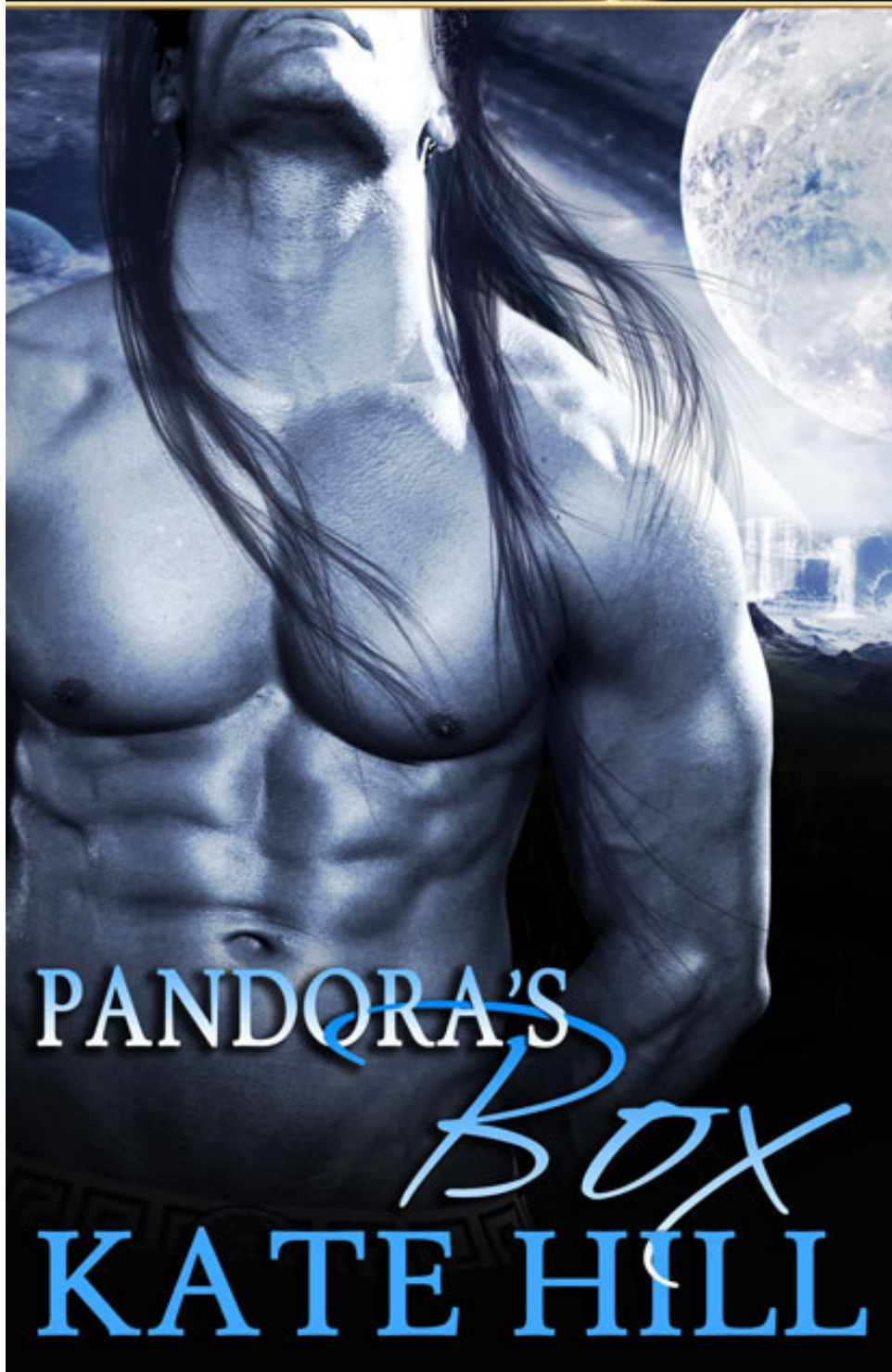


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



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Pandora's Box

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# *PANDORA'S BOX*

**Kate Hill**

*Searilla Glossary*

Chumpsca – gigolo

Jung – sea

Pa – stone

Strumpsca – slut

Rou-tou-loupig – the devil

Undra – sky

## **Part One**

## Chapter One

The sun shone brightly on the stretch of public beach several miles down the coast from ACT headquarters. At any other time Pandora would have enjoyed spending a few hours swimming in the ocean and lounging on the sand, but today was for business, not pleasure.

According to his schedule, Steel had leave time today. He hadn't applied to travel away from the city, so no doubt he would be spending the day at his favorite haunt—this particular beach. One would think a member of an aquatic military unit would want a break from water when he had the chance, but not someone of Searilla blood.

Pandora understood his fascination with the sea. She might look human, but the Searilla was inside her too. Her favorite pastime was swimming in the ocean. Many times she'd wished for Searilla lungs, but on deep dives she was forced to use oxygen apparatus.

No doubt Steel loved living here at one of the most beautiful beaches on the Laetez home world.

She couldn't control the butterflies in her stomach, stirred by the thought of seeing Marcus—Steel—again. Strange that she should still feel such a connection to a childhood friend. Yet under the circumstances it was understandable. They had been prisoners at Aquavalley, bonding in desperate circumstances.

Her boss, Re Lord, hadn't requested that she pretend to be someone else, only that she keep her status as a sexual assassin trainee secret. Perhaps he suspected Steel would recognize her, even after all these years. Re Lord was as perceptive as he was hateful. Pandora realized this made him all the more dangerous.

She stopped abruptly, all thoughts of Re Lord fleeing her mind.

*It's him.*

There was no mistaking Steel.

Like a mythical aquatic god he emerged from the frothy blue waves. Water gleamed on his tall, sleekly muscled body covered in multihued silvery flesh. His body was even more impressive than his photo had led her to believe. Lean and rangy but emanating power, he would have garnered attention even without his crossbreed characteristics.

Pandora generally preferred the look of older men, but in spite of his youth, Steel's body was developed to perfection and he carried himself with an air of maturity that she found incredibly attractive.

Just looking at him was like an optical overload. She couldn't decide what part of him was most gorgeous—those powerful shoulders, impressive biceps or his long, perfect legs. His tight black swim shorts left little to the imagination. Even from a

distance she saw the enticing bulge of his cock straining against the wet fabric and she tingled with desire. She imagined licking his chiseled abs or snuggling close to his beautiful chest. She wondered how that faded scar on his pecs would feel against her cheek.

It amazed her that the ugly little boy she'd known had developed into this stunning creature. Yes, his face was strange with its skeletal Draper structure that seemed at odds with his finely drawn Laetez mouth and rough Searilla flesh, but she found him oddly attractive.

She swallowed, her heart pounding, when she realized he was staring at her and heading in her direction. Thinking back to the conversation with Re Lord just a few days ago, she realized that even then she had suspected meeting Steel again would change her entire life.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the spacious office at ACT headquarters, Pandora had sat calmly under Re Lord's piercing gaze. Re Lord was the superior in charge of the Laetez intelligence department, but everyone knew he aspired to a much higher position. Few doubted he would reach his goals, becoming a chief to the Laetez Prime or perhaps even securing the title of Prime.

The thought of Re Lord as Prime, leader of the entire Laetez species, unsettled her. It wasn't his ruthlessness that bothered her. All people in power needed to be ruthless at times. Re Lord emanated greed and that disturbed her.

"Welcome back to the Laetez home world, Pandora Fourteen," Re Lord said, a slight yet insincere smile tugging at his slender lips.

"Thank you, sir," she replied.

He motioned toward the chair across from his desk and said, "Please have a seat."

She nodded and settled into the chair, crossing her legs so that her simple yet elegant gray skirt hiked up a bit, exposing her rather shapely leg.

For the past several years she had been groomed to take her place among the assassins who served the Laetez government. As a product of ACT—alien conversion testing—she had been bred for the position. Implanted into a Laetez host mother, she had been born in a private lab called Aquavalley. In accordance with her agreement with the private lab, her mother had relinquished her parental rights and Pandora had been reared in Aquavalley until the age of seven.

Just before the Laetez government decided to close private labs so only government-regulated labs could participate in the ACT program, Pandora had been sent to an off-planet lab. There her real training had begun. She was educated in languages and customs of a variety of species as well as fighting arts and most recently, the art of seduction. All her life she had been taught the importance of poise, charm and personal grooming.

Finally, six months ago, at the age of eighteen, she began learning sexual techniques. While this hadn't exactly come as a shock to her, she had to admit feeling uncomfortable with it. Used. Even though right around the time Aquavalley had closed, most ACT products were allowed the same rights as free citizens, she still felt owned by her lab. With no legal parents to claim her, she had become a ward of the lab, prepped to serve the government in any capacity they saw fit. Though she hadn't been treated cruelly – she even liked some of the medics – she had never felt a sense of freedom.

"I can see you have done very well in all areas of your training," Re Lord continued, glancing at his computer monitor which no doubt showed the contents of her personal records. "You are fairly new to sexual training but I see you've excelled. Still, your instructors note that in spite of your perfect technical performance, you sometimes lack convincing emotions."

"I'm working on that, sir," she said, remaining outwardly calm though her stomach clenched. She hated the idea of engaging in sexual acts with total strangers. Performing on the androids used in training was even more unbearable.

"I was very impressed by your records, so it was my idea to have you transferred here. I believe what you need is a real specimen to practice on."

"But, sir, that's –"

He held up a hand and shook his head. "I'm fully aware of your circumstances, Pandora. Your special sexual traits are why you were created in the first place. You are the only Searilla crossbreed we've produced with the characteristics and capability to fill the position required. That's why I've arranged for you to come here to complete your training. There is an officer at ACT Corps headquarters several miles south of here," Re Lord said. "He is also of Searilla blood and therefore immune to the poison produced by other Searillas."

Searillas, an aquatic species from the planet Jungphyre, carried poison in their sexual secretions that was deadly to most other known species. That was why Searilla crossbreeds such as Pandora could only be created under controlled circumstances in a lab. Even then it was a difficult process that usually ended in failure. What made the experiments even harder was that Searillas believed ACT to be sacrilege. They, like several other species, would not willingly participate so their DNA had to be stolen rather than bargained for.

Though purebred Searillas were ugly creatures – ape-faced and covered in blue, silver or gray scales – Pandora had a Laetez or human appearance since she carried the DNA of both species. Unfortunately she also had human-Laetez limitations. She wasn't as powerful as a Searilla, though her strength was greater than humans and more comparable to the Laetez. Nor could she submerge for long periods of time since she had Laetez lungs. Searilla lungs were incredibly powerful, enabling them to swim underwater for several consecutive hours.

What she had gained from Searillas was the one thing the Laetez desperately wanted – the poisonous vaginal secretion. They wanted an assassin who could lure and

kill enemies. With her physical beauty and willingness to serve, Pandora was perfect for the job.

Re Lord went on, "Back at Aquavalley, do you remember an ACT product called Marcus Seventeen?"

At the sound of that name, her stomach fluttered. Marcus, another Searilla crossbreed, had been her closest friend. He was three years her senior but as far back as she could remember, they'd been together. After Pandora had been taken from Aquavalley, she had been devastated by her separation from Marcus. For some strange reason, she had always felt safe with him. He'd been the closest thing she had to family and she missed him greatly.

Fortunately, several members of the staff at the new lab took quite a liking to her and went out of their way to make her feel at home. She soon adapted to her new life, but in the back of her mind she always thought about Marcus and wondered what had become of him. Several years ago she had looked up his records and tried to find out where he'd gone after Aquavalley closed. He had been sent to a government lab as well, but left at the age of sixteen. His whereabouts had not been disclosed and she hadn't heard anything about him since.

"Yes," she said, careful not to give any indication of how much Marcus meant to her. A man like Re Lord would no doubt use her feelings against her if given the reason. "I remember him."

"I would like you to spend some time with him to practice your seduction skills. I realize this won't be easy given his appearance, but unfortunately your job will no doubt require you to seduce men whose appearance offends you so this should be good practice for you in more ways than one."

"I remember what he looks like, sir. His appearance won't offend me."

Re Lord was right about Marcus' looks, however. She was sure most people, in particular purebreds, would consider him quite unattractive. He was also a Searilla crossbreed, but mixed with Laetez and Draper blood.

Drapers were, in many ways, uglier than Searillas. Though built similar to humans or Laetez, their faces were skull-like with yellowish skin stretched over prominent bones and noses so small and flat they were practically invisible on a side view. Drapers did have uncommonly beautiful hair, though, and unlike most species, their hair was highly sensitive. They engaged in a sexual activity called hairplay. Pandora had to study it as part of her alien sexuality training.

Except for his finely shaped Laetez mouth, Marcus looked like a Draper with Searilla flesh, or so she remembered. His nose wasn't quite as flat as a full-blooded Draper, but too flat to pass for Laetez.

Again Re Lord forced a smile. "Good for you. Marcus has legally changed his name to Steel. Something about wanting an identity apart from his ACT bloodline or nonsense like that."

Pandora despised Re Lord's attitude, but she managed to keep a serene expression on her face, as she'd been taught never to reveal her true feelings. A purebred like Re Lord couldn't understand what it was like to be named after a line of test products, knowing you were only another link in a chain of products that could go on indefinitely.

She was Pandora Fourteen. There were thirteen other Pandoras before her, all with Searilla, Laetez and human ancestry. If they found her unsatisfactory in some way, who knew how many Pandoras would come after her? She could fully understand why Marcus—Steel—had decided to break that cycle, even in such a small way as selecting a different name.

"Steel is an officer in an aquatic ACT Corps unit. I'll provide you with his schedule," Re Lord told her. "And also give you a list of recreational facilities he frequents so that you may begin at once. He has no idea you're part of intelligence, so don't let on that it's your duty to seduce him. We want this to be as natural as possible. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," she said in her softest, most disarming voice. She resisted the urge to let Re Lord now exactly how much this entire scheme disgusted her. If she didn't fulfill her duty, if she chose to leave ACT, where would she go? What would she do? All her life she had been trained for this. The government had fed, clothed and housed her. They had taken her from Aquavalley and given her a purpose. Maybe once she had a few assignments quite literally under her belt, she would feel less guilty about breaking away from the lab and ACT itself.

"While you're on assignment, you'll be staying at a seaside inn not far from ACT Corps headquarters. I have a file for you outlining your cover, your background, etcetera. Read it thoroughly. Memorize it. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Then you are dismissed."

Pandora stood, nodded at Re Lord and left his office, trying to shake off the sleazy feeling that came over her every time she was around him.

This new assignment both excited and distressed her. She could scarcely wait to see Marcus again. It had been eleven years. What was he like now? Apparently he had a good military career, being only twenty-one years old and already a sub master.

The idea of meeting him again under false pretenses disturbed her greatly. Being involved in intrigues with total strangers was one thing, but using her wiles on an old friend was another. This wasn't the first time she wondered if she was cut out for this line of work. She hated the idea of living a lie, of killing people in such an intimate way.

She hadn't yet taken a life, but once her training was complete, an assignment was inevitable. In spite of being bred for this job, in spite of all she felt she owed the Laetez government, could she bring herself to do something she knew in her heart was wrong?

\* \* \* \* \*

Steel didn't smile, but approached Pandora with long, purposeful strides. He was so captivating that even the vast blue ocean seemed to disappear behind him. All she saw was his exotic crossbreed face and breathtaking body, gleaming with moisture in the morning sun. His jewel-like gray eyes fixed on her and a hint of apprehension darted through her. His movements were so domineering, his expression almost frightening in its intensity. Why was he looking at her like that?

Pandora nearly took a step back, but held her ground. She wasn't the sort of woman to run from anyone or anything. Not only had she been trained to handle just about any situation, but she had a stubborn streak that refused to back down from threats.

He stopped so close that she could reach out and touch his gorgeous chest if she wanted to. Tilting her face toward his, she nearly melted through the sand. Those lovely Draper eyes burned right through her and she almost forgot her purpose.

She thought back to what she'd read in his personal file, supplied by Re Lord so she could adequately prepare for this seduction.

*Current Rank – Sub Master*

*Ancestral Line – Marcus*

*Species – Draper, Laetez, Searilla*

*Special Note – Product is a cyborg. Due to complications during the growth process, he has an artificial heart, a reconstructed spine reinforced with ultra-lightweight medical exo-filler and a reconstructed right eye.*

She remembered the experiments he had endured in Aquavalley to test the strength of his spine. Exo-filler was among the hardest substances in the galaxy. Medical exo-filler wasn't quite as strong as the variety used in constructing buildings and vehicles, but it was far more durable than the bone structure of most living species.

She recalled more information from his file.

*Product's unique brain made him an ideal candidate for upgrades, including memory expansion. Additional information can be transferred to and from a storage implant in his brain using optical micro disks fitted to an adaptor in his reconstructed eye.*

*The natural Searilla construction of the product's flesh enables him to maneuver efficiently in water. He produces Searilla poison in his sexual secretions and is immune to the poison emitted by other Searillas.*

Anger stirred inside Pandora when she thought about how the personal information of ACT products was still made available to just about anyone. That was something even the revised laws didn't protect.

"Pandora?" he asked, dragging her back to reality. His voice was soft yet deep and she longed to close her eyes and ask him to keep talking just so she could savor the sound.

"Marcus?" she replied, remembering to use his old name so he wouldn't be suspicious of her knowing his new one.

The faintest smile tugged at his slender lips. "I thought I recognized you."

"It's been so long," she said. "The last time we saw each other..." Her voice trailed off under his gaze. He tilted his head slightly to the side, as if waiting for her to continue. Finally she said, "It's been a long time."

His smile broadened a bit. "A very long time."

Almost simultaneously, they reached for each other. At first the embrace was a bit hesitant then his arms tightened around her and she closed her eyes, resting her cheek against his rock-hard shoulder, somewhat cool and damp from swimming in the ocean. She felt the texture of his skin. Though rougher than human or Laetez flesh, it wasn't as coarse as that of a pure Searilla. She loved the feel of it.

Then a sensation of utter contentment washed over her. It was as if she belonged in his arms. In spite of all the years of separation, she felt as if in some strange way they had been waiting for this moment.

He settled his face against her hair and his hand caressed her back with tenderness she'd never experienced before.

For several moments neither spoke, nor did they seem to care about the other people on the beach. No one existed except them.

They probably should have felt uncomfortable, sharing such an intimate embrace. Truly they were little more than strangers, but Pandora had never felt this type of attachment to anyone else. The power of what she felt frightened her. Could she continue? Would she be able to complete her assignment?

Maybe she was overreacting. Steel was a connection to her past. To someone like her, reared in labs, he was the closest thing she had to family. That explained the intensity of what she felt. Even if it turned out to be more, there was no law that stated she couldn't pursue him after she fulfilled her duty. She was supposed to seduce him. It seemed that wouldn't be difficult. Once she did, she could find a way to see him again.

Steel pulled back enough to look into her eyes.

"Are you here alone?" he asked.

"Yes. You?"

"Yeah. Are you busy right now?"

She shook her head, her heartbeat quickening. Acting attracted to him wasn't hard, considering she already wanted to dive into his shorts.

"Do you want to have lunch with me?"

"Yes, Marcus. I'd love to."

"Great. And it's Steel. I changed my name several years ago. Marcus didn't suit me."

He was right. Steel was a much more fitting name for him. He felt and looked like steel—so very hard and silvery gray. That vibrant hair looked even more shocking in contrast to his skin color.

"Well, Steel definitely suits you," she said.

They walked a short distance down the beach to the public restrooms and stalls where they changed out of their swimsuits. Moments later they met outside, Pandora in a lavender dress and sandals and Steel in a black T-shirt and his black uniform pants with the blue stripes running down the side of each leg.

"Not to sound clichéd, but I love a guy in a uniform," she said, her gaze sweeping him from head to foot. That wasn't a lie, especially when the guy had a body like Steel's.

"Thanks. Not many girls love the look of Searilla-Draper crossbreeds."

"Then they're crazy. And as you know, I have an inborn preference for Searillas." She playfully tossed her hair and batted her lashes in his direction.

Another slight grin tugged at his lips and he shook his head. "You were always a brat."

"I was not!"

"Yes you were. I remember you, Pandora Fourteen. You had the Aquavalley medics wrapped around your finger."

She stared in surprise. "I did not!"

"Oh yes you did. It was your pretty face. Now it's even prettier than ever." He gently cupped her chin and leaned so close she thought he might kiss her. Her pulse quickened in anticipation. Then he blinked, an unreadable expression flashing across his face before he dropped his hand from her face and stepped away. "Let's eat."

A short time later, they sat at an outdoor café from which they had a clear view of the ocean.

"You are so incredibly beautiful," he said, placing his fork aside and resting his hand on the table. The scales on his hands were tiny, almost delicate in appearance, a startling contrast to the savage, dark blue claws extending from his long, slender fingers. A shiver of fear and desire darted through her as she imagined him running those claws over her body, not hard enough to break her skin, but just enough to tickle and tease.

Maybe it was the Searilla in her, but she found him incredibly sexy—wild yet civilized, brutal yet beautiful.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Pandora?" he asked.

"I'm a transcriber at a med lab."

"Do you like your work?"

She shrugged. "It's all right. How about you? Do you enjoy the ACT Corps?"

"It has its merits. I looked for you, you know," he said. If only he would stop staring at her with those probing eyes. She felt as if he could read her mind, or worse, her heart. Yet at the same time she never wanted him to stop staring because no one had ever made her feel so important and desirable. "After you left Aquavalley there was no trace of you."

"Since the revised laws, ACT has been pretty good about privacy with free products. I looked for you too, Steel. I know you were sent to Lab 1A, but after that I could find no record of you."

"I was on Tydepth."

This caught her interest and she leaned closer. "What were you doing there?"

"Remember Xenos Nineteen?"

"Who can forget him?" she said, a shudder running down her spine. Xenos Nineteen, a Tydisian crossbreed, had always frightened her. Perhaps it wasn't Xenos himself, but the wild growls and shrieks that rang from his cage. Only as she grew older did she realize those cries were warranted. It seemed products like Xenos and Marcus, who looked alien, were mistreated far more severely and frequently than products with a Laetez appearance, such as herself.

"He arranged for me to study on Tydepth with his mentor, a Tydisian martial arts master called Tepidat. I learned a lot about controlling my Laetez side."

This surprised her. Her brow furrowed, she asked, "I don't recall you having the usual Laetez crossbreed problems with your emotions. You were always on the mellow side from what I remember."

"Let's just say I developed some issues."

"Did the Tydisians help?"

"A lot. I think most species could benefit from their mind control techniques. Do you know most Tydisians can even control their dreams? The Searilla brain is very similar. My old mentor, Tepidat, brought me to visit Jungphyre for several months. It was a fantastic experience. I was able to study the similarities and differences—" He stopped and shook his head slightly. "Are you interested in this? Most Laetez couldn't care less—"

"I'm not all Laetez. I'm Searilla too," she reminded him and reached across the table to rest her hand over his. Their gazes locked. "And I'm very interested in anything you have to tell me. I want to know everything about you from the time we parted."

"No you don't," he said.

"Yes I do."

"Live in the now, Pandora." He shifted the position of his hand so that it held hers snugly. "It's healthier."

Her brow furrowed. What a strange thing to say.

"Wouldn't you like to get to know each other again?" she asked, wondering if he was losing interest already. Maybe seducing him wouldn't be so easy after all. But now she was absolutely determined to have him, not because of her assignment but because she wanted him so much she could almost taste it.

"Very much," he said. "Want to start tonight? Have dinner with me."

"I have a better idea," she said, tightening her fingers on his. "I'm staying at an inn a few miles from here. Why don't we have dinner there?"

"What time should I be there?"

Pandora told him to come fairly early, that way they could enjoy the beach at dusk. Already her thoughts churned with ideas for making tonight unforgettable. They could eat dinner on the patio. The breeze and scent from the sea would be perfect for seduction.

Images of her and Steel, their naked bodies entwined, filled her mind. She could almost feel his slim lips against her. How would he taste? Would his kisses be tender or passionate? He looked so dominant and she longed to surrender her body to him.

Though she could scarcely wait to go back to the inn and prepare for this evening, when lunch ended she was reluctant to leave him. Before they parted ways, he kissed her cheek. His lips were firm, a bit rough but oh-so sexy. When he left, she felt as if a portion of her soul went with him.

This sort of connection simply wasn't natural. Though she wanted to fuck him, she didn't like lying to him about her career and she loathed the idea of seducing him under Re Lord's orders.

Something told her Steel was not the kind of man you played with. He had been nothing short of gentle and polite this afternoon, but he had an underlying hardness. She felt crossing him was the wrong thing to do, yet she couldn't let her crazy feelings for a man she scarcely knew ruin a lifetime of training.

