Drago?"

"Didn't we just talk about that?"

She grinned and shook her head. "You know what I mean. He has something about him, doesn't he?"

"Something?"

She cast him a knowing glance and he shrugged. "I'm not into Drapers."

"He's a crossbreed."

"Yes and that does give him a rather exotic look that's...intriguing."

"Especially from the neck down."

Staff chuckled. "He has quite a bod, doesn't he? But that's strictly off the record. I'm a medic and supposed to be impartial."

"I won't breathe a word," she teased, edging closer to him.

Staff slipped an arm around her and gave her a quick squeeze. "Do I have to worry about losing my girlfriend to a Draper crossbreed?"

"Never." She kissed his cheek. "But how would you feel about us maybe having a friendship with a Draper crossbreed?"

"Umm." He squeezed her tighter. "That has possibilities. We'll talk about it later. I have to get back to work."

"All right. See you tonight."

* * * * *

Once Tasia and Medic Re Stafford left the room, Than stood in front of Drago, twirling the shocker club, a malicious grin on his lips.

"The first thing every slave must learn is obedience," Than said.

Drago's stomach clenched. Usually he was in perfect control of his emotions, which was part of the reason he had been selected for this assignment. However he already loathed this overseer who stirred too many horrible memories.

He locked gazes with Than whose grin faded. "Apparently you're going to need behavior modification. I hear that's a problem with many of your kind."

The overseer struck out with the shocker club. This time Drago tore it from his grasp and twisted him into an unbreakable hold, pressing him face first against the examination table.

"You're as good as dead, you crossbreed piece of shit!"

"Shut up and listen carefully," Drago ordered in his most deadly voice. "Or you will be the one to die."

"Even if you kill me—"

"I'm not talking about me. If you want to verify my identity, contact Section Fifty-Six. I suggest you do it quickly so I can get on with my duties."

Than stopped struggling and panted, "Section Fifty-Six is top secret. If you're with them why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Because, shit for brains, I couldn't speak in front of the slaves. I'm going to release you. If you do anything to further disrupt my assignment, you will die. Is that understood?"

Than stiffened even more in Drago's grip. "I'm not promising anything until I verify your ident—"

The door to the examination room opened and Overseer Viv burst inside. He glanced from Than, who was still pinned to the table, to Drago.

"What's going on?" Viv asked.

"This crossbreed claims to be linked to Section Fifty-Six," Than sneered, "but—"

"He is! So lower your voice, Than!" Viv said in a harsh whisper, glaring at the other overseer and closing the door behind him.

Than's face went paler than it already was. Drago released him and he stepped away, rubbing his shoulder joints. "Then you *are* a spy?"

Drago curled his lip in disgust. No wonder these fools were mere overseers at a farming colony.

"He is an agent," Viv explained, "on special assignment here. We are to give him our full cooperation. He has authority level ten."

Now Than looked sick. Drago resisted the urge to smile at his obvious discomfort. Agents with authority level ten were permitted to do anything necessary to achieve their goals and could only be tried by a jury of their own kind.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Than said, lowering his gaze. "I didn't know who you were."

"I am a Draper-Laetez ACT product assigned here as part of the security team." Drago stared at the overseers with the look that had brought his worst enemies to their knees. "Should my cover be blown or my assignment jeopardized, the party responsible will answer to me. Whatever is left will be turned over to Section Fifty-Six. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," the overseers replied in unison.

"Now what exactly were you told about my assignment?" Drago asked Viv.

"Something about the possibility of a slave rebellion backed by the Laetez government. You need to find out if there's truth in the rumors."

"What rumors?" Than demanded. "We are overseers and have heard nothing. We know everything that goes on in this colony."

"Somehow I doubt that," Drago said with a hint of disgust. He quickly braided his hair and donned his helmet and hair sheath.

"If there's truth in the matter, the Laetez are even more stupid than I thought—" Than began then stopped, casting a frightened look in Drago's direction. "I meant no offense."

Drago's gaze bore into Than's who continued weakly, "All I meant is if the Laetez steal these slaves it will destroy the treaty between our worlds. These slaves are spoils of war."

According to Draper tradition, slaves taken during wartime became property and to bargain for their lives with the enemy who lost them would be considered an act of

weakness. Bargaining with their own DNA was different, Drago thought with disgust. In truth, he didn't give a damn about tradition. What he did care about was striking out at the Laetez in any way he could. They were a petty, vicious, power-hungry species, not to mention cold-blooded murderers.

They, like humans, were ugly, with their elongated noses, fleshy faces and dead hair. And they were weak, their entire bodies overloaded with ultrasensitive nerves.

Since he had undergone the ACT transformation, he had developed a strange, love-hate relationship with those nerves. He was not a true crossbreed but had been altered surgically and undergone conversion treatments to appear to be part Laetez. Even now it sickened him to look at his reflection in the mirror, to see his Draper features distorted by an aquiline nose, to see his pale skin tinged slightly pink. Worst of all were the changes that had taken place deep within his body.

His skin was more sensitive. A month ago, if he'd been struck in the ribs by a shocker club the pain would have been minimal. At the moment his side still ached from where Than had struck him. Of course the overseer had hit him with undue force. Shocker clubs were meant to generate superficial pain on the flesh. Than had hit him hard enough to possibly do further damage to his ribs.

He'd check later. The last thing Drago wanted was to let Than believe he'd hurt him. It was bad enough he had given up some of his resistance to pain, a birthright of the Draper species.

There were few sensitive places on a Draper—except for their hair, hands, feet and faces. Since the conversion treatments he had been feeling things in places he'd never imagined.

What bothered him most was the sensitivity in his genitals. He'd heard that some species, including human and Laetez, found mating extremely pleasurable. Until recently he had been unable to comprehend just *how* pleasurable. His cock was now as sensitive as his hair. To his shame he had taken to touching himself often in private. Drapers rarely ejaculated except for the purpose of mating, but now whenever he stroked his cock he was unable to control himself.

Just thinking about it made him long for the privacy of a lavatory. Furious at himself for the turn his thoughts had taken, he focused on the situation at hand.

"The Laetez have a stubborn streak and they are not known for being trustworthy. Now that we have exchanged DNA, they could turn against us as they almost did to their human allies a year ago," Drago said.

"But that was under a corrupt leader," Viv added. "The Laetez government has since changed hands. The new leaders seem much more honest."

Drago snorted and shook his head. Viv didn't seem as cruel as Than but he was apparently just as stupid.

"Regardless, our leaders view a slave rebellion as a threat, not only because slaves run several of our farming colonies, but because if the Laetez get one up on us other species might try to do the same. We must maintain our reputation for strength and

order. Intergalactic relations are precarious and we will not succumb to the likes of the Laetez."

"Then I'm guessing, Sir, you consider yourself more Draper than Laetez?" Than asked hesitantly.

Drago strode toward him and stood so they were chest to chest, eye to eye. "On this colony I am only a slave, but make no mistake, I *am* and always will be a Draper. Are there any other questions?"

"No, Sir."

"From now on don't call me Sir. I am a slave. However to ensure my cover remains secure, there are instructions you must follow. To keep up my pretense under medical examination I have been fitted with a security chip. However it is disarmed and cannot be activated or controlled in any way," Drago said. "Also, you are the only two who know my true identity. You are to reveal it to no one else, even other overseers. Is that understood?"

"Yes, S—" At a sharp look from Drago, both men refrained from adding "Sir".

"Unless we are in private you will treat me as any other slave. But a fair warning for future reference I do observe who abuses their power."

Again Than lowered his gaze.

"That is all for now," Drago said. "Overseer Viv, if you will assign my duties and quarters, I will integrate myself in the colony."

"Quarters are tight," Viv explained. "I can get you a room in the barracks unless one of the other slaves has extra space in their assigned homes. You're on security so you're considered first class. You're allowed to live and...mate with slaves in your class."

"We won't have to worry about the latter," Drago stated crisply, though the thought of mating made his newly sensitized cock twitch. Due to the conversion, his sex drive had already increased so much that even the Laetez were starting to appeal to him, specifically that human-Laetez crossbreed, Tasia, with her tight little body and the medic with the enticing bulge in his pants.

From the neck down, humans and Laetez were quite appealing. Pity their faces were so...alien. Their eyes were their only truly attractive facial feature. Medic Re Stafford had large blue eyes, the same color as a Tydisian sea. Tasia, on the other hand, had rich brown eyes. A very human color. Drago found that intriguing.

He hadn't missed their interest in him as well. Perhaps he could convince them to share their home with him. The closer he got to the slaves, the more he would learn about them. He needed to build relationships here, friendships most importantly. They had to trust him enough to disclose their plans. Seduction wouldn't work on Drapers, but Laetez and humans were quite susceptible to lust.

In the back of his mind, he realized his duty might be considered dishonorable. Yet he had learned long ago the Laetez had no honor.

Twenty-eight years ago, Drago had been eight years old, living with his parents on this very planet. At that time it had been under Laetez occupation. A small group of Draper scientists had been allowed to conduct botany research. Drago's mother and father had been among them. When war broke out, the Draper scientists and their families were secured in prison camps. Many were killed, including Drago's parents. He remembered the cruelty of the Laetez soldiers and if memories weren't enough, he still bore scars from their abuse.

The Draper army finally arrived, squashed the Laetez soldiers and claimed the planet. Drago was taken into custody and placed in a military school where he was prepped for the Draper army. After several years of exceptional service, he switched to the elite forces in Section Fifty-Six. When this assignment came up, he immediately volunteered. Only his hatred for the Laetez could have driven him to undergo the conversion treatments. He was willing to become what he despised if it meant making the Laetez pay for slaughtering his family and nearly destroying his life.

He silenced that voice in the back of his mind that whispered of dishonor. There was no dishonor in what he was doing. Only justice.

After exchanging a few more brief words with the overseers, Drago left the room and headed out of the med lab. Viv had given him directions to the guardhouse where he would log in.

Partway down the corridor, Medic Re Stafford approached him. He was slightly shorter than Drago, perhaps six feet or so, very lean yet well proportioned. The white medic shirt tucked into white trousers showed off his physique to advantage. That particular uniform wasn't flattering to many but the way Re Stafford was built, he'd look good in just about anything.

Drago's lust for this Laetez slave annoyed him yet he told himself it could be used to his advantage as he again noted it seemed mutual.

The medic's expression remained friendly yet professional but Drago didn't miss how his gaze swept over his body, lingering on his chest and crotch.

"Before you go, I'd like to check your ribs again. Than whacked you pretty hard. He might have hindered the accelerated healing process, not to mention cracked another rib," Re Stafford said. "I also got you a uniform to wear."

"Thank you." Drago followed Re Stafford to another exam room and sat on the table while the medic checked him over.

The treatment had been disrupted but luckily no other bones had been broken.

"I've already suggested at the security office that you rest for the remainder of the day and be on light duty for the next two," Re Stafford said. "As long as a reasonable overseer is in charge, there should be no problem. What quarters have you been assigned to?"

"None are available, except for a bed in the barracks."

Re Stafford snorted. "The barracks are lousy. No ventilation, bad climate control. Not to mention they stink like a garbage unit."

"I haven't got much choice."

"We have some extra space in our unit," Re Stafford said then furrowed his brow, as if shocked by his own impulsiveness.

"We?"

"Tasia and I share a unit. You're welcome to stay with us for a while, at least until your injuries heal. You'll be more comfortable than in the barracks."

A slow smile spread over Drago's lips and he held the medic's gaze, not bothering to disguise his attraction. "As long as Tasia doesn't mind. I wouldn't want to be any trouble."

"I'm sure she'll be fine with it."

In spite of the attraction in Re Stafford's eyes, he didn't look away. This man oozed confidence and Drago felt a slight yet grudging respect for the Laetez male.

"All right then," Drago said. "I appreciate the offer."

"It's my pleasure."

We'll see about that, Drago thought. We'll see.

Chapter Three

The guardhouse was a single-story gray building located across from the med lab. It had two training rooms, a shower room and a vast office where guards checked in and out, filed reports and monitored the colony on a wall spec system.

Tasia had almost finished logging her report from her patrol that morning when Drago entered the office. A little thrill shot through her and again sexual thoughts bombarded her mind. He had changed into a new shirt, black like most slave uniforms, yet it looked almost elegant on his lean, broad-shouldered body. He moved with such power and grace, reminding her of a sleek, wild beast stalking his prey.

He approached the lead guard, Re Lenor, who happened to be on desk duty that afternoon.

"You must be Drago," she said. Tasia had already told her about the new Draper crossbreed who had joined the colony, but Re Lenor still stared at him curiously.

One of the benefits of being a Laetez-human ACT product was that the two species looked so much alike that crossbreeds were scarcely noticed. Most other species didn't mingle as well. Tasia had seen images of monstrosities. Though Drago certainly looked *different*, she couldn't classify him as a monstrosity. Not with that hair and absolutely gorgeous body.

Tasia approached them and said, "I'll check him in, Re Lenor, if you don't mind."

"Be my guest." Re Lenor gestured with her hand. "I've been enjoying the peace and quiet."

"This way, Drago," Tasia said, stepping toward a desk at the back of the room where an overseer named Balin sat. "I'm a lead guard too so I can process your info and assign you."

Balin glanced at them and said, "Drago, right? Your records just downloaded from main control. You've got plenty of experience, that's for sure, but some issues working in groups. We won't tolerate any trouble here."

"Understood," Drago stated.

"But you'll be better suited here than in the slave infantry unit you had been assigned to. Guards usually work alone or in pairs. Tasia, sign him in as a sub-leader. If you work out well, you might just move up to lead guard."

"He was injured on arrival," Tasia said. "The medic suggests he start duty tomorrow."

"The lab already contacted us," Balin said. "We'll take their advice. As soon as you're checked in, report to the barracks, Drago."

"Sir, Medic Re Stafford offered me space in his unit," Drago said. Tasia looked at him sharply and he added, "If it's all right with you, Tasia?"

"Absolutely not," she said, a teasing glint in her eyes, or so she thought.

He nodded abruptly. "Of course. I'll report to the barracks."

"Hey, I was only joking," she said and turned to Balin. "He can stay with us."

Balin shrugged. "It's up to you. Dismissed."

Tasia led Drago toward an empty computer terminal.

"If you don't want me to stay at your unit, I understand. Medic Re Stafford should have asked you first."

"Yes, he should have, but I honestly don't mind."

He cast her a sidelong glance that she found disturbingly sexy. "You're certain of that?"

"If I wasn't I wouldn't say it. Trust me. I don't have a problem speaking my mind. Besides, the barracks are uncomfortable even if you're not sick or injured."

They sat at the computer and she processed his information. As Balin said, most of it had been forwarded by main control. She noted he had extensive training in combat, both hand-to-hand and with a variety of weapons.

"I'm surprised main control has decided to place a slave of your quality in a farming colony."

"The slave colonies on this planet are of the utmost economic importance to the Drapers," he stated.

"True but let's be honest. Your behavioral problems got you banished to the edge of the galaxy."

"It wasn't quite like that. Several members of my unit had problems with a Draper crossbreed."

"Was it not an ACT unit?"

"Yes, but I was the only Draper crossbreed."

Tasia lowered her voice. "Yes. Drapers don't seem to like mixing their DNA. They prefer to keep slaves of other species."

"Many Draper slaves live better than free citizens of other species, not to mention on other planets slaves and prisoners are abused."

"That happens here too. Or did you already forget about Than beating you with the shocker club?"

"I haven't forgotten, but he is an exception, is he not? These other overseers seem fair enough."

Her brow furrowed and she met his gaze. "You speak as if you don't mind being a slave."

"I didn't say that. I'm merely pointing out that we could be laboring under worse masters."

“Or we could have no masters.”

He leaned closer to her, interest in his eyes. Heavens, a woman could lose herself in his gaze.

“That’s the dream of every slave, isn’t it?” Drago whispered. His voice was so deep and smooth. She imagined that voice speaking close to her ear while he made love to her.

Staff was in the fantasy too, his strong, slender hands roaming over her and Drago, his beautiful blue eyes alive with passion.

Drago continued, “Regardless of how well we’re treated freedom is a glittering jewel in the horizon.”

Something in his words made her stomach clench. Not to mention when he looked at her with those deep set, intense gray eyes she felt completely naked. “You make it sound unreachable.”

He tilted his head slightly to one side, as if in question.

Tasia sat back and shook her head. “Talk like this could get us killed. I’m nearly finished processing you. I have a meal break so I can show you to our unit and you can get some rest.”

Drawing a deep breath and releasing it slowly, she turned back to the computer, but felt his burning gaze upon her. Her stomach clenched again but this time with sexual desire.

What was it about this slave that stirred her so much? No doubt Staff was just as moved by him. Though they had never met before, there was an undeniable connection – or attraction – among them.

* * * * *

Once Tasia processed Drago, he waited while she finished logging her morning reports. Afterward, they walked to the living unit she shared with Re Stafford. Though small, the unit was comfortable.

“There’s only two beds,” he observed.

Standing in the kitchen area, she glanced at him over her shoulder. “Staff and I only use one. You can have the other. Don’t worry. We won’t do anything to make you uncomfortable.”

He didn’t miss the playful glint in her eyes. She was clearly feeling him out to see how he’d respond.

“Isn’t lust a benefit of our Laetez blood?” He met her gaze and her smile faded slightly.

She ran the tip of her pink tongue over her darker pink lips. What would that moist little tongue feel like on his cock, lapping the shaft and swirling around the head?

Sexual desire burned deep in his gut and he thrust such thoughts from his mind. He needed to move at her pace. These new sensations made it difficult to be patient.

"That doesn't mean we'll make love in front of total strangers," she said.

His brow furrowed. What did she mean? Make love? Though he spoke fluently in several Laetez languages as well as human English, this was a term he'd never encountered. Apparently it had something to do with mating.

"Friends are another story," she continued, a faint smile once again touching her lips. She turned to him and he stepped closer.

"I hope we can be friends," he said, letting his gaze travel over her slowly. In a strictly physical sense, feigning interest in her wasn't difficult. In spite of her strange facial features, she had an exquisite body. He guessed she was about five feet seven inches, trim yet not too thin but also curvy in all the right places. Her hair was lovely too. Thick and almost black. Pity she wore it short.

She seemed pleasant enough, as did Medic Re Stafford, yet he knew better than to be fooled by any Laetez no matter how innocent they appeared.

"Do you?" she asked, her voice softer than before. When he stepped so close their bodies almost touched, she didn't turn away but tilted her face up toward his.

When looking into her large, dark, human eyes, it was easier to ignore her other features. He searched her eyes, looking for a hint of the cold Laetez bitch he knew lurked beneath their warm surface. Unfortunately he saw no deception in her.

"Very much," he said, his voice just above a whisper.

"I guess you didn't have many friends at your last post," she said.

"No." That much was the truth. Drago had many acquaintances but no one he'd consider a friend. He had learned long ago that getting close to anyone was a mistake. A person couldn't really depend on anyone except himself.

"It won't be like that here," she said. "Not with me and Staff."

To his surprise, her hand brushed his then curved around it. His first impulse was to jerk away from her. She was part of an alien race he detested, yet it was his job to gain her trust and learn what he could so these slaves couldn't escape. Besides, the feel of her hand against his wasn't unpleasant. In fact it was rather nice. Her hand was smaller than his, slender but strong. It was soft in places and calloused in others, probably from her training as a guard.

"I'm glad to hear it." He leaned a bit closer and she followed his lead. Just before their lips touched, she turned away.

Drawing a deep breath, she shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Well, we hardly know each other."

"Something tells me that will soon be remedied."

He took another step toward her but she placed a firm hand on his chest. "I think we better slow down."

"You're right. I apologize if I made you feel uncomfortable."

Smiling slightly, she nodded. Her fingers tightened on his chest before she dropped her hand and cleared her throat a bit self-consciously.

"Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. The lavatory is through that door. Feel free to take a shower. I imagine you want one after the crash and the trek through the desert."

That was true enough. He could scarcely wait to scrub away the blood, sand and sweat. The shuttle crash hadn't been part of his plan to infiltrate the colony, yet it had worked out well so far, except for the dead pilot.

Tasia walked across the room, opened a closet and removed fresh bedding. While she changed the sheets on one of the beds, she said, "You can have this one. I have to go back on duty and you should get some rest. I know accelerated healing therapy makes you tired."

He wished accelerated healing was his only problem. It was nearly time for another dose of the conversion drug and that always made him feel drowsy and a little sick. The longer he took it, the higher the dose he required and therefore the weaker he felt. He hoped to fulfill his duty before he needed to increase the drug to a dangerous level, yet without it he would retain his Laetez characteristics for the rest of his life. The very thought twisted his gut.

"Well, that's about it," Tasia said, placing her hands on her shapely hips. That snug black uniform showed off her body to advantage. He especially loved the way the clinging material exposed the outline of her nipples. "I have to get back to the guardhouse but I'll be home in a few hours and we can talk more over dinner. It will be just the two of us because Staff is working a double shift."

She headed for the door, paused and turned to him when he called her name.

"Thank you for your hospitality," he said. "You and Re Stafford."

"You're welcome. See you later."

After she left the unit, Drago dropped his backpack on the bed. From a hidden section in the lining of his medical case, he removed a micro spec and listening devices made from technology undetectable by colony security. He bugged the house then took a shower. The unit was rather warm so he didn't bother with a shirt, socks or underwear but wore only a pair of trousers.

He injected himself with the drug, sat on the bed and closed his eyes as waves of nausea nearly overtook him. When it passed, he lay down. He must have been more tired than even he imagined because within moments he fell deeply asleep.

* * * * *

Drago awoke to the sound of utensils clinking and the delicious aroma of food. Even though he was still slightly groggy from sleep, his stomach rumbled with hunger. He had rolled over in sleep and was facing the unit's one small window. It was dark outside and his brow furrowed. How long had he slept?

With a deep sigh, he pushed himself to a sitting position and glanced toward the kitchen area where Tasia was preparing a meal. She had changed into a black tank top that showed off her beautiful arms and shoulders. The only thing marring her smooth, tanned skin was a faded white scar that ran down her right shoulder.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" she asked with a pleasant smile.

"Better. What time is it?"

"Half past the seventh night hour."

He felt stunned. "I slept all day."

"No doubt you needed it. I was going to make us dinner earlier but I didn't want to wake you. Besides now we can all eat together. Staff is due home soon."

Drago pulled on his shirt and stepped into the lavatory. He splashed cool water on his face then he leaned on the sink and stared at his reflection. He still wasn't accustomed to seeing himself with that horrible, oversized nose and weird skin tone.

Scowling, he shook his head.

When he finished in the lavatory, he rejoined Tasia. Leaning a shoulder against the wall, he watched her move about the kitchen. Her motions were quick and sure yet there was something incredibly feminine about her. He longed to rest his hands on her narrow waist, stroke the slight swell of her belly and feel the delicious weight of her breasts in his hands.

Drago's cock twitched to life and he tried to force it back into submission by thinking about something other than throwing Tasia onto the bed and fucking her until neither of them could walk.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked, glancing at the food. Though Laetez were omnivores, all slaves adopted the Drapers' meatless lifestyle. Here at the farming colony, their food supply was abundant and for the most part provided without debit from their modest pay. At the moment Tasia was cooking a delicious-looking vegetable casserole with seasoned greens on the side and a fruit tart for dessert.

"Want to set the table? The dishes are in that cabinet." She indicated the place with a nod of her head.

While waiting for Re Stafford to arrive, Drago and Tasia spoke of trivial things. He found her friendly, pleasant and remarkably unpretentious for a Laetez. Of course she was only half Laetez, but humans were so similar it was often hard to differentiate between the two species.

Standing over a pot of steaming vegetables, Tasia said, "If Staff doesn't come home soon we're going to be eating mush."

"You don't use his prefix?"

She glanced at him and smiled. "As close as we are, it's allowed. Plus he makes exceptions for my human side. Even though Mom was married to a Laetez, she still found the Re and Er a little confusing."

"And your father didn't mind?"

"He didn't seem to."

"In my experience most Laetez are very adamant about their prefixes."

Tasia turned to him, a gentle expression in her large, dark eyes. "Sounds to me like you didn't have very nice experiences with the Laetez. Maybe now that you're here you'll get to know the good side of your Laetez heritage."

He pushed aside his disgust. In truth he should be glad his disguise was working so well.

Placing a hand to her cheek, he said, "I hope so. Please don't think me rude for saying this, but I haven't liked much about my Laetez half. Now I'm starting to see I was wrong."

For several moments they stood, their gazes locked. Again he thought how remarkably beautiful her eyes were.

As if drawn by some invisible force, she and Drago leaned closer to each other. The tips of her full breasts brushed against his chest and even that light contact was enough to send his libido into overdrive. Before fully realizing what was happening, he gently grasped her upper arms and covered her mouth with a kiss.

Tasia's eyes slipped shut and she moaned softly. Her lips were warm and slightly moist. He loved the feel of her body close to his and the way she leaned into him as the kiss deepened. At the moment he wanted to feel her all over—to grasp her ass and cup her breasts. To stroke her...

Then she stiffened in his arms. He sensed her discomfort and broke the kiss. He stepped back slightly, though he didn't drop his hands from her.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. I mean yes. You see, Staff and I aren't just roommates."