Still, she hadn't *wanted* the training. She didn't *want* to be an assassin for the Laetez and deep inside she knew that to survive in her profession, a person had to want it. She had to dedicate her life to it or else she wouldn't have that life for long.

## Chapter Two

That evening, Pandora dressed carefully in an outfit made for seduction—a satiny bra top of pale lavender with a matching micro-skirt covered by sheer, ankle-length fabric. Derived from the costumes of Laetez exotic dancers, this particular fashion was popular with young women here on the home world as well as on Earth.

It amused Pandora how a race as sexually uptight as humans relished Laetez freedom of expression. Humans were so repressed. However, at the moment humans weren't her concern, but a particular crossbreed cyborg.

Steel was due to arrive at any moment and the stage was set. The patio table was prepared and she had a meal warming in the cooking unit of the kitchenette. The spacious room was decorated in refreshing pastels, soothingly feminine yet not too frilly, with an oversized bed and a bathroom with a sunken tub built for two. All one had to do was step off the patio and onto a lovely stretch of private beach. Re Lord had chosen the perfect place for romance.

Except this wasn't supposed to be a romance, but a test.

The desk spec buzzed and Pandora's head jerked in its direction. Drawing a deep breath, she released it slowly and walked to the desk to answer the call. The face of the front desk clerk filled the monitor.

"A man named Steel is here to see you, miss," said the clerk.

"Yes. I'm expecting him. Please send him to my room."

The clerk nodded and disappeared from the screen.

Pandora had been trained to remain cool, yet she couldn't help feeling excited. She longed for Steel in a way she'd never before experienced. The closest she could come to this sensation of desperate need was when she'd been separated from him as a child.

A moment later, he tapped on the door and she paused, collecting herself before she opened it. Steel stood outside, looking proud and stunningly attractive in his black and blue uniform.

She knew his helmet and hair sheath weren't part of the traditional attire but had been specially created for him in ACT Corps colors to protect his Draper hair. She was a bit disappointed to see him wearing them. His hair was not only beautiful, but highly sensitive. To properly seduce him, she'd need to coax him out of that protective gear. By the way he was looking at her, it wouldn't be difficult.

His gaze lingered over her full breasts and bare stomach.

"Hi," she said, stepping closer. She slipped her arms around his neck.

Steel welcomed her embrace then held her at arm's length, his gaze once again sweeping her. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks. You're rather handsome yourself."

He snorted, his piercing eyes fixed on hers. "No I'm not."

She knew he was well aware most people wouldn't describe him as handsome, but to her he was.

"Maybe handsome isn't the right word," she said. "Stunning. Irresistible. Those words are more appropriate."

"I can handle that." He smiled slightly and glanced past her toward the patio. "Mind if I come in?"

"Oh! Please do." She stepped aside and his shoulder accidentally brushed her as he walked by. She caught his delicious scent and wasn't sure if it was some kind of herbal cologne or if he'd developed the naturally delectable scent of the Drapers.

Pandora closed the door, telling herself to remain calm and collected. For the past six months she had trained intensely for this moment and she had spent most of her life learning how to manipulate emotions, both hers and others. If she didn't succeed in controlling this man who was already attracted to her then she wasn't worthy of the career planned for her.

Steel walked to the patio and stared toward the ocean.

"Dinner is ready if you're hungry," she said, walking to the kitchenette.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Starving."

"Good." She removed the pan from the cooking unit but Steel approached and took it.

"Do you want this on the table?" he asked.

"Yes. Thanks."

Pandora hurried ahead and opened the patio door for him. He glanced at the delicious medley of vegetables and lean meat. While he placed it on the table, Pandora got the wine that had been chilling in the kitchenette.

Moments later, they sat across from each other.

"It looks good," he said, picking up his knife and fork. "It's not a slain enemy, is it?"

This time he took her so much by surprise that she couldn't control the expression of shock on her face. "Excuse me?"

A smile touched his lips. "I was just teasing. You know how Searillas sometimes eat parts of their defeated enemies."

"Yes. Actually, I try not to think about it," she said. "And this is deer meat, imported from Earth. Maybe I shouldn't have made it. I forgot about Drapers not eating meat."

"No, it's fine. I suppose it's odd, being part Searilla and part Draper—one species that has been known to cannibalize and the other completely vegetarian. Luckily I have that hint of omnivorous Laetez blood to keep things balanced."

He winked at her and she knew he was joking again. He had a rather strange sense of humor, but he was an odd creature. What ACT product wasn't, herself included?

She watched the almost graceful way his slender, clawed fingers manipulated the eating utensils. A feeling of arousal shot through her when he raised the fork to his lips and took a slice of juicy meat between his teeth. He chewed thoroughly, with his mouth closed, then sipped the wine.

Pandora breathed deeply, scarcely hungry at all. She was too turned-on, too anxious and —

Heavy pelts of rain thudded against the patio, soaking everything from the food to their clothes.

"Oh no! I don't believe this," Pandora snapped, standing up and gazing skyward. "The forecast said nothing about rain. The night is ruined."

"Hardly. From where I'm sitting the weather has actually improved it," he said, leaning back in the chair and staring at her.

He seemed completely unperturbed by the weather. At first she attributed it to his love of water then she followed his gaze to her rain-soaked clothes. The bra, skirt and sheer cover stuck so tightly to her body that she might as well have been naked. Her tight nipples, even the dark pink outline of her areolas, were visible, as was the pattern of her neatly trimmed pubic hair. Her cleavage and stomach glistened with rainwater.

She was supposed to be seducing him, yet a blush rose in her face just from his heated gaze. After all the degradations she'd suffered during her training, nothing should affect her, but Steel made her feel uncharacteristically vulnerable. Maybe *he* should have been the sexual assassin instead of her.

"Help me bring the food inside," she said, picking up their dinner plates.

He rose, grasped the bottle of wine and tucked it under his arm then took the tray of food and followed her inside. They placed everything on the countertop in the kitchenette.

"Completely ruined," Pandora muttered, shaking her head over the sodden meal.

"The best part of the evening is still to come," he said in a husky voice.

Pandora turned to face him and her heart skipped a beat.

Sprawled on the couch, his long legs stretched out in front of him, Steel pulled off his helmet and hair sheath, letting his thick red hair drape his shoulders. She longed to run her fingers through it, to see exactly how sensitive it was. To Drapers hairplay was akin to foreplay. When their hair was properly caressed, it allegedly gave them orgasmic sensations.

"You don't think this is a little fast?" she said softly, stepping toward him, but keeping a safe distance between them. Safe from what? It was her duty to fuck him. He was making it easy. Why the hesitation on her part?

"It's what you want, isn't it? Or should I say it's your duty."

"What are you talking about?" A coil of fear tightened in her belly. How could he possibly know?

"You're a sexual assassin, yes?"

For some reason this completely truthful accusation roused her anger. "Why the hell would you think something like that?"

"That's why Searilla crossbreeds are created. You forget, I share your heritage. Any non-Searilla who fucks me risks death. The Laetez government wanted to train me as an assassin too, Pandora."

For a moment she stood in silence, her fists clenched as tightly as her stomach. His words reached a part of her she kept locked deep inside. All the shame and anger she felt threatened to burst forth, but she managed to control it.

"If you knew what I was doing, why have you played along?" she asked.

"Several reasons."

"Explain."

"Only if you come closer."

She stepped nearer, her arms folded across her chest as if that could protect her from his penetrating gaze.

He extended his hand to her and after a brief hesitation, she took it and he pulled her on top of him. Pandora's only choice was to struggle or straddle him. She chose the latter, bracing her knees on either side of him and feeling the hardness of his cock pressing against her tingling clit. Only the barrier of their clothes separated them. She rested her hands on his shoulders and stared into his eyes. In truth she doubted she could look away if she wanted to. It was as if he had her under some kind of spell.

"Tell me why," she said.

"Because since you left Aquavalley I haven't stopped thinking about you."

"I know. We were just children but I've never loved anyone as much as I loved you." She shook her head and lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

"Maybe because it's the truth."

"A childhood friendship can't be the reason you want to sleep with me. Is it because we can only make love to others of our kind and maybe you don't like fucking purebred Searillas?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "I've never had a problem fucking the few purebred Searillas who have a fetish for crossbreeds, but I have to admit when I saw you on the beach today I wanted you more than any woman I've ever seen. The question is, do you want me, Pandora? And not because I'm your assignment, but because you desire *me*."

"I'm sorry, Steel," she whispered. He blinked several times, an almost pained look passing through his eyes then fading. Pandora could have kicked herself. He thought she was apologizing because she didn't want him. Cupping the back of his head, she stared into his eyes and said, "I'm sorry because I lied to you. Steel, when we

met today, I felt as if I'd found something I've been missing in my life and didn't even know it. So yes, I want you. If you still want me."

In reply, he pulled her closer and covered her mouth in powerful yet tender kiss.

Pandora's eyes slipped shut and she clung to him, savoring every gentle press of his lips against hers, every demanding stroke of his warm, wet tongue. She caressed his hair, relishing the feel of the thick, satiny tendrils running through her fingers. A low groan escaped him and she felt his cock grow thicker and harder. Unable to resist, she rubbed against it, desperate to satisfy the wonderful yet frustrating ache in her clit.

He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her back then he gently caressed the sides of her breasts. More than anything she wanted to feel his naked body against hers.

The kiss broke and he pressed his forehead against hers.

"Steel," she murmured, "I want you so much."

"For the job?"

"For myself," she said with heartfelt sincerity, took his face in her hands and kissed him hard.

Grasping her snugly to his body, he stood. Pandora locked her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Her weight didn't seem to hinder him at all as he strode to the bed and placed her on it. It took mere seconds for them to shed their clothes. The youthful drive of their bodies combined with the emotional impact of their reunion made them eager.

Steel pulled the quilt off the bed and stretched out beside her on the sheets.

"Pandora," he said, caressing her from breast to hip.

Leaning over, he kissed her again, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. Her tongue met it, savoring his texture and taste. Her feelings for this man were overwhelming. She wanted him to claim her in every way. If she could open up her mind and soul and let him climb inside, she would do so in a heartbeat.

Tears welled in her eyes and this time she couldn't keep them from spilling. Steel tugged his mouth from hers and she reluctantly met his gaze. In his eyes she saw complete understanding, passion tempered by affection that even after so many years had not faded between them.

He kissed her eyelids and used the tip of his tongue to gently lick the tears from her face. Pandora sighed with pleasure. Somehow his very presence soothed her, made her feel calm and centered but at the same time incredibly aroused—such a heady sensation.

While he took his time covering her face with kisses, he fondled her breasts, kneading them and caressing the nipples. He seemed to know exactly how to touch her, as if he was reading her mind, feeling what she felt. No amount of training could have prepared her for this.

Steel moved down her body, kissing her throat and trailing his tongue between her breasts. He licked the sensitive undersides, tickling her. Then he took one of her nipples

into his mouth and trilled his tongue over it until she moaned with need. Arching against him, she wove her fingers through his hair.

"Hell, Pandora," he gasped. "Don't stop doing that."

"This," she purred, rhythmically stroking handfuls of his sensitive Draper hair. He groaned with desire and she whispered, "How about this?" She trailed her lips over his hair and blew on it softly.

He gasped and moaned, his eyes closing and a look of sheer bliss on his face.

While she continued fondling his hair, he began sucking and licking her other nipple then he lapped his way down her stomach. He guided her legs over his shoulders, grasped her buttocks to hold her steady and covered her clit with his mouth.

"Oh, Steel!" she panted. Yes, during her training she'd experienced oral stimulation through the use of training androids. While they had brought physical pleasure, even stimulated her to climax, nothing those emotionless machines had done felt as good as this.

Some people were foolish enough to categorize cyborgs like Steel with androids. They failed to acknowledge the living side to them, the emotions such as the desire to give and receive pleasure. Steel was far more man than machine and at the moment she thoroughly enjoyed the difference.

His warm, wet tongue thrust into her pussy and explored her soft, sensitive flesh then he returned to her clit. With rhythmic upward strokes, he teased her headlong into orgasm.

When she came, panting and writhing in the throes of the most unbelievable orgasm, he didn't let her go, but held her fast, using his tongue on her until the pulsations slowed.

Then he covered her body entirely with his, bracing most of his weight on his forearms.

"Pandora," he said, his deep voice raw with passion.

She opened her eyes and stared into his, though it was difficult as he slid his hard, satin-skinned cock into her.

"Please," she murmured, her hips thrusting upward in an attempt to make him fill her faster. The friction of her pubic hair against his seemed to drive him wild.

He practically growled with lust. Pandora began caressing his hair again, weaving her fingers through it then tugging on it gently. This really aroused him. His neck arched back, his eyes closed and his hips jerked against her.

Steel kissed her mouth, his tongue thrusting in time with his cock. She moaned and locked her legs around him while continuing to stroke his hair. One hand strayed down so she could clutch his rock-hard ass. Heavens, this man had the most fantastic body.

He was pumping hard and fast now, but she loved every moment. With each thrust he claimed her, making her his in a way that was too complex to think about at the moment. Not when utter pleasure ruled her body and soul.

Those wonderful pre-orgasmic sensations overtook her. The higher she climbed, the more frantically she stroked his hair. His kisses became so demanding they were almost painful, but she didn't care. She raked her teeth over his tongue and he ground his lips against hers. Maybe it was the Searilla in them, but she'd never experienced something so savage and complete. It was as if her soul was utterly free while her body was his willing prisoner.

Briefly she wondered how she had lived so many years without him. Their thoughts seemed to mingle. Impossible, yet it was happening. Or perhaps she was simply overcome by this magical experience. Though young, Pandora had become completely jaded. Now she felt as if she'd been reborn here in his arms.

Waves of orgasm broke over her, each more powerful than the last. In the midst of pleasure, she felt his body stiffen then explode. His guttural roar of unrestrained passion excited her so much that she climaxed again, the sensations so intense they were almost painful.

For several moments she lay in a post-orgasmic stupor. Steel's weight rested fully on top of her, but she didn't care. She loved the feel of his warm, rough skin and the tickle of his breath on her neck. She could actually feel the steady rhythm of his powerful artificial heart beating against her.

Lying there, their bodies and souls undoubtedly one, she felt more complete than she ever had in her life. There was no doubt she and Steel belonged together and now there was no question about whether or not she would choose her career over him.

Finally he lifted his head and gazed at her with a look of utter contentment in his beautiful gray eyes. A slight smile curved his slender lips and he moved to the side, allowing her to breathe freely again, but instead she wanted him back.

As if sensing how she felt, he tugged her close and she rested her cheek against his chest. Draping a leg over his, she moaned softly.

He stroked her shoulder and back and kissed her hair. "I've never felt anything like this, Pandora."

"Neither have I."

"But to you it's business only."

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "No. Not this."

"You better be sure that's how you really feel, because if it's not this has to be the last time for us."

Her brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I won't want to share you with other men, Pandora, even ones you're assigned to kill."

She felt attacked by her own emotions. Confusion, desire, anger, sorrow. Everything seemed to hit her at once.

"I don't want to be like this, Steel," she snapped and sat up, pulling the sheet around her. "Do you think I like the idea of using sex to kill people? I *hate* it."

"Then why do it?"

"Because it's what I've been trained to do. They've invested a lot of time in me. They took care of me."

He raised himself on his elbows, a disgusted expression on his face. "You don't owe them anything, Pandora. If anything they owe you."

"But —"

"You didn't ask to be grown in a lab. None of us did. You have a right to a normal life, or as normal as an ACT product can have. It's bad enough they gave you a Laetez appearance but any Laetez you sleep with will die."

"I slept with you."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not a purebred wannabe, Steel. I'm not ashamed of what I am."

"You're not a slave either. I know how the government works. Like I told you, they tried to make me an assassin too."

"How did you get out of it?" Pandora remembered how she'd been treated when she expressed dissatisfaction in her assigned career. She hadn't exactly been abused, but the medics and trainers had made it clear just how lonely life in a private lab could be and how difficult it was for an ACT product to survive in the outside world without some kind of career.

"I refused to be manipulated," he said. "Besides, with a face like mine I don't know how far I'd get as a sexual assassin."

"There's nothing wrong with your face, Steel." Her brow furrowed. "Didn't they try to convince you to accept the training?"

A faint smile touched his lips and he caressed her hair. "There's only one person who's ever been able to convince me of anything."

"We were only children, Steel, and as I remember it, you were the leader."

"Only when you wanted to try something especially dangerous. Other than that I was happy just being around you."

His words warmed her to the core and she bent, brushing her lips against his.

"I guess I'm a little apprehensive about making it outside of the lab," she said.

"You're surviving here and now," he pointed out. "You don't need the lab, Pandora."

"What about the medication? I'm not like you, Steel. I need the medicine to balance my chemistry or else my Laetez temper will take over."

Again she thought back to what she'd read in his file.

*In spite of his Laetez bloodlines, this product does not require chemical-balancing drugs.*

That was rare for a Laetez crossbreed. A purebred Laetez was made up of two distinct yet symbiotic entities called a Re and an Er. The external being, called the Re,

resembled humans in most ways. It communicated directly with others, through normal speech and functioned like a human.

The internal, parasitic being called the Er lived within the brain of the Re and controlled the Re's emotional state, much like a living conscience. Without the Er, the Re would be as savage and uncontrolled as a wild animal. The two were completely dependent on each other. In spite of the bond between them, this dual existence was the main reason the Laetez were so interested in the ACT program. They generally tried breeding with species that lived as individuals, hoping to free both Er and Re into separate yet completely functional beings.

Like most Laetez crossbreeds, Pandora required medication to keep her emotions, particularly anger, under control. She almost envied Steel with his ability to control his anger without assistance.

"You don't need to work for the government to get the meds," Steel told her. "Any medic trained in ACT product physiology can prescribe them for you. Tell me the truth about why you're scared to leave the lab?"

She closed her eyes and lay on her back, once again feeling vulnerable. It was rather annoying the way he seemed to look inside her, yet at the same time she loved the connection.

"It's not something I'm proud of," she admitted.

He covered her body with his, bracing his weight on his hands. Dipping his head so close to hers that his rather flat nose brushed against her longish one, he said, "Do you think I'm proud of everything in my life? Stop avoiding the subject and talk to me, Pandora."

"I don't want to be alone," she finally admitted, closing her eyes. "I know it's stupid and weak and –"

"Who said you'd be alone?" he asked softly. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes and he held her gaze.

"You won't be alone. You'll have me," he said. "If you want me."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying this isn't a coincidence. There's something between us."

"We're strangers," she protested, though after what they just shared that argument sounded weak. They were *not* strangers. Being with him was like the miraculous reattachment of a missing limb. The bond between them was that strong.

"If Re Lord knew this would happen he never would have sent me to you," she whispered.

"Re Lord. The Chief's cocksucker."

"Steel!" she said, shocked by his bravado. "I work for Laetez intelligence. What if this room is bugged?"

"Is it?"

"Not as far as I know but —"

"Superior Re Lord, if you're listening, sir, I apologize for any disrespect, but this girl is mine."

"Stop it!" she laughed and covered his mouth with her hand. He gently bit her palm then pinned her wrists on either side of her head and kissed her deeply.

When the kiss broke, Steel said, "How about it, Pandora? Marry me."

"Marry you?" Again she smiled and shook her head. "This is utter insanity. I'm eighteen years old. You're twenty-one."

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. When she didn't reply, he said, "Live with me then. I'll move out of the barracks and get a place in the city. I don't want to lose you again."

She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him. That was exactly how she felt. The thought of being separated from him again was almost incomprehensible.

"All right," she said. "But I'll need some time to straighten things out at the lab. Re Lord isn't the kind of man who'll just let me go with no questions asked, not after all ACT has invested in me."

"They shouldn't have manipulated you in the first place," he stated. "We were freed soon after Aquavalley closed. By law, government labs were obligated to retrain free ACT products to join society, not draft them into projects."

"Then why are you in the ACT Corps?" she asked.

"Because I want to be. When I completed my training on Tydepth, I returned here because I was interested in a military career, at least until I decide what I want to do with the rest of my life."

"You don't want to stay in the corps?"

"Maybe. I'm assigned to an aquatic unit but I'm being trained to pilot a wide range of craft. I like the idea of space travel."

"You want to be a pilot."

"It's a definite option. I have prospects, Pandora."

She grinned, realizing that she was actually proud of him. He had come so far from the boy she'd known in Aquavalley.

"I'm sure you do," she said.

His breath caught, as if he was going to speak then changed his mind. He kissed her forehead then her lips before he said, "If you don't want to marry me, I'll help you make the transition from the lab anyway. Don't think I'm trying to manipulate you. I'm not like *them*."

"I know you're not." She ran a hand through his hair, watching his eyes close and loving the blissful expression on his face. "If I didn't want to be with you, I wouldn't agree at all, Steel. I think you're right. How we feel about each other isn't a coincidence. We're family. We always have been."

This time when he kissed her, it wasn't a mere brush of his lips against hers, but something all-consuming. Their tongues mated and Pandora tightened her hands on his hair, making him groan with pleasure-pain.

Steel used his knee to separate her thighs and the thick, velvety tip of his cock pressed into her pussy. She welcomed him, wrapping her legs around his waist and purring with pleasure. Taking her lower lip between his teeth, he bit it gently then sucked on it.

The friction of their bodies rekindled her passion. Pandora's hands roamed over him. She kneaded his powerful shoulders and squeezed his tight, gorgeous ass. When she tugged gently on his hair, he tore his mouth from hers, gasping with desire. She licked his throat.

Again Steel's mouth covered hers. He claimed her with every thrust of his cock, every heartfelt moan and each sweep of his tongue against hers.

No matter what happened, Pandora would always belong to him, body and soul.

## Chapter Three

Late the following morning, Steel stood by his locker in one of the aquatic training rooms at ACT Corps headquarters. He grabbed a towel and dried off. He and his unit had been practicing in the tank since dawn and were taking a short break before moving outside for ocean maneuvers.

Xenos, the unit master, approached and opened the locker beside his. Just as Steel was a rare Searilla crossbreed, Xenos was the only free Tydisian ACT product created by the Laetez. Blue skinned with fangs as well as webbed hands and feet, he drew even more attention than Steel. Xenos was three years older than Steel and had also been created in Aquavalley. He was probably the best soldier Steel had ever met. After five years in the ACT Corps, he had already achieved the rank of unit master and Steel had little doubt he would eventually be a unit commander, maybe even higher.

Though Steel took his military career seriously, he hadn't lied when he told Pandora he might not want to stay in for the rest of his life. Now that he'd met her, the idea of regular civilian life appealed to him even more.

His feelings for her astounded him. Usually he wasn't the type of man who got close to people right away. Still, with Pandora it wasn't like getting to know a stranger but more like being reunited with a missing part of his soul.

It was strange how he had little memory of his very early years at Aquavalley, but he recalled almost every detail of his life after Pandora's arrival. He'd been just three years old when she was born, but he remembered the sound of her infant cries. Even then he felt as if she was crying out to him and when he'd approached her, she'd stopped crying.

Strangely, the medics had allowed them to spend a lot of time together. Usually the medics at Aquavalley made life practically unbearable for most ACT products. Certain medics seemed to relish torturing the products, knowing there would be no repercussions for any cruel and unethical treatment. Products like Pandora, who looked human or Laetez, were treated much better. Maybe because the Laetez medics identified with them. Crossbreeds like Steel and Xenos suffered abuse he tried not to remember.

Yet any tortures they meted out hadn't compared to how he felt when Pandora was taken from Aquavalley. The loss was indescribable. Like the time before she had arrived, the months after she was taken were completely blank to Steel. He remembered the pain of separation then nothing. As he grew older, he was able to retain his memories again, but it was as if Pandora had taken part of his personality when she'd left. He felt cold and so unimaginably empty.

He shook his head and bent to dry his legs. Why was he thinking of this now?

Not that she was ever far from his thoughts. He could have filed his memories of her onto a micro disk and downloaded the information, leaving it in safekeeping along with other types of information he wished to store and use at a later time.

However, he refused to catalog memories of her like he would information from a technical manual. The attached emotions would be lost and when it came to her, he wanted to recall every detail, not perfectly word-for-word like instructions or maneuvers, but to capture the sensations. She was meant to be a natural part of him, kept safe in the deepest corners of his living brain, not in the cyborg addition the ACT medics placed inside him just to see if it could be done.

Right now he should be concentrating on his training, yet he couldn't get her out of his mind.

Even now all he could see was her green eyes, so warm and pretty, staring at him. He remembered her as a lanky, freckle-faced child. Though she still had freckles, they only added to the delicate beauty of her face. Her body had really changed. Just thinking about her gorgeous curves made his cock swell and even quickened the usually measured pace of his powerful artificial heart.

She had such soft skin, so different from the rough texture of his. Yet she hadn't seemed to mind his Searilla flesh. Instead she actually seemed to like touching it. He could still see the desire in her eyes when she looked at him, desire that fed his own.

"There's a rumor that they might be assembling a special aquatic unit in the future," Xenos said.

Steel glanced at him blankly.

"What's wrong with you?" Xenos demanded.

"Nothing. Sorry. A special aquatic unit? Sounds interesting."

"Yes. It does." Xenos narrowed his eyes in Steel's direction. "You seem distracted today. Not a good thing."

"You're right. It's not." Steel flung his towel into his locker and sighed.

"I find the meditation I learned from the Tydisians helps a lot when I need to focus," Xenos said.

A slight smile tugged at Steel's lips. "I tried that. Meditation isn't going to work on this."

Xenos leaned against the lockers. "Are you thinking about the shuttle test coming up? You won't have a problem."

"I know that," Steel snorted. "I wasn't even thinking about the test. Everything doesn't have to be about work, you know."

"What else is there?"

Chuckling, Steel shook his head.

"Well, what else is there?" Xenos pressed, his brow furrowed. "We're here to —"

"Serve?"

Leaning down, Xenos' vibrant blue eyes stared into Steel's. "To make opportunities. The ACT Corps is one of the only places run completely by ACT products. This is where we can make a difference for our own kind."

"By fighting battles for pure-blooded Laetez?" Steel curled his lip. "I agree we have opportunities here. There's a lot to learn, but there's more to life than the ACT Corps. What about a family?"

Xenos looked irritated and disgusted. "A distraction."

"A dist—" Steel stopped short and shook his head. There was no use arguing with Xenos. Most likely his bad attitude about family was due to his upbringing in Aquavalley. He had spent too long in solitary, with only sadistic medics for company. Most likely it had killed his emotions. Steel understood. If not for Pandora, the same might have happened to him.

"Even if we wanted a family, how would we accomplish the task?" Xenos asked. "Most of us can't reproduce naturally and I for one would not choose to add my name to an ACT waiting list so they can grow a child for me in an artificial womb."

Damn. Xenos really knew how to ruin a moment. Steel wasn't about to let his friend's sour grapes taint his newfound happiness with Pandora.

"Maybe you want to spend your life as the lonely warrior, but not me," Steel said.

"Let me guess. You met a woman."

"Not just a woman. The woman."

"All right. I'll go along with it," Xenos said. He reached into his locker, took out his uniform pants and pulled them on. "Tell me about her."

"You know her."

If Xenos had eyebrows, one of them would have been raised. "I do?"

"Remember Pandora from Aquavalley?"

"You're telling me the woman is Pandora?"

"Oh yes." Steel couldn't keep the smile from his face. "You should see her, Xenos. She is so unbelievably beautiful."

"Where did you find her?"

"Yesterday on the beach. I'm seeing her again tonight. I'll be moving out of the barracks. We're going to get a place in the city."

"Don't you think this is too fast? You just met her."

Xenos' questions annoyed him, mostly because there was no way Xenos could understand the connection between him and Pandora. "I can't explain it to you, but this is right for us. It's right for me."

"I know women can be hard to resist," Xenos said. "I like to fuck as much as the next guy, but —"

"This isn't about sex." Steel took a step closer to Xenos, his anger rising.

"Calm down, Steel," Xenos said in a soft yet dangerous voice.

Steel drew a deep breath and released it slowly, backing away. What was wrong with him? As much as he wanted to belt Xenos at the moment, he couldn't take a swing at the unit master.

"I'm not trying to insult you or her," Xenos continued. "I'm just saying you should be careful. Remember what happened when she left Aquavalley."

In a way, Xenos was right. He had gone a little crazy when Pandora was taken from Aquavalley.

Steel sat on the bench by the lockers and closed his eyes for a moment. He felt Xenos sit beside him. Steel opened his eyes and glanced at the Tydisian crossbreed. Was this lecture due to envy on Xenos' part?

Between his appearance and his attitude, Xenos was far less appealing to women than Steel, and everyone knew Xenos had inherited the Laetez sex drive. He spent a lot of time with prostitutes and escorts, trying to sate his physical desires, but deep inside did he actually want more? Maybe subconsciously he longed for the connection Steel and Pandora shared.

"We were children when she left Aquavalley," Steel pointed out. "I didn't know how to handle my emotions back then. It's a common problem for Laetez crossbreeds. You just happened to avoid that particular difficulty. The training on Tydepth helped me a lot. I have you to thank for that."

"I believe you would have done the same for me had our positions been reversed," Xenos said. "I'm just saying you should both give yourselves time before you rush into anything."

"Thanks for the advice." Steel stood. "I need to get to the beach for maneuvers before my unit master reprimands me."

Xenos snorted with laughter. "I'm more likely to reprimand you for being a smartass."

"Guilty as charged." Steel grinned.

The sooner he got to work, the quicker the time would pass before he was with Pandora again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pandora spent the following day thinking about how to tell Re Lord she was quitting her job.

Regardless of whether Steel spoke the truth about the government not owning her, it wouldn't make leaving any easier. Being the only Searilla crossbreed of her particular characteristics the Laetez possessed, they wouldn't want to give her up.

Yet she couldn't forfeit this chance at a life with Steel.

Steel was training with his unit today, but as soon as he got off duty he would meet her at the inn. They planned on going to the city's annual beach festival.

Shortly before he was due to arrive, she pushed aside thoughts of business and Re Lord. Tonight she intended to enjoy herself. It had been so long since they'd been together and she refused to let anything ruin this evening.

That night she groomed herself carefully, wanting to look as attractive as she could for him. She loved the way his beautiful gray eyes seemed to devour her. Just thinking about his heated expressions made her quiver with desire. She brushed her long red hair until it gleamed and applied her makeup subtly. Then she pulled on pink satin underwear.

Glancing at herself in the full-length mirror in her room, she thought she looked pretty sexy. Her stomach clenched with loathing when she considered how well versed she was in the art of seduction. She had been sent here to use those skills on Steel, but she'd never imagined the force of her desire for him or the power of their emotional connection.

Pandora had just slipped her feet into pink sandals that matched her sundress when Steel knocked on her door. She'd left word at the front desk that he would be arriving and he was right on time.

"You're gorgeous," he said, his gaze sweeping her from head to foot then back again.

"So are you," she said. He wasn't in uniform tonight, but wore a silver-gray tank top and black pants in a casual style popular with young Laetez males. He wore a black hair sheath and matching cap. The outfit showed off his sleekly muscled body and she could scarcely keep her eyes off him.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Pandora closed her eyes and clung to him, enjoying the feel of his rock-hard body against her. He was so strong. Far more powerful than mere Laetez or human males and so much sexier.

Their tongues stoked each other, hungry yet tender. When the kiss broke, they held each other's gaze.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"I can't wait. I've been looking forward to this all day."

"So have I."

They left the inn and took his shuttle farther up the coast.

When they arrived, the beach was already crowded with people enjoying the festival. Vendors had booths set up where they sold food, summery clothes, jewelry and other touristy items. There were kiddie shuttles, games and a live band playing a mix of modern and traditional Laetez music.

A long line formed on the pier where people waited to ride on an old-fashioned ferry. Two enormous poles stood close to the pier. Later that night S'lankton divers were scheduled to perform. S'lanktons, an aquatic race, weren't as powerful as Searillas or Tydisians and they could only see in the dark.

"What do you want to do first?" he asked.

"There's a vendor with human food." She pointed to a small blue and green booth with a sign that read *Snack Booth Earth*. "Look. Pizza. Do you like it?"

"It's probably the humans' best invention."

Taking his hand, she tugged him toward the stand where they bought two slices of pizza and ate while walking around.

They paused in front of a pink booth displaying a variety of pastel-colored sweets.

"Tydisian sea taffy," Steel said. "So good."

"Never had it," she said. "It looks pretty, though."

"It tastes better."

The vendor, a young Laetez male, stepped toward them. "What can I get you? A small, medium or large serving?"

"A small bag," Steel said, his lovely gray eyes glancing at the bowls of taffy. "Blue and some green. Pandora, what kind do you want?"

"The pink looks good."

"Pink the lady says." The vendor grinned. "She likes it tart."

Steel paid for the candy and held the bag out to Pandora so she could take the first piece. She chose a small chunk of the pink and popped it delicately into her mouth.

Her nose wrinkled and her eyes started tearing. "Oh, Steel!"

He laughed. "The pink is strong. Once the tartness fades it'll be sweet."

"I don't know if I can wait that long." She very nearly spat out the taffy then the flavor faded to delicious sweetness.

He ate a piece of the blue while she reached for the green. "What's this one like?"

"Salty-sweet."

She bit into it hesitantly, but found the flavor pleasing and quickly finished the rest. "Is this stuff fattening?"

"Don't worry." He slipped an arm around her and held her snugly, whispering in her ear, "We'll burn it off later. Guaranteed."

They walked closer to the band and danced for a while then sat by one of the enormous bonfires farther up the beach.

A young woman on a shuttle cart paused in front of them. She was selling jewelry made from colorful shells, surprisingly attractive compared to much of the junk sold at festivals.

"They're lovely," Pandora said.

Steel picked up a pale green shell strung on a delicate silver chain and held it near Pandora's face. "It's almost the same color as your eyes."

"It looks pretty with her red hair," the vendor observed, most likely hoping for a sale.

Steel paid the girl and fastened the chain around Pandora's neck. "A remembrance of tonight," he said.

She gently touched the shell. Holding his gaze, she smiled and said, "Thank you, but I'll never forget tonight anyway."

Their lips met and Pandora closed her eyes. She felt the warmth of the bonfire, caught its scent and heard the crackling of its flames mingling with the gentle sound of waves licking the beach. Most of all her senses were filled with Steel—his scent and touch and the completeness she only felt with him.

On the way back, they stopped at *Snack Booth Earth* again.

"A large sweet iced tea," Pandora said to the vendor. "Raspberry, please."

"That I've never tried," Steel admitted. "It's not like coffee, is it? I tried that once when I was stationed on Earth and I thought my taste buds were permanently destroyed."

"No. This is better than coffee."

She paid the vendor and offered Steel the first sip. Pandora loved watching his slender lips pucker around the straw. She smiled, her stomach fluttering with happiness just from being with him.

This was without doubt the best night of her life so far. Now that she and Steel were together there would be many more wonderful times ahead. She was sure of it.

"Want to go for a ride on the ferry?" he asked.

"Yes, I'd like that."

Moments later, they stood in line on the pier. A larger crowd had formed because the S'lankton divers were about to perform. While waiting for the ferry, Pandora and Steel, along with most of the crowd, turned to watch the divers.

"They're so graceful," Pandora said.

"More than most Searillas," Steel admitted.

"They're a lot smaller than Searillas too," she observed. The S'lanktons were quite small, averaging four feet in height with thin, wiry bodies covered in pale pink skin.

One of the little female S'lanktons leapt off the pole and made a perfect dive into the dark water. A creak echoed above the applause and Pandora glanced at Steel who stepped out of line and moved toward the tall pole beneath the diving platform.

"Don't!" he shouted to the next diver who had just placed a foot on the rungs leading up the pole.

Seconds later, Pandora realized the problem. The pole, apparently older and in worse condition than beach authorities realized, had cracked at the base. Steel caught the pole just above his head before it smashed into several onlookers.

Pandora's stomach clenched. If not for his Searilla strength, the pole would have caused injuries, even deaths.

People screamed and scattered. A woman directly in front of Steel froze in fear. Seeing that he couldn't hold the pole much longer, Pandora grasped the woman and pulled her a safe distance away. Just as Steel heaved the pole aside, Pandora heard screaming from the pier.

"My daughter fell in the water!" a Laetez woman shouted.

Apparently during the scuffle to avoid the falling pole, the child had been knocked off the pier.

Without hesitation Pandora dove into the water along with two of the S'lankton divers. She couldn't see as well as the S'lanktons, but her vision was far superior to that of humans and the moon provided just enough light for her to see in the nighttime water.

She saw the child caught in reeds beneath the pier and swam toward her. One of the S'lanktons joined her and they managed to free the girl and swim her to the surface. An onlooker took the child while Pandora and the S'lankton climbed out and immediately began resuscitation procedures on the girl. Luckily she had been under such a short time that she revived quickly.

Steel and a couple of lifeguards who had also hit the water to search for the child soon joined her. The lifeguards shuttled the girl and her mother to the hospital and the crowd dispersed.

"Are you all right?" Steel slipped an arm around Pandora.

"Yeah." She sighed deeply, pushing tendrils of drenched hair from her face. "What the hell happened with that pole? It looked strong."

"The bottom was rotted and covered with paint," he said, an angry gleam in his eyes. "Beach authorities will be getting a complaint about this."

They stood and Pandora noticed several people staring in their direction.

"Did you see him catch that pole?" a woman whispered.

"Who could miss it?" snorted the man beside her. "He's some kind of crossbreed, no doubt."

"Good thing he was here," someone else said.

"Yeah, but can you imagine what can happen when a thing like that goes wild? All that strength," said the first woman with a slight shudder. "So unnatural."

Pandora's anger shot to dangerous levels. She was so enraged that she almost felt as if she'd missed her dose of chemistry-balancing meds. Her fists clenched, she hissed, "That fucking bitch. Who the hell does she think she is? Purebred bitch."

Her heart pounding, she took a step toward the woman but Steel grasped her shoulder. Slipping an arm around her waist, he whispered in her ear, "She's not worth it, baby. Who cares what they think?"

Strangely, his presence and the soothing tone of his voice calmed her anger better than any medication.

Closing her eyes briefly, she leaned against him and nodded. "You're right."

Several people were still staring at them as they made their way off the pier.

"Hey, man!" a guy standing with a group of friends called to Steel and waved, a genuine smile on his face. "Nice job."

"ACT power, buddy!" said another man from the group, giving him a Laetez peace sign.

Steel smiled and waved before he and Pandora continued on their way.

"See, not everyone is anti-crossbreed," Steel reminded her.

"Still, I don't know how you can stand people like that bitch," Pandora said. "It makes me so mad the way some people judge others without even knowing them."

"People fear what they don't understand. Not to mention some are jealous of the gifts we have as ACT products."

"You're right. I know you're right." She sighed. "My temper has always been my biggest downfall, but when I'm with you everything seems so clear." Leaning her head against his shoulder, she said, "I love you, Steel."

His arm tightened around her and he kissed her hair. "I love you too, Pandora."

"Let's go back to my room and make love," she suggested.

He grinned. "We must be linked psychically because that's exactly what I was thinking."

No sooner had they stepped into Pandora's room than he swept her into his arms and covered her mouth in a passionate kiss. Smiling, she clung to him, her lips moving against his and their tongues eagerly tasting one another.

Steel kicked the door shut behind them and carried her to the bed. He kissed her neck and tugged down her dress straps so he could run his lips and tongue over her shoulders.

Moaning with pleasure, Pandora unfastened his hair sheath and removed his cap.

"Oh, Steel. I've never been this happy in my life," she said, tenderly stroking his sensitive Draper hair in a way she knew aroused him to the utmost.

"Neither have I," he breathed between kisses. He trailed his lips over the tops of her breasts that were exposed in the dress.

Then she remembered their clothes were damp from their unexpected dip in the ocean.

"We better undress," she murmured, still lost in his kisses. "We're getting the bed all wet."

He stood and shed his clothes. Pandora sat up and did the same, eager to feel his bare flesh against hers.

Once again Steel covered her body with his. He kissed her deeply, tenderly. Each brush of his tongue against hers, every caress of his hand on her body, expressed how much he cared for her and the stiffness of his cock told her of his desire.

Her fingers traveled over his sleekly muscled shoulders, exploring the ridges of his flesh. It was softer than pure Searilla flesh, but rougher than human or Laetez. She loved the feel of it against her skin, rubbing her nipples and making them stiffen and tingle with need.

"What do you want, Pandora?" He nuzzled her neck.

"I want you to fuck me," she said, lost in sensation.

"Do you like this?" He took her nipple between his teeth and flicked his tongue over it.

"Yes." Little shivers of delight darted through her.

When he sucked her nipple, she arched against him, trying to force her breast deeper into his mouth. He sucked and lapped with fervor and she grasped handfuls of his hair, making him groan with pleasure.

Steel moved lower and ran his tongue over her clit. Moaning softly, Pandora slid her legs over his shoulders and squirmed with desire beneath his warm, wet tongue. His lips caressed her delicate flesh while his hands squeezed and stroked her ass. He slid a finger between the indentation and rhythmically pressed his fingertip against her sphincter.

Having her clit and ass teased at the same time sent Pandora's desire off the scale. She cried out in ecstasy, her entire body wrapped in sensation and orgasmic thrills that had her trembling with overwhelming pleasure.

Before making love with Steel, she had never viewed sex as an emotional experience. Due to her training, she had always tried to separate her feelings from physical sensations, particularly since the emotions she usually connected with sex were shame and disgust. She'd never imagined such powerful feelings of affection and fulfillment.

Steel rolled her onto her stomach and gently raked his teeth over her ass. Then he thrust his tongue against her sphincter.

Pandora gasped and clutched the bedcovers. This was the most amazing sexual experience of her life. Steel's hands seemed to be everywhere at once. He reached around and fondled her clit with one hand and kneaded her breast with the other. All the while his tongue thrust deeper, exploring the throbbing little ring of muscle.

Another orgasm broke over her, making her almost dizzy with pleasure.

"Pandora," he breathed, licking his way up her spine. He slipped an arm around her and guided her to her hands and knees. Grasping her hips, he entered her from behind.

"Oh, Steel!" she panted, thrusting her ass in time with his pumping hips. One of his hands reached around and he used his fingertips to rub her swollen, ultrasensitive clit.

Pandora's heart raced. She gasped and moaned, slowly climbing toward another orgasm.

Steel's breath rasped and the caress of his fingers on her clit became faster and more excited. Knowing how much she turned him on aroused her even more.

Their motions became so rough and frantic that he was forced to use both hands to steady her hips.

"Steel, please!" she wailed, her eyes closed tightly as another climax overtook her.

She felt his powerful body stiffen and lunge hard as he came, his heat filling her before they both collapsed onto the bed.

After a moment he rolled over and pulled her close to his chest. A contented moan escaped Pandora's throat before she drifted to sleep in his arms.

## Chapter Four

Pandora's stomach ached from nerves but she used all her training to appear calm and collected as she sat in Re Lord's office.

The superior's cold blue gaze fixed on her and he asked, "What brought on this sudden desire to resign from intelligence, Pandora?"

"Personal reasons, sir."

"I'm afraid that's not good enough. We've invested a great deal of money and time in you. It's your responsibility to fulfill your end of our bargain."

Now anger churned deep inside her, alleviating some of the guilt and apprehension she'd felt about this conversation. It had been five days since she'd met Steel and she knew she could no longer put off the inevitable. She was due to report her progress and had decided now was the best time to turn in her resignation.

"I made no bargain," she said. "I was coerced into this training."

"Coerced into a career that most pureblooded Laetez intelligence officers would give their front teeth for?" Re Lord curled his lip. "I find that hard to believe."

"You know it's the truth."

"You were *created* to be a perfect assassin. Why else would a lab waste time on you?"

"You stole Searilla DNA to create me. I was reared in a lab instead of a home. All my life I was treated as *something* instead of *someone* and you have the audacity to make me feel as if I'm wrong for wanting a normal life?"

He raised his eyes to the heavens. "Look, Pandora Fourteen, I have neither the time nor the inclination to coddle you through emotional outbursts. That's why we have medication for your sort. The fact is, you cannot leave intelligence."

"I'm a free citizen —"

"This started because of Steel."

She sighed deeply and he added, "You don't have to lie. You were quite right about your room at the inn being monitored."

Pandora momentarily stopped breathing and Re Lord smiled, a wicked twisting of his lips. She wondered if this man had ever felt a genuine, warm emotion in his life.

He continued, "I should have known you wouldn't be able to handle it. The medics and trainers on your case warned me about your failures, but I wanted to believe the only Searilla we have with a Laetez face would be able to fulfill her duty —"

"I'm sorry but I can't."

"Let me finish. I wanted to believe you would be able to fulfill your duty *willingly*. You will repay your creators, Pandora. And you will serve the Laetez government."

"I refuse."

"Then you have condemned your hideous Searilla soldier to death."

She glared. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Steel. Your lover. The man you planned to throw away your entire life for," he growled. "Unless you end your depraved relationship with him, I will end it for you."

"I'll warn him."

"Go ahead. Do you think either of you have the power to fight me? I'm a superior. You're a trainee and he's a mere officer in the ACT Corps. In two weeks he's due for an upgrade on his artificial heart. The medics have found a way of making it even more efficient than it already is. At least that's the plan. A word from me and he might just die in surgery. Or perhaps they'll downgrade his heart rather than upgrade it. Wouldn't it be sad if that finely tuned piece of machinery failed during deep sea maneuvers?"

Pandora felt sick to her stomach. She very nearly leapt across the desk and tore out Re Lord's throat with her teeth. Gripping the chair arms so tightly her hands ached, she stated with impressive calmness, "And if I do as you ask?"

"Then I'll forget all about Steel. He'll continue to receive his promised upgrades and he'll enjoy a career in the ACT Corps for as long as he desires. I'm told the corps places great value on their cyborg members. What will it be, Pandora? Will you have a short, fearful marriage to a doomed officer or will you set him free so you can both fulfill your destinies?"

Pandora felt as if someone had shot her through the heart with a stun pistol. The very thought of spending her life apart from Steel was horrible, but the idea of him dying because of her was absolutely unbearable. She knew Re Lord was right. Even if she told Steel the truth, even if they fled the planet, they would be hunted down. Re Lord didn't like failure and he had many friends in high positions.

"Well?" he prodded.

"I'll do what you want. Give me another day to break things off with Steel."

"Granted."

"But if I find you've lied to me, Re Lord, if anything happens to Steel, I am gone. I don't care if you lock me in solitary, torture or kill me. Steel is the only person you have to use against me."

"I believe that. Dismissed."

Pandora stood, seething with hatred.

She made her way to the training facility at intelligence headquarters where she tried to expel her almost uncontrollable emotions with an intense workout on the heavy bag.

She was so furious that she didn't notice a fellow trainee, Re Lex, approach.

"Hey, are you all right?" Re Lex asked, his brow furrowed.

Pandora paused for a moment in hitting the bag and wiped her sweaty face on her forearm. Panting, she shook her head and said, "I've been better."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No. Thanks."

"I'd ask if you want to spar but the way you're looking you'd be out for the kill."

Pandora forced a smile.

"Thanks anyway, Re Lex, but I'm going to take a shower."

Tugging off her protective gloves and hand wraps, Pandora headed for the locker room. Standing in the shower, she realized the workout hadn't made her feel any better. If anything she felt worse. Tears welled in her eyes and she let the warm water wash them away.

She loved Steel so much and that was why she had made the only decision she could. She couldn't tell him the truth because he'd only try to fight Re Lord and that would surely end in his execution. Though it killed her to lie to him, she needed to make him believe she was leaving him because she wanted to. She only prayed she would have the strength to give a convincing performance.

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Pandora waited in her room for Steel to arrive. Already she felt emotionally battered. She couldn't believe the past few days, which had been so perfect, were about to end like this.

Yet she had no choice. Steel's life meant more to her than her own happiness. She knew he'd be hurt by what she was about to do, but he'd get over it. He'd eventually write her off as a mistake. No doubt he would one day find someone else to take her place. The life they'd talked about he would share with another woman. The thought of somebody else living with Steel, touching him and engaging in intimate conversations, made her dizzy with jealousy. But *her* feelings didn't matter. Not anymore.

He knocked on the door and she jumped, her heart pounding.

Closing her eyes, she collected herself then strode to the door and opened it.

"Hello, Pandora." He embraced her snugly and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

She remained rigid in his arms and didn't respond to the kiss though she longed to embrace him and never let go. For a moment she allowed herself to focus on his delicious scent and the comfort of his rock-hard body against her. That was enough. Now she had to continue before she lost her nerve. She stiffened even more in his embrace.

He pulled back and held her at arm's length, his brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"Come in, Steel. We need to talk." She stepped away from him and guided him into the room.

"What?"

She heard the door click shut behind him and she turned, her arms folded beneath her breasts. "I'm leaving today, Steel."

"What are you talking about?"

"Even letting you know is against orders, but you're a nice guy and you deserve better."

"Pandora, I don't get it."