"You're lovers." He nodded. "So I guessed."

"It's not that I didn't enjoy kissing you just now. In fact I'd love to kiss you again." Her large eyes stared into his with such openness that for a moment he nearly forgot what she was. She had a refreshing quality that he found both irresistible and disturbing. "It's just that I want to be honest with Staff about us. Not that there's an us! We just met. But—"

"Tasia, I understand." He released her arms and ran a fingertip across her lips before turning toward the window.

They fell silent and before long Staff burst into the unit, his eyes gleaming, a smile on his lips and a package in his hand.

"Tasia! Guess what?" he said. "Hi, Drago. Excuse my enthusiasm but I just got something I never expected."

"Staff, what are you talking about?" Tasia chuckled. He strode toward her, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close for a smacking kiss. She hugged him then said, "What?"

"I stopped at the trade unit on the way home and the vendor was there. Guess what he had? You'll never guess. I'll show you. Take a look." He held up a micro disk between his thumb and forefinger.

Tasia raised her eyes to the heavens and shook her head, an amused little smile on her lips. "More music. Staff, don't you have enough?"

"As if a person can ever have enough music. But this is special. It's from twentieth-century Earth." He turned to Drago and said, "Music is my hobby. If I wasn't stuck here I'd be traveling all over the galaxy and beyond preserving ancient folk music."

Drago raised an eyebrow. He found it strange that a slave intelligent enough to become a medic would prefer the life of a vagabond, flying from planet to planet for the sake of *music*.

Again Tasia shook her head, but this time at Drago. "Something tells me you're not getting through to him, Staff. Drapers aren't into music and this boy is more Draper than Laetez. But that's okay. A few weeks around here and you'll embrace your Laetez side, Drago." She slipped an arm around his shoulders and squeezed.

"Drapers do have music," he stated. "It's used in its proper place."

"At weddings and funerals, right?" Staff said.

"Yes. And Draper children under the age of eight are allowed music classes in school, if their parents approve."

"How long until dinner is ready?" Staff asked.

"Right now," Tasia replied. "If we wait any longer it'll be inedible."

"Damn! I wanted to listen to this before we ate."

"Listen to it during," Tasia said.

"As long as it won't bother you two."

"Since when does it bother me?"

Staff glanced at Drago who was listening to their conversation with interest. Not because he cared about twentieth-century Earth music, but because he found them unusual for Laetez.

While he and Tasia brought the food to the table, Staff loaded the music into a handheld computer that must have cost him several months' pay. Computers were only sold to slaves who had proven themselves trustworthy. Even then the devices were outrageously priced and had tight security locks.

They sat down to eat with the chaotic Earth music playing in the background.

"This music was made by my own people and I think it's weird," Tasia observed, wrinkling her nose.

"I think I like it," Staff said. "It reminds me of Laetez island music."

Tasia glanced at Drago and asked, "What do you think?"

"I think this music wouldn't be played at a Draper wedding or funeral."

"Yeah, but you can dance to it." Staff grinned and began shaking around in his seat, making funny arm movements that made Tasia laugh.

Drago couldn't keep from chuckling too. These were either the strangest Laetez in the galaxy or else he might have misjudged the species.

Then he realized the latter was impossible. He had lived for too long under Laetez rule, had seen his family destroyed by Laetez soldiers who took pleasure in their suffering.

Of course these weren't soldiers, but slaves who had been influenced by Drapers for over thirty years. Surely within that time they had learned *something* useful from his people.

"Wow, I was starting to wonder if you could smile," Staff said, his lively blue eyes fixed on Drago's. "You seem so grim. I know it's a Draper thing but—"

"Draper thing?" Drago interrupted.

"Most of you are on the serious side. That's all he meant," Tasia explained quietly. "We know how much discipline means to Drapers."

"But I'm not all Draper," he reminded them. "So that means I'm allowed to smile." As if to reinforce his point, he smiled again.

"You have a nice smile," Tasia said, her voice still soft. Their gazes met and he felt Staff watching them.

"Don't you think so, Staff?" she asked.

"Yes. I do."

Drago didn't miss the huskiness in his voice and his stomach tightened, both with desire and anticipation. His plan was going well so far and it seemed he'd have the added benefit of satisfying the sexual urges that were rapidly overtaking him. The longer he lived with his Laetez characteristics, the more he wanted to fuck like a Jinxan buck in mating season.

"It's easy to smile with such pleasant company," Drago told them.

They continued eating and talking. Tasia and Staff discussed their work days and other news of interest about the colony.

It had been a long time since Drago had shared a table with a family and though these two slaves were different than Drapers, he had no doubt they *were* a family. He recalled his childhood when he'd sit down to dinner with his parents. Though their conversation had been far less animated than Tasia and Staff's, they had showed genuine interest in each other. Drago had felt comfortable and a sense of belonging that he had never felt since.

Even during his time in the army, when he had shared tough situations with members of his unit, he had never allowed himself to feel close to them. In the Draper army, close emotional ties weren't usually encouraged. Their relationships were based

on respect and loyalty. That had worked well for Drago because he had learned early in life that emotional bonds only led to sorrow.

When he switched to Section Fifty-Six, he had finally found a job that suited him perfectly in every way. He worked alone, only reporting back when necessary. His personal life was a well-kept secret and he required no ties to anyone.

Now watching Tasia and Staff, he didn't exactly feel longing for someone in his life, but rather reminiscent of a time long past when he had been innocent and happy.

After dinner they pitched in to help clean up and then Tasia suggested Staff play some better music they all could enjoy.

"What do you want to hear?" he asked enthusiastically. "Tydisian drums? How about belly dance music from the Delilah Sector?"

"Just make it something we can dance to," Tasia said. "So we can burn off that dessert."

"I know just the thing." Staff grinned wickedly and made his selection.

Moments later a slow, sensual instrumental filled the unit.

A sexy look in his eyes, Staff pulled Tasia into his arms and began swaying to the rhythm of the music.

"Staff, dancing to music this slow isn't going to burn off anything," she teased.

"Yes but it leads to other things that burn off plenty." He covered her mouth in a kiss.

Closing her eyes, she wove her fingers through his hair.

Drago felt another twinge of desire from watching them and his cock awakened. He leaned a shoulder against the wall and stared them, wondering how he could be so aroused by these *aliens*.

Finally Tasia pulled away from Staff and said, "That's enough, Staff. We have company."

"Then you don't feel like dancing?"

"Not to this." She brushed her thumb gently across his lips then walked to a chair and sat down.

Staff approached Drago, a gleam in his eyes, and asked, "How about you? Or is dancing with another man not your thing?"

"I have no problem with men dancing," Drago stated. "However, I don't know how to dance."

"We can fix that," Staff said.

Drago's gaze swept the medic from head to toe. The idea of touching him intimately, feeling Staff's long, lean body against his, made Drago's heart beat faster. It would be even better if Tasia could be persuaded to help with his dancing lessons.

Already she was gazing at the men with interest in her lovely dark eyes.

"You think you can teach me?" Drago asked, tilting his head slightly in question.

"You look like you'll be a great student," Tasia said.

"Then I'll give it a try."

He straightened and took a few steps closer to Staff. Unlike Drapers who performed ritualistic dances at weddings, the Laetez danced with their bodies pressed very close and there seemed to be little discipline to their style. Their bodies undulated, as if mimicking their crude mating techniques.

At the moment, with Staff's hard body pressed close to his, Drago appreciated that crudeness more than he ever imagined possible.

"Relax," Staff told him. He ran a hand down the length of Drago's spine and swept it over his buttocks. The sensation was so sexually arousing that instead of relaxing, Drago stiffened even more. Then he forced himself to loosen up. If these slaves wanted to dance with him, they couldn't be too offended by anything it might lead to.

It was then he became fully aware of Staff's cock pushing against him. No doubt Staff felt Drago's as well. Though Staff wasn't as tall or big-boned as Drago, his body was very tight and strong. He was warm and carried the faint scent of herbal soap.

Their gazes met and Staff moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. The urge to taste his lips almost overcame Drago and as if sensing his desire, Staff edged even closer.

"Mind if I cut in?" Tasia asked.

Drago had been so absorbed in Staff that he hadn't noticed her rise from her chair and approach them.

"You two look pretty cute together but I'm getting a little lonely over there by myself," she continued, a playful look in her eyes. "Unless you'd like to make this a threesome?"

Staff and Drago exchanged glances. Though Staff didn't release Drago, he said, "If you're uncomfortable with this—I mean, we realize you just got here—"

"On the contrary," Drago said in a voice so husky it even surprised him. "I'm intrigued and...and appreciative that you're making me feel this welcome. And you also know from my earlier examination I am sterile and have undergone STD prevention treatments."

"So have we," Staff assured him, rather unnecessarily. By law, all slaves were placed on the prevention treatments.

"Then I guess we can quit pussyfooting around," Tasia said. She placed an arm around each man and kissed first Staff then Drago.

He couldn't decide which one of these Laetez slaves turned him on more. It was nice to know he didn't need to choose between the two.

Tasia made a motion to break the kiss but Drago cupped the back of her head and held her firm. The tip of his tongue traced her lips then thrust between them. She welcomed him, moaning softly and pressing her body closer to his. His eyes closed and for a moment he lost himself in her warm, wet mouth.

Staff's hand traveled down Drago's back and over his buttocks before he stepped away. Drago opened his eyes partway to see where the medic had gone. Across the room, Staff pulled down the covers on the bed he shared with Tasia. A smile tugged at Drago's lips and he wondered how the three of them could possibly fit on that bed. It was ridiculous.

Tasia's small, strong hand swept over his hip and grasped his ass. Groaning softly, he deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue more forcefully against hers. She tightened her grip on his bottom and right then he forgot about everything except the primitive sexual urge rushing through him.

This was far different than anything he felt in his pure Draper form. The excitement was even keener than when he used his own hand on his newly sensitized cock. The very thought of being touched by Staff and Tasia had his heart pounding almost out of control. He pulled her even closer and she apparently enjoyed it because she locked both her arms around his neck and made a soft, pleased sound. Her tongue swirled around his, tasting and thrusting, so warm and wet.

Drago reached down and grasped her buttocks with both hands, lifting her slightly and thrusting his pelvis against her.

"Ah, Drago!" She giggled, pulling her head back slightly and gazing at him. Her dark, lively eyes gleamed with arousal and a smile curved her full lips. Until meeting her, he hadn't realized how good Laetez lips felt, hers in particular. They were soft and warm. He was even starting to love their unusual shape.

The bed legs screeched across the floor as Staff pushed Drago's bed near his and Tasia's, creating one larger bed.

Chapter Four

Drago hauled Tasia higher on his body. She wrapped her legs around his waist and locked her arms around his neck. Still staring into his eyes, she asked, "Can I feel your hair?"

"Of course."

"I've been dying to since I saw it at the med lab."

Grinning, Staff approached them and said, "Then I'm one up on you. I got to feel it during my examination."

"Is that ethical, medic?" Tasia teased.

Staff held up a defensive hand. "I only felt it in the line of duty."

Drago glanced at him over his shoulder and said, "Too bad. I wanted you to feel it more."

The medic's smile faded slightly. Drago's words apparently took him by surprise. "You did?" he asked.

"Yes," Drago said, walking across the room, Tasia still in his arms. He placed her on the bed then sat beside her and removed his helmet and hair sheath.

"You don't have to wear that around the house if you don't want to. We're not going to do anything nasty like pull your hair or chop off your braid," Tasia said, reaching out hesitantly and running her fingertip along the fat black braid that now dangled down his back. A human or Laetez probably wouldn't have detected the touch, but Drago did. His hair was brimming with ultrasensitive nerves and he relished the faint caress.

She knelt behind him and untied the black and silver binding that held his braid in place. Then she unwound his hair and gently ran her fingers through it.

"Is this how you like it touched?" she asked. "I've heard about Draper hairplay but have never participated in it."

"Then you must be a natural," he said, his voice soft and husky. He reached behind him. "Give me your hands."

She did as he asked, placing her slender hands in his. He positioned her hands close to his scalp then slowly raked her fingers through his hair, teaching her how to stroke it. When he released her, she continued caressing him the way he showed her.

Drago's eyes slipped shut and he sighed with pleasure. After a moment he felt the delicate caress of her lips against his hair and groaned softly. Her breath teased him, warming him to the core and stirring his cock.

“Let me ask, have you inherited any sexual characteristics from your Laetez side?” Staff asked.

Drago opened his eyes halfway and found Staff gazing at him with such burning desire that his arousal shifted even deeper into overdrive. The medic’s gorgeous blue eyes slowly drifted toward Drago’s bulging crotch.

“Yes,” Drago replied, his breath quickening. This would be the first time fucking with a cock heightened by Laetez senses and he was eager for the experience. He always had formidable self-control in almost every aspect of his life. He hoped he wouldn’t lose it now, since he had no desire to come across like a boy in lust, no matter how much he longed to fuck these arousing aliens.

As if sensing his desire or perhaps merely giving in to his own, Staff approached, squatted in front of Drago and parted his thighs. He placed his long, graceful hands on Drago’s inner thighs and caressed, edging closer and closer to his groin until he covered the thick bulge with his hand and squeezed with the perfect pressure.

It must have taken the experience of a Laetez male to know exactly how to touch another. Drago inhaled sharply and moistened his lips. All the while Staff’s sexy blue gaze remained fixed on his. Between Tasia’s hands in his hair and Staff’s hands on other parts of him, it was difficult to keep his eyes open, yet at the moment he couldn’t bear to look away from Staff.

Finally Drago rose, pushing Staff back slightly and feeling the gentle drag of Tasia’s hands on his hair as it moved from her grasp. He quickly shed his trousers, socks and boots. Staff and Tasia did the same. This time when he sat on the bed, Tasia knelt even closer behind him, wrapping her arms around him and pressing her nude body to his. He felt the brush of her prominent nipples, hard yet velvety against his hair.

Again Staff squatted in front of him. Drago spread his thighs to allow him better access to his stiff, aching cock. Staff grasped the shaft in one hand and Drago’s tight balls in his other. He stroked and kneaded, making Drago’s entire body stiffen with desire.

Behind him, Tasia swept Drago’s hair aside and teased his ear with her tongue. Closing his eyes, Drago surrendered to the fantastic sensations stirred by these sexy aliens. He reached down and wove his fingers through Staff’s hair. It was short, coarse and thick. Not like Draper hair, but still pleasant to touch. He stroked Staff’s face, feeling the day’s growth of beard on his jawline.

Staff lowered his head and took the crown of Drago’s erection into his mouth. The sensations were almost indescribable. Staff swirled his hot, wet tongue over Drago’s cock head and flicked the underside with rhythmic strokes that propelled Drago toward orgasm.

Staff clamped his hand around the base of his shaft and slowed his caresses, pausing before Drago tumbled over the edge.

At the same time Tasia stroked his hair, running her fingers through it and randomly teasing it with tender kisses. Staff once again began stroking and sucking

Drago's staff. He released his balls to run his fingers through the Draper's curly black pubic hair. This nearly made Drago insane with desire. He groaned and closed his eyes, arching his head back and clamping a firm hand to Staff's head. His hips thrust toward Staff and his heart pounded out of control.

Tasia purred softly in his ear and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly, her sleek, warm body rubbing provocatively against him.

For several moments he enjoyed their caresses then the need to mate almost overwhelmed him. He wanted to plunge his rock-hard cock deep into Tasia's wet cunt then he wanted to throw Staff onto the bed and suck him until he screamed from the pleasure.

With a groan so carnal it was almost a growl, Drago stood, grasped Tasia beneath her arms and gently dragged her onto her back. He straddled her, his weight braced on his knees so as not to cause her discomfort, and ran his hand over her stomach. His gaze fixed on her full, golden tanned breasts with their large, stiff nipples just waiting for his attention.

Staff climbed onto the other bed and knelt beside them, staring at them with a look of arousal and a hint of jealousy. Drago understood. After all, Tasia had been his woman for a long time. Now he was going to have to learn to share.

Drago could empathize with the new emotions Staff must be feeling. He was almost overwhelmed as well. Drapers usually placed little emphasis on mating, at least as far as intense pleasure was concerned. They usually mated for life and had close links to their spouses and children, but in a disciplined fashion. These powerful desires and strong emotions raging inside him since he had adopted Laetez characteristics were difficult for a man like Drago to handle. Still, he couldn't deny the pleasure he felt here with Tasia and Staff.

The medic moved behind Drago, caressed his hair and swept it aside. Drago felt his wet tongue lapping the back of his neck. Staff ran his tongue down Drago's spine, pausing at the base to lick his lower back close to the indentation of his buttocks.

A shiver of raw passion shot through Drago. It had never occurred to him, a Draper, to engage in ass play. The very idea was considered perverted by his kind. Prior to the conversion treatments, he had been repulsed by the indulgent sexual acts of other species. Now everything had changed. Though part of him was disgusted by his new cravings, another part felt a freedom he'd never imagined possible.

"Is something wrong?" Tasia asked, caressing Drago's forearms. She looked at him with a softness in her eyes that aroused him even more.

"No."

"You've never been with Laetez, have you?" she asked, a slight smile tugging at her lips.

He stiffened a bit. Why her words disturbed him, he wasn't sure. "No."

"I think you'll like it."

"We'll make sure he likes it," Staff said, slipping an arm around Drago and stroking his cock.

Regaining his composure, Drago smiled seductively and cupped Tasia's breasts, watching the soft, golden flesh spill over his hands. He brushed his thumbs over the prominent nipples. Wondering how they'd taste, he stretched out beside her on the bed and took one into his mouth. He licked the stiff pink flesh and rolled his tongue over the areola, enjoying the feel of the tiny bumps of pleasure that rose beneath the velvety skin. She had Laetez nipples, much larger than those of human females, but they seemed to fit her full, firm breasts perfectly.

"Oh, Drago!" she gasped when he began sucking on her nipple. Her body tensed beneath him and she grasped his head, her fingers tightening on his hair in a grip that sent jolts of pleasure-pain through him. Fuck, he liked that!

"I'm sorry," she panted, loosening her grip slightly. "Did that hurt?"

"In the best possible way," he said, his voice rough with desire.

He moved to her other nipple and sucked it, using his teeth and tongue to stir her even more.

While he and Tasia played their sensual game, Staff nipped and licked Drago's ass cheeks while running his hands over him and Tasia. Drago sucked one of her nipples and Staff pinched and stroked the other.

By the sound of her breathing and the way she thrust against Drago, she was as ready as he was to fuck.

He mounted her and filled her with a long, slow thrust. She was so fucking hot, wet and tighter than he'd imagined. Or maybe the sensations were so great because this was the first time he'd thrust his ultrasensitive cock into such an enthusiastic woman.

While he began pumping in a steady rhythm, not too fast lest he come too soon and ruin the next blissful moments, she ran her fingers through his hair, pushing him to heights of desire he'd never imagined possible. Staff once again began caressing their bodies. He grasped Drago's bottom and thrust his tongue between the indentation, teasing the sphincter. That was all Drago could take.

He thrust faster and harder into Tasia. His motions soon made it impossible for Staff to continue licking him so intimately. Instead he took over the hairplay since Tasia was now so close to the edge herself all she could do was cling to Drago, moaning and writhing with passion. Their lustful groans mingled, their heated bodies fused together and their hearts pounding as one.

Then Tasia's pussy convulsed around his cock, hurling Drago over the edge. He practically roared with pleasure as wave after wave of orgasm struck him, more intense than anything he had ever felt in his life.

He rolled off Tasia and lay on his back, his eyes closed and heartbeat slowing. Her hand settled onto his chest and he opened his eyes, glancing at her. Lying on her side, she wore a contented smile, her lovely eyes gentle in the aftermath. Staff lay close to her, stroking her hip and thigh.

Tasia turned to Staff and said, "I think we owe you."

"True," Drago added. "And I always pay my debts."

There was no missing the lust in Staff's eyes or the size of his erection as he stretched out on his back.

Tasia covered his mouth in a kiss, her hands stroking his hair-dusted chest. It was good she was so involved with his upper half because Drago had plans for everything below the waist.

He clasped Staff's cock and took the head between his lips. Though he had never pleasured a man before, he recalled the things Staff had done to stimulate him and mimicked the motions. He sucked the bulbous head and flicked his tongue along the underside, relishing the texture and shape of him. Again he appreciated his newly enhanced sense of smell. He thoroughly enjoyed the subtle musky aroma of Staff as much as he'd enjoyed Tasia's delicious scent.

Staff groaned and thrust his hips toward Drago. Again Drago's cock grew stiff with need. He enjoyed pleasuring Staff, seeing and feeling the excitement in the medic's lean, hard body. Yet he wanted even more. He wanted to claim Staff just as he had claimed Tasia. To fill him with his cock. To share his flesh in the most intimate way possible.

Just when he sensed that Staff was about to explode, he stopped licking and sucking and clamped a hand at the base of the medic's cock.

Staff's eyes opened and his gaze met Drago's over Tasia's back from where she lay, covering the medic's chest with hungry kisses.

"I want you on your hands and knees," Drago stated, his voice rough with passion.

At those words, Tasia glanced from one man to the other, a look of raw desire on her face. She stretched across the bed toward the cabinet built into the wall and reached inside. After rummaging through several folded shirts and socks, she withdrew a small container and opened it. She dipped her hand into the clear gel and offered some to Drago.

He knew exactly what it was. Drapers often used such gel to facilitate the mating process. It heightened sensitivity somewhat. Now he could only imagine how wonderful it would feel.

Staff pushed himself onto his hands and knees and Tasia use the gel to lube his ass while Drago did the same to his cock. He was right. The feeling of his gel-slicked hand stroking his cock was almost as good as Staff's mouth on it.

Drawing a deep breath, Drago tried to will his heart to stop pounding, but it was impossible. He knelt behind Staff, grasped him firmly by the hips and slowly thrust his cock into him. It was then he noticed the faded scars covering the medic's back. His brow furrowed and he ran a hand over them lightly. Staff groaned with pleasure-pain. Drago understood. His need was just as great. He began pumping in a steady rhythm.

Tasia sat close by, staring with fascination. As if unable to resist, she reached for Staff's cock with one hand and stroked him while Drago thrust. With her free hand she caressed Drago's pubic hair, sending jolts of delight through him.

Staff came first, gasping and writhing into Tasia's hand. His ass pulsed with pleasure and Drago exploded.

All three collapsed onto the bed, Staff between them. When he recovered enough, Drago raised his head and once again stroked Staff's back.

"These scars look old," he commented softly, running his fingertips over the little white ridges.

"They're from when I was a child. When the Draper soldiers took over this planet," Staff said coolly.

"You must have been quite young. It is against regulations to flog slaves under the age of fourteen."

"Tell that to some of the scum they put in charge," Tasia snorted.

"What did you do to incite this?" Drago asked.

"Nothing," Staff said tightly.

"Nothing?"

"The soldier in charge amused himself by torturing slaves. It was a game for him," Staff continued. "He asked my mother who he should flog to death, me or her. She was—"

"Weak," Tasia said, her voice dripping rage, whether at Staff's mother, the soldier or both Drago couldn't be certain.

"The soldier flogged me while she watched then he shot her. I was seven years old," Staff finished, tugging away from Drago and rising from the bed. He headed for the lavatory but paused before entering, his gaze meeting Drago's. "In some ways you were lucky to be reared in a lab. At least you never had to know what it was like to be betrayed by someone you trusted."

"Staff," Tasia said.

"Sorry." The medic shook his head and stepped into the lavatory.

"I don't think he meant that crack about the lab," Tasia explained. "He has a problem with trust. I don't think he ever really got over what happened."

"I understand. I'm sure life here was terrible for you. It's unfortunate you were subjected to a soldier unfit for his position."

"He was crazy. Later he was demoted for his behavior, but by then it was too late for several prisoners." Tasia caressed Drago's face. "I guess it hasn't been easy for any of us."

He nodded slightly and she kissed him before leaving the bed and knocking on the lavatory door.

"Staff, are you all right?"

“Yeah. I’m just cleaning up. Be right out.”

Cleaning up wasn’t a bad idea. Drago felt a bit sticky and he looked forward to washing and going to sleep. After he made love to Tasia and Staff again, of course. It was good there were two of them. Drapers had more strength and stamina than Laetez. Luckily the conversion treatment hadn’t changed that. If not for the side effects of the drugs, he might have learned to enjoy this assignment.

* * * * *

The following morning when Tasia awoke, Staff was still sleeping soundly. She took a moment to admire how cute he looked with his hair tousled and eyes closed. He wasn’t on duty for several hours, so she left the bed, careful not to disturb him. Unfortunately she and Drago were scheduled for an early patrol of the northern sector.

Drago’s bed was empty and she heard water running in the lavatory. Several moments later he stepped out looking paler than usual.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Fine.”

She didn’t believe him. Not looking the way he did. “Maybe Staff should check you out before we leave for the guardhouse. You might have hurt your ribs again last night.” A slight smile touched her lips. “Things got a little wild around here.”

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. “I said I’m fine.”

“Why don’t you have something to eat? I’ll get washed and dressed. Be out in a minute.”

She took her uniform from the closet and went to get ready for her shift.

When she finished, she joined Drago in the kitchen. He’d waited for her, so they ate breakfast together.

Their gazes met across the table and recalling last night she felt uncharacteristically shy. She and Staff had been together so long she could scarcely recall what it was like to converse the morning after making love for the first time.

Since it seemed Drago wasn’t about to ease the tension by speaking first, she knew it had to be her move. She cleared her throat and took a sip of juice then said, “Last night was...I just wanted to say I had a really good time. I know Staff did too.”

He smiled slightly but there was no missing the sexy gleam in his eyes. “So did I. I’m glad I got transferred here. This colony is already far preferable to me than the infantry unit.”

“Well, I’m happy you’re here too.” She reached for his hand and rested hers atop it. He took her hand and held it snugly.

Tasia’s gaze drifted over his long, slender fingers. Like all Drapers, his nails looked like marble—milky white with fine grayish veins running beneath them. Rather than long and sharp, his were filed just past the tips and squared in a Laetez style. Again she

noted the family tattoo on the back of his hand. It was a leafy design done in dark blue ink.

"Did you know your father?" she asked softly.

"Why do you ask?"

"Since he had you marked I thought he might have—" She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have asked."

"It's all right. And no. I never knew my donors."

Like all lab-reared ACT products, he didn't refer to his predecessors as his parents, but as donors. That was a far more accurate description. Still, Tasia couldn't help feeling sorry for products brought up in labs, pawns of their government. Looking at Drago she once again realized how lucky she was to have known the love of two parents, even if they were taken from her too soon.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Shaking her head, she replied, "I was just thinking of my parents. They died about five years ago when a bad case of Brill's Flu struck the colony. The overseer in charge of ordering medical supplies forgot to process the medics' initial call for medication and by the time we actually got the meds it was too late for many of the slaves."

He held her gaze for a long moment. "I'm sorry. Was the overseer punished?"

Tasia snorted. "You're joking, right?"

"I suppose that's a luxury of being in charge," he said with a coolness that took her aback.

"Cruelty shouldn't be considered a luxury," she said.

"And the Laetez are no strangers to cruelty."

"You seem to forget you're part Laetez."

Their gazes locked. Tasia found herself challenging him with her look, as if urging him to continue so that she could vent some of the anger she still felt regarding the death of her parents, even after so many years.

Instead he said, "I didn't meant to upset you, Tasia. Nor did I mean to belittle your loss. I am sorry for what happened."

Sighing, she leaned back in her chair, her gaze dropping to her hand that brushed crumbs off her trouser leg. "I know. You'll have to excuse me. I'm still a little sensitive about it. Actually that's a lie. I'm a lot sensitive about it."

"I understand. There are things about my past I can't forgive as well."

She looked at him and nodded. "I'm sure that's true."

"We should leave for the guardhouse."

They hastily cleaned the breakfast mess then stepped outside. As usual, it was a hot, sunny day. Luckily Tasia liked hot weather otherwise life on a desert planet would have been unbearable.

After checking in at the guardhouse, Tasia and Drago took a patrol shuttle to the northern sector where most of the vegetable crops were grown. They rode at a slow pace around the perimeter to check the barriers. Next they patrolled the fields to make sure no fights had broken out and to see if anyone needed medical assistance.

Around midday they finished their patrol and were about to return to the guardhouse when they heard screaming from the grub-shucking machine. Grubs were the Drapers' most popular export—a root vegetable with a hard brown skin and a sweet green interior. Enormous machines operated by slaves quickly husked the grubs before they were shipped to the factory also located at the colony.

"We better go check it out," Tasia said, turning the shuttle back toward the machines.

A group of slaves crowded around a machine. Most were shouting in panic.

"Clear out!" Tasia ordered as she and Drago forced their way through the group.

She nearly panicked as well upon seeing a child of about eight stuck by his slave collar in the conveyer belt. Though the machine had already been shut down to prevent him from being pulled farther in, the collar was still strangling him.

Tasia recognized the child's mother, Re Nina, as one of the slaves desperately trying to pull him loose. She joined them, but he was stuck too tightly.

"Take off his collar," Drago said.

"Only an overseer can remove a child collar," one of the slaves reminded him. Children on the colony wore collars until the age of twelve when their security chip was implanted.

"Re Harley," Tasia said to another slave. "Take my shuttle and bring back an overseer. Now!"

The slave raced off to follow her orders, but by looking at the child, time was limited.

"Get it off!" Re Nina screamed.

Everyone knew the punishment attached to removing a child collar. Forty lashes with an electro-flogger. At the moment Tasia was past caring. She wasn't about to let this child die but she needed to find something to cut through the collar.

Before she could react, Drago shouldered her aside, slid his fingers beneath the collar and pulled. His Draper strength was enough to rip through the metal. The broken collar clanged onto the conveyer belt and the child was free.

"Is he all right?" Re Nina said, touching the child's face.

Tasia checked the boy and said, "He seems to be but we better take him to the med lab. Re Harley should be back with my shuttle at any moment."

A short time later three shuttles sped down the field. She had hoped Viv would be the one to come. To her disgust, Than was piloting one shuttle. An overseer called Milo piloted the one beside him. Milo was as cruel as Than and nearly as stupid. The other shuttle was piloted by Re Harley.

"What's going on here?" Than demanded with his usual self-important attitude. Tasia noticed his gaze fell on Drago and a look she'd never seen before crossed his face. Fear, perhaps? But why would an overseer fear a slave?

"This child needs to go to the med lab," Tasia said. "His collar got stuck in the conveyer belt and he nearly strangled."

"Another one?" Than curled his lip. "I swear, Laetez young are the most stupid creatures in the galaxy."

"I wouldn't bet on it," murmured someone in the crowd.

"Who said that?" Milo demanded, his yellowish complexion darkening with rage. "I swear, I will make your lives miserable if whoever said that doesn't step forward right now!"

"Can you punish us later and get this child help now?" Tasia said.

"She's right," Than said, shocking Tasia as well as the other slaves into silence.

Milo strode toward the conveyer belt where the child now sat, looking dazed and rubbing his badly bruised neck.

"He looks fine to me," Milo said.

"We'll take him to the med lab as a precaution," Than stated. "But there is a bigger problem. Who removed his collar?"

"I did," Drago said without hesitation, his gaze locked with Than's. "There was no time to wait for an overseer to arrive. The child would have strangled."

"No one except an overseer is allowed to remove a child collar," Milo growled.

"I am familiar with the rules," Drago said.

His bravado stunned Tasia. At the prospect of electro-flogger punishment, most slaves would have been trembling in their boots.

She tried to catch his gaze, to give him a sign not to push Milo, but he didn't so much as glance her way. He seemed completely focused on the overseers.

"Then you must also be familiar with the punishment," Milo sneered. "Forty lashes with an electro-flogger."

"If you want to punish me for acting in the interest of this colony, it is your prerogative."

"What do you mean?" Than asked.

"If the collar was not removed the child most likely would have died. That means you would have lost a worker who would serve for the next seventy years or so."

"I can't believe we're listening to this, Than." Milo curled his shapeless upper lip. He removed handcuffs from his uniform and stepped toward Drago. "Come quietly, slave, or else it will be execution for you instead of a mere beating."

"Maybe forty lashes is excessive," Than said, further surprising Tasia. "Under the circumstances his actions might have been warranted."

“Are you crazy? If we start making exceptions these slaves will walk all over us. That’s a Laetez trait and I’m sure this crossbreed is loaded with disgusting Laetez traits,” Milo said, looking repulsed. “Take off your shirt, crossbreed.”

Slowly, fury burning beneath the cool surface of his eyes, Drago did as ordered. Then he allowed Milo to snap the cuffs on his wrists.

Tasia couldn’t help thinking how wrong he looked, so tall and powerful, bound at the mercy of a lesser man.

“Do what you want,” Than said. He picked up the child and placed him in the shuttle.

Tasia scarcely noticed. Right now her biggest concern was Drago who was being led by Milo to the watchtower. Severe punishments usually took place there in clear view of the slaves to remind them of what would happen should they break Draper rules.

It had been months since any slave acted out enough to be beaten with an electro-flogger. The last time it happened, the slave had almost died. A few years back, one had died from the same punishment.

Most of the slaves dispersed and went about their work, their faces reflecting horror and disgust. Fear had once been prominent as well, but their secret plans had given them hope. They knew that soon they would be free of Draper rule, one way or the other.

Re Nina and a couple of others stood with Tasia who stared toward the watchtower, her stomach clenched even more tightly than her fists. With few exceptions, she *hated* the overseers.

“He saved my son’s life,” Re Nina said. “He didn’t even know us.”

“I know,” Tasia murmured.

Milo locked Drago’s bound hands on a hook above his head.

The overseer uncoiled the electro-flogger from where it hung from his belt. He activated the charge and the long, slender weapon glowed pale blue. At the first strike against Drago’s sleekly muscled back, Tasia flinched.

Then she drew a steadying breath. Drago hadn’t flinched. By the determined look on his face he had no intention of giving Milo the satisfaction. She doubted his fortitude would last through the entire punishment, but he had courage that was for sure.

Tasia watched, rage building inside her with every strike. The energy coursing through the flogger left long, blackish burns on his pale flesh. His gray blood trickled down his back. His stubbornness must have annoyed Milo, because the overseer’s beating increased in ferocity. Several times he struck Drago hard enough to almost knock him off his feet. No doubt the bindings on his hands were the only thing that kept him upright under the full-blooded Draper’s strength.

The last few strikes dragged groans of pain from Drago’s throat, but didn’t give Milo the pleasure of a scream.

When the punishment ended, Milo, panting from the exertion of dishing out the violent beating, growled and curled his lip, glaring at Drago's bleeding back. He unhooked his hands, released the cuffs and walked down the steps, leaving Drago leaning against one of the wooden polls on the tower.

"Everybody get back to work!" Milo barked before he hopped into his shuttle and raced off, sending a group of slaves laden with armfuls of grubs scattering.

Tasia raced up the watchtower stairs, taking two at a time, Re Nina and Re Harley behind her. Re Harley was tall and strong. He could easily help Drago to the shuttle so Tasia could bring him to the med lab.

To her surprise, he had already straightened his stance, no longer requiring the pole for support.

"Oh, this is bad." Re Nina's nose wrinkled at the sight of his back. "Really bad."

"We need to get you to the med lab right away," Tasia agreed. "Can you walk?"

"Yes," he said, his voice strained. "Just...give me a minute."

"Re Harley, I have a first-aid kit on my shuttle with some pain spray."

"I'll get it." The slave disappeared.

Tasia and Re Nina helplessly examined Drago's back.

"Do you want to sit down?" Re Nina asked him.

"No." He forced a smile. "If I do that I doubt I'll get up again."

"Thank you for what you did," Re Nina continued.

"I can't exactly say it was *no* problem." His lips twisted in what might have been a smile. It was difficult to tell. Tasia wondered how he had suddenly developed a sense of humor at the worst possible moment. But she was beginning to realize there was much to discover about this man and she was determined to learn it all.

Chapter Five

"I know what you're doing, Drago," Staff said, his gaze focused on his hands as he cleaned the new slave's shredded back and temporarily sealed the wounds.

For the first time since arriving, Drago jerked slightly. Staff almost felt relieved. He was starting to wonder if the man felt any pain. He'd been so still while his injuries were tended.

"Sorry about that," Staff said. "I can give you something stronger for the pain if you need it."

"No, I'm fine," Drago said. "What do you mean you know what I'm doing?"

Staff grinned. "You keep getting hurt so you don't have to work."

"That's completely untrue—" Drago said, shifting position to face Staff, but stopped upon seeing the medic's smile.

"I'm just joking," Staff said. "Keep still so I can finish."

"I don't see anything funny about this," Tasia snapped, pacing the room. "Milo is the one who needs flogging. He and Than think they're..." Her voice faded and she shook her head. "I actually couldn't believe Than's reaction. He was almost compassionate for a Draper—" Glancing at Drago, she said, "No offense."

Drago didn't reply and Tasia was on such a roll she didn't seem to care. Her dark eyes blazed and Staff couldn't help thinking how damn sexy she looked when she was riled.

While she ranted, Staff continued working on Drago. Maintaining a sense of humor in a situation like this usually helped keep his temper under control. He hated seeing anyone punished when they didn't deserve it, but seeing Drago's beautiful body mutilated like this made Staff furious. Just last night he and Tasia had made love with this man. Staff had felt the warmth of Drago's flesh against his, had felt the touch of his lips and tasted his tongue. Now the man's dark Draper blood stained his gloved hands as he worked to repair the damage of the guard's electro-flogger.

This man had sacrificed his own skin and risked his life for a complete stranger—a child he'd never seen before. Disgust coiled in Staff's belly. His own mother had willingly handed him over to the cruelty of the Drapers. He thought he'd gotten over that feeling of betrayal, but at this moment he clearly recalled how he felt when she'd pushed him toward the vicious Draper warrior.

"Times like this make me realize just how unbearable our existence is," Tasia continued.

"Lower your voice, Tasia," Staff warned. "This med lab has specs all over it, not to mention you know all about the Drapers' overdeveloped sense of hearing. Guards could be right outside."

"At this moment I don't care."

"You will if you're the next one flogged," Staff said.

She raised her eyes to the heavens, but managed to control her temper. Sighing deeply, she stepped closer to the table and looked at Drago whose gaze had been following her around the room, as if trying to figure her out. *Good luck*, Staff thought, a smile once again playing around his lips.

"Well, Drago," she said, just above a whisper but with a hard edge to her voice. "Now do you still think the Drapers are benevolent masters?"

"Tasia," Staff said sharply. She could be the sweetest woman in the world, but also completely tactless. "This isn't the time."

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. When she opened them, she reached out and gently ran the back of her hand across Drago's cheek. "You're right."

"Do you think this is the first time I've been punished, Tasia?" Drago asked, his voice steady, neither gentle nor accusing.

"No," she admitted. "But I still can't understand how you can just accept—"

"That's it, Drago," Staff interrupted, placing aside the tools of his trade. "You can return to the unit and rest. You'll feel much better in a day or two."

Staff grasped the slave's arm to help him up, but Drago moved with surprising ease for a man who had just been flogged. Either he had inherited the Drapers' tough skin or he was the most stubborn man Staff had ever met. Most likely it was a combination of both. While his initial examination had shown that Drago's flesh wasn't quite as sensitive as human or Laetez, it had far more receptors than a pure-blooded Draper. No doubt even with the mild anesthetic, he was still feeling considerable discomfort.

"I didn't say I accepted anything," Drago told Tasia. "Simply that if we are enslaved we could have worse masters than the Drapers. Or at least most Drapers. Obviously there are some exceptions. However," he lowered his voice and added, "freedom is always preferable to captivity."

"Yes it is." Tasia met his gaze and Staff had the mad urge to clamp his hand over her mouth. With their plan almost underway, they needed to be more careful than ever. Discussing the merits of freedom with a new slave was reckless and he would have to remind her of that later.

"Sit here and relax for a minute, Drago," Tasia said. "I'll go get the shuttle from parking and bring it closer to the entrance."

She left the examination room and Staff followed her.

"I'll walk with you," Staff said.

She smiled at him. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"It's not pleasure I want to talk about."

Her brow furrowed. "What's wrong? He's not hurt worse than I thought, is he?"

"No. Drago's a hardass."

"Leave it to you to be thinking about his ass at a time like this."

"I mean —"

"I know what you meant. Honestly, Staff, I think his Draper disposition is rubbing off on you already."

"Tasia, please. This is important."

"All right," she said, her grin fading.

He waited until they were outside before he continued speaking in a low voice. "I don't think all that talk about the guards and freedom is wise. At least until we know him better."

"I didn't say much."

"You said enough."

"Staff, he's a slave, just like we are. Do you think he enjoyed being flogged? I've seen his type before. We both have. He's so used to taking orders that he makes excuses for the guards, but he has a fire in his eyes that tells me he wants freedom as much as we do."

"Tasia." He grasped her shoulders and stared deeply into her eyes. "We can't risk what we've worked so hard for and even if we wanted to jeopardize our plans for a man we just met, no matter how sexy and courageous he might be, we have no right to make that decision for everyone else. One mistake in judgment and every slave in this colony suffers. Is that what you want?"

"You know I don't," she said, anger and a hint of fear in her eyes. Staff didn't doubt that fear wasn't for herself, but for the others. Tasia might be rough around the edges, but she was the bravest, most caring woman he'd ever known. That was why her feelings for Drago concerned him. Yes, Staff liked the new slave too, but he realized they needed to move slowly and be very careful in trusting him, particularly since he was half Draper.

"Let me ask you something," Tasia continued, her expression once again defiant. "How long should we take before feeling him out as far as freedom fighting goes? Our plans are almost ready to be put into action. What's going to happen when we all escape? Are we just going to leave him behind?"

"You know I'm not suggesting that," Staff said then sighed and closed his eyes. "Just be careful. Promise me you won't do anything stupid —"

"Give me some credit," she snapped. "I am a security guard, you know. Honestly, Staff, sometimes your paranoia makes you impossible to deal with."

His eyes widened and he gritted his teeth. "Paranoia? I can't believe you said that."

Before his Laetez temper got the better of him, he turned on his heel and headed back toward the building, but Tasia caught his arm.

"I'm sorry." She looked at him with such affection in her large, dark eyes that his anger ebbed. She placed a hand to his cheek. "I didn't mean that how it sounded."

"Yes you did."

"All right but I'm sorry."

He sighed, took her hand and kissed her palm. "Paranoid or not, we need to be careful, Tasia. Both of us are getting wrapped up in this slave rather fast."

"It's hard not to. He's very –"

"Intriguing?"

"I was going to use the word sexy as hell."

"That's three words."

"Staff." She chuckled and shook her head. "Just get back to work."

"I am. By the way, tonight was supposed to be our secret meeting but we can't both go and leave Drago alone. He'll get suspicious. You're needed more tonight for training so I told the others you'd be there while I stay with Drago."

"Oh sure." She gazed at him through her lashes. "You just want him to yourself."

"Right. He's recovering from a beating with an electro-flogger so I don't think we'll get too hot and heavy."

"Just remember, the next meeting is yours and I get to Drago-sit."

Staff laughed and shook his head. "You got it. Truthfully I'm looking forward to the three of us spending time together. The more we get to know him, the better the chances of including him in our plans."

"You're not just saying that to pacify me?"

"I know by now nothing ever pacifies you."

Shaking her head, she stepped closer and kissed him before turning and heading for the shuttle.

* * * * *

Drago awoke to nausea and such a pounding headache that at first he scarcely noticed the soreness of his back. The lights in the unit were turned to their dimmest setting, except for over the table where Staff was busy at work on his personal computer. Music played very softly in the background but still too loud for a Draper with a migraine.

He rose slowly, silently cursing the conversion treatments, and brushed his long hair out of his face. When he'd returned to the unit earlier, he'd removed his helmet and hair sheath since its roughness irritated his injured back.

Staff glanced in his direction and stood. Approaching Drago, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

“All right.” Drago glanced at his wrist spec. It was long past time for his medication. He reached for the medical case and stood a bit shakily.

Staff placed a steady hand on his arm. “Easy.”

“I’m fine.” Drago tugged away from his grasp, annoyed by his weakness. “I have to take my meds.”

“I already gave you the shot,” Staff said. “I woke you up but you were still pretty groggy from the anesthetic.”

Drago’s brow furrowed. He didn’t recall Staff waking him, but if he had given him his shot it at least explained his headache and nausea. It should pass soon.

“I have to admit I’m a little concerned about the dose you take,” Staff said. “I took the liberty of contacting a medic at main control to discuss an alternative treatment.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Drago said, making sure he looked anything but grateful.

Staff narrowed his eyes, somewhere between curious and angry. “I’m not trying to butt in, but I am a medic. I’ve seen the results of that particular medication and —”

“I’m sure you’re competent but you’re not as familiar with my case as the medics at main control. Excuse me.” Drago needed to use the lavatory. He hoped he wouldn’t vomit. The last thing he wanted was for Staff to gain any further proof that the meds were poisoning him. Staff was quite right that if he didn’t come off them fairly soon they might prove fatal.

In the lavatory Drago relieved himself then washed in cool water, allowing it to soothe the massive headache that was thankfully starting to fade. He reminded himself that because of his physical condition, he needed to complete his task as quickly as possible. Taking out his anger on Staff wouldn’t help him accomplish that. Worst of all his anger wasn’t merely regarding the medic’s attempted interference, but because he didn’t like the strange feelings roused by Staff’s and Tasia’s concern.

He wasn’t accustomed to having anyone worry about his welfare, nor had he imagined Laetez were capable of such kindness, at least not to a stranger. Of course he appeared to be half Laetez so that probably influenced their reaction to him. At least telling himself that made it easier to avoid emotional attachment on his part.

These strange feelings must be due the conversion treatments. Soon he would be making a report to Section Fifty-Six and when he did he would also speak to his Reality Checker. Realty Checkers were counselors of sorts, assigned to agents, in particular those undergoing conversion treatments. Their job was to listen to any problems and offer advice that would keep the agents focused on their task and true to their Draper nature.

Drago dried his face and leaned against the sink, closing his eyes and taking a moment to collect himself before he strode out of the lavatory.

Staff had returned to the table and his computer but had turned off the music.

"If you're hungry there are leftovers in the refrigeration unit," the medic said, not taking his gaze from the computer monitor.

After taking a portion of food, Drago joined Staff at the table. Now that the headache and queasiness had faded, he was starting to feel hungry. He began eating slowly, his gaze lingering on Staff.

The treatments must really be affecting his mind, because he was starting to appreciate the medic's Laetez face or at least found it less offensive than usual.

He let his gaze drift over Staff's broad shoulders and sleekly muscled arms exposed in the sleeveless white shirt he wore, having discarded his long-sleeved medic's jacket. The shirt was so thin that the medic's flat, dark pink nipples could be seen through it. Drago imagined touching them, feeling their softness, such a contrast to the rest of Staff's hard, chiseled chest. There were other parts of the medic that were hard yet silken too. Drago thought about his thick, enticing cock.

This wasn't good. Just imagining Staff's cock made Drago's fill with blood. It swelled and ached, desperate for stimulation.

Instead of lingering on these fantasies, he forced himself back to reality and asked, "Where's Tasia?"

"Visiting with friends," Staff replied coolly, still focused on the monitor.

Drago didn't need Laetez emotions to know the medic was upset about his earlier abruptness.

"I'm sorry if I sounded rude before," Drago told him.

"It's all right." Staff glanced up and smiled slightly. "You must be feeling pretty crappy after what you've been through these past couple of days. Not to mention that medication has some unpleasant side effects."

"Trust me when I say this particular medication is necessary for me. Draper-Laetez crossbreeds are rare."

"And with good reason. The Laetez thought Drapers would finally be the species that could free our Ers, but it hasn't turned out that way."

"Maybe the Ers aren't meant to be free. Why is it that a species born into a symbiotic relationship despises it?"

"Wait a second. We don't despise it." Staff looked offended. "Er Pace and I are perfectly happy with each other."

"Er Pace. So that's the name of yours." Drago didn't have to feign interest. He had always found the Laetez connection between Er and Re both revolting and fascinating. The idea of having another thinking organism attached to you, like a super-intelligent parasite, was intriguing in a way.

"Yes," Staff said, holding his gaze.

"How much of what you say to me comes from you and how much comes from him?"

"My thoughts are completely my own."

“But he’s privy to them.”

“They’re still *original* thoughts. What the hell do you think I am? Some kind of oversized ventriloquist’s dummy that repeats what my Er tells me?”

Drago sat back and studied the medic carefully. Was this the reason the Laetez so desperately wanted separation? He had never imagined any kind of jealousy existing between the Re and the Er, but what did he really know about their relationship? What did anyone, except other Laetez?

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Drago said evenly. “I was merely curious. Forgive my...ignorance.”

Staff sighed deeply and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry about that. Whenever I get on my soapbox about individuality, Er Pace reminds me, by the most persuasive method, exactly how much we need each other.”

“May I ask what method that is?” Drago ventured carefully, not wanting to shove his foot any deeper into his mouth.

“He releases his hold on my emotions.” Staff smiled. “Petty on his part, but effective.”

“So without your Er, you truly will have no control over your temper?”

“Pretty much. And it’s not just my temper, it’s all strong emotions. We Res still feel them, but our Ers allow us to think more clearly. They’re much more even tempered than we are, you see. Of course some things affect them just as deeply and then we’re both in trouble.”

“Such as?”

Staff fell silent for a moment. Though his expressions were usually unreadable, Drago sensed the turn their conversation was taking troubled him, so he waited patiently for the medic to continue. As the moments passed, the desire to offer Staff some comfort almost overcame him.

“Grief,” Staff said, his voice just above a whisper. “When the Re and the Er both love the same person, it’s very difficult to control our emotions. Betrayal is something else we find difficult to control, at least Er Pace and I do.”

An odd pang shot through Drago. Betrayal, which was exactly what he was doing to Staff, Tasia and all the slaves at this colony.

Yet he couldn’t let his new interest in his lovers affect his duty.