"I'm an agent, Steel. You know that. I'm sorry it had to end like this but my assignment is complete." She glanced at him, her expression detached. "I don't need you anymore."

He strode toward her and she held her ground, though it was more difficult than she'd imagined. So far she had only seen Steel's gentle side. Now the ferocious expression on his face sent a shiver down her spine.

"Pandora, this is a load of shit. What's going on?"

She raised her eyes to the heavens and released a frustrated breath. No doubt she looked convincingly annoyed. It seemed that when forced, she was an even better actress than she'd given herself credit for. "I was told giving you this courtesy was a mistake, but unfortunately I let you get to me. I'm trying to be kind, Steel."

"Kind." He grasped her chin in his hand, a bit too hard for her liking, but she remained standing there, her gaze locked on his. Curling his lip, he said, "You're lying."

"I'm not lying," she said coolly. "You probably wish I was because I know rejection is painful, particularly for someone like you."

An iciness crept into his eyes and again she resisted the urge to pull away in fear. She knew his physical strength and the extent of his skills as a warrior. Even with her combat training he could destroy her, yet he dropped his hand from her face.

That frigid look melted away and he said, "You've been ordered to do this, haven't you?"

"My order was to seduce you. Convince you there's something between us. Fuck you. You're my first live test subject, Steel, because you're one of the only men on this planet who won't die from fucking me. It's over now. I've done my job and you've done yours."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

With a suddenness that stole her breath, he grasped the front of her dress and tore it open.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"I want to make sure you're not linked to a monitor. Do you have an implant?" He took her by the wrist and dragged her toward the bed.

At any other time having him pull her half naked to bed would have turned her on, but not now. Not with that wild look in his eyes.

She'd known he wouldn't leave easily, but this was getting out of hand.

"I don't have any kind of implant," she snapped as he pushed her onto the bed and began running his hands over every inch of her.

Her heart pounded with irritation and a hint of arousal. She loved the feel of his hands on her, the way he explored her gently in spite of his obvious emotional distress. He still loved her as much as she loved him.

This parting was wrong. So wrong.

He rolled her onto her back and ran his fingertips over her scalp, across her shoulders and down her spine. When he slid a finger along the indentation of her ass, she shivered with passion. His other hand spread her legs and he reached underneath her, cupping her soft mound.

"Don't do this," she panted.

"Why? Do you like it?" he said, a vicious edge to his voice. His finger dipped inside her pussy that was already soaked with passion. He slid in another finger then another.

"No!" She kicked back at him and he grunted then stood and hauled her over his shoulder.

"Now what are you doing?" she demanded.

He headed for the porch. "Taking you out of this room."

"It's broad daylight and I'm naked!"

"That's your problem. Not mine. I want to know the truth and something tells me this room isn't a safe place to talk."

He was far too perceptive for her own good.

Still, if the only way to convince him to keep away from her was to speak to him outside then she'd do it.

He walked a safe distance from the inn. Luckily the private beach was empty at the moment.

Steel placed her on her feet, grasped her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "Now tell me the truth, Pandora. Why are you doing this?"

"I am telling you the truth," she stated, her gaze locked on his. If she showed any sign of weakness he would know for sure she was lying. It was bad enough he already suspected it. "Steel, we haven't seen each other since we were children. The idea of us being soul mates is just a fantasy. It's been fun. I've thoroughly enjoyed this assignment, but I have spent my life training for a position in intelligence. Did you honestly think I'd blow years of hard work for an affair with a man I just met?"

At that moment she knew she'd convinced him. The expression in his beautiful gray eyes tore at her heart, but she couldn't let him get to her. His very life depended on her strength.

Then the pain in his eyes disappeared, replaced by utter coldness.

"*Strumpsc*," he stated. The Searilla word for slut.

That insult hurt worse than she thought possible, mostly because in many ways it was true.

He turned and walked away, leaving her naked on the beach.

Pandora wrapped her arms around herself and headed back to her room. Tears welled in her eyes but this time she refused to let them fall. There was no longer room in her life for weakness. No place for genuine softness. For the first time she realized she could make it as a spy, as an assassin. It was what she was bred and trained for and from now on it was all she had.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steel returned to headquarters by instinct alone. He wasn't consciously aware of piloting the shuttle because his thoughts were filled with Pandora. That horrible emptiness that had faded in her presence now overwhelmed him.

He'd spent his life learning to combat that emptiness, to focus his wayward emotions, but none of that seemed to matter now.

Worst of all, he couldn't help feeling that she'd lied.

Something wasn't right.

Why did he feel like dying?

Back at headquarters, he left word that he'd be diving then changed into his swim shorts and headed for the beach. Maybe if he challenged himself physically, he could alleviate some emotional distress, perhaps fill that deep void.

Yet he knew it would be impossible. Years ago the emptiness had almost consumed him and though he had learned to live with it, it had never faded.

At the test range on the beach, he approached the training tower and asked the soldier in charge to release targets into the water.

"What level, Sir?" called the lower-ranking soldier.

"Advanced," Steel said. "Set it on automatic."

"How long?"

"Indefinite."

The soldier looked slightly surprised, but did what Steel asked.

Moments later, he dove beneath the surface. In this exercise, targets were released from the tower. The number of targets was transmitted to Steel's wrist spec and he had to locate and return them to the underwater launching pad. An advanced setting would force him to recover the highest number of targets from the widest range.

He literally immersed himself in his work, yet no matter how long or fast he swam, no matter how much he concentrated on the targets, he couldn't forget Pandora and the love he'd lost, found and lost again.

Steel's lungs started burning and he glanced at his wrist spec. He'd been under for longer than he realized. A bright blue target glowed a short distance away and he swam toward it then darted to the launching pad. After returning the target, he broke the surface, gasping. He waded toward the tower and after a brief rest, dove again.

Trying to rid himself of the emptiness, he dove again and again, losing himself in the depths. Ignoring the ache in his lungs and the soreness of his muscles, he swam for another target, half buried in a bed of reeds.

Those particular reeds were dangerous, snaking around those who wandered into their domain. Approaching, Steel saw the remains of several fish and other sea creatures trapped in their deadly embrace.

Ever-so briefly, a thought flashed across his mind. The thought of surrendering to the only thing, other than Pandora, that might save him from the abyss.

He headed toward the target, not even drawing his stun pistol, which was protocol when approaching the reeds. Reaching for the target, he felt the caress of the reeds on his flesh. They seemed so willowy, yet he knew them to be strong.

Just when he thought he'd escape without mishap, the reeds tightened around his arms and legs. They squeezed his ribs, forcing him to lose precious air.

Instinct kicked in and he struggled, breaking the reeds with his clawed hands, but for each one he destroyed, dozens more seemed to latch on to him.

He lost air rapidly and panic struck him, making him fight harder.

Blackness overtook him and the next thing he knew he was on the beach, coughing up water.

"Take it easy," Xenos said from where he knelt beside Steel.

It took a few moments for Steel to collect himself. He felt sore everywhere and when he glanced down, he noted he was bruised all over from the force of the reeds.

Glaring at Xenos, he panted, "Why the hell did you interfere?"

"If I hadn't you'd be dead," Xenos growled, his deep Tydisian voice resounding above the rolling waves.

For the first time, Steel noticed how dark it was, the wind cold and fierce, the sky stormy. He felt even stormier inside, yet those emotions merely resounded in the empty void. He clung to them because he knew once the anger and hurt faded, he'd be alone again.

"The question is, what the hell were you trying to do?" Xenos continued, grasping Steel's arm roughly. "According to the report at the training tower, you've been at it since late this morning. And why were you in the reeds but your weapon still holstered?"

"It's none of your business, Xenos." Steel shoved him away and tried to stand, but Xenos dragged him back onto the sand. Though Xenos was quite strong, Steel was even stronger. He could have risked further punishment by breaking away from Xenos, but he didn't want to. Not because he feared another mark on his record, but because he

desperately needed to talk to someone, even Xenos who would never understand how he felt.

"As unit master it's very much my business if one of my men tries to commit suicide."

"You don't get it!"

"So tell me."

"Why don't you just reprimand me and get it over with?"

"What's gotten into you, Steel? You're a good soldier. Does this have to do with the woman?"

Steel glared at Xenos then nodded.

Sighing deeply, Xenos sat back on his heels. "What happened?"

"We broke up. Or she broke up."

"So you want to kill yourself because a woman you've only known for five days rejects you? Think about it."

"I have! Do you think I want to feel like this?"

"When you told me it was Pandora I feared this might happen. What is it about her?" Xenos looked distant, as if trying to find a logical explanation for a completely illogical situation. The man obviously had no understanding of love. Real, deep love that pulled a man out of the void.

Again Steel sighed and pushed himself to his feet. This time Xenos also stood. He stepped in front of Steel and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I want to understand this, Steel."

"Why? So you can tell me what an emotional asshole I am?" Steel snarled. Rain and wind lashed him, stinging his sensitive Draper hair and making his eyes blur so that he could scarcely see Xenos.

"No, so I can help you," Xenos said.

"You can't help me," Steel shouted. "No one can help me except her. I can't explain it exactly. There's an abyss and I'm in it. Alone. But when I'm with her, that emptiness is filled."

"We're all alone."

"Then how do we deal with it? That kind of barren existence. No emotions. Just emptiness. Darkness. Everything in life is just a way of coping with the void."

Xenos' brow furrowed and he shook his head. "What is it about you and her? When she left Aquavalley, you couldn't cope. I thought you'd changed."

"I have. I'll deal with it. Life on Tydepth showed me how to do that."

"Then no more swimming in reed beds without drawing your weapon first."

"No more." Steel gazed skyward and a streak of lightning flashed. "Maybe this would be easier to accept if I felt she was telling me the truth, but I have the feeling she was somehow forced into this decision."

"What do you mean?"

On their way back to the barracks, Steel briefly explained Pandora's connection to Laetez intelligence.

When he finished, Xenos said, "I think you're wrong to continue pursuing her. Emotional connections can only destroy a person's focus." Steel was about to argue, but Xenos continued, "However, seeing that you're determined, perhaps you should see her one last time, if only to let her confirm her decision. I warn you, Steel, if she's working for intelligence, you can't trust her. She has been trained to lie and to kill."

"We've been trained to kill." He glared.

"But differently. More honestly. Think about it. Wouldn't manipulating you into marriage in mere days prove to her superiors that she is indeed as useful a weapon as they want her to be?"

Steel drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Xenos was right, of course. He was examining this situation from a distance, not feeling the emotional impact that so deeply affected Steel.

"I'll talk to her again," Steel said.

"Before you do anything I want you to stop by the med lab."

"I'm fine."

"That's an order," Xenos stated without room for question. "I'm willing to keep this incident off your record, but you will be examined to make sure you haven't sustained a serious injury."

Steel nodded, his jaw tight with annoyance.

"And if she rejects you this time, do yourself a favor and forget her," Xenos said. "You don't need her, Steel. You've lived all these years without her. You survived training with Tepidat, which I know from experience is no easy task. And you have a promising career ahead of you. Don't throw it away for a woman who couldn't care less about you."

Again Xenos was right, yet it was hard to imagine Pandora felt nothing. Not when Steel felt so much.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first place Steel tried looking for Pandora was back at the inn. When he got there the clerk informed him she had already checked out. From there he went to the main intelligence office in the city. Surprisingly, he didn't need to go through a hassle to see Pandora.

Standing in the main lobby, he paced slowly, his heart pounding. If she had been telling him the truth then he was an idiot for following her here. Perhaps he was a fool anyway. After all, the last place she'd be able to speak freely was here in this office.

"I thought you'd be able to take no for an answer," Pandora said.

Steel spun and faced her. She looked particularly beautiful in a pale pink dress that showed off her slim yet curvy body to advantage. Just looking at her made him buzz all over, yet he felt turmoil and was unsure if it was strictly his own or emanating from her. She certainly looked calm enough.

"Well?" she demanded. "This *strumpsc*a wants to know what you're doing here."

"Just satisfying my curiosity."

"Pandora," called a man's voice. A handsome, sandy-haired Laetez male wearing a casual suit approached. His brow furrowed, he looked at Steel.

"Lex." Pandora smiled warmly and turned to the man who slipped an arm around her and held her close to his side.

"Didn't mean to interrupt," he said, glancing at Steel. "I didn't know you were with someone."

"This is Steel," she explained. "We grew up together in the same private lab. He was in the area and just dropped in to say hi. Steel, this is my husband-to-be, Re Lex."

Husband-to-be. Her revelation should have stunned him, but it didn't. Not from a woman like her. One way or the other, it was clear she no longer wanted him around. That was one thing he was sure of.

"Hey nice to meet you." Re Lex extended his hand and Steel grasped it.

"I'm sorry I can't do lunch today, Steel," she said. "Lex and I have plans."

"I'm sure you do," Steel said. "Goodbye, Pandora."

Her smile became even sweeter and she nodded before he turned and left the building.

How could he have been such a fool? How could he have misread her? He was so certain he had known her. Why did he feel this kind of connection when she felt nothing? *Nothing*.

Shortly after returning to headquarters, he joined several members of his unit, since they were scheduled to test new nighttime tracking devices. Xenos was already on the beach.

"Everything all right?" Xenos asked rather stiffly. Emotional issues were out of his scope and Steel took it as a compliment that he'd even bothered listening to his problems at all.

"Fine," Steel said with conviction.

Xenos cast him a discerning look then nodded.

Though inside Steel longed for Pandora, seeing her with another man had been the shock to his system that he needed. His first impulse had been to squeeze the life out of Re Lex, but if the man was tied up with a manipulative bitch like Pandora, eventually she'd do that particular job herself.

Already the abyss was taking over Steel. This time instead of fighting it, instead of searching for the comfort of the emotional contact he had wanted all his life, he welcomed the emptiness.

Xenos was right. Love was useless. It accomplished nothing.

"Can you handle this dive tonight?" Xenos asked. "You were submerged quite a lot today."

"I'm part Searilla. It's what I was created for," he said coolly.

Nodding, Xenos headed toward the other soldiers who had assembled by the training tower. Steel followed.

This was the beginning of a new life for him. An entirely new life. He no longer wanted connections to his past and that included the ACT Corps.

In a few months, his time would be up here and he decided he would not reenlist.

There were other paths to follow. Paths as dark and dangerous as falling into the abyss.

## **Part Two**

## Chapter Five

### *Fourteen Years Later*

"You're arrogant, lack integrity and have no respect for authority. If not for pressure from Prime Re Terran, you wouldn't be here," Superior Yashel said, his scathing gaze sweeping Steel who had already settled, uninvited, into the chair across from his desk.

Steel glanced around the ACT Corps Superior's spacious office at headquarters then back to the man himself. Yashel was a self-righteous prick. About a year ago when Xenos had turned outlaw and led a rebellion to fight for the rights of ACT products, Yashel had taken his place as Superior of the ACT Corps. He had pursued Xenos relentlessly and taken part in the tragic execution of Xenos' ancestral line.

Not that Xenos and his rebels hadn't committed their share of sins in the name of freedom, but what was the old Earth saying? You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

The rebels had at least managed to draw attention to the brutality of private labs. They had also exposed corruption within the Laetez government that led to an important reform and the arrest of several officials, including Chief Re Lord and the former Prime himself, Re Vic.

Though Steel hadn't formally joined the revolt—he had long ago vowed never to join any organization again—he had often delivered supplies to Xenos' rebel ship when they were deep in hiding.

No, Steel would never be a "joiner" again, nor would he bind himself to anyone, be it in business or in his personal life. Partners of any sort were out of the question. He worked alone, flew alone and lived alone. Steel had learned not only to accept the abyss, but master it.

"And why would Re Terran so desperately want my expertise?" Steel asked.

The previous morning he'd delivered his latest prey—a Butchcade pirate who had been on the intergalactic most wanted list for the past seven years—to a retention base near the Delilah Sector. He'd been outside the base, checking his bank file to see that the handsome price for the pirate had been deposited into his account, when a young agent from the Laetez government approached him with a message from Superior Yashel.

"Because for this particular case we feel you are the best man for the job," Yashel said coolly.

"Ah, the mighty Laetez government has come crawling to a bounty hunter," Steel said, his voice almost a purr. A smile spread across his face. "How wonderful."

Yashel's lip curled slightly. No doubt this meeting was distasteful to him. He was among the members of ACT who were completely brainwashed into believing the program was a good thing.

Maybe that was because he could pass for a purebred, as long as he left his gloves on. Steel gained some satisfaction in knowing the bastard had webbed hands and feet, a result of his Tydisian blood. He might kiss the Prime's ass. He might live his life as a wannabe purebred, but he was just as much a crossbreed as Steel.

"What is the job the government can't handle?" Steel asked.

"Three months ago one of our top ACT assassins went missing."

One of the government reforms from last year forced all crossbreeds, even those in offices such as intelligence, to fall under the jurisdiction of the ACT Corps Superior.

"Intelligence has been unable to locate her," Yashel continued. "The one agent who reported that he was getting close has also disappeared."

"Do you think he found the assassin or did the assassin find him?" Steel asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"That's what we're hiring you to find out," Yashel replied.

"Why do you want me specifically?"

"Because the missing assassin is a Searilla crossbreed. There's no telling when or how she might use her sexual poison and we need someone who is immune to it."

A warning shot flashed through Steel's mind. His pulse quickened, unusual considering it generally took a great deal of physical or emotional stress to affect his new artificial heart.

"Who exactly is this assassin?" he asked.

Yashel's intense blue gaze held his and the superior stated, "Pandora Fourteen."

Steel had spent years controlling his feelings. So many times his very life depended upon his ability to remain cool. Even now he sat calmly, his gaze never faltering, yet turmoil raged deep inside him.

*Pandora.*

The only person he had ever loved. The one who had taught him the most painful – and valuable – lesson of his life.

Even now he could see her luscious curves, her long red hair and her vibrant green eyes – the alluring eyes of the most beautiful demon in the universe.

"That's the main reason we've called you," Yashel said. "We know that in Aquavalley you and Pandora had a deep connection."

"That was ages ago. We were children," Steel snapped. "A lot has changed since Aquavalley."

"You were engaged to be married, were you not?"

"How did you find out about that?" That humiliating situation happened fourteen years ago. He was surprised she had even told anyone about it.

"It's in her record, a special note made by former Chief Re Lord."

"From what I know about Re Lord's part in the corruption of the Laetez government, any word from him should be treated with skepticism."

"But was it true in this case?"

"Superior Yashel," Steel said calmly, though his hands tightened on the arms of his chair, "whatever happened between me and Pandora was a mistake. I'm sure if you know about our brief engagement then you also know she married a man called Re Lex."

Yashel's brow furrowed. "She never married."

Steel fell momentarily silent then he said, "I'm not surprised. You see, she was engaged to both of us at the same time. Perhaps you should ask *him* to track her."

"We're asking you," Yashel said. "Re Lord was very specific in his note that you greatly affected her. We don't know if she has defected or if she is dead. At the moment she is our only Searilla product with the qualities required to complete very specific tasks."

"You mean she's the only one who looks human or Laetez?"

"We want her back, dead or alive," Yashel said, clearly irritated. "We believe you can complete the task."

"I'm not surprised, considering I've brought in more intergalactic criminals than most of the governments strung together."

"I'm not going to beg you to take a job for which you will be *very* well paid. Either you want it or you don't. Make up your mind."

Settling back into the chair and crossing his legs, Steel inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. He didn't even try to keep the slight smirk from his lips as he asked, "How much?"

"One million intergalactic currency units. One quarter paid now. The rest when she is delivered."

"Half now."

Yashel snorted. "Out of the question."

Without further comment, Steel rose and headed for the door.

"Wait," Yashel said.

Steel paused but didn't so much as glance over his shoulder.

"All right. Half," Yashel said. "And our preference is to have her back alive."

Steel momentarily closed his eyes. That was his preference too. The thought of Pandora dead was more painful than he wanted to admit. He hated knowing that even after all this time, the mere mention of her stirred him in so many ways.

"If you need backup of any kind, don't hesitate to contact us," Yashel said. "We'll supply any equipment you might need as well."

"I have my own equipment." Steel turned to Yashel. "As soon as you credit my account, I'm on the job."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pandora's sandaled feet clicked softly on the pink stone walk leading to Bangle's private garden at Kayndle. Bangle was master of the most exclusive pleasure house in the Delilah Sector.

Well hidden deep in the mountains of Talpyne, Kayndle was protected by the most powerful security team currency could buy, and currency was something Bangle had much of. He possessed the widest assortment of beautiful escorts in a variety of species and sexes. All were in excellent health and regularly treated with the most advanced contraceptive and disease control products in the civilized universe.

Pandora had met Bangle a little over a year ago when she'd been following a lead on a particularly elusive target. She'd stopped at Kayndle for information and ended up disclosing more about herself than she had since she'd been with Steel.

Bangle had the unsettling ability to read people, to draw them out even when they didn't want to be. Still, Pandora doubted he would have been able to extract so much from her if she had not been at the end of her tolerance regarding her life.

After the incident with Steel, she had immersed herself in her loathsome career. The Laetez government had control of her. As long as Re Lord continued to gain power, she would be forced to either serve or live on the run. One way or another she could not, would not, risk falling in love again.

When Pandora met Bangle, she felt an immediate connection to him and due to his sexual orientation there was no way in hell anyone would believe they were lovers. He was a safe haven in so many ways and when she learned they had a mutual enemy – Re Lord – their friendship had been sealed. She and Bangle had much in common, both crossbreeds who had been created as sex slaves.

Bangle might not be an assassin, but he had been used. He had also found a way to free himself from slavery and build a life of his own. He encouraged Pandora to do the same, no matter what the cost.

Yet she had already paid the ultimate price. Steel had been the best part of her life and he was gone forever.

Not long after their breakup she had inquired about his welfare, wanting to make certain Re Lord had held up his end of the bargain. She had been informed Steel's surgery had gone well and he had returned to duty with the most advanced artificial heart available on the Laetez home world. Shortly after that, she learned he had left the ACT Corps by personal choice and she had lost track of him for several years. Then she found out he had become a successful bounty hunter.

She'd considered tracking him down, but there was no point. She was still an assassin and Re Lord had been promoted to the position of Chief. The bastard edged closer and closer to the Prime and still had jurisdiction over intelligence.

About a year ago at the end of an ACT rebellion, he had been arrested for conspiring with several other government officials against many of their allies, including Earth. Re Lord had been directly involved in plans for biological warfare against a wide range of species.

Soon after Re Lord and Prime Re Vic had been taken into custody, Superior Yashel of the ACT Corps had been placed in charge of Pandora and other crossbreed members of intelligence. She wasn't sure he was much better than Re Lord, but she did know she could no longer bear her life. If the Laetez government hadn't allowed her to resign as a trainee then she doubted they would let her go now that she was one of their top assassins.

As Bangle had often told her, she could either continue as a slave or finally take control of her life. She had been on the verge of completing her latest assignment, ready to take a man to bed and poison him with her very essence, when she decided she would no longer be a weapon for the Laetez. She would not kill again. Not like that.

Bangle had long ago offered her sanctuary and a temporary job at Kayndle until she could put her life together. She knew how difficult it had been for her to infiltrate his domain and didn't doubt she would be safe there, at least for a while. Impressed by her skills, he had made her his personal assistant and she enjoyed the job far more than the career she had been bred for.

Nearing the garden, she heard grunts, heavy breathing and the sound of flesh slapping flesh. Those sounds were normal for Kayndle. What was slightly unusual was this time they were not derived from sexual acts. It was Bangle's exercise period and no doubt he was kicking around his bodyguards.

Bangle was skilled in several forms of martial arts from various planets. Even Pandora, whose body was deadly in more ways than one, had learned some useful techniques from him.

Just behind a wall of neatly trimmed red bushes native to the area, she saw Bangle standing in a lush circle of grass. Four tall, thickly muscled Triroot males employed as his bodyguards surrounded him. They attacked the smaller Laetez crossbreed as if he was their enemy instead of their employer. Bangle wouldn't tolerate anything less than their best efforts and they realized that if they wished to keep their body parts intact, they needed to be sharp.

Pandora settled onto a black iron chair intricately decorated with floral shapes. Those of the Triroot species were not only quite strong, but had the advantage of a third arm that grew between their shoulder blades as well as horns that sprouted from their piggish faces. They were born warriors, though of late many had turned to piracy. Bangle had ten Triroot males on his staff of fifty bodyguards who kept Kayndle safe.

Bangle wasn't particularly tall but had a sinewy build, very well proportioned with broad shoulders, a trim waist and long legs. He wore his dark brown hair fairly short but long enough for his lovers to run their fingers through.