The Laetez had once destroyed his life. That was something that could not be forgotten or forgiven.

“This conversation is getting grim,” Staff said with another of his easy smiles. “Why don’t you keep eating and I’ll finish categorizing my music then we can do something fun if you’re up to it?”

“What kind of fun?”

“Something that won’t hurt your back too much.”

A thrill of desire shot through Drago and again his cock twitched to life. He could think of a few things that could definitely be classified as fun but wouldn't affect his back at all.

After finishing his food, Drago cleaned his dishes then opened the door and inhaled deeply, enjoying the fresh night air. The desert became much cooler after dark and it was a lovely night. Stars filled the clear sky and Drago absorbed the beauty of the scene. He had always enjoyed off-world assignments. Something about flying through space put everything in proportion and sometimes made one's problems seem almost insignificant. Usually he was preoccupied with duty but moments like these offered some relief.

His keen Draper hearing detected Staff's approach so he closed the door and turned around.

"Damn." Staff grinned. "I was trying to take you by surprise."

"And do what?" Drago asked, studying him carefully.

"This." Staff looped his arms around Drago's neck and kissed him.

To Drago's annoyance, his body responded almost immediately. His pulse quickened and his cock stiffened. He took some comfort in feeling Staff's erection pressing against him. There were few things stronger or more predictable than the Laetez sex drive, particularly in the males. They were a race known for their sexual freedom and though not all Laetez were homosexual or bisexual, it wasn't uncommon for members of the same sex to enjoy intimacy.

At the moment Drago was greatly enjoying that freedom. Closing his eyes, he cupped the back of Staff's head and focused completely on their stroking tongues.

Staff threaded his fingers through Drago's hair, sending thrills of desire through him. The medic's touch was sure, undoubtedly masculine but also tender.

The kiss broke, leaving both men breathless. Their hot gazes locked and Staff smiled. "You really should be resting."

"I'm not tired."

"I got that feeling." Staff cupped the front of Drago's pants. "As your medic I don't recommend a lot of strenuous physical activity until you're completely healed."

Again Drago clapped a hand to the back of Staff's head, pulled him close and spoke against his lips. "It's not nice to tease."

"You didn't let me finish. I was going to suggest that you sit back and relax while I do the work." Staff gently bit Drago's lower lip and Drago growled with pleasure. Fuck, he liked that kind of handling.

Sensing his partner's desire, Staff bit Drago's lip again and sucked on it, intermittently swiping his tongue over it.

Enflamed by desire, Drago wrapped his arms around Staff, pressing him close and plunging his tongue into his mouth. When Staff responded by thrusting his tongue into

Drago's mouth, Drago captured it and sucked on it. He felt Staff's body tense and his cock swell even more.

For several moments they kissed fiercely, nipping and sucking, their rock-hard bodies pressed close.

Panting with need, Drago finally pulled away to undress. Staff followed his lead and within moments they were once again wrapped in each other's arms, naked this time – all hot skin, hard muscles and swollen cocks.

In his enthusiasm, Staff tightened his grip on Drago's back, making him gasp in discomfort.

"Sorry," Staff said, immediately loosening his hold.

"It's all right," Drago reassured him, once again pulling him close for another kiss, but Staff had other ideas.

He sank to his knees, took Drago's cock head into his mouth and grasped his ass with both hands. Staff's hot, wet tongue teased Drago, sending his libido into overdrive.

Staff began sucking his cock and Drago clutched Staff's head. His leg muscles tightened and his hips thrust in time with the rhythm of Staff's incredible mouth.

Just when Drago hovered on the edge of a soul-ripping orgasm, the door opened and Tasia stepped in. At first she looked a bit surprised then a sexy smile spread over her face and she quickly closed the door behind her.

"Good thing I didn't bring anyone home with me," she quipped.

"I'll say," Staff admitted, one hand still clutching Drago's tight ass and the other wrapped around the base of his cock, as if he knew his partner was on the verge of exploding.

Drago took a couple of deep breaths then guided Staff's hand away from his cock.

"I hope you two won't stop on my account," she said then narrowed her lovely brown eyes. "Providing you let me join in of course."

"It wouldn't be the same without you, sweetheart," Staff told her.

"I couldn't agree more," Drago said. At the moment he almost didn't care who finished him off as long as he reached that indescribable state of pleasure. He sometimes wondered how creatures such as Laetez and humans who felt such splendor didn't become more obsessed with mating than they already were.

"I really need a shower first, so how about you two keep enjoying yourselves until I wash?"

"Sounds good." Staff reached for Drago while Tasia stepped into the lavatory. He began sucking Drago's cock again.

Closing his eyes, Drago surrendered to sensation only to be interrupted once more.

"But don't enjoy yourselves too much," Tasia called, glancing in from the lavatory. Both men looked at her and she added, "Make sure you save some for me."

"You hear that, Drago?" Staff winked. "We've got our orders. You thought I was teasing before. Let's see how many times you can hold back before she finishes her shower."

"I think this is a game I'll enjoy," Drago said and squatted on the floor where Staff knelt. He curled his hand around Staff's thick cock and stroked it, feeling it grow in his grasp. The medic's large blue eyes darkened with passion and he drew a deep breath. "But the rule is I get to tease too."

"I like that rule," Staff breathed.

"Somehow I thought you would."

"Remember, boys," Tasia called, closing the door. "Don't get too carried away."

"Who, us?" Staff murmured, his eyes closed halfway as his passion grew beneath Drago's hand.

One thing Drago had learned fast was the best way to stroke a cock. He'd had lots of practice on his own.

For several moments Drago stimulated the Laetez male with a hand job. Just as Staff had done a short time ago, Drago teased him to the edge then stopped, keeping a firm grip on him before he exploded. Strangely he enjoyed pleasuring Staff almost as much as he enjoyed being pleased himself. Watching his lover's expressions change from blissful to tense, seeing the tightening of his sleek muscles and hearing the rasp of his breath fascinated Drago.

Finally Staff grasped his wrist and panted, "That's enough. I can't take anymore. It's your turn again."

Smiling wickedly, Drago released Staff and rose to his feet. Again Staff clasped his cock, this time using one hand to stroke the shaft while he sucked and licked the head. His other hand grasped Drago's balls and kneaded, arousing him even more.

The lavatory door opened and Tasia again stepped into the room. She looked incredibly sexy, wearing nothing but a lustful smile. Her enticing body with those luscious curves would have been enough to inspire an erection if Drago hadn't already had one the size of an electro-flogger.

"Glad to see you haven't worn yourselves out," she purred, sauntering toward them. Her short, dark hair was sleek and wet from her shower and Drago longed to run his fingers through it, even if it wasn't Draper hair.

Staff rose to his feet and stood beside Drago. Both stared at her as she approached. She slipped her arms around Staff's neck and pressed a lingering kiss to his lips. Drago watched, feeling an unfamiliar hint of jealousy as they deepened the kiss. He saw their mouths open and caught glimpses of their wildly fencing tongues.

Then Tasia broke the kiss and turned to Drago. She placed a hand to his cheek and spoke against his lips, "How's your back?"

"Better," he said. He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her with a hint of roughness. She seemed to like it and responded with a soft moan. Her mouth opened

to him and she took his lead, her tongue meeting his strokes but not attempting to overpower him. In spite of her independent nature part of her seemed to enjoy being dominated. That could prove useful in many ways, but he would have to tread carefully. Draper males tended to be domineering, especially by human standards and she was half human.

The last thing he wanted was to frighten her into retreat, not when part of her seemed to trust him already. She was a bit naïve. Usually his purpose in these situations was to take advantage of his enemies' naïveté or any other weakness in their nature, but when it came to Tasia he found it refreshing and enticing. Oddly, protective instincts rose in him. This was bad. Very bad.

But the sensation of her tongue stroking his and her hands gently sifting through his hair was too good to ignore.

While she and Drago kissed, Staff moved behind her and slid his hands between their bodies. He began fondling her and by the way her nipples hardened and her tongue became more demanding, she was quickly becoming as aroused as the men already were.

Her body grew warmer and so did Drago's. She moaned and tried to break their kiss but he wouldn't let her. She gasped into his mouth, her breathing ragged as her desire increased.

After a moment he allowed her to pull back slightly. Her face was flushed and her dark eyes hazy with lust.

"Oh please," she murmured breathlessly. "You guys are too much."

"Really?" Drago said, teasing. "Maybe we should stop."

"Don't you dare," she practically growled and kissed him hard.

Staff swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and placed her upon it. He stretched out and guided her legs over his shoulders. Sliding his hands beneath her buttocks, he lowered his mouth to her clit and began licking and sucking it.

She cried out with pleasure and grasped handfuls of his hair.

For several moments, Drago stood a short distance away, studying the erotic scene. Tasia's eyes were closed, her muscles tense with impending orgasm. Her nipples stood out stiffly, crowning her full, luscious breasts.

As a full Draper he never could have enjoyed this moment as much as he did now.

He walked toward the bed and sat beside Tasia. He cupped one of her warm, soft breasts and fondled it. His thumb swept over her nipple, feeling the hard tip and the texture of the sexy little bumps that rose on her areola.

His hand on her breast seemed to spur her excitement even more and she cried out, her entire body convulsing in waves of pleasure. Staff's mouth never moved from her. He licked and sucked, dragging out her pleasure to the last.

Finally he drew back, leaving her limp and satisfied. Her eyes were closed and she wore the faintest smile on her lips.

Drago noted Staff's erection was stronger than ever, so thick and hard and with a little droplet of pleasure glistening at the tip. As if in sympathy, Drago's own rock-hard erection twitched and ached. He moved closer to Staff and reached for his cock. Once again he began stroking it and Staff's huge blue eyes fluttered and closed. This time Drago didn't stop but stroked him to climax. He didn't even mind that Staff's come shot over them both. Some even reached Tasia but she was still too relaxed to notice.

When it was over, Staff went to retrieve a towel. It was then that Tasia began to come around. Her eyes opened partway and she smiled at Drago. Her gaze flickered toward his cock and she drew a deep breath. The most endearing look shone in her eyes and she spread her legs, inviting him to sate his desire in her soft, wet cunt.

By now Drago was so aroused that he couldn't resist even if he'd wanted to. He loomed above her, supporting most of his weight on his hands as he eased his thick cock into her.

His eyes closed and he arched his head back, groaning. She was so wet, hot and tight and he was so, so ready.

Yet he knew he couldn't just think of himself. As much as he wanted to lunge into her, gaining quick pleasure, he also wanted her to enjoy the moment. And he wanted her to know that he was and always would be the master of his will. The dominant of their threesome.

He began pumping slowly while kissing her face. First her temples then the tip of her nose and her smooth cheeks. Finally he reached her lips. He used his tongue to gently trace their shape then thrust into her mouth in time with his pumping hips.

The sound of her breathing and the way her body clamped around his told him she was on her way to another climax. He broke their kiss, his heart pounding, and willed himself to keep control. It was so difficult with her clinging to him, mewling softly, her drenched pussy clamping around his desperate cock. He was so aroused he didn't even care about the discomfort of his healing back.

Then she came, crying out, her heated flesh pulsing around him. With a primal cry of his own, he claimed her with fast, hard thrusts. His body surged into hers and he surrendered to a blinding orgasm.

He collapsed on top of her, panting and totally fulfilled. After a moment he moved aside. Still lying on his stomach, he drifted to sleep, but not before he felt one of his partners, he wasn't sure which, cover him with the sheet.

Chapter Six

Once Staff felt certain Drago was asleep, he quietly left the bed, nudged Tasia and motioned for her to join him outside. They dressed quickly and moments later stood a short distance from their unit.

“How did the meeting go tonight?” Staff asked.

“It was good. Re Ordell returned safely from his rendezvous with the *Nameless* crewman. He brought back enough supplies for twenty more surgeries.”

Nameless, a ship piloted by Xenos, a man who had once been the most wanted criminal in the galaxy, was to be the slaves’ ride to freedom. Even though not long ago Xenos and his crew had caused havoc during an intergalactic rebellion, they had brought about reform within the corrupt Laetez government and guaranteed rights for many unfairly treated ACT products. Even more, they had become symbols to those everywhere who sought freedom.

After the rebellion ended, Xenos and the crew of *Nameless* were hired by the Earth government as ambassadors for ACT. They spoke to planets involved in the program, pointing out pros and cons and making sure any cruel treatment of products was made public.

What many didn’t know was that beneath their veneer as public servants, the *Nameless* crew performed other secret duties that the Earth government wanted no traceable connection to. Even though they represented Earth, they were still private contractors and had no permanent link to them. If they were caught in these covert schemes, Xenos would take the blame, just as he would be blamed if the slaves’ escape plans were uncovered.

It wasn’t exactly by chance the slaves crossed paths with Xenos. Several months ago he had been sent by Earth to discuss ACT with the Drapers. Not that the Drapers were particularly fond of Xenos. His rebellion had, to many, tarnished the reputation of the Drapers who at the time had been discussing their alliance with the Laetez. Only to show their goodwill regarding intergalactic peace had they agreed to meet with members of the *Nameless* crew. During these talks, *Nameless* or her shuttles often stopped at Shandbha for rest or repairs.

After learning about this, Staff and another medic succeeded in a plan they had been working on for months. They had secretly removed the security chip from one of the slaves, Re Ordell. He was able to escape the colony with a stolen spec long enough to contact a member of the *Nameless* crew. It was risky, but even the slaves had heard about Xenos’ rebellion and felt he was their only hope for escape.

Re Ordell had bravely returned to the colony and reported that the former rebels were willing to help their cause. They had provided him with the supplies to remove the security chips from five more slaves.

The process of chip removal was slow and difficult. Each surgery was performed in an underground chamber and required rare, expensive chemicals not readily available on the colony in the quantity necessary. It had taken Staff months to pilfer enough to perform Re Ordell's surgery.

Now with more slaves free, they continued digging their underground tunnel. The slaves free of the chip could come and go from the colony and had been meeting with contacts from Xenos, some even included the vendors who visited the colony regularly. They brought supplies for more surgeries but their time was running short.

Staff and the other medics needed to finish removing all the chips very soon. The slaves had done their best to please the overseers, thereby giving them no reason to activate their security chips. Still, they knew men like Milo and Than didn't need legitimate reasons to torment slaves. It was inevitable that one day they would activate a chip and realize it caused no harm.

Once all the slaves' chips were removed, they would take over the colony. In the control room at the overseers' gate, they could ensure all barriers were deactivated and the communications system destroyed. The slaves could then escape through the tunnel, board a getaway vessel arranged by Xenos and fly to freedom.

"I can't wait until this is over, though," Tasia continued.

"I know," Staff said. "And we're not the only ones in danger. If Xenos and his crew are caught smuggling chemicals in or slaves out, can you imagine the repercussions? No doubt this time they would face execution. They were lucky to escape punishment after the rebellion. I'm surprised the Drapers have allowed them to keep landing on this planet at all."

"Due to the peace talks, they asked to use this place as a stopover. It's the only inhabitable planet between the Draper and Laetez home worlds. Since the reform even the Laetez government has had a relationship with Xenos. Many planets do, now that they're ACT ambassadors for Earth. Snubbing him would be like inviting trouble."

"It's good to see the Drapers keeping on their toes," Staff said, a vicious edge to his voice. "I don't care what anyone says, they *had* to be involved with all those plans the former Laetez leaders had for domination."

"I wouldn't put it past them, knowing them as I do," Tasia said. "But during the intergalactic trials they were cleared as far as the biological weapons were concerned. It was only the former Laetez leader and his assistants who ordered those."

Staff gave a snort of disbelief then shrugged. "That's not our problem. Right now our main concern is finding the best way to free ourselves."

"I thought —"

"Shh!" Staff tugged her close and clamped a hand over her mouth.

She shoved him away. "What?"

"I thought I heard something."

"Like what?"

Staff shook his head. "We better get back to bed. We both have early shifts tomorrow."

* * * * *

Drago turned away from the door and hurried to the refrigeration unit before Staff and Tasia stepped into the room.

He'd drifted to sleep for a while then something woke him and he realized his lovers were gone. His keen hearing detected voices outside so he walked to the door and heard Staff say he was glad to see the Drapers on their toes. Then he, like many others, accused them of being involved with the former Laetez leader's plans to take over the galaxy.

This infuriated Drago. Yes, the Drapers were conquerors, but they weren't stupid enough to poison entire planets. That was strictly Laetez "genius". All the Drapers had wanted from the Laetez was further access to their ACT program. The Laetez plans to devastate worlds using biological warfare were strictly their own.

Thanks to the Laetez and that damn outlaw Xenos, the Draper name had been smeared and even after the intergalactic trials many still believed they couldn't be trusted.

In a way it served his people right for sinking to an alliance with a species like the Laetez.

Of course he couldn't completely blame these slaves for hating Drapers. Living here for even a short time revealed that they had reason to loathe captivity. Still, it was his job to see they didn't escape and from what Staff said before their discussion came to an abrupt halt, these slaves were planning to flee. But how? Since he seemed to catch only the end of their conversation, they might have been discussing their escape plans earlier.

That's what Drago needed to learn and once he did and their plans were thwarted, he would see that overseers like Milo and Than were replaced. Keeping slaves was one thing. Mistreating them was another. Such abuse reminded him of his own captivity in Laetez hands. Drapers believed themselves to be more advanced emotionally than the Laetez but abusing slaves certainly didn't prove it.

"Drago, did we wake you?" Tasia asked.

He glanced at them over his shoulder. Staff closed the door but his discerning gaze fixed on Drago. Staff was intelligent and extremely perceptive. He might even suspect Drago of being a spy. Drago would need to be very, very careful around him. Winning his trust would not be easy.

Drago recalled Staff's issues regarding trust and pushed aside the twinge of guilt that shot through him. Why should he feel guilty? The Laetez hadn't felt guilty destroying his family. Staff didn't feel guilty accusing the Drapers of despicable acts they hadn't committed. Everyone had to do what they felt was right. Drago had always believed paying back the Laetez, *any* Laetez, was justice for what people like his parents had suffered during the war. Why should Staff and Tasia be any different?

Just because his emotions and his sex drive were hyperactive due to the conversion treatments was no reason for him to question beliefs he had stood by all his life. And it absolutely no excuse to abandon his duty.

"No, I was just thirsty," Drago said, taking a drink of water. "Is anything wrong?"

"Not at all," Staff said.

"I know. You just wanted some time alone," Drago said. "There's no reason for me to continue intruding. I'm certainly well enough to take a bed at the barracks."

"There's no need for that," Staff said, approaching him. Desire gleamed in the medic's eyes and Drago nearly smiled. Like many Laetez, this man's weakness was sex.

"We like having you here," Tasia added. "But if you'd prefer to go—"

"No," Drago said. "I like being here very much."

"We should go to sleep," Staff said then brushed his lips across Drago's. "And I do mean to sleep."

"He's right. Goodnight, Drago." Tasia kissed him as well before she and Staff climbed into their bed.

Drago lay down on the other bed, staring in their direction until he finally fell asleep.

* * * * *

By the end of the week, Drago had completely recovered from his broken ribs and the flogging. Though he had been taking his regular patrols, due to his injuries he hadn't practiced in the training rooms at the guardhouse.

One evening after their shift was over, he joined Tasia for training with some of the other guards.

She found his skills even more impressive than his records had suggested. The urge to recruit him as an instructor for their underground training almost overcame her. Then she recalled Staff's warning. Not that she needed Staff to tell her to be careful. Through experience she knew trust wasn't something to be given easily. Yet unlike Staff she retained some hope for the integrity of her fellow creatures.

Luckily over the following weeks, there were no more incidents with overseers such as Milo and Than. Staff and Tasia observed Drago carefully. Staff because he was overly cautious and Tasia because she wanted to prove Drago could be trusted with their escape plans. She hated the idea of leaving him behind. Even though Staff said that wasn't his plan, Tasia wasn't certain.

She didn't doubt Staff's attraction to Drago. She even believed he cared about him, but usually Staff's intellect controlled him more than his emotions. Hell, it had taken him *years* to completely trust her so she doubted he'd drop his guard around Drago after mere weeks.

When he was off duty, Drago spent most of his time with Tasia and Staff but also made a point to work with the other slaves. It wasn't uncommon to find him helping in the fields. Initially the others were surprised by a first-class slave wasting his free time working with those of a lower class, not to mention his stern Draper manner took some getting used to. Eventually they began to relax around him, accepting his quiet help and finally learning to engage in conversation.

One afternoon when both Staff and Tasia had time off together, a rare occurrence, they walked to the southern sector where Drago had gone to help harvest fruit.

"He seems to enjoy working the fields more than taking patrols," Tasia said with a chuckle. "If he wasn't such a skilled guard I'd say he was placed in the wrong class."

"So it seems," Staff said quietly. Just looking at him she knew his brain was wrapped around some deep thought.

"You'll be gone for most of the night, right? Performing the next two surgeries?"

"Yes. The next couple of slaves are all prepped and I'm going to log in Laey flu as the cause for their absence."

"That flu has really been sweeping through the colony, hasn't it?" She grinned. Laey flu was the perfect cover for the chip removal surgery. It caused symptoms that warranted dismissal from duty for a day or two but was rarely fatal. The surgery took less than an hour and the patient generally recovered within a day. Other slaves pitched in to ease the workload of one who had recently undergone surgery so there was little chance of injury or discovery once they returned to duty.

They approached the orchard and found Drago on a ladder picking the ripe orange Meltja fruit, one of the Drapers' most popular exports.

"Hey up there," Tasia called, waving to him. He returned the gesture and climbed down from the tree. As he approached, she asked, "Are you ready to go to the swimming hole with us?"

"Yes," he said and called his goodbyes to the slaves on duty.

"So tell us what the thrill is in picking Meltja in your off time?" Staff said, a teasing edge to his voice.

"Exercise. Companionship. All the Meltja I can eat."

Tasia glanced at him then grinned, seeing the teasing glint in his eyes.

Staff gave a snort of laughter and shook his head.

"I told you on my last assignment the others in my unit weren't as accepting as you are here. It's a nice change."

"Yes," Staff said. "I imagine it would be."

"You don't like the idea of associating with slaves of other classes?"

Staff's brow furrowed in irritation. "I never said that. That is a load of crap. We're all in this together so fuck the Draper classifications."

"Staff, ease up," Tasia said.

Shaking his head, Drago said, "That Laetez temper used to take me by surprise, Staff. It takes some getting used to, coming from a man with such innocent eyes."

"Innocent?" Staff looked insulted, but Tasia couldn't resist the opportunity to tease him more.

"Yes, those big baby blues of yours," she said and gently patted his cheek. "So adorable."

The medic's posture stiffened and he shook his head. "How did I get tied up with you two?"

"Tied up? That's something we've never tried before," Tasia teased.

"But we'd be glad to accommodate if that's your thing," Drago added.

The sexy gleam in his eyes made Tasia's belly clench with desire. Her nipples tingled and poked against her thin black shirt.

"I like the sound of that," she said in a husky voice. "What do you boys say we return to the unit and then go to the swimming hole?"

"I'd say that's one of the best ideas I've heard in a long time," Staff said, moving behind her and Drago to grasp their asses, a cheek in each hand.

Tasia gave a little yelp when he squeezed her. If Staff did the same to Drago, she couldn't tell because in spite of the lustful gleam in his eyes, he didn't react with such exuberance.

Her curiosity was satisfied when Drago said, "So, Staff, you're in the mood for ass play as well as bondage?"

"I'm all for ass play," the medic said smoothly. "But I refuse to be tied up."

"I don't," Tasia quipped.

Drago and Staff exchanged glances and sexy grins.

"This has possibilities," Staff said.

Drago grunted softly in reply.

Once they reached their unit, they quickly shed their clothes. Tasia retrieved the container of lubricant gel. She noted they were running low and would need to stop at the trade unit for more next time the vendor stopped at the colony.

Drago snuck up behind her and swept her into his arms. He lifted her close to his face and playfully nuzzled her neck, making her giggle with pleasure.

"What are you doing?" she asked when he placed her on the bed, sat beside her and removed his helmet and hair sheath. He unwound the bindings from his hair.

"You liked the idea of bondage, correct?"

"Yes, but —"

“Turn around and put your hands behind you.”

Bondage had sounded fine earlier but when faced with surrendering to him she wondered if it was a wise idea. Then she glanced at Staff who was studying them carefully. Even though she knew he couldn't take Drago in a fight, Staff was cunning and always on the lookout for trouble. She felt safe with him around and in spite of her usual good sense, she trusted Drago not to harm either of them. She felt deep inside that he was trustworthy.

After a moment's hesitation, she turned and placed her hands behind her back. Drago deftly bound her wrists, not hard enough to cause discomfort but snug enough that she doubted she could free herself without help. His hair binding was made of a soft material reinforced by a small amount of pliable, ultra-fine metal. Quite comfortable actually.

“Now,” Drago said to Staff, “come closer, Staff.”

With confidence the medic strode toward the bed and stopped nearby when Drago held up his hand. He picked up a pillow from the bed and dropped it on the floor in front of Staff then grasped Tasia's arm and made her kneel on the pillow. He reached for the lube and coated his hands with it. Taking Staff's cock in his grip, he stroked it with his lube-slicked hand.