It was no surprise that, with his pleasant disposition and good looks, not to mention the wealth he'd acquired, Bangle had no shortage of admirers. Pandora knew his wealth had come at a price though.

He'd been a slave to the brutal sexual desires of others, which was the main reason he was so adamant about keeping Kayndle a safe haven for his employees. There would always be flesh peddlers, especially in the Delilah Sector, but Bangle had a reputation of being *the* man to work for if you wanted fair pay, quality health care and a measure of respect.

At the moment Bangle's dark eyes calmly observed his sparring partners. He and the bodyguards were shirtless. The Triroots wore black pants and boots. Bangle wore loose-fitting red trousers and lightweight black shoes. Even when the Triroots moved simultaneously, he defended himself with precision and speed that left two of the bodyguards with blackened eyes and the third sprawled on his back.

The fourth managed to avoid two of Bangle's sharp kicks and retaliate with a powerful punch. Bangle dropped to the grass and spun, using his extended leg to sweep the Triroot's feet out from under him.

The man landed hard, grunting as his third arm crunched behind his back. Bangle sprang lightly to his feet.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "That's all for today."

He extended his hand to a bodyguard who still lay on the ground and helped the man to his feet.

The Triroots left the garden and Bangle turned to Pandora, a pleasant smile on his lips. He approached, his short dark hair slick and damp, his smooth face and lean-musced torso gleaming with sweat. A gold ring pierced his right nipple and a black and purple bracelet-style tattoo wrapped around one of his strong wrists.

"Pandora, my darling," he said, sitting beside her. He momentarily closed his eyes and arched his neck back as he caught his breath after his workout.

Shaking her head, Pandora grinned. "Sometimes I wonder why you employ bodyguards at all, you handsome ass-kicker."

"I'd rather be known as a handsome ass-licker," he teased, wiggling his sleek, dark eyebrows.

Pandora raised her eyes to the heavens. "You're incorrigible."

"Completely." He gave her his most charming grin and said, "You look particularly lovely today. Radiant even."

She gave a snort of laughter. "All right, Bangle, what do you want?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"You've gone past obvious and reached pathetically blatant."

He narrowed his eyes and smiled slightly, reaching out and brushing away a wisp of hair that had caught in the corner of her mouth. "Sometimes when I look at you I almost understand what males see in the opposite sex."

"You're slicing it awfully thick today, my darling," she purred, taking his chin in her hand and brushing a chaste kiss across his firm little mouth. She knew women who would kill for those rosebud lips, yet the rest of his face was handsome enough to carry them off without appearing effeminate. "What do you want, Bangle? Do you need me back on security for whatever reason?"

"No. I need you in another capacity." All humor faded from his face and for the first time since she'd known him he looked apprehensive.

"What is it?"

"We know a lot about each other, Pandora. In many ways we're the same, both bred and used for our bodies. When you came here, I promised I would never ask you to do anything that would cause you shame. I won't go back on my word, but I must present a proposal. If you don't want to do it then we'll forget it entirely."

"You can't possibly be asking me to act as an escort," she said. "I'll kill your clientele."

"Not this particular client," he said softly. "It's rare that we get Searillas around here. They're as uptight as most Tydisians when it comes to sex outside the marriage bed. However, a Searilla male arrived today looking for some company. It would only be for one night and he's willing to pay very, very well."

His suggestion stunned Pandora. Bangle, a man she had come to consider a friend, was the last person she expected to place her in this position. She couldn't believe he was doing it for the money.

"Is it really so important to you?" she asked.

He sighed and shook his head then ran a hand through his damp hair. "Actually I was thinking about you."

"About me?"

"You've spent your entire life using your sexuality to serve other people. Since you've been here you haven't expressed any desires of your own. It's almost as if you're afraid of sex."

At that comment she laughed loudly.

"What I mean is you have a fear of using sex for pleasure."

She stood, folded her arms beneath her breasts and walked to a stone fountain a short distance away. She watched the pink-tinged water pour from a round bottle held by a Laetez maiden. The last time she had enjoyed sex was fourteen years ago, those brief but memorable days with Steel.

"You know what happened the last time I enjoyed it," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Bangle stood behind her and placed his warm hands on her shoulders. His palms were calloused, but his touch gentle.

"I know, love," he said in her ear. "But don't you think it's time you started living again? I don't give a damn about the money, but maybe if you take this guy to bed you'll see there is still pleasure out there for you."

She smiled sadly, shook her head and turned to him, taking his hands in hers. "It's sweet of you to care, Bangle, but with all due respect, you're not one to give advice about love."

He drew a deep breath and nodded slowly. "You have a point. But if the right guy came along I'd be gone in a second."

"You would not."

"I just haven't been able to find someone —"

"You mean you're still carrying a proverbial torch for whomever has the match to this." She ran her fingertip over the tattoo on his wrist. He'd told her the story behind it. How years ago he and the only man he had ever truly loved had marked each other with soul mate bracelets. Then his lover had left abruptly.

Bangle hadn't told her exactly what happened, but it was something to do with Re Lord, crossbreeding and the Laetez government. Seeing how discussing the incident still upset Bangle deeply, Pandora hadn't pried. All she knew was that he despised Re Lord for driving his lover away from him.

"You're right." Bangle sighed. "It's none of my business. But I still think you're making a mistake, if just for the pleasure factor. How often do you find someone you can fuck without consequences? And, Pandora, he has the most stunningly gorgeous body." He turned to her, a lustful gleam in his eyes.

"Then why don't you sleep with him?" she teased.

"Trying to get rid of me, are you?" He narrowed his eyes. "You know he's as poisonous as you are."

Pandora absently chewed her lower lip and thought about Bangle's proposal. Maybe he had a point. She was getting tired of using sex toys and her own hands to pleasure herself. If this Searilla had such a great body, maybe she could ignore his ape-face. Perhaps she could close her eyes and pretend he was Steel.

She recalled every detail of Steel's face. No, he wasn't traditionally good-looking, but he was incredibly sexy, compelling, almost handsome in a strange way.

"All right," she said. "I'll do it, but if I change my mind after meeting him, there will be no questions asked."

"I promise."

"What's his name?"

"He checked in as Jax Coolheart."

"Oh brother." Again she raised her eyes to the heavens.

He chuckled and tugged affectionately at a lock of her long red hair. "Something tells me you're going to appreciate Mr. Coolheart's qualities, Pandora."

She shrugged. "Maybe, but it's doubtful. Sometimes I think I'm completely sexed out, Bangle. My career turned me off love."

"Not love. Just murder."

"For me that's usually one in the same."

\* \* \* \* \*

In her room, Pandora changed into a seductive dress of pale green with a deep neckline. Gazing at herself in the full-length mirror, she touched a fingertip to the delicate green shell necklace resting between her breasts. She sighed, recalling that wonderful night Steel had bought it for her.

They had been so happy then. She thought she'd been jaded, but in reality she had been almost blissfully innocent. She had no idea then the horrors that would ensue—the loneliness and desolation of a life without love, only cold, calculated murder.

Her eyes narrowed at her reflection, as if searching for some remnant of the girl who had been in love with her magnificent cyborg soldier. She shook her head and left her room.

She made her way down the winding staircase to the lowest level of the bordello, nicknamed the dungeon. The rooms in this section were reinforced with Laetez exo-filler—one of the strongest substances in the known universe. Bangle usually placed potentially dangerous clients there. If they got out of hand, they could be restrained by hidden doors. Knowing Searilla strength, it made sense that this client would be serviced in the dungeon.

Already Mr. Jax Coolheart raised many questions in Pandora's mind. Why was Bangle so certain she would enjoy sleeping with him? He knew how she felt about relationships, even superficial ones. Using sex for murder had turned her off the act. The only time she felt true arousal was when she remembered being with Steel. It was pathetic how she still loved a man who had probably forgotten her. Not that she blamed him. Part of her hoped he had found happiness.

When she reached the lowest level, she heard nothing but the click of her heels echoing across the marble floor. It seemed to be deserted down here today. Not unusual, considering Bangle was very serious about security and rarely allowed in anyone considered threatening enough to warrant the dungeon.

She paused outside the door behind which Jax Coolheart waited. A strange feeling swept over her and her stomach tightened. She had the crazy urge to turn and flee. Then she shook her head. What the hell was her problem? With all the horrors she'd faced in her life, she had no reason to fear a Searilla male who wanted nothing more than sex.

She touched the color-coded keypad on the door and it opened. Pandora stepped into a sitting room with black marble walls and a thick lavender carpet on the floor. A plush black and purple couch stood against one wall. To her left was a fully stocked bar and to her right a potted tree bearing colorful fruit.

"Hello?" she called. "Mr. Coolheart?"

No one answered and she cautiously made her way toward the archway leading to the bedroom. When she reached it, her heart skipped a beat and she momentarily stopped breathing.

"Hello, Pandora," Steel said, a wicked smile on his slender lips. Wearing black pants, boots and a dark green tank top, he lay on the bed, his broad shoulders resting against the carved headboard. If possible, his body was even more chiseled and hard-looking than she remembered. Muscles rippled beneath the silvery flesh of his arms. He had some sort of tattoo on his left shoulder and another on his right forearm.

A sleek black cap covered his head and she caught a glimpse of a metal hair sheath dangling from the back of it, protecting his sensitive Draper hair. His piercing gray eyes stared at her from his savage face, rendering her momentarily speechless.

"What's the matter, beautiful?" he asked.

Pandora recovered quickly and anger overtook her shock. How could Bangle do this to her? He knew all about Steel, including what he looked like. Her best friend had set her up and she would not forgive him for this.

"I don't have to ask what you're doing here, do I?" she demanded. It was no coincidence that their paths crossed now – one of the most feared bounty hunters in the galaxy and a recently defected spy.

He drew a breath and cast her a lustful look. "Since this is a bordello it doesn't take a genius to figure it out."

"Don't insult my intelligence by claiming to be here as a client, *Mr. Coolheart*."

"Why wouldn't I be? The only non-Searillas who would fuck me are suicidal and most Searillas won't touch a mixed breed, so that doesn't leave me with many options, does it, beautiful?"

"Quit calling me that."

"I don't recall you having a problem with compliments. Your beauty is the greatest weapon in your arsenal, isn't it? However, if you'd rather dispense with the flirting and get right down to business, that's fine with me." He patted the empty space beside him on the bed.

Pandora's heart still pounded and her head spun. She'd thought she was long past the point in her life when anything could shock her or stir her emotions, but then she'd never thought her path would cross Steel's again.

Even after all these years and after all the things she'd done she still loved him every bit as much as she had fourteen years ago. Yet it was insane to think anything could ever exist between them again. They were strangers. But the last time they'd met

they had also been strangers, parted as children. The feelings between them had held strong.

Now that Re Lord was imprisoned, should she finally tell him the truth about why she'd broken off their engagement so long ago? Was there a chance he still loved her too? Even if she told him the truth, she was still a deserter. If he returned her love that meant he would also become an outlaw.

"Of course being a Searilla mixed breed yourself, you have the same problem I do regarding our deadly sexual nature. I was surprised to find someone here I could do business with. It must be slow for you, however. Searillas generally aren't into fucking mongrels."

She stared at him hard. "You presume a lot."

"No, no." Another wicked smile touched his lips. "I *used to* presume a lot, but I grew up."

"Yeah. You went from a respectable soldier to a space-scum bounty hunter."

His smile twisted into a sneer. "You're hardly one to talk. What happened, Pandora? Did the assassination business finally start to bore you? I have to admit I can't figure out why you'd leave such an esteemed, well-paying job to become a *strumpsc*a in the Delilah Sector, but considering I'm going to benefit from your career change, I won't complain."

Seeing that she wasn't about to go to him, he rose from the bed and approached her with long, slow strides. Hell, even after fourteen years he still had a body to die for. She'd almost forgotten how tall and rangy he was. He was slightly heavier and more muscular than she remembered, but in her opinion a man didn't really reach his peak until he hit his thirties.

His eyes were as sexy as ever and the bastard refused to take them off her.

It was one of those rare moments when Pandora wanted to turn and flee. Steel did things to her she wasn't ready to handle, not anymore. Instead of backing away, she stood her ground.

"Steel, I don't believe you know me or my situation well enough to understand what I'm doing here."

"I don't care what you're doing here, Pandora. I came here to fuck and I intend to get my money's worth," he said with such coldness that his statement actually hurt.

Was this the man she had sacrificed her life for? There was a hardness in his eyes she'd never seen before. This tattooed bounty hunter wasn't the soldier she'd fallen in love with.

Of course she wasn't the rather naïve young woman she had once been, either.

He grasped her shoulders and tugged her closer, but she braced her hands against his chest and pushed. She knew her strength was insignificant to him, yet he paused and tilted his head slightly to the side, an almost sinister half-smile on his lips. A chill raced down her spine. What had happened to him? What had happened to them both?

His gaze drifted downward and he touched a fingertip to the shell necklace.

"You still have this," he said, his voice scarcely a whisper, as if he wasn't aware of speaking the words aloud.

"Yes," she said. "It's one of my best memories, that night we went to the festival."

"Why? Because it marked your first professional conquest?" he said bitterly and once again met her gaze.

Her teeth clenched but she tried to relax. How was he to know why she had left him? She had done a great job of convincing him that her love for him had been a charade.

"Steel, we need to talk."

He pulled her closer. Her breasts pressed against his chest and in spite of her emotional doubts, her body responded to him. The man still aroused her more than anyone she had ever known. Her nipples tightened and her clit throbbed with desire.

Dipping his head toward hers, he spoke against her lips. "I didn't pay to talk."

"I thought bounty hunters were supposed to uphold the law. You plan on forcing me?"

"First of all, here in the Delilah Sector there is no law. Second, I doubt I'd be forcing you. You still get that wild look in your eyes when you want to fuck."

She curled her lip. "Wild look? What the hell is that supposed to mean—"

His mouth descended on hers, silencing her except for the moan of desire that escaped her throat. Pandora's thoughts blurred and all she could do was cling to him. After fourteen years this should feel like the kiss of a stranger, but it didn't. It was as if they had never been apart, so perfectly did their mouths and bodies align. She loved his taste and scent, the hardness of him against her. His tongue slipped between her lips and teased her with gentle yet demanding strokes.

Pandora's eyes closed and for some brief, blissful moments she surrendered to him completely.

## Chapter Six

When the kiss broke, Pandora continued leaning rather heavily against Steel. She lowered her chin slightly, her forehead resting against his shoulder. Then she tilted her face toward his.

He still wore a faint smile and sparks of desire ignited beneath the cool surface of his eyes.

"It's against my policy to force anyone. Even *strumpscas*," he said and took a single step back.

Pandora, who was still leaning against him, nearly stumbled. Her anger rushed back and she glared at him, "Call me a *strumpscas* again and I *will* hurt you, Steel."

Tossing a particularly lustful look in her direction, he asked, "You promise?"

Desire mingled with fury, the latter mostly directed at herself because she wanted him desperately though she knew the last thing she should do was sleep with him.

This time she grasped the front of his shirt and tightened her fist in it until her knuckles pressed against his warm flesh. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him. Hard.

Steel cupped the back of her head and opened his mouth to her searching tongue. He groaned, a sexy sound deep in his chest. They stood so close that she felt his cock stiffen between them.

They could talk later. If they didn't fuck right now, the passion would no doubt incinerate them.

Their mouths still fused, he swept her into his arms. He carried her to the bed and tossed her on it.

Pandora's heart throbbed and she tingled all over. She hadn't felt this alive in fourteen years.

After so many years of using sex to kill, lovemaking had lost its luster. Or so she'd thought. She felt almost like a girl again—fascinated by passion and overcome by the drives of her body.

Steel did this to her. He was the only man she had ever loved.

Pandora had no illusions that tonight would go anywhere. She'd be a complete fool to believe he wasn't here to claim the reward for her capture, but that didn't mean she couldn't allow herself these moments of pleasure.

If not for her keen survival skills she wouldn't have lasted this long in her career. Steel might think he could seduce her into his trap but she was more intelligent than he gave her credit for.

Right now outsmarting him wasn't her top priority. Enjoying the drives of her body was.

She stared at him and licked her lips as he pulled off his tank top. Several faded scars marked his silvery flesh. A particularly thick one on his chest reminded her of his artificial heart.

Unable to resist, she sat up, reached out and rested her hand on his chest. Her eyes closed briefly and she enjoyed the sensation of his strong, steady heartbeat against her palm. She had paid a high price for that heartbeat and it had been worth it.

When her eyes opened, she found Steel staring at her, an unreadable expression on his face. This disturbed her. At one time he had looked at her with love and until now she hadn't realized just how much she missed that. Now it seemed he'd never look at her like that again.

He pressed her gently onto the bed and pushed her dress up. He deftly unfastened the front clasp on her bra, freeing her breasts. Without preamble he took one of her nipples between his lips and sucked on it.

Pandora gasped and clutched his head, feeling the smoothness of his black cap and the cool metal of his hair sheath. At that moment she wanted to feel his sensitive Draper hair, to stroke it until he hovered on the edge of explosion. She wanted to weave her fingers through it while he filled her with his big, satin-skinned cock.

"Steel," she murmured. "Oh, Steel."

He growled softly and sucked her other nipple while using his fingers to pinch and roll the first. Slowly he ran his tongue beneath her breasts, tickling her and making her writhe. He licked his way down her belly. Pandora kicked off her shoes so he could easily tug off her underwear. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and caressed her inner thighs.

It felt so good she didn't want him to stop, but she also wanted to touch him.

Reaching up, she brushed her fingertips over his hair sheath. "Take this off. Please."

A smile tugged at his lips and he stood, unzipping his trousers. As he removed his boots and socks, she pulled off her dress and bra completely.

Standing before her in all his naked glory, Steel stared at her with a hungry look. He reached up and removed his hair sheath and cap, freeing his hair. It tumbled down his shoulders, as thick and red as she remembered, except for a few strands of silver at his temples.

He stretched out beside her and placed a sleekly muscled arm over her, trapping her in the most pleasant way imaginable. Warmth emanated from his body and she relished the feel of his skin pressed intimately against hers.

"It's been a long time, Pandora," he said in a rough whisper.

"A very long time," she said.

He kissed her deeply and Pandora responded with fourteen years of buried desire.

Steel pressed closer to her. Their tongues mingled and hands caressed every part of each other they could reach. When his mouth finally left hers, he buried his lips against her neck and teased it with kisses and tickling swipes of his tongue. Pandora ran her fingers through his hair, stroking it in the way Drapers loved. She must have remembered just what he liked because every few moments he groaned with desire.

He kissed her from shoulder to shoulder then pressed moist, tender kisses over her breasts. Pleasure washed over her—not just sexual but an emotional contentment she only felt with him.

Closing her eyes, she continued stroking his hair, his arms and his shoulders, relishing the feel of his hard muscles beneath his textured Searilla flesh.

They still knew each other's bodies so well it was as if they'd never been apart.

The last time Pandora had made love for pure enjoyment had been with Steel. They were made for each other in body. At one time they had belonged together in soul too, but Re Lord's cruelty had ruined their chance for happiness together.

Or maybe not.

The way he was making love to her wasn't like a man seeking pleasure from a whore. Even now his soft kisses rained down on her breasts and stomach. He stretched out on the bed and lifted her legs over his shoulders.

His warm, wet mouth covered her clit and lapped. Then he thrust his tongue inside her pussy and explored her damp, silken walls.

Pandora moaned and writhed in ultimate pleasure. Usually any man who tasted her like this died from her poisonous secretions, but Steel shared her heritage. Just as pure-blooded species allied perfectly, so did she and Steel.

"Oh, Steel. Yes! I've missed this so much."

He groaned in reply but didn't stop licking her. Within moments her body exploded in a breath-stealing orgasm.

In the midst of the fantastic spasms, Steel covered her body with his, thrusting his thick, rock-hard cock inside her. He pumped into her and she reached for him, holding him tightly, but she knew she couldn't hurt him. He was so strong, hard and —

"Steel! I want this so much," she cried as he pushed her toward another orgasm.

"Bet you don't want it as much as I do," he said, his voice raw with desire.

She opened her eyes and in the midst of intense pleasure, he paused in his thrusting. Their gazes locked and they smiled at each other with intimacy and affection that warmed her through to her soul.

"I think we've waited long enough," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

She nodded and he began pumping double time.

Still smiling with the keenest pleasure she'd ever felt, Pandora clung to him, her arms and legs tight around him, their bodies fused as he drove them both into orgasm.

Pandora came first, this climax even more intense than the last. Somewhere in the red-hot haze, she felt him come and heard him shout her name. Remembering his Draper hair, she reached up and stroked it, drawing out his pleasure even more.

Finally he lowered his body to hers. Pandora lay beneath him, enjoying the feel of their skin pressed close. When she recovered enough, she lifted her hands and caressed his hair then she stroked his back.

She ran her fingertips along his spine, feeling the texture of his skin and the ridges of old scars. It still amazed her that he had an exo-filler spine, far more powerful than the bones of most known species. His spine had been replaced when he was very young and the technology was advanced enough for it to grow as he did, like a natural part of his body.

It felt so good being here with him, touching him and feeling the rhythm of his breath and heartbeat against her.

This definitely qualified as one of the best moments of her life.

Much too soon Steel shifted position and raised himself on his elbow. Though their bodies still touched, Pandora already missed the full weight of him on her, even if she had scarcely been able to breathe. The only times in her life she had ever felt this secure had been with him. How could she have been apart from him for so long yet still feel closer to him than she ever had to anyone else?

She placed her hand to his cheek and smiled. For the briefest moment, the coldness in his eyes thawed. He bent slightly, as if to kiss her, then the ice crept into his expression and he rolled onto his back. He folded his arms behind his head. The position made his well-defined biceps stand out even more and tightened the sleek muscles in his chest and belly.

Aquatic species were so lithe and sexy. Even now Steel looked as if he belonged stretched out on a rocky shore, the tide lapping his gorgeous, silvery body. With his long Draper hair he reminded her of a merman from an old Earth legend.

She rolled toward him, folded her hands on his chest and rested her chin on top of them.

"It still works great for us, doesn't it?" she asked softly.

"I can't imagine it not working for you and anyone you set your mind on seducing."

Her stomach tightened and her contentment faded. "What's that supposed to mean? I enjoyed this and I know you did too."

"I don't imagine you'd get too many returning customers if you said otherwise. Customers who can survive sleeping with you must be few and far between so you need to keep them happy."

"I am *not* a prostitute."

"But you are a deserter."

She moved away from him and rested her back against the headboard, the sheet drawn up to cover her breasts. Suddenly she no longer wanted to be lying naked with him.

He rolled onto his side and caressed her thigh through the sheet. "I don't give a damn why you decided to stop serving the Laetez government. It's none of my business."

"But you came here to take me back." She turned and held his gaze. "Didn't you?"

"Not everyone is a puppet of the Laetez government."

"Then why are you here?"

He cupped her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. "You look so human – or Laetez. Doesn't matter. That face and body have been powerful weapons for you, haven't they, Pandora? And you use them well. You always did."

"Steel, what are you talking about? If you're referring to what happened to us fourteen years ago –"

"Oh, it started way before that. Do you think I still care about our little fling way back when?"

"Why not? I do."

He gave a mocking laugh. "I'm wise to you, Pandora. Don't think you'll wrap me around your little finger *again*. You always were so good at manipulating people."

"I've done what I had to do. If you'd just listen –"

"Maybe I should. If you believe I'm here to take you back to the Laetez then I'd like to see how you plan to convince me not to. Let's see. What can you offer that's worth more than the reward on your head? In some ways the Laetez are like Drapers. They like to hunt down traitors."

Rage burned inside her, both at his attitude and her stupidity. To think she had sacrificed so much for this –

"Have I struck a nerve, Pandora? I thought assassins like yourself were too cunning to reveal their true emotions."

"You know nothing about my true emotions or about me," she said in a voice that dripped venom. She moved to leave the bed, but he caught her and pinned her beneath him, their mouths almost touching and only the thin sheet separating their naked bodies.

"I know that you've been a conniver almost since the day you were born. Remember Aquavalley, Pandora? The medics doted on you. The cute little crossbreed who looked like a purebred. All you had to do was look at them with those big green eyes and they'd do whatever you wanted."

The expression on his face was like nothing she'd ever seen on him before.

He went on, "They tried to make your life as comfortable as possible but mongrels like me and Xenos got treated like shit. Worse than shit. They butchered us, but not

you." As he spoke he loosened his grip on her and lightly caressed her face, the gentleness of his touch at odds with his harsh words and the fierceness in his eyes.