Staff's broad chest expanded even more as he drew a deep, pleased breath. A knowing grin on his lips, Drago continued fondling him until his cock swelled, thick and hard.

Watching Drago and Staff together aroused Tasia's passion. Her nipples tightened, her clit ached and warmth flooded her pussy.

Finally Drago stopped caressing Staff. Still holding his cock, he said, “Take him in your mouth, Tasia.”

Staff's blue eyes looked almost black with passion. His lips parted and he watched intently as she leaned closer and allowed Drago to place his cock head to her lips. She took him partway into her mouth and began sucking him, enjoying the taste and feel of his hard yet velvety cock.

Drago released Staff's cock and knelt behind him, using one of his lubed hands on his own cock and the other on Staff's ass.

This double stimulation seemed to drive Staff wild. His muscles tensed, his hips rocking gently. She knew he was trying to hold back but couldn't resist fucking her mouth just a bit. She welcomed him, teasing him with lips and tongue, relishing the feel of him and the sound of his ragged breathing.

She didn't have a clear view of what was going on behind but a few brief glances indicated that Drago's mouth was pressed close to Staff's ass. By the way Staff was gasping and trembling, she guessed Drago was using his tongue on him. She smiled slightly. Staff always reacted this way to rimming. She'd done it to him often enough to know. Not that she blamed him. It did feel great.

Just when she doubted Staff could hold out much longer, Drago rose to his feet and said in a husky voice, "How are you doing, Tasia?"

She tried to reply positively but it was difficult talking around Staff's engorged cock.

Drago chuckled softly. "Understood. I'm going to fuck him from behind. Just a warning in case you want to stop sucking him."

She tilted her gaze up and saw that Staff looked almost desperate. His eyes were half closed, his handsome face tense, his brow and upper lip beaded with sweat. There was no way in hell she'd stop now.

While she continued sucking with a vengeance, Drago grasped his hips to hold him somewhat steady.

Staff cried out sharply in pleasure-pain as Drago entered him and began thrusting.

Tasia could have laughed from sheer pleasure. Their encounters seemed to get better and better.

It didn't take long for Staff to explode. In the final moments, Tasia had little choice but to pull back. She fell against the bed and watched Staff climax, his cock spurting and muscles jerking in the throes of pleasure.

"Ah! All pleasuring," Staff gasped.

Behind him, Drago also came hard, practically growling with passion.

When they finished, Staff dropped heavily onto the bed and laughed. "That was the best fuck I've had in a long time."

"I enjoyed it," Drago said, the lustful look in his eyes at odds with his relatively calm words.

"I mostly enjoyed it," Tasia said, rising rather awkwardly to her feet because of her bound hands. "However I could use some further stimulation, boys."

"All you have to do is ask," Staff said, rolling onto his side and gazing at her. He patted the bed, beckoning her to join him.

"Hold it." Drago took the bonds off her hands and said, "Don't look so disappointed, Tasia. You're not quite free yet."

He jerked the sheet off the bed, right out from under Staff, and spread it on the floor.

"Get your pillow if you want it, Tasia, and lay on the sheet," Drago ordered.

She shrugged and did as he said. So far his ideas had been pretty good so she was willing to take his lead. Drago was excellent at getting people to follow orders, she mused, in the bedroom and out. Pity such talent was wasted on a slave. But when they escaped he would have the opportunity to pursue better things. They all would.

Stretching out on the floor, her head resting on the pillow, she stared at Drago and asked, "Now what?"

He sat behind her, took her hands and used one of his to pin them over her head. "Staff, join us."

The medic had already approached and stared down at them, a hungry look in his eyes. He positioned himself between Tasia's legs and lovingly stroked her inner thighs.

Moaning softly, she closed her eyes and prepared to enjoy herself thoroughly. Staff began lapping her clit, his hot, wet tongue sending waves of passion rolling through her.

"Not too fast," Drago warned.

Her eyes opened and she glared at him. "What do you mean? I can hardly wait."

"Waiting is the best part," Drago told her.

"It is?"

"Maybe not the *best* part but it makes those final moments even more worthwhile."

"Yeah. Right," she panted, her eyes again slipping shut as Staff flicked his tongue along the sensitive underside of her clit. Those teasing upward strokes soon had her hovering on the brink of explosion.

Then he inserted his fingers into her drenched pussy and explored.

No one knew her body as well as Staff and he used that knowledge to advantage, keeping her hovering on the brink until she thought she'd go insane with desire. Her clit and pussy ached and her breath came in desperate gasps.

While Staff worked on her clit, Drago used his free hand to fondle her breasts, stroking them and caressing her nipples.

"Please," she panted, trying to pull away from Drago's hold but he was far too strong. "That's enough. Let me come."

At that moment, Staff began lapping and sucking her relentlessly. She was so overly stimulated that it took seconds for her to come. Sweat broke out over her straining body and massive pulsations overtook her, almost painful in their intensity. The orgasm lasted so long that for several moments after she lay completely drained yet incredibly satisfied.

Finally she became aware of her men lying on either side of her. Opening her eyes partway, she watched Drago stroke her hip and belly. Staff brushed her mouth with a kiss.

"I think it's time for a swim," Staff said.

"This has been the best afternoon off I've had in a while," she said.

No one could argue with that.

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A short time later, Tasia, Staff and Drago arrived at the swimming hole. After their interlude in the unit, they looked forward to a refreshing swim and a meal. Several other off-duty slaves were there, enjoying the shade of the nearby trees and splashing in

the water. Tasia, Staff and Drago exchanged greetings with several friends then found a secluded spot beneath a tall tree with long, leafy branches bent over like a canopy.

After taking a swim, they settled beneath the tree to eat the meal they'd packed.

"I really worked up an appetite back at the unit," Staff said, a lustful little grin on his lips.

"So did I," Drago admitted.

"Yup," Tasia said, covering her mouth because it was already full of Meltja fruit. She finished chewing and swallowed while the men also dug into the food.

"Drago, I want to ask you something," Tasia said in a low voice.

As if sensing the serious turn she had suddenly taken, the men fell silent. Staff watched her with a wary expression on his face and Drago narrowed his eyes, leaning closer and concentrating on her fully.

"Yes?" Drago said, also speaking softly.

"What would you say if someone asked you to teach slaves who aren't guards how to defend themselves?"

Staff's expression became stony but he didn't interrupt. Instead his gaze shifted to Drago, waiting for his response.

The Draper crossbreed sighed and leaned his back against the tree trunk, a contemplative look on his face. "I'd say that's a dangerous thing to suggest, for me and the slaves."

"But how do you feel about it?"

"I feel..." His voice trailed off then he met her gaze directly and stated with confidence, "I feel that everyone should be allowed to learn how to defend themselves."

"Then you'd do it?" she pressed.

"If I was asked. Why?"

"Because you're being asked."

Their gazes remained locked and though she tried to read his expression, it was difficult. He was even better than Staff when it came to hiding his innermost feelings.

"You want me to train slaves?"

"I want you to help me train slaves. Yes."

"I'm willing but how can we do it without getting caught? We can't bring them to the guardhouse. There's not enough room in the units and if we try to teach them outside the overseers are sure to find out."

"We have a place. I'll show you."

Drago nodded and resumed eating slowly.

"Don't you have any questions?" Staff ventured.

"Yes, but this sounds like a pretty big secret you're letting me in on," Drago said. "I'm sure when you're ready to tell me more, you will."

“You’re very patient, Drago,” Staff continued.

Tasia’s gaze shifted from one man to the other. She knew Staff was wary of Drago’s apparent lack of suspicion. Maybe he was right. But at least this was a way to finally test his loyalty. If he betrayed them in this venture, the only thing the overseers could thwart would be self-defense practice. However if Drago proved as loyal as Tasia believed him to be, this would be the first step toward including him in their escape plans.

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Drago observed the small group of slaves practicing the new self-defense technique he had just taught them. That night after dinner, Tasia had brought him to a secret room dug behind an underground storage unit. To create such a place, so well concealed, the slaves must have worked for months, possibly years. If they had created a training room like this, there was no telling what other secrets they kept. It was fortunate he had been assigned to them now or else he didn’t doubt they had the skill, intelligence and determination to escape, if not soon then eventually.

While teaching the class, he made discreet observations about every detail in the room, looking for any proof that other rooms might exist, but he saw none. He would have to work out a plan to spend some time alone here so he could make a more thorough search. Now that he was gaining their trust, it should be easy.

“Re Ordell, keep your hands up. Protect your face,” Drago ordered.

The lanky blond slave immediately obeyed and Drago continued circling the room. Most of these slaves had some talent for hand-to-hand combat. Tasia had obviously done her job well. He’d been a bit surprised to learn that the slaves had been training for years. Her father had been their first instructor and now Tasia and the others passed on their skills to new generations.

Though they weren’t warriors, he didn’t doubt they could take the overseers by surprise. Yet if they did manage to overtake the colony, how did they plan to evacuate the planet? There were no ships large enough to accommodate all the slaves and as soon as main control realized something was wrong, they would send warships to take back the colony.

Drago could act quickly and have them punished for this secret training. He could have this underground training room filled in and the colony searched for other such rooms, but that wouldn’t help the Drapers locate the slaves’ accomplice. If they planned to escape, Drago had no doubt there *was* an accomplice. Perhaps, as main control suspected, it was the Laetez or possibly the humans.

Even if the slaves were interrogated through torture or truth drugs, whoever planned to shuttle them off the planet would still be out there and no doubt they would be difficult to catch. If Drago waited just a little longer, he could stop the slaves and capture their accomplice. Then everyone would know that Drapers weren’t to be trifled with.

And it would give him more time with Tasia and Staff. His stomach twisted with self-disgust. His attachment to them, his sickening Laetez-influenced *desire*, was becoming more difficult to control. The longer he stayed, the more he craved their company. Yet if he could crush the hopes of these slaves he would prove to himself that he was still a Draper. The Laetez feelings would fade away along with the revolting physical characteristics.

"Drago, I'm sorry to interrupt but we need to wrap things up," Tasia called softly from the entrance. "It's getting late and some of us have an early shift tomorrow."

He smiled slightly and said, "Namely me, right?"

"Yeah. You are scheduled for dawn patrol on the northern sector."

"All right. Everyone dismissed," Drago stated.

Most of the slaves left the room, nodding to him on the way out, while a few others lingered, practicing moves. He noticed Re Nina, the mother of the boy he had saved several weeks ago, remained behind for extra practice. Though not especially powerful, she was quick, precise and a fast learner.

"You're blocking a little too close to your own face," Drago told her. He approached and repositioned her defensive arm. "Keep it there and you'll be all right."

"Thanks," she said. "I wish the techniques we're learning here could be more helpful above, like when my son got stuck in the machine. We all want to protect the ones we love, but in a place like this it's almost impossible."

Drago nodded slowly. He understood her better than she realized. "Why don't you go home? We have another session tomorrow and we'll practice more then."

She smiled and nodded then joined the others in leaving.

Now only Tasia and Drago remained. She approached him and slipped her arms around his neck.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said.

Her words, her very nearness, made him feel warm inside. He both loved and hated the emotions she and Staff roused within him.

Holding her close, he kissed her hair and whispered, "So am I."

Chapter Seven

The next day, Drago patrolled the northern sector alone. He took the opportunity to contact Section Fifty-Six to fill them in on his progress. Dra-Mae Colton was keeping track of his assignment. In the Draper hierarchy, Dra-Maes were similar to Earth generals and assigned to different areas within the Draper government.

Dra-Mae Colton's stern face filled the monitor of Drago's micro spec and he said, "Report."

"I have successfully infiltrated the colony and gained a certain level of trust from the slaves. Two in particular have been most helpful," Drago said, burying his feelings for Tasia and Staff. "I believe they are planning an escape, however I have no details yet. I have taken part in a secret training program. It seems the security guards have been teaching the other slave classes hand-to-hand combat and basic weapons."

"That is enough to warrant a lockdown and interrogation," Dra-Mae Colton pointed out.

"It is. However I believe that if you give me a little more time, I can find out exactly what their escape plan is, if they have one yet. I also feel certain they have outside help. I'm sure I can discover who their accomplices are and if we handle this carefully, we can catch them in the act of attempting to free the slaves."

Dra-Mae Colton paused for a moment, a discerning look on his face. "If you fail, we will lose the spoils of war, not to mention we would again look like fools. We're still recovering from that incident with the Laetex and their rebellion last year."

Drago's jaw tightened. "I will not fail."

"You have always been successful in your missions," Dra-Mae Colton stated. "I have no reason to doubt you will not deliver here. Before I grant permission there is one other issue we must discuss. The medic monitoring your case here has informed me that you will soon need to increase your conversion medication to a dangerous dose. Once that happens you might not have much time to finish your work."

"I realize that, but I don't believe I'll need much time. I'm on the verge of winning these slaves over completely."

"There is a particular medic at the colony who has contacted main control. Medic Re Stafford is his name. It seems he is concerned with your medication. If he is a problem we will have him removed from the colony."

"No," Drago said. "He has actually been most helpful. I have befriended him."

Befriended. Kissed. Fucked.

Drago again pushed aside his emotions. He could not allow his feelings for Tasia and Staff to interfere in his duty.

"I believe he will continue to be useful," Drago added. "I have reports of a couple of guards who are abusing their position here. I don't want to stir anything up now but once the case is complete I will file a report. I believe they are in need of retraining and should be reassigned."

Dra-Mae Colton nodded. "I will launch a further investigation at the appropriate time. Do you have anything else to report?"

"No, Sir."

"A medic will be contacting you soon to monitor your physical condition before increasing your dose. Dra-Mae Colton out."

Drago switched off his micro spec and sighed deeply from where he stood a short distance from the barrier between the colony and the open desert. It seemed like so long ago that he had traveled over those dunes toward the colony. A slight smile touched his lips as he remembered seeing Tasia for the first time.

He recalled how she had tended his injuries, gazed at him with those lovely dark eyes and made a routine assignment so much more complicated. Then he'd met Staff and the three of them, so different yet in a strange way sharing a common past, had taken to each other almost immediately.

His thoughts were becoming dangerous again. Dangerous to him personally and even worse, dangerous to his assignment.

There was no doubt he needed to do something about his thoughts and feelings.

Each agent in Section Fifty-Six was assigned to a Reality Checker, similar to a counselor. Their duty was to listen to the agents regarding any problem they might face, especially pertaining to cases. Agents like Drago in particular who had undergone the stressful conversion treatments were susceptible to losing their perspective emotionally as they opened their bodies and minds to the traits of alien species.

Though he hated to admit it, Drago realized the Laetez characteristics were starting to affect his mind.

Once again turning to his micro spec, he contacted his Reality Checker, a female Draper named Shonda. She was a bit older than him, with very flat bone structure, an almost indiscernible nose and lovely dark red hair that she always wore loose. Among Drapers, she was quite beautiful. Much prettier than Tasia with her distinctly human-Laetez features, however to Drago she wasn't nearly as appealing. What was it about Tasia and Staff that touched him so? It had to be the conversion treatments.

"Drago," Shonda said. "How are you?"

"Fine."

A slight, skeptical smile touched her lips. "Even with the conversion treatments?"

"They have been fairly difficult," he admitted. "But the treatments aren't what I would like to discuss. Or maybe in a way they are."

"Tell me."

“On this assignment I have, for the first time in my life, questioned the nature of the Laetez. These slaves are not like the Laetez I remember.”

“In what way?”

“They have been very welcoming to me in a way I hadn’t expected.”

“Remember they believe you are one of them.”

“Not entirely. To them I am a crossbreed.”

“You have infiltrated other societies before. Why is this different?”

Drago knew what Shonda was doing. It was her method of drawing him out, making him look at all aspects of his situation, thereby enabling him to make clearheaded decisions. It was a process Drapers were taught since childhood and it shamed him to think he needed to be reminded of this.

“Because I expected them to be...different than us. In many ways they are, but in others—” He stopped and shook his head.

“Continue.”

“They are able to care about others. They aren’t as hateful as I remembered. Not as immovable.”

“Remember, Drago, these slaves have had almost thirty years of our influence. They have been tempered by our ways. Improved.”

“If that’s true then why would they try to escape? That’s the reason I’m here, because our government believes they are on the verge of breaking out.”

Shonda sighed and shook her head slightly. “Regardless of how acceptable their situation, no matter how much freedom and benefits we offer, they are still Laetez. It is their very nature to rebel.”

“That’s another thing. During my time here I have witnessed as well as experienced abuse at the hands of certain overseers. If we treat these slaves cruelly, how can we expect loyalty?”

“That is an excellent point. I suggest you make a report about these particular overseers—”

“I have already informed my superior a report is pending.”

“Then you have done your duty not only to the Drapers but to these slaves as well. Your duty is still clear, is it not?”

Drago stiffened. “Completely. I have never questioned my duty, only my hatred of the Laetez.”

“In a way that is good,” Shonda told him. “Hatred clouds one’s mind. You had reason to hate certain Laetez, but not all. Your feelings for these slaves aren’t necessarily detrimental. We are masters. Conquerors in many ways, but we must not be cruel to our slaves. They must be cared for properly, even if like spiteful pets they sometimes choose to bite the hand that feeds them.”

Drago nodded. She was right, of course. Yet he didn't think of Tasia, Staff or even the other slaves as "pets". It seemed degrading somehow and he knew they were worthy of more respect, even from a man like him who despised their kind.

"Also remember, Drago, you have accepted foreign elements into your body. At the moment you *are* part Laetez. In a case like yours, bonding with them emotionally is not unusual. The very fact that you have contacted me indicates that you are fully aware of your position. You know the effects of conversion treatments are temporary and you are not willing to allow the Laetez in you to take over completely."

"Thank you for your time, Shonda."

"That's why I'm here. Good luck, Drago, and don't hesitate to contact me again at any time."

She disappeared from the spec and Drago returned to his shuttle. He needed to complete his patrol before the overseers noticed he was gone too long.

Strangely, instead of putting him back on track, the conversation with Shonda only made him question his beliefs further.

He couldn't moralize now. Soon his dose of medication would be increased and he doubted he would last long before succumbing completely to its poisonous effects. Time was short and he needed to focus on duty.

* * * * *

During his lunch break, Staff went to the guardhouse where Tasia was on desk duty. As soon as he stepped through the door, she greeted him with a smile and motioned for him to join her.

He took the empty seat across from her and asked, "What time is your lunch break?"

"I still have to hang around here for another hour."

"Too bad," he said, giving her a flirtatious look.

She responded in kind and said, "Save that attitude until tonight."

"Don't worry. I will. With a little luck, Drago will be in the mood too."

Tasia chuckled. "He always seems to be in the mood. Speaking of Drago, here he comes."

Glancing over his shoulder, Staff saw Drago striding toward them and couldn't help thinking how sexy he looked. Now that he was familiar, his Draper-Laetez features weren't as startling as they once were. Lately he had been starting to look almost handsome in an odd way and that body of his was nothing sort of breathtaking. Even now Staff had the urge to feel him all over, caress that powerful chest and stroke his long, hard thighs.

Drago paused by Tasia's desk and greeted his lovers.

"How was everything in the northern sector?" Tasia asked.

“Quiet,” he said. “I have to go log my report.”

Just before he turned away, Re Lenor approached and said, “I just wanted to remind you about the Tarn party the night after tomorrow.”

Tarn was the Laetez new year, traditionally celebrated with festivities. The Drapers had allowed the slaves to continue the tradition. An odd feeling shot through Staff when he considered that this would probably be the last time they celebrated any holiday at the colony. Next year at this time there was no telling where they might be, but wherever it was they would be free. He had to believe that.

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Tasia said. “Right, Drago?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he replied. “My former unit never celebrated Tarn.”

“Still so much to learn about your own kind.” Tasia smiled slightly. “At least as far as the good stuff is concerned.”

“I think you’ll enjoy it,” Re Lenor said to Drago, a questioning look on her face.

Staff grinned. Though the slaves respected Drago and many had come to like him, most were still intimidated by his stern Draper attitude. Staff on the other hand found it to be an incredible turn-on. He was so proud and remote yet with underlying passion. He revealed the depth of that passion to Staff and Tasia each time they made love.

Sometimes in the midst of lovemaking when Staff looked into Drago’s eyes he caught a glimpse of his soul. That more than anything else had pushed Staff toward trusting him. If you were lucky enough to see into a man’s soul, even for an instant, you could decide exactly what kind of man he was and Staff liked what he saw inside Drago. Strength. Passion. Loyalty. Such things were rare on their own, but in combination—

Staff knew that if you found a partner with all three, you held on and didn’t let go. Other than Tasia, Drago was the only person he’d ever felt that way about. That’s why he and Tasia had recently approached the other slaves about including Drago in their escape plans. A vote had been taken over the last few secret meetings and it was unanimous. No one wished to leave Drago behind when they evacuated.

Tasia and Staff were to bring him to the next meeting which was scheduled for the eve of Tarn. While the slaves celebrated, Tasia, Staff, Re Ordell and Re Lenor would take Drago to the tunnels and tell him about their plans.

Staff’s heartbeat quickened just thinking about it. Part of him still worried whether or not they had made the right decision. He hoped his and Tasia’s affection for Drago hadn’t clouded their judgment. The fact that the others also trusted Drago comforted him somewhat. Not to mention Er Pace also believed including Drago was the right thing to do.

Of course in this case Er Pace was a bit biased, even if he adamantly argued that he was, as usual, completely reasonable. Staff knew better. He knew that just as both he and Er Pace loved Tasia, they also loved Drago.

"I'm sure I will enjoy it," Drago said to Re Lenor then excused himself to log his reports.

Staff and Tasia exchanged glances. He could almost read her thoughts and knew she was just as anxious about revealing their plans to Drago as he was.

* * * * *

After dinner that night, Drago and Tasia went to the underground training room to teach classes. When they finished, they walked to their unit.

"It's another beautiful night," Tasia said, gazing skyward.

"You're beautiful," Drago said softly. His belly tightened when, for the first time, he realized he meant it. Funny how he no longer considered seducing her and Staff part of his act, but something as natural as breathing. At that moment he decided no matter what, he would not allow harm to come to his lovers. Even after the slaves were retrained and punished, he would see to it they did not suffer.

In the back of his mind he considered that he should probably discuss this with Shonda, but he knew he wouldn't. He no longer wanted to disclose such things to his Reality Checker. It was enough reality that he would be forced to betray the only two people he had ever loved in his adult life.

Tasia turned to him with a look of surprise. "Thank you. You're easy on the eyes yourself."

He gave a snort of laughter and they continued walking in silence for a few moments. Tasia took his hand as they strolled beneath the stars.

"Sometimes I wonder what it's like to be out there, traveling through the galaxy," she said.

"You've never been on a ship before?"

"A long, long time ago. When my parents and I first came to this planet. I don't remember all that much about it, except the feeling. There was such freedom..." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head then stared up at him. "Drago, do you sometimes wonder how the hell we end up in the situations we're in?"

"Every day of my life," he admitted.

"Then I look at you and Staff and realize some situations are pretty fantastic," she said and slipped her arms around him.

They paused and he held her close, resting his cheek against her hair and closing his eyes.

"Let's go to the unit," he whispered and kissed the top of her head.

"Yes." She tilted her face toward his and smiled. "Staff is probably there."

"I hope so," he said. The desire to make love was overwhelming. At least when things got physical, he was too occupied to dwell on whether or not he should care about his partners. Pleasure was all that mattered.

Yet even as he told himself that, he knew it was not the truth. Sex was no longer just something physical, a way to sate his newfound desires. It had become an emotional link between him and these slaves.

The line between duty and love had started to blur and he couldn't let it. He needed to remain focused on the task at hand. Learn their escape plans. Once he did that he could have the conversion treatments reversed and return to the clear-minded Draper warrior he had always been.

The sound of someone running on gravel caught Drago's attention. He turned and saw Staff running toward them, his short, thick hair slick and skin aglow with sweat. His white tank top clung damply to his chiseled torso.

Glancing at Tasia, Drago saw her staring at the medic with the same desire he felt.

"Hey," Staff said, slowing to a walk as he approached. "While you two were busy I figured I could do with some exercise."

"Hmm," Tasia purred, stepping toward him and caressing his chest. "It paid off."

"We were on our way back to the unit," Drago said, grasping the back of Staff's head and pulling him close for a kiss. "Care to join us if your workout is finished?"

"Even if it wasn't, I'm not about to turn down an invitation like that."

They walked to the unit together. No sooner had they stepped inside than Tasia literally leapt on Staff, her legs wrapped around his lean waist, her arms locked around his neck and her lips pressed to his.

Drago closed the door and watched them, aroused by the sight of them together. They were so alien yet incredibly sexy. He imagined how good Staff's hard, wet body felt to Tasia and how wonderful her strong, curvy body felt to Staff.

When she broke the kiss, the medic chuckled and said, "Maybe I should take a shower first."

"Why? You know I like you sweaty," Tasia said.

Staff glanced in Drago's direction and raised an eyebrow in question.

"I agree. It's rather a turn-on," Drago said, circling them in a predatory manner. He wanted to devour both of them and by the way they looked at him they sensed it.

"Fuck him, Tasia," Drago ordered. "And when you're done, I'll fuck you both."

"Oh yeah." Staff grinned, releasing his hold on Tasia. She dropped to her feet and he quickly undressed.

She did the same but Drago remained a short distance away, watching. While they fucked, he would undress. It would at least keep him from diving on them before they finished pleasuring each other.

Within seconds Staff lay on his back in bed, his blue eyes gleaming with lust. His chest rose and fell with excited breathing as Tasia straddled him. He reached out and began fondling her, stroking her clit and using his long, slender fingers to explore her pussy.

Tasia arched her head back and moaned softly. Her lovely breasts thrust forward and Staff used his free hand to caress them. With a sharp little cry of desire, she tumbled forward, bracing her hands on either side of his head and kissing him deeply.

Drago watched, his cock straining in his pants. They both looked so tempting. Staff's face was slightly flushed and his eyes closed as passion grew. Perspiration glistened in the dusting of hair on his chest and his cock swelled thick and hard between their bodies.

Tasia's eyes closed too, her luscious body writhing with pleasure, her dark pink nipples stiff. Lovely lavender veins created a sexy pattern against the smooth flesh of her neck.

Again she sat up. This time she guided Staff's cock inside her. He held out his hands to her and she clasped them as she rode him, slowly at first then with increased speed as their desire grew.

Drago began undressing, never tearing his gaze from them. He finished before they reached their destination so he began stroking his own cock to their fevered movements.

Lovely Tasia came first, moaning and bucking. Then sexy Staff followed, his body jerking upward, his sleek muscles straining and soft cries of passion falling from his lips.

Smiling slightly, Drago approached the bed. He continued watching at them, giving them a moment to recover before he rolled Tasia onto her back and covered her body with his.

"Drago," she murmured, clinging to him. "Oh Drago."

He kissed her, enjoying the softness of her lips and the way her tongue thrust against his. He pumped slowly, steadily, driving her toward another orgasm. By now he was too aroused to tease her for long, especially since he intended to make love to Staff right after. He hoped he could last. It was difficult with her soft, wet cunt clamping his erection.

Finally she climaxed, clinging to him hard and panting his name. He loved the way she looked and sounded when she came. For a second he thought he might explode right along with her but he somehow managed to keep control.

He moved off her and found Staff gazing at him with longing. The medic had already retrieved the container of lube and offered it to Drago along with a sexy smile and moved to his hands and knees. Growling with desire, Drago used a well-lubed hand to prepare Staff. Then he grasped his lean hips and slowly thrust his rock-hard cock into his lover's tight ass.

Unable to resist, he reached out and ran a hand down Staff's sleek back, loving the play of muscles beneath his skin. He even appreciated the pattern of old scars that marred his back though it once again stirred feelings of guilt. He didn't want to betray either of his lovers, but he knew that because of his past Staff would be hurt the most.

Intense physical sensations overtook Drago, pushing aside any thoughts except those of pleasure.

Tasia stared at them with keen interest. She reached out and began stroking Staff's cock and fondling his balls while Drago pumped.

Soon the medic was panting and moaning as much as Drago. Staff came and Drago soon followed. His eyes closed, he surged into Staff, overwhelmed by desire and affection for these Laetez slaves.

* * * * *

The next afternoon Drago was on desk duty in the guardhouse when Than told him to report to the med lab. A medic had just arrived from main control and wanted to see him.

When he reached the examination room, Medic Rufe from Section Fifty-Six awaited him. Rufe had been in charge of Drago's conversion treatments from the beginning.

Throughout the examination, Rufe asked him questions.

"How have the side effects been?"

"Tolerable," Drago replied.

"I don't recommend you continuing the treatments for more than two weeks. Any longer than that and the meds will either fail and the alien characteristics will become permanent or you'll die."

"Neither option is a pleasant prospect."

"Do you still want me to increase the dose?"

"Yes. If I'm right, my task will be complete before two weeks are up."

"Remember that is just an estimate. There's no telling how you'll react to the increased dose. It could kill you on the spot."

"That is an acceptable risk."

The medic quickly finished his examination and instructed Drago on how much to increase his next dose of medication.

"I will inform Medic Re Stafford about this examination," Rufe stated with a curl of his lip. Clearly he disliked reporting to a slave, but Drago had insisted that Staff not be reprimanded or removed from the colony. As the medic in charge of this particular lab, it was normal procedure for him to be updated about Drago.

Drago returned to duty but his thoughts drifted to the following morning when he would be increasing the dose of his medication. Already the side effects after the initial shot were quite uncomfortable. Still, they eventually faded and he had never before allowed mere discomfort to sway him from his duty.

Yet he knew it wasn't physical pain that distracted him. This time it was something far worse.

Love.

* * * * *

Drago wasn't scheduled for patrols the next morning. His shift would begin in the afternoon and last until evening, giving him just enough time to join the Tarn celebration.

Thankfully both Tasia and Staff had to leave for work early. At least Drago would have the unit to himself when he took the first dose of meds.

Once they'd gone, he took his medical case to the lavatory and set up the injection. For the first time he hesitated, needing a moment to prepare for the worst. He took the dose and had scarcely closed his medical case before nausea struck him. Leaning over the waste receptacle, he threw up.

Never in his life had he vomited so much. It crossed his mind that he might pass out in the midst of heaving, but eventually the nausea subsided and he found himself kneeling over the receptacle, drenched in sweat, bile dripping from his mouth.

It took him several moments before he could rise to his feet and clean up.

Glancing at the time, he saw that he still had a couple of hours before his shift started. He set the alarm on his wrist spec and lay down. His head pounded mercilessly and he felt as if someone had used a cleaver to scrape the inside of his stomach and throat.

It seemed like he'd just drifted off when the alarm beeped.

Dragging himself out of bed, he went to the lavatory to relieve himself and clean his teeth again in an attempt to rid himself of the foul taste that lingered from his bout of nausea. He stared at himself in the mirror and curled his lip. He looked awful and felt worse.

The very thought of two more weeks on the drugs nearly made him shudder.

* * * * *

Tasia was at the guardhouse logging the report from her last patrol when Drago walked in to begin his shift. She turned to him and waved but her smile faded when she noticed how terrible he looked. The last time she'd seen him look that bad, Milo had used an electro-flogger on him.

"Shooting asteroids, what's wrong with you?" she demanded and reached out to feel his forehead. "Are you sick?"

He shrugged off her hand and said, "Just a headache."

"Headache? Come on, Drago. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. How was your patrol?"

"All right. Maybe you should see Staff."

"You're overreacting, Tasia."

"You're the one who looks like you've just been mowed over by a runaway shuttle."

"I said I'm fine. I have to go on patrol. See you at the celebration tonight."

She nodded slowly, her brow furrowed. "All right."

Her gaze followed him as he checked in then left the guardhouse. In spite of his reassurances, she couldn't help thinking something was wrong. She'd seen the man walk away from things that would render other people unconscious. Now he wanted her to believe he looked like hell because of a headache?

Drago had been on her mind a lot lately anyway and she knew it was the same with Staff. Tonight they would disclose their escape plans to him. She was anxious over this for so many reasons. Until Drago was included, she wouldn't rest easy. The very idea of abandoning him here when the rest of them fled was almost too painful to consider. She had been so glad to find out the others felt the same.

Almost from the moment he arrived Drago had been a good friend to them. Yes, he had a board up his butt and a strange sense of humor, but he had heart. That was something Tasia greatly admired. Staff had it. She liked to think she had it and she knew without doubt Drago had it.

When they left this damn desert planet, it would be all or nothing. Their trio wouldn't be broken up for anything.

* * * * *

By the celebration that night, the side effects from Drago's medicine had faded significantly. Other than occasional queasiness, some muscle soreness and lingering weakness, he felt all right. He was just glad there wasn't an underground training session. Though he had intended to enjoy the celebration, he hoped for the chance to leave early and get some rest before his next dose of meds in the morning.

The Tarn celebration took place by the swimming hole. Lights were arranged around the area, making it almost as bright as day. Staff made sure there was a steady supply of music and many slaves had prepared food that everyone enjoyed. Some danced and others swam in the warm water. The children played games and painted their faces. For the first time Drago recalled, they acted like children instead of undersized workers. He smiled slightly as he watched a group of them play tug-of-war.

Much like these children, his youth had been stolen. First when the Laetex murdered his parents then when the Draper government had made him a ward of the military. In a way these slave children were lucky. At least every now and then they got to frolic.

He shook his head, realizing that was a bitter attitude. If he was completely honest, he had to admit what they really deserved was the freedom to live and grow like normal children.

"Drago." Tasia approached and slipped her arm around his waist. Cuddling close, she tilted her gaze toward his. "You look better."

"The headache is gone."

“Staff and I would like to talk to you in private.”

Drago placed aside the fruit punch he’d been drinking and said, “Of course. Is something wrong?”

“No.” She offered a strange little smile and he immediately sensed there was indeed something wrong.

“What is it?” he pressed.

“Come with me.” Taking his hand, she led the way back toward the colony center.

Chapter Eight

Drago followed Tasia away from the festivities and back toward the colony center. They approached a medical supply unit and Staff opened the door partway. He beckoned them closer and a sense of excitement built inside Drago. He felt as if something important was about to happen.

Inside the medical supply unit, Staff closed the door. A glow lantern was on its lowest setting, giving them just enough light to maneuver around the shelves and containers.

Staff held a finger to his lips, motioning for them to keep quiet. He led the way to the back of the unit, behind several rows of metal containers.

He opened a huge container labeled *hazardous* and stepped into it. Drago's brow furrowed, but when Tasia gave him a slight push toward the container he followed Staff. He made his way down a dark hole in the bottom of the empty container. Staff, holding the glow lantern, stood at the bottom of a crude stairway.

Drago walked down the stairs. Behind him, Tasia closed the container as well as the cover to the hole and followed the men. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Staff turned the glow lantern to a higher setting and said, "This way."

"What is this place?" Drago asked.

"You'll know very soon," Tasia told him, an excited gleam in her eyes.

They made their way down a long, surprisingly well-constructed tunnel and paused in a simple yet efficient examination room similar to the ones in the med lab. Re Ordell and Re Lenor were there and when Drago stepped in, they nodded in greeting.

"Since you've come to the colony you've been a good friend," Tasia said.

"We've grown to consider you one of the family," Staff added.

Drago's stomach clenched with a combination of eagerness and revulsion. He sensed they were about to disclose their plans to him and that excited him greatly, however their words also touched him and that weakness in his character disgusted him.

Now it wouldn't be long before he could rid himself of these Laetez traits. Once again his mind would be clear. He would be a Draper, one who had taken some measure of revenge against the species that ruined his life.

Yet part of him already missed Tasia and Staff. In his heart he knew he would never again experience the closeness he had felt with them.

"You have no idea what your acceptance has meant to me," he said truthfully. Though inside he was more anxious than ever, he waited patiently for them to continue. He had no desire to blow his cover now.

"Family doesn't leave family behind," Re Ordell stated.

"Usually," Staff muttered. Apparently he was thinking about his mother again.

A pang of guilt shot through Drago. Soon Staff would be betrayed by someone he trusted. Drago regretted that someone would be him.

Tasia continued, "Remember all those times we talked about freedom, Drago?"

"How can I forget?"

"What would you say if we told you there might be a chance to take it?"

"Take our freedom?" he asked coolly.

Four pairs of eyes stared at him intently.

"I would say it's a great risk but one that must be taken. Better to take fate into my own hands than spend my life under the threat of an electro-flogger."

Tasia and Re Lenor smiled.

Re Ordell rested a friendly hand on Drago's shoulder and said, "And you'd know all about that."

"Unfortunately," Drago said with a wry grin. He noted Staff was still watching him with a discerning expression. Usually the medic's eyes were unreadable but this time Drago clearly saw apprehension in them. Was that due to the fact that he didn't quite trust Drago or was it that, because of his past, he feared trusting anyone?

"We have a means to escape," Staff said. "It has been in the planning stages for decades. We were waiting for the right opportunity."

"You've been patient," Drago said.

"Very," Re Lenor added. She gestured around the room. "Beneath the colony we have dozens of secret rooms and tunnels. You've seen our training hall many times."

"In a way you've already been helping in our escape plans," Tasia added. "Simply by training the slaves. When we make our move, there's a good chance there will be fighting. Drapers are stronger than the Laetez but we have them outnumbered. Long ago, my father began teaching the slaves martial arts and how to handle weapons. When the opportunity came he wanted us to be ready."

Drago glanced at them skeptically. "It will take more than martial arts for you to escape the colony. What about our security chips?"

"While Re Lenor, some other slaves and I have carried on my father's training, people like Staff and Re Ordell have been working on the technological side of our escape," Tasia said.

"We have been systematically removing the security chips from the slaves," Staff explained. "It's taken months but almost all the slaves are now free of their chips."

They went on to explain how they accomplished this and also told him about the help they'd received from Xenos' crew.

Xenos. Drago should have known that despicable former outlaw was behind this. He wouldn't doubt if, as main control suspected, the Laetez government had something

to do with it as well. Probably even the humans. After all, Xenos and his crew currently worked for Earth. But there were so few human and half human slaves at the colony it was difficult to believe Earth would risk angering the Drapers over them.

Or Xenos could be acting on his own. The Drapers surmised that in spite of his new status, he was still nothing more than a criminal.

"Two weeks from tonight we're going to escape the colony," Re Ordell said. "By then all the surgeries should be complete. If they're not, the medic on *Nameless* has agreed to remove any remaining chips immediately, since the slaves wearing them will have little time to survive once the Drapers realize what's happened and take back the colony."

"But we'll be long gone by then," Re Lenor said with conviction.

"If you agree, I can remove your chip by the end of the week," Staff told Drago.

"Of course I agree," Drago stated. Though he remained outwardly calm, his heartbeat quickened. They had already given him enough to destroy their plans, but if he held on just a little longer he could bring down Xenos and his band of pirates as well.

That would make main control happy and help Drago's already radiant career. After what he'd gone through with the conversion treatments, he wanted to drain this assignment for all the benefits he could.

Yet deep inside he knew these were only superficial reasons for extending his stay at the colony. He would not, *could not* think about those other reasons now. Not when he was on the verge of completing his assignment.

"Then it's settled," Re Ordell said.

Tasia nodded, her gaze drifting from Staff to Drago. Looking into her eyes, he felt himself weaken the slightest bit. She and Staff had gotten to him. There was no doubt about it. But he needed to remain strong and fight the Laetez emotions that threatened to overcome him completely, pushing him to turn traitor against his own kind for a species he should hate.

"This time next week, we'll all be free of the chips," Tasia said.

"Now we better get back to the celebration," Re Lenor said.

"You two go," Staff told them. "Tasia and I are going to give Drago a tour of the tunnels. After all, he's only had access to the training room and that's not even connected to the rest of the underground network."

"All right." Re Ordell picked up a glow lantern.

As he and Re Lenor left the room, she glanced over her shoulder and called, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Great. That means we can have an orgy down here," Tasia teased.

"No doubt you will." Re Lenor smirked.

Re Ordell grasped her arm and tugged her away. "Come on. Give them some privacy."

Tasia and Drago exchanged glances and smiled then they turned to Staff who appeared to be deep in thought.

"What's wrong?" Tasia asked.

"Everything." Staff shook his head. "I'm just worried. I won't rest until we're actually free."

Tasia hugged him tightly. "We will be."

Seeing them together, Drago felt sick inside and not just due to the side effects of the medication. When he first arrived at the colony, rallying his hatred for the Laetez had been easy. Now he actually felt guilty lying not only Tasia and Staff but to the others as well. They might be Laetez but they didn't deserve such betrayal.

He thought about what Shonda had said. After thirty years these slaves were bound to be influenced by the Drapers. Perhaps in some small way part of them was now Draper. During the conversion treatments he had taken not just the physical characteristics of the Laetez, but his emotions had changed due to his exposure to them. Surely even the Laetez were capable of understanding, even appreciating, other cultures. That's why he felt a particular closeness to these slaves. He saw certain elements of his own people reflected in them.

Thinking about it was a waste of time. Regardless of his personal feelings, he had a duty to perform.

"Come on." Tasia grasped Drago's hand.

Staff, holding the glow lantern, led the way out of the room into a long, dark tunnel.

Tasia gently squeezed Drago's hand. He gazed down at her in the dimness and smiled slightly.

Now that they had included him in their plans she felt so much better. Even the possibility of leaving him behind when they escaped was too painful to consider. As Staff said, he was part of the family both in a larger sense, such as the colony, and in a more intimate sense, such as their threesome. She and Staff had discussed Drago in private and once they were all free, they planned to ask him if he wanted to join them permanently.

In spite of his stern demeanor, she didn't doubt his feelings for them. When they made love, he seemed to completely release his hold on his emotions. During those times he revealed the secrets of his heart.

For the next hour they toured the tunnels, pointing out certain rooms used for supplies, recovery from surgery and tactical planning. They didn't have time to follow the longer tunnels burrowed outside the colony, but she and Staff pointed them out to Drago so that he would know as much about the underground system as the other slaves.

Finally they paused in Tasia's favorite room. While tunneling they had come across an underground spring. They had built a spacious room around a natural pool where the slaves could swim and relax.

The room was empty now since everyone was at the celebration. To ensure their privacy, Tasia closed the door.

"Let's make your initiation even more memorable," she said, tossing him a sexy look. She began to undress.

"Tasia, this is a serious night," Staff said. Obviously he was still very uptight.

As if sensing this, Drago stepped behind Staff, slipped his arms around him and nuzzled his neck. "We *are* serious."

Staff's eyes closed halfway and he tilted his neck to the side, allowing Drago easier access. With a soft groan of arousal, Drago kissed Staff's neck with greater enthusiasm. He ran his teeth lightly along the medic's flesh then followed the trail with his tongue.

Finally naked, Tasia walked toward them, eager to feel their kisses and their warm, hard bodies against hers.

Drago grasped Staff's shirt, pulled it off and tossed it aside. With the medic's chest now exposed, they couldn't resist touching him. Drago ran his hands over Staff's pecs and down his lean sides. Tasia stood in front of him and rubbed her cheek against the light dusting of hair covering his chest. She began kissing the expanse, loving his warmth against her lips and the scent of his skin. Her tongue lashed his nipples and she reached down to fondle his cock through his pants.

Moaning with pleasure, Staff caressed her hair, shoulders and back. He trailed his fingertips along her spine and brushed them across the indentation of her buttocks. Drago joined him in stroking her and she mewled softly, her eyes closed, completely absorbed in the moment.

Drago's hands left her and she opened her eyes partway to see where he'd gone. He stood a short distance away, removing his clothes. While he did that, Tasia unfastened Staff's pants and pulled them down. He kicked them off along with his shoes.

Tilting her face up toward his, she held his gaze and moistened her lips with her tongue. She pulled off his socks then began kissing his thighs, first one then the other. Her hands caressed his hard legs and she used her tongue to trace the joining of his thighs to his pelvis. Unable to resist, she brushed her face against his pubic hair, grasped his cock and began licking it from root to head.

Drago moved behind her and began licking and kissing her, starting at her neck and moving down her spine. Her breath caught as Drago reached around to fondle her clit and pussy.

"I want to fuck you," Drago said in a husky voice.

"This time I have an idea," she said. "Staff, lie on your back."

They looked at each other and his blue eyes gleamed with arousal. No doubt he guessed what she intended.

He did as she asked and she lay by his legs, her body positioned slightly to the side.

Growling softly with desire, Drago lay behind her. She chuckled. He hadn't even needed words to know what she had planned. While she continued sucking and licking Staff's thick, hard erection, Drago filled her from behind. He thrust his hips slowly, almost gently, while using his hands and lips to caress her. He kissed the back of her neck and used his tongue to tease her ear, sending little shivers of pleasure down her spine.

As her desire increased, it became more difficult to explore Staff's cock slowly. Her sucking and licking quickened, becoming almost desperate. He had such a beautiful cock that she didn't want to stop touching it in spite of her own pleasure.

The medic groaned in delight. He tightened his hands in her hair and thrust his hips, trying to match the erratic rhythm of her mouth.

"Tasia, damn, you give good head," he panted. "Between you and Drago, I'm not going to last until my thirty-sixth birthday."

"But you'll die happy," Drago said, his voice deep and husky with passion.

His comment made Tasia chuckle and the vibrations must have felt good to Staff because he groaned again, his hips pumping faster.

Drago continued thrusting, also quickening his pace. He pressed his teeth against the back of her neck, like a wild animal claiming its prey, then he licked and sucked the same spot. He fondled her clit, making her squirm with need, yet he used his hips and legs to keep her under control.

In the midst of pleasure, she realized she and Staff were headed for a simultaneous orgasm. Before she could waste any more time thinking, sensation overtook her completely. She moaned and seemed to pulse from head to toe in an intense climax.

Her eyes closed tightly, she panted around Staff's cock but somehow didn't forget to keep licking and sucking. He also exploded, his come shooting into her mouth, but she didn't care. She licked and swallowed, her ass bucking against Drago who now pumped wildly. He cried out in orgasm and surged into her.

For several moments they lay in a hot, tangled heap. Their panting breaths filled the chamber but as they calmed she became aware of the sound of water lapping in the pool.

Smiling, she shifted her position, extracting herself from the men's heavy limbs. Staff groaned and stretched. Drago opened his eyes and raised himself onto his elbow. He gazed at Tasia who smiled at him and walked toward the pool.

She waded in and floated on her back, enjoying the sensation of water against her heated flesh.

Drago was the first to rise and join her in the pool. Staff continued to lie on his back for a moment and she didn't blame him for taking the opportunity to rest. Lately he'd been spending most of his free time in the tunnels performing surgery and making technical plans with Re Ordell.

They'd been covering up by telling Drago he was working extra shifts at the med lab. It was so nice to know that everything was now out in the open. Drago had been such a big help already, training slaves. No doubt he would be a huge asset to their cause now that he knew the truth.

In the pool, Drago swam toward Tasia, a sexy look in his jewellike gray eyes, and took her in his arms. She returned his embrace and rested her cheek against his water-slicked shoulder.

Tilting her face up to Drago's, she noticed a droplet of water clinging to the very tip of his long nose and stood on tiptoe, using her nose to brush the droplet away. Grasping her shoulders, he held her even closer and kissed her deeply. His tongue thrust into her mouth with warm, wet strokes that were both tender yet demanding. She moaned softly, thoroughly enjoying the possessiveness of his kiss.

Drago was one of those men who made a woman feel safe and protected. Even an independent woman like herself wasn't immune to his charms.

She enjoyed being self-sufficient but part of her also liked being cared for. And she absolutely loved a take-charge man. Though Staff didn't outwardly appear like the rugged type, when it came to getting things done few could compare with him. He was the kind of guy who came on with a slow burn, getting hotter and hotter in crucial moments.

Drago, however, was the sort of man whose very appearance was enough to intimidate others and he wasn't all show either. He had a steel spine and a courageous heart.

She sighed with contentment, thinking how lucky she was to have two such men as her mates.

* * * * *

The following morning, Drago was scheduled for early desk duty at the guardhouse. This meant he would have no privacy when he took his dose of meds. There was no way he could disguise the side effects and he couldn't think of a reasonable explanation for his reaction to them.

If he didn't take the dose on schedule, he chanced retaining his Laetez characteristics permanently.

He would have to find a way to leave the guardhouse for a couple of hours. Luckily when he arrived, one of the guards was complaining that his partner was sick and he had to patrol the western sector on his own. This particular guard, Re Eason, hated being alone. Not out of fear but because he liked talking. Drago wouldn't be surprised if his partner had feigned illness just to avoid a morning spent with such a gabby companion.

Still, it worked out well for Drago. He volunteered to swap duties with Re Eason who gratefully agreed.

Soon Drago's shuttle coasted toward the most remote barrier of the western sector. At least now he could endure the effects of the medication in private. Not that he relished puking his guts up in the middle of the desert but it was better than being discovered.

Already his stomach tightened and his heartbeat quickened just from thinking about the side effects. He parked the shuttle, took his medical kit and stepped onto the sandy ground. Even this early in the morning the heat was almost unbearable.

Drawing a deep breath, he prepared his medication then took the dose without giving himself the chance to hesitate.

If possible the nausea was even worse than yesterday. This time pain racked him from head to toe. He felt like something was inside his skeleton trying to tear its way out.

His last memory was of being on all fours, vomiting beneath the scalding desert sun.

* * * * *

Drago awoke to a pounding headache. Though the severe pain had subsided throughout his body, he ached all over and his limbs felt heavy. At least he was someplace cool. He couldn't tell where, since his vision was rather blurry.

"Drago," Tasia said softly and stroked his cheek.

He moaned in reply since his tongue felt too thick to form words.

"Staff, he's waking up," she said.

"Good," Staff replied then Drago felt his strong yet gentle hands examining him.

Drago blinked a few more times and his vision cleared.

His lovers were standing by his bed in a room in the med lab.

"How are you feeling?" Staff asked. "And if you say fine I'm going to slug you."

Drago somehow managed to force a very slight smile. "How about if I say I feel better?"