A sick feeling washed over her, not because she feared him. In her life she'd been in far worse positions. What struck at her core was that she'd never realized how twisted his feelings for her were. She'd never known he was so jealous of her, but how could he not be? What he said about Aquavalley was true.

"I didn't make them torture you, Steel," she said in a soft but steady voice, her gaze fixed on his. "I hated what they did."

"At one time I thought nothing could hurt more than what they did. I was wrong. You were a far worse torturer than any fucking medic. But like I got over them, I got over you, beautiful." He brushed his lips against hers.

Pandora slipped her arms around his neck and said, "I wish things had been different for both of us."

"As humans say, you've got to play the hand you're dealt. Right now I want to get the rest of my money's worth."

Pandora nodded, a sad smile on her lips. "I need to use the bathroom first. Be right back."

He moved away from her and sighed deeply. Relaxing onto his back, he closed his eyes.

Pandora rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom. Before she shut the door behind her, she gazed at him, sadness tugging at her heart. She'd been wrong to think she could reach him or that they could ever be together again. At one time she would have trusted Steel with her life, now she didn't doubt he would betray her in a heartbeat to satisfy the rage festering inside him. He might appear cold and calm but something told her that concealed emotions too hot and deadly to release.

In the bathroom, she wrapped an oversized towel around her and took a secret exit to the corridor. She hurried to the control panel a short distance away and activated the hidden doors, sealing Steel inside the chamber.

Seconds later, he bellowed, "Pandora! What the hell is going on?"

Ignoring him, she left the dungeon and made her way to Bangle's chamber.

"Bangle!" she shouted as soon as the guards let her pass through his door. "Bangle, where are you?"

"In here," he called from the room that contained his heated indoor pool.

She stormed in and found him soaking in the water, his arms stretched out on the pale blue marble rim. Water gleamed on his lean, athletic body and his short dark hair was slick against his head. He raised an eyebrow and asked, "Something wrong?"

She glared at him. "You bastard. How could you do this to me?"

"What happened?"

"What do you think happened? Were you trying to get me arrested?"

Bangle's eyes widened a bit. He turned and hoisted himself out of the pool. Naked, he walked toward her and reached for the robe on the table beside her. He shrugged on the robe, his gaze never leaving her. "Are you going to talk to me?"

"Why should I? You didn't see fit to tell me that a bounty hunter was after my ass. Instead you, *my friend*, sent me right into his arms."

For the first time Pandora ever remembered, Bangle looked guilty. He sighed and reached out to touch her face, but she stepped away, still glaring.

"Honey, I thought you might have another chance with him. I know how you feel about him and something in the man's eyes when he talked about you told me he wasn't going to turn you in."

"Well, you were wrong. That's exactly what he intends to do."

Bangle actually looked surprised. He was known for his uncanny intuition and was rarely wrong when judging people of any species. "He said that?"

"Not in those words, but he insinuated it."

"In that case my shuttle and my bodyguards are at your disposal."

She nodded and followed him to his study where he used a spec to order his fastest shuttle prepared for travel. Then he approached her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Pandora, please believe I had no intention of hurting you. I know what it's like to be parted from someone you love. When Steel arrived I thought for sure you and he might have a second chance."

Some of her anger faded and she embraced him. "I know. But both of us also know that second chances like that only happen in fairytales."

"What's a fairy?"

"A mythical Earth creature with wings and..." Pandora sighed and shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I—"

The spec buzzed and Bangle turned to it, taking a message from one of the bodyguards.

"We're reporting a disturbance in the dungeon," the guard said.

"We know. There's a client secured there," Bangle said.

"From what we're seeing down here he won't be secured for long," came the guard's anxious reply. "He's denting the walls."

"They're made of the improved Laetez exo-filler. The strongest kind available."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't think the prisoner knows that. What species is he? He's strong as a Triroot yak."

Bangle glanced at Pandora, his brow furrowed. "Can he break through the exo-filler?"

"The improved stuff? I doubt it."

"But he's a cyborg and we have no way of knowing what improvements he's had since you two parted ways." Bangle turned back to the spec and issued orders to the guard. "Get more security down there. See that they're well armed –"

"Bangle, I'd prefer that he lives," Pandora said, knowing she was probably a fool. If Steel was dead then he couldn't hunt her. But in spite of everything she still had feelings for him.

"Use stun pistols or tranquilizers only. I will join you directly," Bangle said and switched off the spec.

"I have to leave right now," Pandora said. She embraced Bangle again. "Thank you for everything. I'll get in touch as soon as I can."

"Be safe. And Pandora, please don't stop searching for love."

Raising her eyes to the heavens, she shook her head and smiled. "Good luck with Steel."

"Sounds like I'm going to need it."

Pandora left Bangle's chamber and hurried to her own. She donned comfortable clothes for travel and packed her few belongings. Then in the company of two guards, she headed for the docking bay. As promised, Bangle's fastest shuttle—a sleek blue prototype from Wormhide—awaited her. She turned to the guards and said, "Thanks, guys, but I'm on my own from here."

They wished her luck and she boarded. Moments later she was zooming through the Delilah Sector, once again putting distance between her and the man she loved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steel had sensed Pandora was up to something when she left the bed. Usually he listened to his instincts but that was different. Unlike most people, he didn't consider his instincts quite the same as *feelings*. Feelings insinuated heat, passion. Usually Steel was cold. He was a good judge of people so when his instincts told him something, he paid attention. When he was with Pandora, however, he *felt*.

He'd thought for certain she wouldn't affect him like this again. When she had left him fourteen years ago, his gentle emotions such as love had gone with her, replaced by the coldness that had plagued him all his life. He'd sworn to not only accept it but to use it to his advantage. And he had. He'd shut out his human-Laetez desire for the warmth he could no longer feel. He had concentrated on his Draper discipline, his Searilla fierceness and his cyborg coldness.

How could being with her for scarcely an hour override the past fourteen years? As soon as she'd stepped into the room, his emotions had leapt into overdrive. Anger, love, passion and sorrow had almost consumed him and he'd *wanted* them to.

Pandora was like drug. Even after years without her, the tiniest taste rekindled the addiction.

She felt the same about him. He sensed it and saw it in her eyes, but she knew all about his career and it didn't take a genius to figure out he had been paid to find her.

It was all such a fucking lie. He never had any intention of turning her over to Superior Yashel. Taking the assignment had been an excuse to track her down. She'd played him for a fool once and he swore that would *never* happen again. Yet he hadn't been able to resist the chance to see her.

Now here he stood, locked in the dungeon of a bordello, trying to break down a door that was apparently reinforced with Laetez exo-filler. The bitch had sealed him in. Not that he blamed her. He'd only intended to scare her a little, repay her for the hell she'd put him through. Apparently he'd been too convincing.

Ripping through the inner door had been simple, but this outer door was proving impossible to penetrate. He didn't even have a weapon since they had to be checked before he'd entered the brothel.

Even more important to him than his freedom was finding Pandora. Most likely she'd fled and he could not, *would not*, lose her again. Not when she still seemed to have feelings for him as well.

He pounded the door until his fists bled, yet it began to dent beneath the blows. Turning around, he smashed his back into it over and over. His exo-filler spine was much tougher than his hands.

Finally the door popped open. The hinges had finally given.

Panting and drenched in sweat, his gaze swept the corridor where ten guards of various species stood, stun pistols aimed at him.

The owner of the brothel, a dark-haired Laetez male called Bangle, took two steps closer to Steel and fired the tranquilizer gun he carried. The little needle stuck in Steel's shoulder.

Moving with swiftness that made Bangle gasp and the guards close in with their stun pistols ready to fire, Steel grasped Bangle by the throat and pinned him against the wall.

To his credit, the man remained calm, his dark eyes fixed on Steel in a way that made his stomach clench. Very few people could affect Steel with a mere look, but this Bangle had eyes that seem to tear through him.

Steel curled his lip with contempt and pulled the needle out of his shoulder. "I'm immune."

"Sir, should we fire?" asked one of the guards.

"Go ahead." Steel smiled wickedly. "Let them fire."

"No," Bangle stated coolly. "Now that I get another look at you I see that I was right the first time."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Steel demanded.

"You still love her, don't you? Not just any love, but a very deep love. Life has been almost unbearable without her, hasn't it? The loneliness is —"

Steel growled, his hand once again clamping Bangle's throat.

"I can escape from you, Steel, and you will never make it out of Kayndle."

"Want to bet?" Steel said with a curl of his lip. He wasn't even surprised that Bangle knew his real identity.

"I took a risk just letting you see her. If you chase her down and return her to the Laetez, there's a chance they'll kill her or imprison her for life."

"She chose her own path."

"Maybe lately, but not before. Think about it, bounty hunter. Think about how she makes you feel when you're with her."

Steel leaned closer to Bangle and spoke through clenched teeth, "I don't feel."

Bangle narrowed his eyes. "That might be true, but when you're with her the coldness fades, doesn't it? The void is filled."

Those words shocked Steel so much that he wasn't sure he kept the surprise from his face. How could Bangle know that? Was he some kind of mind reader?

Most likely he was just a very good con artist. Pandora had told him things about their relationship and now he used that knowledge against Steel.

"Think about it, Steel. You know her. Do you honestly think she enjoyed her profession?"

Steel considered Bangle's words and asked, "What do you mean she chose her own path now but not before?"

"You should have asked her instead of threatening her."

"Tell me or I'll kill you."

"I won't tell you anything and if you so much as attempt to harm me, you won't get out of here alive. You're wasting time, aren't you, Steel?"

The twerp was right. He should be running for his shuttle and tracking down Pandora.

He released Bangle and turned, but the guards still surrounded him. Growling with annoyance, he shifted his stance, prepared to fight his way out. No doubt he'd be injured in the process, perhaps fatally. He must have been a complete fool to put himself in this position, but when it came to her he'd always been a fool.

Bangle motioned for the guards to let him pass. Without wasting another second, Steel left at a run. His keen hearing detected Bangle's words to his guards.

"Let him go. Pandora has a head start. What they do with their lives from now on is not our business."

## Chapter Seven

Pandora should have known luck wouldn't be with her. Shortly after leaving Kayndle, a Butchcade pirate ship began tailing her. At first she wasn't concerned. Bangle's prototype shuttle could out-fly the pirate ship. Too late did she realize the Butchcades had chased her into an ambush. She found herself surrounded and in spite of the shuttle's speed, a blast from an enemy ship struck home, leaving Pandora's craft practically immobile.

"Fuck," she breathed, drawing a deep breath and trying to reengage her shields, but the damage was too great. "Oh well. Better to die here than in a Laetez prison."

No doubt the sleek shuttle had caught the pirates' attention. They must have assumed anyone who could afford a prototype like this must have plenty of currency.

She waited for one of her attackers to make contact.

Several blasts from an oncoming shuttle knocked two of the ships out of orbit. The others turned their attention from Pandora to the sleek black and silver ship that wove among them, firing away. No doubt the pilot was highly skilled, and by the chances he took, suicidal.

Pandora used the opportunity to examine her engine, hoping she could make some quick repairs that would at least allow her to flee.

She cursed softly. According to her monitor, the damage was far too serious to repair from inside, and not without specialized equipment.

When she glanced at the view screen to check the progress of the battle, she was stunned to see not a single pirate ship in sight. Only the black and silver shuttle hovered directly across from hers. Her stomach clenched and she tingled all over. Though she couldn't see the pilot, something told her it was Steel.

The main spec beeped and she switched it on. Steel's face filled the monitor and his gray eyes seemed to pierce her soul. How could she still love a man who was out to destroy her?

"Your shuttle is seriously damaged," he said. "You won't make it far. The closest planet is Roum. I'm sure you see it on your monitor. Land there and I'll pick you up."

Pandora snorted. "You've got to be joking."

"Pandora, you're wasting time. Hover like this much longer and you're going to crash. You'll be lucky if you don't get killed landing on Roum. A better idea would be to attempt a bridge connection. Is your shuttle capable of that function?"

A bridge connection was when both shuttles extended their boarding gear in space, creating a link between two ships.

"Get this through your thick Draper head, Steel, I am not going anywhere with you. I am not returning to the Laetez."

"Who said anything about returning to the Laetez?" he demanded.

"You're a bounty hunter. I'm a fugitive. It doesn't take a genius to figure out your plan."

"Well, genius, you're wrong. Do you honestly think I would choose the Laetez over you? For that matter would I choose the Laetez over *Rou-tou-loupig*?"

*Rou-tou-loupig*. The Searilla equivalent of the devil.

"You were once a Laetez soldier."

"And you know why. You also know I left. And you know that I feel no ACT product owes the government anything."

"I also know you can't stand me. I..." Her words faded and she gave a little shout as her ship dropped. She managed to keep it in orbit, but her time was running out quickly. Soon she would crash and who knew where she might land?

"Pandora!" he said, an almost desperate edge to his voice. On the monitor his face tensed even more and his eyes glistened with...could it be panic? "Head for Roum. I will not turn you over."

She had no reason to trust him. In his mind, she had betrayed him. What was to prevent him from repaying her in kind? Yet trusting the man she loved was preferable to dying in cold space.

"Doesn't look like I have much choice," she said. "We'll initiate the bridge connection."

Moments later, Pandora found herself aboard Steel's ship.

"Put your bag in the locker," he called from the cockpit. "Then get over here and strap yourself in the copilot's seat. It's going to be a hard landing."

She quickly dumped the bag and joined him in the cockpit.

"What's the problem?" she demanded, strapping herself in.

"I sustained some damage in the fight with those Butchcades. Faulty shield."

"Why the hell did you tell me to come aboard when you're in the same condition I was in?"

"You were ready to crash. I've still got enough power to land. It's just going to be a little rough."

"Why did you engage those pirates when you have a faulty shield?"

"My masochistic nature."

"How stupid are you, Steel? What kind of bounty hunter flies with a bad shield?"

"Think you can shut up while I try to land?" he said, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"No. I can't shut up. Why didn't you get the shield fixed?"

"It was on my list of things to do."

"It should have been at the top of the list."

"You're starting to sound like the mother I never had."

"Fuck mothering you! I'm worried about my own life."

"That I believe."

She glared at him. "Don't start with me again, Steel."

"Brace yourself, beautiful," he said just before the ship broke the planet's atmosphere at terrifying speed.

Pandora's heart pounded and she checked her safety straps then curled into a crash position.

When the ship struck land the impact was enough to make her lose her breath. For several horrifying moments they crashed through a stretch of forest.

Finally the ship came to a stop.

"Pandora, are you all right?" Steel demanded.

She straightened and swept her long hair from her face. "Yes. You?"

"Fine, but..." He checked his monitors and shook his head. "Shot to hell. This was probably the best ship I ever had."

"This was the best?" she sneered, unfastening the safety strap.

"All because I didn't get that fucking shield replaced."

"Once again, why didn't you?"

He walked toward the back of the ship. She followed him to the engine room where he stood over the smoking engine and shook his head.

"Why –"

"Why?" He turned to her, annoyance making his gray eyes glisten in a way that turned her on in spite of their desperate situation.

"That's what I've been asking," she said flippantly.

"Because last month I was supposed to meet with Xenos and he was going to install the new shield. Then around the same time I got the chance to have my heart upgraded by a specialist who only comes to Wormhide once a year, so I canceled the shield installation. By then Xenos' ship was on the other side of The White Zone in ACT orientation meetings with some new species—the Mar-Tense. But this new heart is a beauty, Pandora. I could fall into a live volcano and the sucker would keep ticking."

"Great, Steel. You'd be burned to a crisp but the heart would still be there. Kinda like what could have happened if those pirates blasted your ship out of the sky. You must want the price on my head pretty badly."

"I already said I'm not turning you in, didn't I?"

"Then why risk your life to help me with those pirates?"

"Call me stupid. It's sure not the first time I've used bad judgment." He cast her a look that indicated he was thinking about their engagement.

"Are you ever going to stop living in the past?" she asked.

"I don't. Come on. We need to get out of here and find civilization. Before my monitor fizzled out it indicated a village just outside the forest. We need to head north." He walked to a storage compartment and removed a backpack as well as a handheld monitor. Then he took her bag from the locker and passed it to her. It was then she noticed the condition of his hands. His torn knuckles oozed red and the rest of his hands were stained with dried blood.

"What the hell happened to your hands?" she demanded.

"Nice of you to ask," he said sarcastically. "How do you think I escaped from that cell you locked me in?"

Her lip curled and she held his gaze. "You broke the door down?"

"I wasn't going to let you get away from me."

His words struck her deeply. He'd been that determined to reach her.

"Where's your first aid?"

He passed her a container from the compartment and she opened it.

Pandora removed some antiseptic spray and bandages.

"Hold out your hands," she ordered.

He did as she asked and she cleaned and wrapped his injuries.

"That should hold for a while," she said, running her fingertips over his bandaged knuckles.

A little thrill shot through her when he took her hand in his. Tilting her face up, she met his gaze. They stared at each other for a moment then both seemed to snap back to reality.

He released her and she stepped away.

Steel opened another compartment and examined the contents.

"Let's see," he said. "I've got insect repellant for Jungphyre, Tydepth, Pal-zo, Laetez, Earth, Phanteppe..." He paused, his brow furrowed. "Now why do I still have spray for Phanteppe when Xenos blew it out of the universe last year? Better toss that."

"Toss it? Why? We're abandoning the ship. Don't you have any insect repellant for this planet?"

"Somewhere," he replied, digging deeper into the compartment. "Here we go. This is supposed to be universal repellant for this sector."

"Universal for a single sector? Sort of a contradiction, isn't it?" she said.

"Close your eyes and mouth."

She did as he ordered and he sprayed her all around, chuckling. "This seems to be the only way to shut you up. Other than kissing you. My turn."

"Good." She snatched the spray from him. "Now maybe *you'll* shut up."

After she finished applying the insect repellent for him, they took their limited supplies and stepped outside.

Steel walked around the ship, shaking his head at the severity of the damage sustained during the crash.

"Hell," he muttered. "And to think that in three days Xenos was going to meet me and install the new shield."

"Why didn't you have the shield installed at Wormhide while your heart was being replaced?"

"Because I don't trust Wormhide engineers unless I'm there to keep an eye on them. That's a little hard to do while I'm in surgery."

"Let me get this right. You won't trust your *ship* to Wormhide engineers, but you'll allow their medics to knock you out and replace your *heart*."

"Lady, you're starting to make me wish the pirates had blown me out of the galaxy. Do you ever stop complaining?"

"Fine." She removed her handheld monitor from her bag and used the directional to find the location of the village. Without so much as glancing at him, she strode ahead.

He fell into step beside her. "We should probably take inventory of what we've got since we have a few days' travel ahead of us."

"What we've got?" she snorted. "It's more like what we don't got."

"I don't remember you being such a pessimist."

She shot him another annoyed look, trying not to be impressed by the sight of his long, sleekly muscled legs in his snug black trousers. The ground was rocky and uneven, so each step tightened muscles in his ass and thighs. She was so busy admiring him that she scarcely noticed the rough terrain, at least at first.

She was in good condition, but this hike definitely tested her.

"Will you slow down a little?" she demanded. "Not all of us have an artificial heart, you know."

"Sorry," he said and reached for her bag. She nearly protested then changed her mind and let him take the bag from her.

He slung it over his shoulder and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Whatever happened to Re Lex?"

Wrinkling her nose, she asked, "Who?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "The other guy you were supposed to marry. Or were you just toying with him too? By the way, how did you two fuck without him getting killed? Did you keep the sex toy manufacturers in business? Even so, it couldn't have been a very fulfilling relationship."

Pandora raised her eyes to the heavens. She was getting sick and tired of his innuendos.

"Why do you care?" she asked.

"I don't."

"Then why ask?"

"Conversation."

"Well, let's converse about something else."

"All right. What happened to the agent the Laetez government sent to find you? Did you kill him?"

"I thought you didn't care about serving the Laetez."

"I said I wasn't going to turn you in."

She paused for a moment and gazed skyward, catching her breath.

Steel turned toward her. "Did you kill him?"

"It was self-defense. He intended to take me back dead or alive. I tried to avoid killing him but—" She shook her head, feeling exhausted, not just from the hike, but from life itself. "I'm never going to kill again. I don't care what the reason. I'm through. I just want to go someplace where I'll be left alone."

"Being alone isn't all it's cracked up to be," he said quietly. Their gazes locked and he continued, "Trust me, Pandora. You don't want to be alone."

Again her anger rose and she approached him, tilting her face to meet his gaze. She pointed a finger in his chest and said, "You don't know anything about me."

"Maybe because you never wanted me to."

She probably should have told him what happened, but at the moment she was too angry at the entire situation to confide in him. They were strangers. He seemed content to keep it that way, so why should she feel any different?

They began walking again, this time in silence.

After a moment, she said, "It's hard to believe you and Xenos are still friends after all these years."

"Why?"

"I guess you do have a lot in common."

"You mean we ugly crossbreeds?"

She ignored his sarcasm and said, "Speaking of Xenos, I heard his girlfriend is human. That's a shock."

"She's his wife now."

This really surprised her. "Xenos, the infamous ACT revolutionary, married a pure-blooded human?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? He was always great at giving advice about relationships, mainly 'don't fall in love'. Then he goes and marries the first pretty girl who risks everything for him."

This struck deeper than he could imagine, but she had lots of practice at hiding her feelings. She said, "I think it's kind of romantic, don't you?"

"I wouldn't know."

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that he should know because she had risked everything for him, but he'd probably think she was lying and she had no way to prove that she spoke the truth. Why did it matter to her? Their chance at happiness had been destroyed long ago.

"Maybe Xenos has learned how to treat a lady, unlike my present company."

"Are we talking about ladies or *strum* —"

Moving with the speed of a trained assassin, she swept his feet out from under him and Steel, taken completely by surprise, crashed to the ground.

Standing over him, she placed her booted foot against his throat, just below his chin. "I said if you called me a *strumpsca* again I'd hurt you."

"I love a domineering woman," he said, his lips twisted into a wicked grin.

With a snort of combined annoyance and amusement, she stepped away from him and picked up her bag.

"I carry my own weight, thanks," she said.

He stood and swept her into his arms. Pandora was forced to grasp his neck as he continued through the forest.

"What's this all about? Trying to prove your manliness?"

He chuckled. "That's one thing I've never had to prove, beautiful."

"Put me down," she said, the softness of her voice countering her demand.

"I like you where you are."

"We still have a long way to go. We need to pace ourselves."

"I like the sound of that. Tonight I'll keep that in mind."

"So you think something is going to happen tonight?" she quipped.

Again he smiled and winked.

After several moments she relaxed. Closing her eyes, she rested her head against his shoulder. It felt so good to be in his arms. She didn't even mind that they were stranded. When he was being like this, she was almost convinced that if she told him the truth about her past, everything would be all right between them.

Finally he stopped walking. Pandora opened her eyes and saw that they stood in a small clearing. A short distance away, a brook ran through the trees.

"This looks like a good place to camp for the night," he said, placing her on her feet. Instead of moving away, she remained standing so close that the tips of her breasts brushed against his chest. Even that slight contact made her nipples tighten and swell with desire. Her stomach clenched and she tilted her face toward his.

Steel's silvery gaze fixed on her and he drew a deep breath. Each seemed to want to speak, yet something stopped them.

Finally, she said, "I'll gather some wood for a fire."

"All right. I'll set up the camp. I have supplies in my backpack."

Pandora turned away while he shrugged off his backpack.

After walking several steps, she paused and glanced at him only to find him staring at her as well. Her entire body tingled and she nearly surrendered to the desire to leap into his arms. Instead she turned and continued searching for twigs.

A short time later, Steel and Pandora sat by the fire. While he took some nutritional packs from his backpack, she opened the medical case she always kept with her. It was nearly time for her chemical-balancing meds, the same used by most Laetez crossbreeds to keep their tempers in check.

Inside, two of the vials were broken.

"Oh no!" she said, panic tightening her chest.

"What?"

"Most of my supply of meds is destroyed. Steel, I need them."

She noticed a flicker of concern in his eyes then he seemed to shake it off or bury it, as if he didn't want her to see that he cared. Perhaps he didn't. Maybe she'd just imagined the look because she wished he still cared for her.

"Don't worry. We'll reach the village tomorrow."

"They won't have my meds."

"I'm going to use their main spec to call Xenos and ask if he'll pick us up. His whole crew is made up of crossbreeds. They'll have meds for you."

"But what if he can't get here right away? What am I going to do?"

"You'll be all right."

"That's easy for you to say. You never needed the meds."

"Pandora." He approached her and placed his hands on her shoulders, his gaze fixed on hers. Somehow looking into his eyes soothed her panic. He'd always had a calming effect on her, or at least he used to. Now all they seemed able to do was argue. Yet at this moment he wasn't being sarcastic. His words, look and touch comforted her instead.

"You'll be fine," he continued. "I'll help you. Before you know it we'll be on *Nameless* and the medics there can refill your prescription. Until then, how much medicine do you have left?"

"Another day. Maybe two if I cut the dose, but I've rarely done that."

Few things frightened Pandora, but the possibility of losing control over her Laetez temper terrified her. The Laetez Er kept in check the powerful emotions of the Re. Most crossbreeds who didn't have the benefit of that symbiotic relationship were at the mercy of their unrestrained emotions, like primitive humans who had no conscience.

"Pandora," he repeated, gently cupping her face. "Everything will work out. I can show you some mind exercises I learned on Tydeph. They'll help you stay focused."

"Tydisian mind control takes years to develop, not hours or days."

"Upsetting yourself isn't going to help the situation."

He was right. Giving in to panic would only defeat her purpose.

"Come on. Let's eat."

Sighing, she discarded the broken vials then placed the medical case back in her bag and followed him to the fire where they sat and began eating from the nutritional packs. Nearby, he had set up a shelter half against the side of a tree. The shelter half was of ultra-thin, lightweight material that could be folded up and stored in his backpack, yet durable enough to resist harsh weather.

To keep her mind off her problems, Pandora asked, "Some functions of my monitor were damaged during the attack so I didn't get to see any readings about the village we're heading toward. What did your monitor say?"

"It's a Lassen village."

Her brow furrowed. "That species sounds vaguely familiar."

"They're rather primitive and keep to themselves. Their home planet borders The White Zone. Xenos had dealings with them."

"Did he destroy them too?" she asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"No. They're on friendly terms. I've done some trading with them myself. Not on this planet, but on their home world. I'm surprised to see a settlement of Lassens here, though. Usually they don't leave their planet."

A horrible thought struck her. "What if they recognize me? I'm an intergalactic fugitive."

"They pay little attention to other cultures. Besides, since you've been dressed down out here in the wilderness, you don't look much like the picture they're flashing around."

She curled her lip. "Thanks a lot."

"It was meant as a compliment. You look great."

Raising her eyes to the heavens, she shook her head. "I couldn't care less how I look as long as I'm not recognized."

"Maybe you should cut your hair, as much as it hurts me to say that," he said, wincing and touching a hand to his head. "I know it doesn't hurt you, but the thought of it still makes me cringe."

"That's a good idea," she said. "Got a knife?"

Steel unsheathed the field knife that dangled at his lean waist. She reached for it, but he held it away from her grasp and said, "It might come out better if I do it. Isn't it hard to cut your own hair?"

"Yeah, but you might cut my throat instead."

A faint smile touched his lips. "No. That neck is much too pretty to hurt. It's not meant to be cut, but kissed." He bent and touched his lips to the side of her neck, making her tingle with desire.

"All right." She drew a deep breath and released it slowly, turning her back to him. "Go ahead."

He kissed the other side of her neck then began cutting her waist-length hair until it touched her shoulders.

"Do you speak Lassen?" she asked.

"I have a file for my memory base that does."

His memory base, an enhancement built into his reconstructed eye, allowed him to store large amounts of information and process it at an accelerated rate.

"I thought the Laetez fitted your memory base with an automatic tracker?" she said. "It must be annoying, knowing they can follow your every move."

Snorting with contempt, he said, "I had that tracker removed a long time ago. In fact my current memory base is completely different than the one given to me by ACT. Do you think I'd allow the Laetez to have that kind of power over me?"

"No," she said softly. "Not someone like you."

"I can't tell if you mean that as a compliment or an insult."

"Neither. It's simply an observation. So did you get this new memory base at Wormhide?"

"Yes."

"And how do you know the medic there didn't include a tracker of his own?"

"Because he values his life."

Raising her eyes to the heavens, she shook her head slightly.

"Stop moving before I cut you by accident."

"Sorry." She stilled immediately. "Hurry up. I'm hungry."

"Do you want this to look good or not?"

"Somehow I doubt a haircut with a field knife is going to come out good regardless of whether or not you hurry."

A short time later, she ran her hands through her now shoulder-length hair, feeling a slight pang of regret. Still, losing some of her hair was better than losing her freedom and possibly her life. She gazed down at the long, thick pieces of red hair then picked them up and tossed them aside while he sheathed his knife.

They resumed eating.

"This nutritional pack isn't bad," she said.

"You know what I wish I had right now? Pizza. Topped with siel fish, Laetez peppers and olives and a glass of warm Jungphyre whiskey."

"And a medic to pump your stomach after," she said, curling her lip.

He grinned. "Not me."

"Why? Did you have your stomach reconstructed too?"

"Oh, you're in top form tonight, aren't you, Pandora?"

Glancing at him from the corner of her eye, she smiled coquettishly and said, "I don't know. Maybe if you're lucky."

Being alone with him like this, sitting close and teasing each other, almost made her forget they had become enemies. Or at least in his mind she was his enemy – the cold, calculating bitch who had used him to further her career.

Steel looked momentarily surprised then he narrowed his eyes seductively and reached out, brushing a fingertip across her cheek. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to be friendly. We only have a single shelter half and the nights can get a little cold around here."

He took her nutritional pack from her and placed it aside, along with his. Then he slid an arm around her. Her stomach clenched with anticipation and a sexual jolt shot through her. She snuggled closer and rested her palm against his chest, loving the feel of his hard, sleek muscles and the rhythm of his breath and heartbeat.

"This is only for pleasure," she said, uncertain if she was warning him or herself.

"Of course. What else could it be?" His jewel-like eyes never left hers, even as he dipped his head closer and spoke against her lips.

"Exactly," she whispered, already consumed by desire. "What else?"

His mouth descended on hers in a kiss that was both demanding and tender. No one had ever kissed her like Steel and she couldn't get enough of him. Her arms slipped around his neck and she held him tightly as their tongues devoured one another. It was as if they wanted to make up for fourteen years of separation with this one kiss. At least Pandora felt that way.

When it broke, even Steel, with his Searilla lungs, was slightly breathless.

"If I was with anyone but you I'd think my heart was defective," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. A smile tugged at her lips when she felt his heart beating rather fast for an advanced artificial organ.

"That seems to happen every time I think about you, Pandora," he said. "One thing is for sure, you're as arousing as ever."

"Well, I might make your heart beat faster, but you already have me drenched with desire," she admitted.

A grin tugged at his lips. "Do I?"

She nodded.

"I'll have to examine this a bit closer." Taking her hand, he stood and guided her to the shelter half. He'd spread a lightweight thermal blanket on the ground. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it was better than lying naked on dirt and rocks.

## Chapter Eight

Pandora and Steel quickly shed their clothes and she spread them on top of the blanket to create a thicker cushion. She was on all fours, straightening the material, when Steel placed his hands on her hips and kissed first one ass cheek then the other.

Smiling, Pandora closed her eyes and wiggled her buttocks closer to him.

"I thought you'd enjoy having your ass kissed," he teased.

"Especially by the man who prides himself in never kissing ass. Until now." She strained her neck to glance at him over her shoulder.

He made a sound that was something between a growl and a chuckle, grasped her ankle and tugged. Grunting softly, she fell onto her stomach. He lightly caressed her back then ran the tip of his tongue from the back of her neck down the length of her spine. He grasped her ass and squeezed gently then covered it with kisses. Every brush of his lips against her flesh aroused her more and more.

His lips trailed over the backs of her thighs down to her knees.

"That feels nice," she murmured. He'd always known just how to touch her.

"So do you," he said, once again kissing her buttocks. This time he slid a hand underneath her. He kneaded her soft mound and dipped his fingers into her pussy. "So you *are* drenched."

"I said I was."

"Yes, beautiful Searilla crossbreed," he said, rolling her onto her back. He settled onto the blanket, lifted her legs over his shoulders and thrust his tongue into her pussy.

Pandora gasped and arched against him while he explored, lapping her essence. Pleasuring her like this would kill most males, but not one of Searilla blood. Steel seemed to enjoy every moment almost as much as she did. The more aroused she became, the more he groaned and growled with desire.

The pleasure became so keen that her heart pounded out of control and she trembled, every muscle tense with need.

"Steel, please. Please," she chanted, unable to think of any other words. Pleasure overloaded her body and mind.

He licked her clit and the delicate yet relentless laps of his warm, wet tongue flung her over the edge. Waves of orgasm washed over her and her head spun. She clutched his shoulders, her fingers biting into the hard muscles. Her hips rolled upward and he grasped her ass, holding her snugly against his face while he lapped until she relaxed, thoroughly satisfied.

Steel released her, easing her hips and legs onto the ground. Then he loomed above her, a hand braced on either side of her head. Pandora opened her eyes and met his gaze, her stomach once again tightening with lust. The heated look in his gorgeous gray eyes rekindled her desire.

Using his knee, he nudged her legs apart and she spread them wide, longing for him. She wanted to feel him deep inside her. She wanted to wrap her arms and legs around him, feel the beating of his heart against hers and the rasp of his breath in her ear.

"I've never wanted anyone the way I want you," he said, his deep voice just above a whisper. He filled her with a long, slow thrust. His velvety cock felt so right nestled deep in her drenched pussy. For a moment he remained still, their gazes locked and bodies connected in the most intimate way.

"Steel," she murmured, taking his face in her hands. She ran her fingertips over his rugged Searilla features.

He kissed her, his lips moving gently against hers. She opened her mouth and he thrust his tongue into it. Hers met it with hungry strokes. Kissing him felt so good. It wasn't just the sexual excitement he aroused, but the deeper emotions he stirred. He made her feel safe and wanted in a way no one ever had. Yes, men had desired her. Her entire career depended on their lust, but no one except Steel had ever connected with her soul.

She moaned and clung to him as he thrust into her, his motions slow at first. He pulled out nearly all the way then swooped back in again and again, edging them farther down the path to ultimate fulfillment.

The friction between them was indescribable. Her heartbeat quickened and her hands roamed over as much of him as she could reach. The heat of his flesh and the feel of the straining muscles beneath turned her on almost as much as the relentless strokes of his big, hard cock.

His motions quickened and she wrapped her legs around him, her hips and belly thrusting against him and her lust-soaked pussy clamping around his cock.

Crying out in pleasure, she came and he followed moments later. His powerful body pumped into her, but even at the height of passion he was never rough with her.

Finally he withdrew his softening cock and settled beside her. Pandora curled against him, needing both the warmth of his body against the night's chill and the emotional security of his very presence.

"Good night, Pandora," he whispered and kissed the top of her head.

"Good night, Steel." She smiled and closed her eyes. Resting her cheek against his chest, she fell asleep to the slow, steady rhythm of his heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pandora awoke late that night. Like Earth, this planet had a moon and its light shone through the trees, making the clearing bright enough for her to see Steel even though the fire had died. He lay beside her on his stomach, his eyes closed and lips slightly parted. She smiled. Though she'd never forgotten what it was like to sleep beside him, she hadn't believed she would ever do so again.

She loved watching him sleep, seeing the rhythm of his breathing and the way his eyes twitched as he dreamed. She loved the way he slept with his beautiful Draper hair loose. In spite of his attitude, he must still trust her a little to leave his most vulnerable part exposed while he slept.

She snuggled closer and his eyes opened partway. She held his sleepy gaze for a moment before he rolled over and tugged her into his arms. Resting her head against his chest, she once again drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Pandora woke to the scent of herbal tea. Nearby on a rock sat a small kettle. She grinned, recalling how much Steel hated coffee.

He had lit another fire and it warmed her, making her hesitant to leave her rather comfortable position on the blankets. However, they needed to reach civilization—or at least she did. The faster they arrived at the village, the sooner they could contact Xenos. Not that she was eager to see *him* again. Even if Steel didn't want to turn her in, she had no guarantee that Xenos or a member of his crew wouldn't.

Sighing, she ran a hand through her short hair. She could always take her own life. Every Laetez assassin had the means of doing it.

Pandora shook her head. She certainly didn't want to commit suicide, yet it was preferable to the sentence that would no doubt be passed upon her should she be returned to the Laetez. Even if she could somehow manage to convince them that she had been forced to become an assassin, she had already destroyed her life. How many times could a person kill before they did irreparable damage to their soul?

Anger stirred inside her. She had come to loathe ACT almost as much as Xenos and Steel. She needed to stop thinking about this before her temper took over. The only reason she wanted to get aboard *Nameless* was to replenish her chemical-balancing meds.

In truth she was surprised by how good she felt. Yes, she had some jitters because her body was accustomed to the meds, but psychologically she felt calm and in control. It occurred to her that she had always felt that way around Steel. It was as if his strength and coolness somehow projected onto her whenever they were together. She didn't have much time to think about it since the sound of a splash from the nearby brook drew her attention.

She glanced toward the water where Steel was bathing. He stood completely naked, his silvery flesh glistening with moisture. The sight of his gorgeous torso, bare ass and long, sleek thighs made her pulse race with desire. She stared, hoping he would turn

around so she could get another look at his cock. It had been so long since they'd been together that now she couldn't get enough of him.

As if summoned by the heat of her gaze, he turned to her and she drew a sharp, pleased breath. His cock, rather thick even in its flaccid state, lolled against his firm, pale inner thigh.

She had the wild urge to take him in her mouth and suck him until he begged for mercy.

Why not? What did she have to lose? Her life had been spent following orders, doing things she hated for other people's sake. Now she was a fugitive on the run. Why not live for herself while she could?

She turned to her supply bag and searched through it. She cleaned her teeth then undressed and headed for the brook. Time for a bath and hopefully another taste of what they'd shared last night.

"Good morning," he said as she stepped into the water.

"It could be worse." Pandora smiled and ducked beneath the surface. She straightened, brushing moisture from her eyes.

Steel approached and wrapped an arm around her waist. He cupped her face and gazed at her. "You're so beautiful, Pandora. I know in your profession they train you in how to look your best—how to dress, do your hair and face. But it's wasted on you. You don't need the trappings. You're perfect just like this."

"Oh sure," she scoffed and tried to pull away from him, but he refused to loosen his hold. The darkly lustful expression in his eyes didn't exactly frighten her, but made her wary. His cock pressed against her and she felt it swell. Her clit tingled in response and she knew her pussy must be soaked with passion. "Steel, I'd like to bathe."

He continued holding her for several heartbeats then released her and walked to the large, flat rock on the edge of the brook. The sunlight shining through the space in the trees must have already warmed it. Stretching out on his back, he closed his eyes. He folded his arms behind his head and crossed his ankles.

Pandora's pulse raced. He was so gorgeous with those long, hard legs, sleek chest and powerful arms. His cock rose straight and hard, as if waiting for her touch. The urge to lick and suck him hadn't diminished, but increased.

She bathed quickly then approached the rock and crawled onto it.

A smile touched Steel's lips and he opened his eyes halfway. He spread his legs, making it easier for her to settle between them.

Water dripped from her onto him, but he didn't seem to care. Pandora caressed his inner thighs, loving the texture of his Searilla flesh and the hardness of the muscles beneath.

Unable to resist a moment longer, she grasped his cock and took the head between her lips. She licked and sucked, relishing his taste and scent.

Pandora took her time with him. She stroked his shaft and kneaded his balls while her lips and tongue teased him to the brink and back so many times she lost count. After a while his excitement reached such heights that even his cyborg physique showed the effects. His muscles tensed and breathing hoarsened. Only when her mouth grew tired from the constant stimulation did she finally allow him to surrender completely.

Stroking his shaft with one hand while kneading his balls with the other, she flicked her tongue along the underside of his cock head. Her relentless attack hurled him into orgasm.

He cried out, his body bucking with pleasure, and grasped her head. Not that Pandora had any intention of pulling away. She sucked, licked and swallowed, loving every moment of his climax almost as much as he did. Stimulating him excited her so much that she nearly came as well. Her clit and pussy ached and throbbed with need. She squirmed, her heart pounding, and reached down with one hand to touch herself.

Steel lay on his back, his eyes closed and chest heaving as he recovered. Pandora watched him through half-closed eyes, her fingers eagerly rubbing her clit.

Just before she came, Steel's eyes flew open and he grasped her roughly by the shoulders, though not enough to hurt her.

He guided her onto her back and covered her body with his.

"You didn't think I'd let you get away with that, did you?" he asked.

"What?" she panted, spreading her legs. The tip of his cock, which was already hard again, pressed against her drenched pussy.

"Not that you don't look gorgeous masturbating, but I think you might enjoy this more." He eased into her with a long, slow thrust.

Pandora's eyes fluttered shut. He was right. It felt so good having him deep inside her, filling her where she was so hot and wet.

He began pumping into her, slowing and speeding his motions much as she had done to him.

"Oh, Steel," she breathed, caressing his chest, arms and back. She loved touching him, feeling his strength and knowing that after so long he was hers again.

"Pandora," he murmured and covered her mouth in a penetrating kiss while he drove her over the edge.

She gasped into his mouth, her tongue stroking his fervently. As her orgasm waned, his motions again quickened, pushing her toward another climax.

This one was so intense that all she could do was close her eyes and cling to him. Steel was so strong that it didn't matter how hard she held him. She couldn't hurt him, at least not like this. In fact he seemed to relish her tight hold.

He groaned with pleasure and murmured in her ear, "Harder. Hold me as hard as you want."

"Steel, my love," she cried, coming again.

This time an angry growl escaped his throat, but she was too far gone to care. Her body throbbed in ecstasy and he kept pumping into her until she lay still and satisfied. Then he pulled out abruptly.

Pandora opened her eyes and reached for him, but he stood and walked away.

"Steel? What's wrong?" she called, raising herself on her elbows.

"Steel? Don't you mean *my love*?" he sneered, once again the cold, bitter cyborg. Obviously he wanted to make certain she knew that one time making love didn't change how he felt.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she sighed deeply. She was so tired of fighting with him.

She stood and joined him. They began dressing.

"I must have been so easy to you," he said. "I was an ugly Searilla crossbreed with practically no experience with women. Such a target. I've come a long way since then, Pandora."

"Have you?" she demanded. "It seems to me you've regressed."

Curling his lip, he shook his head and grinned. "You see, that's another change. I couldn't care less what you think."

"I don't believe that's true."

He stared at her hard. "Believe what you like. Right now we need to get moving if we're going to reach the village by nightfall."

"That's fine with me. The sooner we're off this planet the better."

"At least we agree on something," he said and turned away.

Pandora grasped his arm. He looked at her and she held his gaze, rage simmering inside her. "Remember one thing, Steel. Don't make me too upset or else you're liable to have a raging Laetez crossbreed on your hands. You haven't forgotten that I'm low on meds."

"I haven't. And you're right." He lifted a hand to her cheek. "If I want to argue, I should wait until you're in full control. No disadvantages."

She smiled slightly. "Then I can expect a rematch?"

"No. I said we'd call a truce and I meant it. The past means nothing anymore."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes. We're different people now. I know I am."

"You're right. We are different."

He nodded and picked up his bag. He removed a small box and opened it then selected a tiny, ultra-thin piece of metal and inserted it into his right eye like a contact lens. It was a file for his memory base, no doubt filled with information he deemed useful for their current situation.

"Doesn't that hurt?" she asked, pulling on her pants.

"Not at all. The eye is reconstructed. They did a nice job of making it look real, though. If I need a connection cord it can get a little awkward, but a plain old file is scarcely noticeable."

She remembered from years ago that a connection cord—a tiny metal wire—allowed cyborgs like Steel to link their memory bases to other devices.

"What's in the file you just put in?" she asked.

"Languages and some cultural information."

"About the Lassens?"

"Among others. I'm not sure if anyone at the settlement will speak languages we do, so I might as well be prepared to converse in Lassen."

"Good idea."

A short time later, they left the clearing and continued on their way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dusk fell as they neared the Lassen settlement. It lay about a mile outside the forest, amidst acres of fertile ground they used for farming. Dozens of workers dug and planted in the fields, most using old-fashioned tools. There were only a few of the modern machines used by a majority of the farming colonies in the civilized universe.

The Lassens gave an overall human appearance, except they were taller on the average with a heavy musculature, rather like cavemen of ancient Earth. Most of the males wore bushy beards and both sexes had rather heavy eyebrows.

About twenty cottages surrounded a tall white building that appeared to be a control center, probably supplying the entire settlement with power and housing a main spec. On the outskirts stood several large storage buildings.

At least Steel hoped this village had a main spec so they could get a message to Xenos.

"Not the most modern group, are they?" Pandora whispered to Steel.

"The Lassens keep to themselves and haven't developed as quickly as many other species, but they do have their merits. Unlike the Laetez, they have a sense of honor and integrity."

"Is that according to Xenos?"

"You still don't like him."

"I don't really know him, nor do I want to. If he can give us a ride out of here and not turn me in to the Laetez *then* I'll like him."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Answered like a true survivor."

She was about to retort, but two men heading toward them armed with old-style stun pistols gave her pause. Both had dark hair and beards. One was about Steel's height and the other several inches taller.

"Halt," said the taller of the two men. "Identify yourselves."

"My name is Steel," he said in Lassen, thankful for his cyborg memory base. "This is my partner, Mertle. Our ship crashed on the other side of the forest and we need to borrow your main spec to send for help."

The guards nodded and the shorter one said, "We'll take you to the farming chief. This way."

Pandora and Steel exchanged glances then followed the guards toward the tall central building.

Inside a spacious hall, two men studied a digital map set on a long wooden table. Both men were tall, the older one quite burly and the younger one lean. Steel guessed the older one, with streaks of gray in his brown hair, was somewhere in his forties and the younger one, with the glossy black hair, in his twenties.

"Chiefs Vayl and Bramah," said the shorter guard escorting Pandora and Steel. "We found these strangers heading toward the settlement. Their names are Steel and Mertle and they claim their shuttle crashed and they'd like to use our main spec to call for help."

The young black-haired man approached them and held Steel's gaze. "How did you crash?"

"We were attacked by Butchcade pirates."

"Why would they want you?"

"I have no idea," Steel said, his gaze fixed on the younger man. "We would appreciate the use of your main spec. However, if you choose not to lend it, we will move on immediately."

"The closest city is several hundred miles away," said the older man who still stood by the table. He glanced up from the map and said, "Our main spec is costly to run. We only use it in emergencies."

"I would offer you currency, but I'm afraid we don't have much," Steel said. "However, I noticed you have a busy farm here. We're willing to work off our debt."

Interest flickered across the man's eyes. He beckoned Steel closer.

"You speak the Lassen tongue rather stiffly. However, you seem to understand our ways. I am Farming Chief Bramah. This is our chief guard, Vayl." He gestured toward his black-haired companion.

"I am Steel and this is Mertle. She doesn't speak Lassen, but you'll find her as willing as I am to pay our debt through working the farm."

"To be fair, it will take no more than one day's work to pay for the use of our spec," Bramah said. "You look like an ACT product, so I guess you're quite strong. We can use a man like you, even for a day."

Steel nodded respectfully. "Thank you."

"Follow me," Bramah said. "I'll take you to the main spec."

As Bramah guided them out of the hall, Vayl dismissed the two guards then followed the farming chief and the newcomers.

The main spec was located in a smaller room. Its old-style monitor hung on a wall. Steel tried contacting Xenos directly, but he wasn't in range so he sent a message to the nearest Laetez base and asked them to have Xenos contact him here at the settlement.

After sending the message he glanced at Pandora and saw she looked a bit surprised but also relieved. If he had asked the Laetez base to send someone to pick them up, she would have been arrested, but as promised he had called for Xenos.

It seemed the seductive spy had finally started to trust him. His gut tightened as he thought that at least she *could* trust him, which was more than he could say for her. Though he couldn't help his feelings for her, the love that swelled inside him at the very thought of her, he still could not trust her after what she had done.

He tried to tell himself that maybe she had changed. After all, it had been a long time since they'd last met.

Even after fourteen years the pain of what she'd done still felt fresh inside him, but only if he dwelled on it. He had learned not to wallow in useless emotions like sadness and self-pity.

After making the call, Steel turned to Bramah and said, "We will be receiving a response, though I'm not sure when. Would it be possible for us to stay here, working for room and board, until our rescue ship arrives?"

"Of course," Bramah said. "While you were using the spec, I sent for my daughter. She will show you and your woman to a room."

Moments later, a young black-haired woman of about twenty stepped in.

"Hello, Minah," Vayl said, smiling at her.

"Vayl." She nodded then turned to Bramah. "You sent for me, Father?"

"Yes. This is Steel and his woman, Mertle. Their ship crashed and they'll be staying with us for a time. Steel will be stationed in the fields and Mertle will work with you. Let them rest today, however. Give them a meal. It appears they've journeyed hard to reach us."

Minah nodded and glanced at them. "Please come with me."