"I'm glad to hear it," Tasia said and squeezed his hand. "You scared the hell out of us."

"How did you find me?"

"You were about an hour later than usual returning from patrol so I tried contacting you but you didn't answer your spec. I got worried and went looking for you."

"And it's a good thing she did," Staff replied. "Any longer in the heat in your condition and you would have died. Drago, I don't give a damn what you or that medic from main control says. You have to stop the meds."

"I can't," Drago snapped, trying to push himself to a sitting position. The room spun and he fell back, scarcely able to control the nausea.

Tasia brought him a damp towel and a glass of water.

While he sipped the water, she gently wiped his face with the towel. "Staff is right. That shit is going to kill you."

"You don't understand," Drago pressed.

"What's to understand?" Staff said, an angry edge to his voice.

"I'm not what you think I am," Drago said. He needed to do something before Staff saw to it that he'd never revert to his Draper form again.

This wasn't the best moment for Drago to come up with a lie to save himself. He was sick, feverish and desperate, but he'd faced this kind of trouble before. In his profession, it was just another day at the office.

"What are you talking about?" Staff's blue eyes took on a frosty expression and the medic stiffened visibly, his mistrust rising again.

Drago knew whatever story he told him now would set back his relationship with Staff. The man's paranoia had been difficult enough to overcome. Still, Drago had no choice but to weave another lie.

"I am not an ACT product," Drago said. "At least not in the way of most. I'm not like Tasia. I wasn't born a crossbreed. I was given Laetez characteristics through conversion treatments."

For a moment Staff and Tasia remained silent, staring at Drago then exchanging glances with each other.

"Well, that explains the medication," Staff said coolly. "But why the lie? Even more, why has main control lied? Sending us records with false information."

"I was an officer at main control," Drago said. "I was responsible for the death of a fellow officer. As punishment I was forced to undergo conversion treatments and I was placed in this colony to do my time."

"As a slave," Tasia said.

"Yes. No one here is supposed to know my true identity."

She sighed. "In a way that's almost a fitting punishment."

"I think it stinks," Staff snapped. Drago wasn't exactly sure how he meant that.

"It stinks for my sake or yours?" he asked.

"Both," Staff said. "Though you probably deserve whatever you get." He paused and gave a snort of laughter. "Actually it hasn't been too bad for you. We saved you from the barracks and you've had a couple of stupid lovers to sate your newfound Laetez desires."

"Staff," Tasia said. "You don't even know his reasons for killing that officer. Maybe—"

"It was accidental," Drago stated. "But I'm no less guilty."

"Accidental?" Staff scoffed. "I don't think you've ever done anything accidentally in your life. You might have fooled us about your past but at least give us some credit for knowing a little bit about you as a person."

Drago and Staff locked gazes for a long moment. Regardless of what they believed, they didn't know him at all.

"Even better, we're making it easy for you to avoid your sentence, aren't we?" Staff said and Drago knew he was referring to their escape plans.

"I cannot escape my sentence. It's crawling inside me," Drago stated.

"Crawling? Oh, that's beautiful. You make it sound like Laetez characteristics are some kind of disease. A parasite. Isn't that how you think of my Er? As a disgusting parasite?"

Drago was a bit surprised to see the usually calm medic giving in to emotion like this. Yes, Staff's temper sometimes got the better of him, but he'd never had such a hateful look in his eyes. Even Tasia, who had known him all his life, looked wary.

"How long were you to stay at the colony?" Tasia asked.

"A year," Drago said.

"Then they lied," Staff informed him. "With the medication you wouldn't last a year. You'll be lucky if you live through another dose."

"I can survive as long as two more weeks. Then they'll consider allowing me to revert and serve the rest of my sentence elsewhere."

Staff snorted with angry laughter. "I'm the medic, pal, not you. Who said you'd last another two weeks? The medic from main control?"

"All I'm saying is I must continue the treatments or else I can never revert to my pure Draper form."

"There's nothing pure about Drapers," Tasia said softly.

"I know you despise my kind," Drago said. "And I'm sorry for not telling you the truth, but I had reasons."

"You could have told *us*." Tasia's dark eyes fixed on his. Unlike Staff there was no anger in her, only confusion and a hint of disappointment. "We would have kept your secret."

"Oh, but he obviously doesn't trust us to keep his secrets," Staff said. A hint of hope kindled in Drago. If Staff was concerned that Drago didn't trust him then that meant he still had feelings for him. Otherwise the medic wouldn't give a damn.

"What exactly are we to you, Drago?" Staff demanded. "I can answer my own question. We were *amusement*. Relief from your *punishment*."

"You've been much more than that," Drago said, holding Staff's gaze. It was the truth in so many ways. Staff's reaction got to him more than he'd ever imagined. He didn't like being at odds with either of his lovers. Tasia was much more forgiving but he'd known that right along.

"Staff, ease up a little," Tasia said. "He's just getting over a near-death experience."

The medic stood for a moment, proverbial steam floating from his ears. Then he sighed, closed his eyes and shook his head. "You're right. I just don't like being lied to. You both know why."

"I know," Drago said. "I am...so sorry, Staff. You and Tasia have meant more to me than you can ever imagine. I lied about my identity but I didn't lie about my feelings for you and Tasia."

Again Staff sighed but he seemed to be thawing the slightest bit. He stepped closer to Drago, cupped his chin and stared into his eyes. "That's probably the conversion treatments talking. Once you revert to your pure Draper form you'll most likely be humiliated by this whole affair."

"Never," Drago said fiercely.

"Yeah." Tasia tickled Staff in the ribs. "You make it sound like we're something to be ashamed of. He's the convict, remember?"

"Anyone, regardless of species, would be lucky to call you friends, not to mention lovers," Drago said.

"I need to contact main control," Staff said. "One way or the other you need to stop the medication permanently. I'm going to recommend an immediate reversal of your conversion treatments, if it isn't too late already."

"What do you mean too late?" Drago demanded.

"Didn't the medic tell you that the medication only works for so long and needs to be taken on time otherwise the changes become strong enough to overpower the meds and you're stuck with them permanently?"

"Yes, of course I know that."

"Since Tasia found you I've temporarily changed your medication."

"But it was only this morning that I passed out."

Tasia and Staff exchanged glances.

"What?" Drago demanded, a coil of fear tightening in his belly.

"Drago." Tasia sat on the edge of his bed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You've been unconscious for two days."

He must have looked as stunned as he felt because even Staff took his hand and held it firmly.

"There's still a slim chance that the treatments can be reversed. If you had been honest with us from the first this could have been prevented," Staff said. "I really am sorry, Drago."

Drago closed his eyes for a moment, his heart pounding. He tugged away from his lovers' touches. Though he craved their closeness, the emotional battle raging inside him made him want to lash out. They seemed to understand and dropped their hands from him, though Tasia still sat on the bed. Damn the conversion treatments but he was actually grateful for her presence.

“I’ll start testing right away so we can determine if the reversal will work,” Staff said and headed for the door. He paused and glanced over his shoulder, his blue eyes compassionate. It disgusted Drago how much he wanted and needed that compassion. “But, Drago, there’s a good chance that from now on you’ll be as much a crossbreed as Tasia.”

Drago had always believed that would be a fate worse than death, to retain a permanent connection to the species he most hated. Yet he had found love with these two Laetez slaves, something he hadn’t experienced since the death of his parents.

What hurt most of all at this moment was the realization that regardless of whether or not the conversion treatments worked, he could not, would not, destroy Staff and Tasia’s hope for freedom. That decision would most likely mean his own death. It would make him a traitor to his blood, to his family and to his own beliefs, but it would free the only true lovers he had ever had.

Chapter Nine

The following day, Staff entered Drago's room wearing his usual unreadable expression yet Drago knew him well enough to sense something was wrong.

"Drago, I've double-checked the results of your tests and also forwarded them to main control so the medic there could read them as well." Staff held Drago's gaze. "Reversal isn't possible. I'm sorry."

Drago nodded. Closing his eyes for a moment and sighing, he realized he hadn't needed a test to tell him that. He'd sensed it. Once the lingering side effects of the medication had passed, he had *felt* different. Up until then, he'd felt as if his body was fighting itself, but now he felt like a whole being again. Whole, but as much Laetez as he was Draper.

"Main control has sent another medic to examine you," Staff continued. "He's still talking to one of the overseers. I wanted you to hear the results from me, not him."

"Thank you."

Staff's cool gaze remained fixed on Drago. He wished there weren't so many bad feelings between them. For the first time Drago could remember, he wanted a friend or better yet a lover.

"You're welcome," Staff said.

They stared at each other for several moments and in that silence they said more to each other with a look than they ever could with words.

Then they were interrupted by a tall, dark-haired Draper. Though he was dressed as a medic, Staff recognized him as Kent, a fellow agent from Section Fifty-Six.

"Leave us," the agent said to Staff without so much as glancing at him.

Drago's stomach clenched. He hated the way many Drapers seemed to treat the slaves here, with scarcely a shred of common courtesy. Funny that prior to meeting Staff and Tasia he had never noticed or cared. He'd been too wrapped up in his hatred.

With a final look in Drago's direction, Staff left the room and closed the door behind him.

Kent approached Drago and said, "Medics at Section Fifty-Six confirmed that reversing your condition is no longer possible."

"Yes."

"We understand what you have sacrificed, however from what I've learned by questioning these slaves and overseers, you are still willing and able to continue here." Kent stepped closer and lowered his voice to scarcely a whisper, "The story about you

being a military prisoner is brilliant. I assume you mean to follow through with your plan to catch the slaves and their accomplice in the act of escaping?"

"That is my intention," Drago stated, calling upon his formidable skills as a spy. He would need a perfect performance to convince one of his own kind – an authority level ten agent – that he was telling the truth. "I have come too far and sacrificed too much to give up now. Besides, without the meds I no longer have the same time constraints."

Kent smiled slightly and nodded. "Main control will be monitoring your progress and expecting another report as soon as you have something. Is there anything you need from our end?"

"No."

They had already done quite enough as far as Drago was concerned.

"Then good luck to you, Drago." Kent nodded and left the room.

Drago tried to relax but it was difficult now that his thoughts were churning. His new objective was completely different than his original one. Instead of preventing the slaves' escape he now needed to make sure it was a success.

A short time after Kent left, Staff returned, this time followed by Tasia.

"I'm on a meal break," she explained. "Just wanted to stop in and see how you're feeling." She leaned down and brushed his mouth with a kiss then sat on the edge of his bed. "So how are you?"

"How do you think he is, Tasia? He's part Laetez," Staff said sarcastically.

"Give it a rest, Staff," Tasia said, clearly annoyed.

Drago couldn't help feeling grateful for her support.

"I have rounds to make." Staff left the room.

"Staff holds grudges," Tasia said, as if that needed explaining.

"I don't blame him. He feels betrayed. I'm sure you do too," Drago said. *And there's worse to come.*

"I was a little hurt at first but I understand why you lied."

"Am I no longer included in—" He paused and lowered his voice. "In the plans?"

"We've informed the other slaves about your situation," she said. "If it was up to me, I'd say nothing's changed, however with so many of us involved we have to take a vote."

Now Drago's temper stirred. He, a Draper agent, was being voted on by Laetez slaves? Then he calmed down. After all, he still had the power of life and death over them and the means to destroy their plans for freedom. But he didn't want to do that.

"When will you know?" he asked.

"By tomorrow night. Staff said you'll need to rest here for another day or two anyway. Is there anything you need?"

"No. Thank you."

"You don't even want me to smuggle you in some Meltja fruit?"

He smiled and caressed her face. "No. The pleasure of your company is more than enough."

"I've missed you at home."

"So have I."

She leaned toward him and their lips touched.

Drago pulled her closer and they held each other, their lips and tongues mating.

It felt so good to hold her and to be held that when she finally pulled away he didn't want to let her go.

"I have to get back to the guardhouse," she said. "Re Eason and Re Lenor are on desk duty. I have to make sure she hasn't killed him for talking too much."

Drago chuckled softly and watched her head for the door. She paused and smiled at him before leaving.

* * * * *

Over the next two days while Drago regained his physical strength in the med lab, his thoughts moved at high speed as he formulated new plans.

On the day he was released, Staff walked him out of the med lab. Drago was glad to see Staff's anger had faded and he'd been friendlier lately. Unfortunately Drago realized that might not last long. Not once Staff learned that Drago was still lying to him. Yet it was better to hurt Staff now than do worse damage by allowing the Drapers to crush their escape plans.

"Drago, there's a meeting tonight underground," Staff said, his voice just above a whisper even though they had walked a good distance from the med lab. "We want to talk to you about how the vote went."

"Good. I want to talk to you as well."

Staff's brow furrowed and he studied him carefully, once again mistrusting.

"All right," the medic said. "Go back to the unit and rest. Tasia said you're not scheduled for duty until tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Staff. For everything."

The medic shrugged then smiled and pulled Drago into a firm embrace. Drago held him tightly for a moment, closing his eyes and enjoying the familiar sensation of Staff's lean, hard body pressed against his. Something told him he'd probably never feel it again. Not after Staff learned the truth.

The men stepped apart. Staff returned to the med lab and Drago walked to their unit.

He glanced around the place then lay on the bed. Lost in thought, he stared up at the smooth gray ceiling. He finally drifted off for a while and awoke to the sound of someone cooking and the delicious aroma of dinner. He looked up, saw Tasia in the

kitchen and was struck by a feeling of familiarity that was both heartbreaking and wonderful.

Glancing in his direction, she smiled. "Hi. Staff will be home soon so we can eat together before our meeting."

"Good." Drago yawned, stretched and went to the lavatory. He looked in the mirror. It felt strange knowing his Laetez characteristics were now permanent. Not that he would have to live with them for long.

This particular night was especially important to him. When Staff got home, they ate together then listened to music for a while. Drago and Staff even danced together. It was almost like nothing had changed for them, but it had and there were more changes yet to come.

The meeting seemed to arrive quickly. Soon Drago, his lovers and several other slaves, including Re Ordell, Re Nina and Re Lenor, were assembled in one of the underground rooms.

"After careful consideration it's been decided by the majority that you are still to be included in our escape plans," Re Ordell stated.

"Wait." Drago held up his hand. "Before we go any further there are some things I must tell you."

Everyone exchanged glances and Tasia said, "What things?"

Drago drew a breath and released it slowly. He appeared confident but inside apprehension slithered through him like a snake.

"You can't vote on anything without knowing the truth," he continued. "And without me you have no escape plans at all."

"What?" Re Ordell and Staff said in unison.

"Staff, I think those meds affected his brain worse than we thought," Re Lenor said.

"I ask you all to listen. Let me finish completely before you interrupt or jump to any conclusions," Drago said. "I am not a prisoner. I had to make that up so when main control came here and questioned you that would be the story you'd tell them."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tasia demanded.

He leveled his most serious gaze upon her. "I asked you not to interrupt."

"I don't get this," Re Lenor said. "What is going on here?"

"Let him talk," Re Nina said, staring at him with as much apprehension as the others, but also with a desire to listen and learn. That was a good sign.

"I am an agent from Section Fifty-Six," Drago continued.

Staff laughed humorlessly. "Oh, this just keeps getting better."

"Let me finish," Drago said. "I was sent here because main control believes you are planning an escape. My duty was to find out if this is true and see that it doesn't happen."

Re Lenor's face drained of color. The others didn't look much better.

"Shooting asteroids," Re Ordell murmured.

"I won't lie and say —"

"Why stop now?" Staff said bitterly.

Drago repeated, "I won't lie and say I wasn't completely absorbed in my mission at first. I was. But living here and sharing your Laetez characteristics, I've come to realize you're not the people I thought you were."

"Likewise," Tasia snapped. Her hurt was apparent and Drago wasn't immune to it yet he needed to continue and not allow emotions to taint him yet again.

"What the hell did you think we were?" Re Ordell demanded.

"Murderers. Torturers."

"Oh, so you thought we were Drapers," Re Lenor quipped.

He shot her a frigid look. "No. Unfortunately those characteristics can belong to any species. I have seen Draper cruelty here, just as I once saw Laetez cruelty."

"Where?" Re Nina asked softly. "Where did you see Laetez cruelty?"

"This isn't my first time on this planet. During the beginning of the Laetez-Draper war, I lived here with my parents. During the Laetez occupation, they were tortured and killed by Laetez soldiers."

"I see," Tasia whispered.

"Don't tell me you believe this?" Staff practically snarled. He emanated fury, from the flames in his eyes to the rapid rise and fall of his chest. "How many lies are you going to listen to from him? Hell, he's a product of conversion treatments. Even he doesn't know who or what he is anymore!"

"I know who I am, Staff." Drago held his gaze, unfaltering. "I know what I was sent to do but I also know I can no longer fulfill that assignment. The slaves of this colony deserve the freedom they have worked so hard for. I have no intention of betraying you to main control."

"Why should we trust you?" Re Ordell demanded.

"You must," Drago stated calmly. "You have a decent escape plan but I can make sure it doesn't fail. I have access to overseer security passwords. I can also perform overrides that will buy you more time to escape."

"Why would you do this?" Re Ordell asked.

"Because you deserve the chance at freedom."

"Not good enough," Tasia stated. "I don't believe that's the truth."

Drago knew what she wanted and he also realized that in her way it was emotional payback for his past actions. Yet looking into her eyes he also sensed she did indeed trust him. That was more than he could say for Staff who stared at him as if trying to incinerate him with his eyes.

"All right. I have experienced friendship and acceptance here that I never had before. I have said that from the beginning and that was never a lie." His gaze swept each of the slaves, lingering on Staff and Tasia.

"This is going to take some heavy thought," Re Ordell said. "We can't trust you after this."

"Why not?" Re Nina asked softly. All gazes turned to her and she continued, "If he is an agent and intends to prevent our escape then why would he tell us? Wouldn't he gain more by following through with his plan to catch us in the act?"

"What makes you think he won't?" Staff said. "Maybe he's setting us up so he can have us all herded together when he contacts main control."

"Don't you see it doesn't matter anymore," Re Nina pressed. "Yes, that might be his intention but he doesn't have to wait for that. A word from him at any time and we're crushed."

"He can't give any word if we kill him," Re Lenor said, glaring at Drago.

"Kill me and main control will send other agents looking, most likely before you have a chance to escape," Drago warned. "I'm not saying that for self-preservation. My fate has already been sealed."

"What do you mean?" Tasia asked.

"I mean that after I help you escape I'll have to turn myself over to main control."

"Why?" Re Lenor asked.

"Don't buy what he's selling," Staff spat out. "One thing Drago is very good at is saving his own skin."

"He lost quite a bit of skin saving my son, so I'm willing to consider his proposal," Re Nina said.

Staff shook his head. "Don't you see? That was his way of gaining our trust. Everything he's ever said or done has been a lie."

"That is not true." Drago stepped so close to Staff they were almost chest to chest.

Curling his lip in disgust, Staff turned away.

"Say we decide to go with your plan," Re Ordell ventured warily. "Why would you have to turn yourself over? You could come with us and we'd all be safe."

"No. You would never be safe traveling with me. By Draper tradition, runaway slaves cannot be hunted. If they're smart enough to escape then they've earned their freedom. A traitor on the other hand is hunted down and executed. In trying to find me they would be free to track you as well. They probably won't take you back into captivity but they'll be dangerous to your health, if you get my meaning."

Tasia's brow furrowed. "So you're willing to die for us?"

"Due to the conversion treatments I may slip by with an insanity plea and get life in prison instead of death. It doesn't matter. I'm no longer a pure Draper and have no place among my people."

“And you don’t blame us for that too?” Staff demanded. “You seem to blame us for everything else.”

“Accepting the conversion treatments was my choice.”

“This requires further discussion,” Re Lenor said.

“Yes,” Re Ordell sighed. “We’ll have to hold more meetings and have another vote.”

“We better hurry,” Tasia said. “We have a little over a week before Xenos sends the evacuation vessel.”

“All right. We’ll spread the word throughout the colony about what’s going on and meet back here in two nights. We’ll have a decision made by then,” Re Lenor said. She, Re Ordell and Re Nina headed out of the room, but Drago, Tasia and Staff remained behind.

“Aren’t you coming?” Re Ordell called.

“No. We need to talk a bit longer,” Staff said coolly.

Once the others had gone, Drago and Staff stood still, their gazes locked. Staff looked fiercer than Drago had ever seen him. He obviously made Tasia nervous as well because she approached him cautiously and rested a hand on his shoulder but he jerked away.

“Staff—” she began but before she could finish Staff lunged at Drago and punched him hard in the face.

“That’s enough!” Tasia shouted, stepping between Staff and Drago.

“Stay out of it, Tasia!” Staff bellowed.

“I’m not staying out of shit! Fighting each other isn’t going to help anything.”

Drago spat a mouthful of blood and shot an irritated look at Staff. He could have easily returned the blow, used his Draper strength and superior skill against the medic, but he had no desire to do that. Staff had every right to be angry. Drago knew he had hurt him deeply.

“Regardless of what the colony decides to do about you, I want you out of our living unit,” Staff said and strode out of the room.

Tasia released a pent-up breath and turned to Drago, a pained look in her lovely dark eyes. She shook her head slightly.

“Tasia, I’m sorry,” he stated.

“So am I.”

“This is the only way for all of us. Trust me.”

“I want to.” She stepped closer and placed a hand to his cheek. “I care about you, Drago, but I don’t know if I can believe you. I need to make sure Staff is all right.”

He nodded and said, “Go ahead. I need some time alone too. I’ll return to the unit within the hour and remove my belongings.”

“That might be best. At least for now.”

She headed for the door then turned and impulsively kissed his cheek before leaving.

Drago sighed deeply and closed his eyes. This could certainly be classified as one of the worst days of his life.

* * * * *

Tasia hurried after Staff. Though she felt sick inside over the entire situation, she knew Staff probably felt even worse. One thing he could not abide was betrayal and even though Drago was willing to risk his life to save them, to Staff his lies had rendered him unworthy of his respect. Yet she knew Staff still loved Drago.

"Hey," Tasia said, falling into step beside him down the long tunnel.

"Leave me alone, Tasia." He continued walking, his jaw set and gaze fixed straight ahead.

"I understand how you feel about Drago."

"Do you?" he snapped.

"Yes. He lied to all of us but he's trying to make up for it now."

"Is he? How can we be sure? I mean, first he was a slave. Then he was a convict. Now he's an agent. You want to know what I think? I think he's crazy."

"Then why has main control been so interested in his case? Thinking about the prisoner story, it has lots of holes in it. I mean, why would main control keep sending medics out to check on him? You think prisoners get that kind of treatment?"

He slowed his steps and his brow furrowed in thought. Then he shook his head. "I don't care."

"You don't care that he might be risking his life for us?"

"I don't believe he is. When it comes time to vote, I'll be voting against him. What about you, Tasia?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"That's fine, but as far as we're concerned there is no vote. I do not want him in our home and I sure as hell don't want him sharing my bed or my woman."

She stopped abruptly and curled her lip. "Your *what*?"

Staff turned on his heel, strode toward her and grasped her shoulders. "My woman. You're *mine*, Tasia. We've belonged to each other all our lives. I will not let him taint that."

"Look, Staff, I appreciate the alpha male attitude. I really do, but get this straight. I belong to no one but myself. If we're anything we're partners. I don't give orders in this relationship and I sure as hell won't take them."

"Fine. If you want him, you can have him. I'll move out and you two can have a happy, untruthful life together."

“That’s enough!” She shoved his hands away and glared at him. “I love you, Staff. I always have and I always will. I won’t lie and say I don’t love Drago. I do love him, but you and I have plans for a future. Drago is moving out. We’ve both agreed to that. He said he never felt as accepted as when he was with us. I know he loves us, Staff, but that no longer matters. As long as you get to hold your grudge.”

“Don’t make me out to be the villain here.”

“There is no villain!” she shouted in his face. “The sooner you get that through your head the sooner we can all work this out and gain our freedom.”

She strode past him and out of the tunnel.

* * * * *

Two days later the slaves decided by a very close vote to continue working with Drago. Using his passwords, he could access the overseers’ armory and take the best weapons for the slaves so they could more easily take control of the overseers and therefore the colony. Once the overseers were locked in a supply room, Drago would go to the control room. There he could release all planetary shields and monitor communications so that main control wouldn’t have reason to suspect anything out of the ordinary.

Business went on as usual with the slaves acting docile and content in their work while continuing to train and make their plans. Staff was scheduled to complete the last of the surgeries two days before their escape.

Tasia couldn’t help worrying, not only about their plans, but about Drago and Staff. Drago was still living in the barracks since Tasia couldn’t convince Staff to let him back in their unit. She knew the medic held grudges but this was ridiculous. In mere days their plan would be underway. They might never see Drago again, especially if they couldn’t convince him to escape with them.

She, Re Nina and several other slaves had been working on Drago, telling him that it made no sense for him to stay behind. Once they were free, they could disperse. Even if the Drapers tracked them, they wouldn’t necessarily find them. Yet for some reason Drago was determined to play the martyr.

The day before the escape, Tasia had had enough of both men.

She knew in her heart Staff still loved Drago and these bad feelings were hurting both of them. Correction. All three of them. She also knew that no matter what he said, Drago belonged with them.

It was early evening and Staff had gone to the underground pool for a swim before dinner. She had suggested he do that, mostly because she planned to meet Drago there later. For the past few days while Staff had been completing the surgeries and Drago had been going over every detail of the escape plans, they hadn’t so much as seen each other let alone talked.

Tasia, feeling like a piece of Tydisian sea taffy spread too thin, had been trying to spend as much time with both men as she could. Now was the time for drastic action.

She was to meet Drago in fifteen minutes. That would give her enough time to talk to Staff first.

Luckily she found him alone, drying off after his swim.

"You should go in," he told her. "It's refreshing."

"Good," she said. "Maybe it helped clear your mind."

He narrowed his eyes in question. "What?"

"We don't have much time so I'll get right to the point. I can't believe you don't care that he plans to stay behind."

Staff's nostrils flared as he drew a deep breath. He turned away and continued drying off. "I'm not even sure I believe he actually plans to help us. But if he is miraculously telling the truth and he decides to stay behind, it's his choice."

"Staff, you have to talk to him." She approached and rested her hands on his damp chest. Looking deeply into his eyes, she tried to let him know how important it was for him to reconcile with Drago before it was too late. "This grudge you're holding is—"

"Grudge? I can't believe you of all people can say that! You know what he is, why he came here."

"I also know that if it was another agent we probably wouldn't be having this conversation because we'd be in retraining, maybe even stationed on another colony because our plans would have been exposed by now."

"He betrayed us!" Staff snapped.

"No he didn't," she said with more calmness than she felt. "He could have but he didn't."

Staff glared. "He lied to us."

"Yes he did, but look at his reasons."

"Stop defending him," Staff said, a look of disgust on his face. "It still makes no sense that he wants to help us. What does he know about slavery anyway?"

"I think he knows quite a lot about it," she said. "He was a slave of the Laetez during the occupation. Then he was a slave to the Draper government. For most of his life he's been a slave to his own hatred. It drove him to mutilate his body and nearly lose his life through conversion testing. In many ways, Staff, he's more a slave than you and I have ever been."

Staff gave a snort of disbelief.

She moved even closer, her face mere inches from his. "It's time you stopped living in the past. Your mother betrayed you out of fear for her own life. Drago is protecting you at the risk of his. Start looking at this situation from his point of view. Er Pace, I know you're listening in there so use some of that impartiality and help Staff see reason."

"Er Pace feels the same way I do," Staff said haughtily but she saw the faintest flicker of something in his eyes that told her she was finally reaching him.

"Then he must be hurting a lot because I know that regardless of what you say, you still love Drago. Just like I do. Staff, listen to me. He's fighting the same kind of demons we are, except from his point of view *we're* the evil ones. Laetez killed people he loved just like Drapers killed those we loved. But we're different. He's different."

Shaking his head, Staff turned away from her.

She continued, "I can't believe you're going to let your anger keep you from someone you love. If Drago doesn't change his mind about going with us, we'll probably never see him again."

"Good riddance," Staff said, his voice dripping venom.

Her jaw tightened and she said quietly, "I know you don't mean that."

"Don't I?" He strode toward her, his expression fierce. Meeting her gaze, he sighed, his anger fading. "You're right. I don't. I hate what he did but I don't want him to die."

"Then tell him. Please." She slipped her arms around him and he enfolded her in an embrace so tight it was almost painful.

"Excuse me for interrupting," Drago said.

Tasia and Staff moved slightly apart and stared in his direction. He took a few steps toward them then stopped. "Tasia, if you want to talk later —"

"No. Please stay," Staff said and walked to Drago. The men faced each other, the tension between almost tangible. Staff shrugged and asked, "How have you been?"

"Fine."

A slight smile touched Staff's lips. "Always fine, huh?"

Drago also grinned. "For the most part."

Staff took another step closer and they seemed to reach for each other simultaneously. Tasia smiled, warmed by the sight of them locked in a tight embrace.

"I've missed you," Staff admitted.

"I missed you too." Drago sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

After a moment, the men stepped slightly apart, their gazes locked.

"We still have a lot to work out," Staff said. "But I'm willing if you are."

"I am."

"Then let's go home," Staff said. "That is, if you want to move back with us."

"Are you joking? And give up the luxury of the barracks?" Drago teased.

They turned to Tasia and Staff said, "Is this all right with you?"

"All right?" She chuckled. "It's about time."

They left the chamber together and accompanied Drago to the barracks where he collected his few belongings.

As soon as they stepped into their unit, they quickly shed their clothes, eager to make love as they had in the past.

Staff pushed the beds together and they tumbled onto them, a tangle of limbs, stroking hands and lashing tongues. Drago's long, satiny hair brushed their flesh, teasing yet comforting.

Tasia took a handful of his hair and held it to her nose, inhaling its wonderful scent. She ran her lips over it and he moaned with pleasure, the sound muffled a bit since his mouth was fused with Staff's.

Unable to resist, Tasia reached down, grasping Drago's cock in one hand and Staff's in her other. She stroked them, taking her time and enjoying the feel of them swelling in her hands. Their cocks were similar yet different, each with its own unique size, shape and pattern of veins.

Her touch excited them so much that they broke their kiss and lay on their backs, allowing her to tease and stroke them simultaneously. Just handling them made her wet and aroused. She wanted to feel those cocks inside her, but first she wanted to taste them.

She leaned toward Drago and took his thick, smooth cock head between her lips. She rolled her tongue over it and flicked the underside. She used her hands to knead his balls and stroke his sensitive pubic hair, knowing that touching it gave him as much pleasure as having his cock fondled.

While she worked on his cock, Staff moved closer and covered Drago's mouth in a kiss.

Just before Drago slipped over the edge, Tasia and Staff moved away. She pushed the medic onto his back and began sucking and licking his cock. By now Tasia was thoroughly drenched with passion. Her clit and pussy ached with desire that Drago was more than ready to stoke.

While she used her mouth on Staff, Drago positioned himself behind her and filled her with his long, thick cock.

Tasia moaned, sucking and licking with even more enthusiasm.

While Drago pumped into her, driving her headlong into orgasm, she licked and sucked Staff to explosion. Drago was the last to come, groaning with pleasure as his body surged into hers.

For several moments they lay together in a contented heap then Tasia lifted her head and whispered, "Drago, I'm telling you once again to come with us when we go."

"You can't stay here," Staff told him, also speaking softly. They had checked the unit many times for bugs. Other than the listening devices Drago had planted then removed, they had found nothing but they still couldn't be too careful.

"I already told you why I can't go," Drago said in a low voice.

"It doesn't make sense. We can go anywhere. The Drapers won't find you."

"Yes they will. I worked for Section Fifty-Six long enough to know they always reach their objective."

"Not always," Staff said. "You're proving that by helping us."

"If I went with you I'd only be prolonging the inevitable."

"We won't lose you," Tasia said, taking his face in her hands and staring into his eyes.

"Drago, if you don't go, I won't go," Staff told him.

"And if you both won't go then I won't go," Tasia said.

Drago raised himself on his elbow and curled his lip. "You're both crazy."

"No crazier than you are," she said.

"This is how it's going to be, Drago," Staff stated. "Either all of us go or none of us."

Drago closed his eyes and let himself fall flat on his back. He shook his head then stared at his lovers and said, "I guess I don't have much of a choice."

"Then you'll go?" Tasia asked, excitement and relief flooding her.

"Yes," Drago said. "I'll go."

Chapter Ten

The day of the slaves' escape began as usual with everyone going about their early morning shifts so when the revolt began the overseers were taken completely by surprise.

Tasia was on desk duty that day and was among the group of slaves who overtook the guardhouse. She, Drago and Re Lenor had broken into the armory the previous night and hidden weapons throughout the colony. They had worked until the early morning hours, getting scarcely any sleep. Tasia realized she should be exhausted but she was far too anxious to notice. No doubt when this was over it would hit her how tired she was.

At the moment she had a stun pistol aimed at Than, Viv and two other overseers while Re Eason tied them up.

"Everybody just keep quiet and you won't get hurt," Re Eason said. "We aren't trying to harm anyone, especially you, Viv. Than, we ought to take this chance to kick your ass but we're not like that. All we want to do is get this over with. So everybody just—"

"Re Eason, shut up," Tasia snapped. She was already tired of his rambling.

"I'm nervous!" Re Eason told her. "I talk when I'm nervous."

"You ought to be nervous," Than sneered. "The punishment for attacking an overseer is death."

"You're no longer in the position to make threats," Tasia told him.

"You don't actually think you're going to get away with this?" Viv said. "We tried to make life for you comfortable but—"

"It's not the point, Viv," Tasia said. In truth she still liked him yet he would never see them as anything but slaves. "We have the right to make lives for ourselves."

"Don't bother talking to them," Than sneered. "These fucking Laetez pigs don't know what's good for them. I have news for you. Main control knows all about your plans for escape."

Re Eason finished with their bonds and led them out of the guardhouse. Tasia, still holding the stun pistol, followed.

Outside everything seemed eerily quiet. Armed slaves marched groups of overseers toward the storage unit they had reinforced to hold their captives.

She turned sharply at the sound of a skirmish. Milo had broken free of his bonds, knocked over one of the slaves and was about to pick up his fallen weapon. Re Nina, who had been following at the back of the group, leapt at him and smashed her stun pistol across his face. Then she kicked his legs out from under him.

His look of surprise when he landed on his back was priceless.

"Get up!" Re Nina shouted.

"Laetez bitch!" He sprang to his feet but this time she fired.

Mile flopped to the ground, gray Draper blood pouring from a fatal chest wound.

"That's for my son and for Drago, you bastard," she said.

"Re Nina!" Tasia called.

The woman looked up, a fierce expression on her face. Tasia couldn't blame her but there was no time to wallow in revenge.

"Get the rest of those guards to the storage unit," Tasia ordered and Re Nina obeyed.

Once Tasia had locked up her group of overseers, she helped several other slaves secure theirs then she made her way to the main gate where Drago should have already taken over the control room.

She found him there with Staff who was assisting him in shutting down the gates and planetary shields.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Very good," Staff said. "With the shields down we can stop sending slaves through the tunnels. The evacuation vessel is on its way to the colony now. The rest of us are going to board from here."

"Fantastic," she said, excitement still racing through her. She knew it was still too soon to relax yet she couldn't help smiling. She kissed Staff and said, "We're going to be free."

"Very soon it seems," Drago said. "I'm picking up a signal from the evacuation vessel. A pilot named Dario is sending his regards."

"Dario is one of the best pilots on Xenos' crew," Tasia explained. With him at the helm there was little doubt they would escape unscathed and be out of sight before main control even suspected a problem. Just to be sure, she asked, "Drago, has there been any communication from main control?"

"Yes, but just routine. They seemed quite satisfied with my replies."

Within the hour, every slave at the colony except Staff, Tasia and Drago had boarded the escape vessel.

"It's our turn," Staff said. "Ready?"

"More than ready," Tasia stated. "Drago?"

"You two go. I'll be right there once I set up an automatic reply in case main control contacts us again."

Tasia and Staff exchanged glances and he said, "We can wait for you."

"Don't waste time," Drago said. "The vessel is waiting and I will be right there."

"All right but if you're not aboard in five minutes we're coming back for you," Tasia said.

Drago looked at his lovers, smiled and motioned for them to go. This was probably the best acting job of his life, appearing as if nothing was wrong when inside he was screaming.

This was the last time he'd ever see Tasia and Staff and it was exactly as he wanted to remember them – hopeful and headed toward freedom.

Now he had no doubt they would be free. He hadn't come this far to risk their newfound freedom and their lives for the sake of himself. Regardless of what he told them, he could not follow them down this path. His very presence would keep them in constant danger. Not only that, deep inside Drago knew he was a traitor to his very blood.

He could not live the rest of his life as a crossbreed, torn between his Draper roots and his Laetez emotions.

This was the best decision for them all.

As soon as his lovers exited the building, Drago contacted Dario on the spec and told him that as soon as Tasia and Staff were aboard, they should take off. He briefly explained why and in spite of the pilot's attempt to talk him out of it, he held firm.

He would remain at the colony, keeping main control at bay for as long as possible. When he was certain the evacuation vessel was safely out of Draper space, he would release the overseers and turn himself in.

* * * * *

Staff and Tasia had just settled into the cargo area of the evacuation vessel when they felt the ship move. The pilot announced that everyone should prepare for takeoff.

"What the hell is going on?" Tasia demanded.

"Hey!" Staff shouted, pushing through the slaves milling around until he reached a crewman. "There's still a man down there. His name is Drago. He's running the control room."

"I know," the crewman said, his gaze darting from Staff to Tasia. "Come with me. Dario has a message for you."

Tasia felt panic creeping up on her. Something was very wrong here.

On the bridge, three crewmembers were working the controls.

"Will someone tell us what happened to Drago?" Staff demanded after a few moments of silence.

"We're clear," said a tall, brown-haired man. "Penn, take over please."

The crewman seated beside him nodded then the brown-haired man stood and turned to Staff and Tasia. "Hello. I'm Dario, a pilot from *Nameless*. You're Tasia and Staff?"

"Yes. Where's Drago?" Tasia asked, not wanting to sound brusque but desperate to know what happened to their lover.

"He decided to remain behind. He explained his reasons and they seem to be good ones."

"Go back and get him," Staff said, this time not bothering to hide his emotions. He looked every bit as panicked as Tasia felt.

"We can't. It's too risky and he was very clear in his wishes."

"I don't give a damn about his wishes!" Tasia shouted, tears springing into her eyes. "They're going to kill him."

"I'm very sorry," Dario said.

"I don't believe this," Staff breathed, his eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "That liar. That fucking liar."

"Staff." Tasia reached for him. She'd never seen him this distressed before and it worried her as much as Drago's stupid, selfless act.

"I shouldn't have listened to him. I should have dragged him on the fucking ship."

"You two come with me," Dario said. "You look like you can use some privacy."

"Yes," Tasia murmured, swiping at her eyes. "Thank you."

As she and Staff followed Dario to an empty room, she wondered how the best day of her life had suddenly become the worst.

* * * * *

Drago stood in the judgment hall at Section Fifty-Six headquarters on the Draper home world. He squinted against the brightness and tried to ignore the itchiness of his long, filthy hair. Not that he could scratch it if he wanted to. His hands were bound behind him and his ankles shackled.

After the escape at Shandbha Colony a week ago, he had been interrogated thoroughly. Due to his new Laetez characteristics, truth drugs had eventually broken down his previously impenetrable defenses.

With this new information, the Drapers accused Xenos and his crew publicly, but other than the report from Drago, there was no proof of their involvement with the slaves' escape. The words of a single Draper spy, who was, as the Laetez and humans put it, physically and emotionally tormented by conversion testing, meant little.

Since then, Drago had been kept in a dark, windowless cell in solitary confinement where, in the Draper tradition, he was given the time to ponder his crimes.

Now he would face the judgment of his peers. A jury of five authority ten agents had discussed the charges against him, weighed the evidence and would now sentence him. Execution would most likely be the punishment. Drago almost didn't care. He had many regrets in his life. The biggest was that he didn't have more time with Tasia and Staff.

The agents sat at a long table set upon a raised platform while Drago, flanked by guards on either side, stood in front of them. Drago had once been among them at the table, self-righteously staring down at the accused. No doubt his judges believed his betrayal to be a disgusting act of weakness. In some ways they were right. Yet even if given the chance he would have made the same decision.

Agent Kent said, "You have been found guilty of treason. After discussing the evidence, we believe your actions were influenced by the conversion treatments therefore you were not fully in control of yourself. Execution is the usual punishment for an agent turned traitor, however due to your special circumstances you are sentenced to hard labor for life in Section Fifty-Six high-security prison on the planet Vayge. The sentence is to be carried out immediately. Dismissed."

Drago stared at them, so stunned that he didn't move even when one of the guards poked him in the ribs with a stun pistol.

This sentence would be worse than death, not because he feared hard labor but because he would spend the rest of his days remembering what he might have had with his lovers.

Another prod from the guard and Drago followed them out of the judgment hall.

* * * * *

Drago had been working in the furnace room at the prison on Vayge for nearly six months when he began to truly understand the slaves' desire for freedom. The prison factory on Vayge built special coils used in spaceship engines. The coils required high temperatures to fortify them before they could be sold to shipyards. Drago's job was to see that the furnaces kept burning day and night. He and several other prisoners alternated in twelve-hour shifts.

The rest of his time was spent in a tiny cell. As a Draper crossbreed, he was not accepted well by prisoners or guards, but he didn't care. He preferred to keep to himself. At first some of the prisoners had started trouble with him but he soon became known as someone to avoid fighting with. Not that his reputation hadn't come at a price.

The first month he suffered two stab wounds and a broken arm, which made working difficult. Not to mention a murderer with hatred for aliens had broken his damn Laetez nose. After Drago had learned the man's preferred method of killing was disembowelment, he felt glad that it was only his nose he'd targeted.

He was in the middle of a shift, trying to ignore the stifling heat of the furnace room by remembering a better kind of heat—the kind shared with Tasia and Staff—when a guard approached.

"Drago," the guard said. "Come with me."

Wiping his sweaty face on his forearm, Drago turned to the guard and said, "Where are we going?"

“Warden wants to see you,” the guard replied.

Drago stood still as the guard bound his hands behind his back then guided him toward the exit. His steps were rather clumsy due to the shackles and he missed the freedom of being able to walk with his usual long strides.

There was so much he missed, so much he hadn’t appreciated when he had the chance. His thoughts again drifted to Tasia and Staff. In this place, memories of them were his only source of happiness, but at the same time he missed them so much that the need for them was almost physically painful.

He wondered what they were doing. Were they happy? He hoped so. Did they ever think about him?

They stepped into the elevator and it dragged up, higher and higher, until they reached the floor where the warden’s office was located. As soon as they stepped off the elevator, Drago drew a deep breath of fresh, cool air. It had been so long since he’d breathed anything that wasn’t steaming hot like the furnace room or musty like his cell.

He didn’t have a mirror in his cell but he sometimes he caught glimpses of himself in the metal plates reinforcing part of the furnace room. Prisoners weren’t allowed to bathe daily so he generally looked grubby and smelled worse. At the moment he was drenched in sweat, his clothes and skin covered in dirt from the furnace room. His long, matted hair clung wetly to his back, arms and shoulders. A tendril stuck across his face and though he tried to blow it away, it wouldn’t budge.

They paused outside the warden’s office and the guard knocked.

“Enter,” called a deep male voice.

They stepped inside and Drago’s brow furrowed at the strange assembly. The warden, a tall, red-haired Draper, sat behind his desk. In the chairs across from him, Dra-Mae Colton sat beside a lithe, hairless male with blue skin, elongated features and fangs that shone sharp and white against his dark lips. Though Drago had never met Xenos, he would recognize the man anywhere.

Dra-Mae Colton’s gaze swept over Drago and there was no mistaking the disgust in his eyes. Whether it was directed at his appearance or his very existence Drago wasn’t sure, nor did he care.

“Drago,” the warden began, “you already know Dra-Mae Colton and this is—”

“Xenos,” Drago finished. Not long ago he had loathed this man but since he had freed the slaves, in particular Tasia and Staff, he had respect for him. He nodded to the Tydisian crossbreed and said, “It is an honor.”

Now Dra-Mae Colton looked furious. Even the warden and the guard looked as if they had taken a bite of something sour.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m here,” Xenos said, seeming to take no notice of the animosity directed at him by the warden and the Dra-Mae.

“Yes,” Drago replied.

"I have to admit I found your accusations against me intriguing," Xenos said. "Such imagination."

"I'm afraid I wasn't myself at the time," Drago said, following Xenos' lead.

"Nor will he ever be himself again," Colton added. "The scars from conversion treatments gone awry are invariably permanent."

"It is precisely that which makes him so valuable to me," Xenos stated. "Drago, you know my involvement in ACT. My medics would like to study your case further, if you agree."

Drago wasn't exactly sure where this was leading but few things could be worse than his current situation.

"Of course that means you will be set free," Xenos continued, his blue gaze fixed on Drago. The slightest smile tugged at the corners of his lips then faded so quickly it might not have been.

"However you will be stripped of your Draper citizenship," Dra-Mae Colton stated. "You will not be allowed on Draper territory and if you set foot on it you will be executed on sight."

"Those are the rules," Xenos stated.

"I agree," Drago said.

"And our rules, Xenos, are that you will arrange a meeting between us and the Tydisians," Dra-Mae Colton said, curling his lip. "Our leader is very eager to communicate with them."

"Two Tydisian colony leaders, DrkMari and Clana, have agreed to invite two Draper delegates to a meeting on Tydepth. That is the best I can do."

"And if we say it's not good enough?" Colton demanded.

"Then our deal is off and we part ways," Xenos replied lightly. "But I believe you will regret that decision more than I will. After all, everyone knows the Drapers have been trying to negotiate with several aquatic species, including the Tydisians, to no avail. This is the closest you will get."

"Very well." Colton turned to the warden and said, "Process the traitor and see that he leaves with Xenos."

Colton rose to his feet, approached Drago and stared at him hard. Drago's gaze never faltered and finally Colton turned away and said, "Good luck to you, Xenos, traveling with him. He stinks like a dead fish. But maybe you can relate to that."

"Charming, Dra-Mae," Xenos replied. "Like most of your species."

Colton snorted and left the room. Once again Xenos and Drago locked gazes. Drago's curiosity was getting the better of him. He longed to know exactly why Xenos wanted him and even more important, did he know how to find Tasia and Staff?

His questions were soon answered when Drago boarded Xenos' ship, *Nameless*. Thankfully, he had been allowed a shower and a change of clothes before leaving the prison. He was especially grateful for this when he stepped off the shuttle and onto the

ship's dock to find Tasia and Staff waiting there. Near them stood a brown-haired female, probably human or Laetez, whom Drago recognized as Xenos' mate, Moonlight. During the rebellion her image had been splashed over the intergalactic newscasts.

"Drago!" Tasia shouted and raced to him, Staff close behind her. She flung her arms around him and held on tightly. He was so happy to see her that he embraced her with all the enthusiasm he felt. Hearing her give a grunt of discomfort, he loosened his hold.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's okay. That's the best way to be crushed," she said and released him enough to gaze into his face. "I've missed you so much."

"I missed him too, you know," Staff said, playfully nudging her aside and hugging Drago who returned the fierce embrace.

"Are you all right?" Staff asked. "We've been trying for months to get you out of that prison."

"When we found out you weren't executed, Moonlight asked Xenos if he might be able to turn some political tricks to help us free you."

The dark-haired woman who now stood close to Xenos said, "I'm Moonlight, Xenos' wife. Translator. Tactician. Troublemaker."

"You can say that again," Xenos muttered and she teasingly elbowed him in the ribs.

Staff continued, "We didn't think we'd be able to get you out, but when the Tydisians finally agreed to meet with the Drapers that was enough for them to free even—"

"A traitor?" Drago said.

"Yeah." Tasia kissed him again. "But I wouldn't have you any other way."

Drago looked at Xenos and said, "I'm surprised the Tydisians have agreed to negotiations with the Drapers. All the Drapers are interested in is getting a supply of Tydisian DNA for their ACT program. I thought the Tydisians were anti-ACT?"

"They are," Xenos stated. "And who said anything about negotiations? They've agreed to one meeting and according to my inside sources that will be the last meeting."

"We owe you so much," Tasia said to Xenos.

"You owe me nothing. Members of this crew help each other. That was the pact when you signed on, yes?"

"Pact? Signed on?" Drago looked at his lovers in question.

"After the evacuation, Moonlight and I got friendly," Tasia said. "Staff and I loved this ship."

"Really loved it," Staff said. "When I found out they were in need of another medic to lighten the load of their chief medic, I applied for the job. It's great. I'm still a medic but I've been able to collect music from all over the galaxy. Drago, once you're settled, you've got to hear the sample I have of Searilla war horns."

Tasia playfully slapped Staff's shoulder. "Enough about you."

Drago had missed seeing them together, their teasing and their affection. At the moment he was so happy he was afraid that if he closed his eyes for longer than a blink he'd find himself back in the prison cell, or worse in the furnace room.

Tasia interrupted his thoughts as she continued, "They hired me as part of the security team, which is great. You should see the training rooms they have here on *Nameless*. One of them has a swimming tank the size of a Meltja field."

"We can see you all have a lot to talk about," Xenos said. "However once you've rested, Drago, I would like to speak to you about the possibility of a job."

"On this ship?" Drago asked. "What sort of job?"

"Tasia and Staff have told me about some of your skills. I believe they could prove useful to us, but we will discuss it later."

"Wait," Drago said. "You're willing to hire a traitor?"

"Not long ago I was also considered a traitor. What's important is to remain loyal to the truth. Sometimes that means questioning our beliefs. On this ship that is what we do. We aren't loyal to a particular planet but to freedom for species everywhere."

"Then we'll definitely have to talk more," Drago said.

"Right now let's go home," Tasia suggested.

Staff placed an arm around each of his lovers and led the way to their quarters.

Home.

Drago sighed with pleasure.

For the first time in a long time he truly was home.

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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