Steel and Pandora followed her out of the building and toward one of the larger wooden houses set on a hill behind the settlement.

"We have an extra room in our house," Minah said. Surprisingly, she spoke in human English. A bit slowly and with a heavy accent, but well enough to be understood.

"You speak human English?" Pandora asked.

Minah smiled, a slight blush rising in her face. "I have been studying, but there are few here who speak the language. I cannot practice often."

"I'll be glad to practice with you while we're here," Pandora said.

"I am grateful, Mertle," Minah replied.

Pandora wrinkled her nose. "Mertle?"

"Am I not pronouncing your name correctly?"

"Yes," Steel replied before Pandora could speak. "It's just that Mertle isn't accustomed to hearing the Lassen accent. You speak English language well, Minah."

"Thank you," she said.

They entered the house, walked through the kitchen and up a wooden staircase covered in a worn maroon carpet. The old-fashioned house reminded Steel of something from a museum. It was clean and well cared for and had some of the most beautifully carved woodwork he'd ever seen. The Lassen people appreciated ancient skills—hand-done carpentry, needlework and other crafts—and questioned modern technology.

On the second floor, Minah opened the door to a small room with a private guest bath attached.

"I will bring up some food. In the meantime please rest. I am sure you and your woman will be comfortable here."

She left quickly and Steel closed the door behind her.

Pandora folded her arms beneath her breasts and asked, "What did she mean 'your woman'? What exactly did you tell them about us?"

"Lassen women belong to men. Their fathers, husbands, brothers or guardians. Lassen ways are different than those of Laetez and humans. I told them you and I were traveling together. They automatically assumed you belong to me." Steel approached and placed his hands on her shoulders. He smiled, not caring if he looked condescending. Pandora was arrogant enough to deserve it. "Will it be so bad, having them believe you're my woman for a few days?"

She pushed his hands off her and strolled around the room. "I can handle it. As long as you keep the facts straight in that cyborg brain of yours."

"I have a natural brain, if you remember. Parts of it are merely enhanced to store additional memories."

"Yes, I know. Finish telling me what else you said to the Lassens."

"In order to pay for our use of the main spec as well as room and board while we're here, I said we would work on the farm."

Pandora raised her eyes to the heavens. "I'm not keen on farm work, but at least it's a fair trade."

"Also to keep your identity private, I told them your name is Mertle."

She glanced at him over her shoulder and forced a smile. "And here I was thinking that was just another Lassen word. Mertle. You could have picked a nicer name."

"It's the first human name I thought of. Besides, I kinda like it."

"You could have chosen a Laetez name."

He snorted with laughter. "What's the difference? We're only going to be here for a few days."

"That's if Xenos contacts you. He could be anywhere. He might be across The White Zone involved in more talks with the Mar-Tense."

"Then we'll have to make the trip to the nearest city."

"And do what? Call the Laetez? I knew having you on my side was too good to be true. You're still nothing but a bounty hunter with an artificial heart."

Steel usually had no problem keeping his temper in check, but her words cut deeper than he wanted to admit. Grasping her arm, he forced her to face him. "Those are harsh words coming from a fucking assassin. I said I wouldn't turn you over and I meant it. I keep my word. Can you say the same?"

"Let go of me!" she snarled, the fury in her eyes reminding him that she was a Laetez crossbreed suffering from a lack of chemical-balancing medication.

## Chapter Nine

He loosened his hold on her and gently stroked her arm. "All right. Fighting with each other is stupid. We're in this together and we'll get out of it together."

She shrugged him off and once again wrapped her arms around herself. She walked to the window and gazed out. "I'm sorry. It's just hard to control myself without—you know. It's weird, Steel, but without the medication I'd usually be a crazy woman by now. I hate to admit it, but..."

He approached and stood beside her, longing to touch her but thinking the next move should be hers.

"When I'm around you, I seem better able to control my temper. You get under my skin in one way, but in another..." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head then leaned against him.

Steel tugged her into a firm embrace and for several moments they stood, content with each other's company. He stared out at the vast fields of fruits and vegetables, at the Lassen workers going about their business, but scarcely saw them. All he cared about was that right here, right now, the woman he had always loved was back in his arms.

What a fool he was. He'd vowed never to get close to anyone again. He traveled alone, worked alone and lived alone. Steel the cyborg bounty hunter needed no one.

Then why did Pandora still have power over him?

Tapping on the door interrupted his thoughts. Minah stepped in, carrying a tray of food. She placed it on top of the dresser.

"My father said you are free to rest for today. Tomorrow at dawn meet us downstairs in the kitchen for breakfast and he will tell you about your assignments."

"Thank you, Minah," Pandora said.

"You are welcome."

The young Lassen woman left and Steel walked to the dresser and examined the contents of the tray. "Smells good. Stew. Fruit. Vegetable juice. Bread. One thing about the Lassens, they're not cheap with provisions."

"Before I eat anything I need a shower," Pandora said and began undressing.

Steel sat on the bed, leaned back on his elbows and watched her remove her shirt, a lustful grin on his lips.

"Good idea," he said.

What was it about the way he looked at her that never failed to melt her emotional defenses? Even after years as an assassin, learning to harden herself to the harsh realities of her profession, he still made her feel vulnerable and aroused her like no other man could.

Topless, she flipped her hair over her shoulders and folded her arms across her breasts then turned and headed for the bathroom.

"Wait for me," Steel said.

She glanced at him. Her heartbeat quickening with desire, she watched him tug off his shirt, baring his gorgeous torso. She loved the ripple of muscles in his chest and shoulders and the way his silvery flesh shimmered in the light. He unzipped his pants and his semi-erect cock sprang into view.

By the self-satisfied expression on his face, he knew how attractive she found him. For spite, she tried to look as disinterested as possible and said, "If you want to join me, wait a few minutes first. When I wash I like privacy."

"Whatever you say." He bowed deeply, a playful smile on his lips.

In the bathroom, it took Pandora a moment to figure out how to turn on the water, since the plumbing was run by antique levers and knobs instead of a modern control panel. Finally she stood under a spray of warm water.

She had just finished washing when Steel opened the shower door and stepped inside.

Pandora turned to him, brushing water from her eyes. The sight of his naked body never failed to make her heart beat faster. To her he was the perfect male—long and lean with beautifully developed muscles that weren't overly bulky. His silvery skin looked especially sexy when wet. He wore his long reddish hair loose and as the water drenched it, tendrils clung to his shoulders and arms.

"Did I give you enough time?" he asked, staring at her with an expression even steamier than the hot shower.

Her legs went weak and it was all she could do not to fall into his arms.

"Yeah," she replied, placing both hands on his hairless chest and caressing the uneven Searilla flesh. That skin was part of the reason he swam so fast, but she also loved the sensation of it against her smooth human-Laetez flesh.

"Good." He slid his hands over her waist and behind her to cup her ass. Tugging her so close that she felt the hardness of his cock against her, he dipped his head toward hers. His mouth captured hers in a demanding kiss.

Pandora closed her eyes and surrendered completely. Her mouth opened to his warm, wet tongue and she moaned softly as he seemed to devour her.

In her entire life she'd never met a man as sexy and virile as Steel. His confidence, sometimes bordering arrogance, aroused her passion and the wildness of his Searilla side excited her almost beyond reason. Yet he also had a gentleness that tempered his

aggressive traits. She wondered how, after what he'd suffered as a child in Aquavalley and experienced as an obvious ACT product, he still managed to be compassionate.

Sometimes when she thought about her life, resentment overcame her. Though she'd seen Steel resentful on occasion, he'd never completely surrendered to bitterness. If only they had been able to follow through with their plans so long ago, they could have cleansed each other of the stains on their souls left by ACT.

As if sensing the turn her thoughts had taken, he broke the kiss and stared into her eyes.

"Pandora," he said in his deep yet soft voice. "Don't be upset."

He gently caressed her cheek and traced his thumb over her lips.

"I'm not," she said.

Warm water poured over them. Droplets caught on his long lashes. Smiling slightly, she took his face in her hands, guided him closer and kissed his eyelids.

Again his mouth covered hers in deep kiss, this one laced with tenderness that touched her heart and stirred her passion. He caressed her belly and gently cupped her breasts. Slowly his thumbs circled her nipples, gradually building her desire more and more.

In spite of his obvious arousal, he seemed in no hurry and wanted to take his time pleasuring her. His lips teased the side of her neck. Grasping one of her full breasts, he lifted it slightly and bent, taking the nipple between his lips. He sucked and licked the stiff, aching flesh. His teeth worried it then he sucked again, sending a jolt of desire through her.

"Oh, Steel," she breathed, weaving her fingers through his sensitive Draper hair in a way she knew turned him on.

He groaned and lashed his tongue over her nipple while she tugged on his hair in the gentle rhythm Drapers loved.

Pandora arched against him, writhing with pleasure-pain. He'd been working on her nipple so long she could scarcely endure another swipe of his tongue or tug of his teeth.

He moved to her other breast and gave it equal attention. Closing her eyes and leaning against the smooth shower wall, she continued stroking his hair then reached down with one hand and grasped his thick, hard shaft. She stroked and squeezed it then used the tip of her thumb to tease the underside of his cock head.

Steel released her nipple, his breath quickening.

"You're so fucking sexy," he said, taking her face in his hands and kissing her mouth. Their tongues met and teased each other for several lust-filled moments. Then he said against her lips, "I want you, Pandora."

"I want you too, Steel," she breathed. "I want you so much."

Growling softly, he kissed her again then turned her to face the wall.

One of his long, sleekly muscled legs slid between hers and nudged them apart. Grasping her hips, he licked her shoulder and ran his teeth along the side of her neck. He paused a moment, his breath teasing her ear and the tip of his cock pressing against her pussy.

"Ready?" he said in her ear, his voice a deep, husky whisper.

"Hell yes."

He chuckled softly, a wickedly sexy sound, grasped her hips and began thrusting slowly into her drenched pussy.

Pandora braced her hands against the water-slicked tile, her ass thrust toward him and her heart pounding out of control.

Both were thoroughly aroused so it took little time before she teetered on the edge of orgasm. Little tremors rolled through her and she wriggled and writhed, but his strong hands held her steady as he continued pumping, driving her headlong into ecstasy.

Little sobs of pleasure escaped her and she felt herself slipping, but he kept her from falling.

"Pandora, ah fuck!" he grunted, his hot, slick body tightening against her, pinning her to the wall. He thrust faster and harder and growled with passion as he came.

For several moments her body remained trapped between his and the wall then he straightened and pulled her into his arms.

She tilted her face up toward his. Their gazes locked and they smiled. At the moment that was all the communication they needed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pandora and Steel had just finished eating and were cuddled on the bed when Minah returned again.

Steel dressed quickly then answered the door, leaving Pandora on the bed, covered up to her neck with the sheets.

"I am sorry to disturb you," Minah said, "but there is a call for you on the main spec. It is from Xenos. My father said to hurry please."

Steel guessed the hurry was due to the cost of running the spec.

"I'll be right back," he said to Pandora as he tugged on his boots then followed Minah out of the room. While the young woman excused herself to return to the kitchen, Steel made his way to the main building where Bramah awaited him.

Xenos' purplish-blue face filled the main spec.

"Steel," Xenos said. "What do you need?"

"My ship crashed on Roum. You know where it is?"

"Yes. I understand you're contacting me from the Lassen village?"

"That's right. My companion, Mertle, and I are stuck here and we need a lift off the planet. You remember Mertle, right?"

Xenos stared for a moment, but he was smart enough to catch on quickly. "Of course. We're currently heading toward The White Zone to see the Mar-Tense leaders again. I anticipate a brief meeting and we can pick you up in three days."

"That's fine."

"You'll be at the Lassen village?"

Steel turned to Bramah and asked, "Is that all right with you? We will be at your service during that time."

"Permission granted," Bramah said.

Turning back to the main spec, Steel said, "We'll be here. Thanks for the ride."

"Not a problem."

Xenos' face vanished from the monitor. Steel thanked Bramah then returned to the room and informed Pandora of their plans.

"So for the next three days we're farmers," she said. "What is the old Earth term? Yee-hah."

"We better get some rest. It's going to be another long day tomorrow," Steel said.

He removed his clothes and climbed into bed beside her. Pandora turned off the light and curled up near Steel.

"Goodnight," she said softly.

"Goodnight." He kissed her hair and briefly tightened his hold on her. A short time later, he drifted to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, Pandora and Steel awoke shortly before dawn.

After dragging herself out of bed, she glanced out the window and groaned. "It's still dark out. I am such a night person."

"Come on. There's nothing like the crack of dawn," Steel said.

She glanced at him, about to retort, but was rendered momentarily speechless at the sight of him, his arms raised overhead as he stretched his sleek body. No purebred she'd ever seen could compare with this sexy crossbreed.

"When I was in training on Tydepth, my teacher and I always woke at dawn. There's nothing as beautiful as Tydisian waters in sunlight. Catching fresh fish and eating them on the shore of a pink sand beach. That was the life."

"As much as I hate to admit it, it does sound nice." She walked toward him and slipped her arms around his neck. He held her close and she rested her cheek against his rock-hard shoulder. She added, "But lying in a fancy hotel at midnight on satin sheets while ordering room service is also a beautiful thing."

He chuckled. "We never actually got there together, did we, Pandora?"

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "Maybe we can someday." Sighing, she shook his head. "What am I saying? I'm a fugitive. You're a bounty hunter. We can never be together, can we?"

"You made that decision long ago."

"Yes," she whispered. "I did."

Pandora stepped away from him, the pain of past memories and future separation from the man she still loved was almost too much to handle at the moment. He was right. She had made the decision and she didn't regret it, but she wished things could have been different. Even if she told him the truth about why she had done it, nothing would change. She would still be a fugitive and he would still be a bounty hunter.

She showered first then, while Steel washed, she dressed and braided her hair in a fashionable style she'd learned while in the Delilah Sector. It didn't come out as nicely as she'd hoped, but it was better than the uneven, shoulder-length haircut courtesy of Steel's field knife.

He stepped out of the bathroom, running a towel over his long red hair. Glancing at her, he smiled, "You look great."

"Sure I do."

"Really. I like how your hair looks."

"Thank you."

"Do you mind braiding mine?"

Mind? She loved touching his hair.

She shrugged. "Of course not. I'm not very familiar with Draper styles, though."

"Just a plain braid. I'm not a girl, you know."

Pandora chuckled. "Oh, I know that. Come sit on the bed."

He did as she asked and she knelt behind him, a comb in her hand. "Would you like to dry your hair first?"

"No, I'll leave it damp. I'm guessing it will get pretty hot working, so having it damp will keep me cool longer."

She combed out his hair gently, knowing how sensitive his Draper hair was. No matter how often she touched it, she loved feeling it. Thick and smooth. It was alive with sensitive nerve endings.

"Keep stroking my hair like that and we'll be late," he breathed, his voice husky with pleasure.

"Ah, but we have to pay our debt."

"True. Very true."

She braided his hair and when she'd finished, wrapped her arms around him from behind. Splaying her hands over his chest, she caressed the solid muscles, loving the

feel of his silvery flesh and the way he emanated power. If only they could tumble back into bed, but not this morning.

After a moment, he took her hands, kissed each of them then released her and stood. He put on his hair sheath and pulled on his clothes.

They left the room and went to the kitchen where Minah, Bramah and his wife, who was introduced as Lyz, were already seated at the breakfast table. Also at the table were Bramah and Lyz's twin sons who looked no older than three.

After an exchange of greetings, Bramah spoke to Steel who then translated to Pandora. "He said you and I will be digging in the fields today along with Minah. They're limited on machines so they depend greatly on manpower."

"And womanpower," Pandora added.

Minah, who understood what she'd said, gave a little laugh.

Bramah spoke sharply to Minah whose smile faded. She cast her eyes down and jumped a bit when Bramah repeated the words in a shout.

"He's asking her what you said," Steel told Pandora. "The womanpower comment."

The farming chief glared at Pandora who held his gaze, unfaltering. It was one thing to be polite in a man's home, but quite another to let him intimidate her. The Lassens might treat their women like property, but she wasn't Lassen.

Steel interjected, speaking the Lassen tongue in his most soothing voice. He finished with a very masculine chuckle and placed an affectionate arm around Pandora, patting her shoulder as he would a pet dog.

She stiffened, but didn't speak. After all, she wasn't nearly as familiar with the Lassen culture as he was. Perhaps her innocent comment had been a major offense.

Bramah seemed appeased by whatever Steel had told him and breakfast continued without further incident.

Afterward, they left Lyz to clean the breakfast mess and followed Minah to the fields while Bramah headed toward the main building.

"What did you tell Bramah?" Pandora asked during the walk.

"That you have a sharp tongue, but you're harmless and don't really understand the implications of what you're saying."

Pandora curled her lip. "Thanks a lot."

"Our ways are not like yours," Minah said softly. "I have read about human females. You are, what is the word? Independent."

"Quite," Pandora said.

"If a woman here talks back to the man in charge of her, it is punishable by beating or food deprivation," Minah told her.

Pandora's brow furrowed. No wonder Minah feared her father and Lyz had scarcely spoken a word during breakfast.

A short time later they reached the field Bramah had instructed them to work in. A sturdy, brown-haired Lassen male, probably in his mid-twenties, approached them, smiling pleasantly.

"This is Tobyn," Minah said and there was no mistaking the affectionate gleam in her eyes. "He's the supervisor for this field. Tobyn, this is Steel and Mertle. They'll be working with us for the next few days. Father said we are to help dig here today. Steel speaks Lassen but Mertle only speaks human English. We can practice with her."

"Excellent," Tobyn said in English. "Few of us here study human languages, or any language other than Lassen for that matter."

"There is little time for study with so much work to do," Minah added. "But one day Tobyn will have more time. Someday he will be a farming chief."

Tobyn smiled at her slightly and their gazes met. Pandora noted it was refreshing to see that love seemed to be no different among Lassens than among humans or Laetez.

A patrol shuttle drew near and Vayl dismounted the small, speedy vehicle. He approached and stared coolly at Tobyn. The chief guard grasped Minah's upper arm and tugged her to his side. Tobyn's eyes darkened, but a frantic look from Minah seemed to help him keep his temper in check.

After a brief exchange of words with Vayl, Tobyn asked Steel and Pandora to follow him. Minah tried to join them, but Vayl kept hold of her arm.

In a wooden shed, Tobyn showed them where to get shovels.

"Why is Vayl treating her like that?" Pandora asked. "I thought her father was the only one who could boss her around?"

"Bramah has offered her in marriage to Vayl," Tobyn said, a bitter edge to his voice.

"That bothers you?" Pandora asked.

"Mertle!" Steel said sharply.

She turned to him and shrugged. "What?"

"You know what. It's none of our business."

"Yes," Tobyn said, more to himself than to them. "It bothers me. You can start digging. If you have any questions, feel free to ask."

Tobyn strode out of the shed. Pandora was about to follow, but Steel grasped her arm and said, "Don't start trouble. We're only here for a few days."

"Let go of me, Steel. I might pretend to be 'your woman' but I'm a free individual. Your friend, Xenos, fought for that right for all ACT products, didn't he?"

"You must be irritated to use Xenos as an example," he said, releasing her. "We know how you feel about him."

"I'm irritated. Obviously Minah and Tobyn have feelings for each other. No one has the right to keep them apart. It's cruel."

"When did you start caring about cruelty in the game of love?"

She glared at him. "I know more about manipulation than you ever will."

"That I believe. Let's get to work." Steel brushed past her and out of the shed.

Still upset with him, Pandora chose not to dig beside him, but walked farther down the field and claimed a spot beside Minah.

After a few moments, Pandora said, "Tobyn seems nice."

"He is the kindest man I've ever known. Yes, he can be stern with the workers, but what good supervisor isn't?"

"True."

"But he is fair and to those in his charge, he is very kind. After his father died, he cared for his mother and his sister. He didn't insist his mother bind herself to another man and when it came time for his sister to marry, he allowed her to help select her own mate. She was able to marry a man she liked. A decent man. Now his mother lives with his sister and her husband on the Lassen home world. I think Tobyn is lonely sometimes."

"Sounds like you care about him."

Minah paused in digging and glanced at Pandora, a blush tinting her cheeks. "I do. I wish..."

"What?"

The young woman glanced around then whispered, "Even though these others don't speak human English, I fear talking against my father."

"How is praising Tobyn talking against your father?"

"Because he has arranged for me to marry Vayl. It does not matter that I..."

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

Pandora leaned closer and whispered, "You love Tobyn, don't you?"

"I have no right to."

"We can't help who we love," Pandora said, closing her eyes for a moment. Unfortunately that was the truth. In a way, she identified with this young woman who was being manipulated away from the man she loved because someone had other plans for her.

"You might be right," Minah said, once again digging. "As a human woman you have seen more of the universe than I have. I do not mean that as an insult —"

"I don't take it as one."

For a few moments they worked in silence. Pandora was glad Tobyn had offered them gloves along with the shovels. Though in many ways Pandora's profession had been difficult, having the skin worn off her hands from digging hadn't been a hazard of the trade.

"Mertle," the Lassen girl asked.

"Yes?"

"Have you been in love before?"

"Yes, I have."

"Was Steel the one?"

"Yes," she admitted. "He was and is."

"Then you must be very happy to be with him."

"Unfortunately he doesn't know how I feel."

"But you are his woman."

"Only temporarily."

"Is he delivering you to someone else?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Minah touched her shoulder and the women locked gazes. "Then maybe you do understand how I feel."

"Trust me, Minah. I do."

In spite of the hard work, the day passed quickly. Pandora and Minah talked about many things and Pandora found herself liking the girl and wanting to help her. It wasn't fair that she should spend her life bound to a man like Vayl. Throughout the day, she observed the chief guard on his patrol. He seemed not only arrogant, but condescending, as if the workers were little better than the dirt beneath his boots. Most of all she hated the way he treated Minah, as if he already owned her.

Throughout the day, Pandora cast glances in Steel's direction and often found him staring back. Usually he offered her one of his rather charming smiles and a wink. Each time their gazes met, her stomach tightened with pleasure and her heart beat a little faster.

Nothing was worse than knowing you could never be with the person you loved. Talking to Minah reminded her of the unfairness of her own situation, yet it was too late for her and Steel. Maybe, in spite of Lassen rules, it wasn't too late for Minah and Tobyn.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night after dinner, Steel and Pandora retired to their room for some time alone.

"I am so dirty," Pandora said, peeling off her filthy clothes.

"A shower will sure feel good," Steel said, tugging his dirt-stained shirt over his head and tossing it onto the floor. He removed his hair sheath and unwound his sweat-dampened hair from its braid then ran his fingers through it.

"You worked pretty closely with Tobyn today," Pandora observed.

"They needed an extra hand to haul away loads of rock. My Draper-Searilla strength came in handy."

"Lassens seem strong to me."

"They're a pretty rugged species. Almost as strong as Drapers. Not like Searillas, though."

"I'm afraid I missed out on the Searilla strength," Pandora said, a bit haughty. "But I have other qualities."

Steel's appreciative gaze swept her bare breasts. "You sure do. No Searilla female I've ever seen has breasts like a Laetez woman. Even humans don't have those big, beautiful nipples."

Pandora smiled and cupped her breasts, brushing her thumbs over her large pink nipples. "Steel, you almost make me blush."

"Yeah right." He chuckled and stood, wrapping his arms around her.

Pandora closed her eyes and sighed, loving the feel of her breasts against his hard, warm chest.

"What do you think of Tobyn?" she said. "What kind of man is he?"

"Well, we only met him today, right?"

"Come on, Steel. You're a great judge of character," she said, remembering how he had instinctively known she was lying when she'd broken up with him years ago. Few people could call her bluff, but he almost had.

"A survival skill you helped me learn," he muttered.

"Steel, please. Forget about the past for a moment. I want to know about the present, as in what you think of Tobyn."

He released her only to step away, sit on the edge of the bed and pull off his boots.

"He seems fair with the workers. He's stern when he needs to be and compassionate when the situation calls for it. At least from what I saw today."

"Do you like him better than Vayl?"

Steel grinned and wagged a finger at her. "I know what this is about. Pandora, I said I didn't want any trouble, that includes matchmaking. In fact, matchmaking is one of the most dangerous interferences in the Lassen world."

"Her father seems to be an expert on it," she said sarcastically.

"He has the right."

"No one has the right to ruin a person's life by forcing her away from the one she loves."

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm starting to wonder about you, Pandora."

"Wonder what?"

"Why did you really defect from the Laetez? Did the cold-hearted assassin fall in love with one of her intended victims?"

"Of course not!"

"Right." He raised his eyes to the heavens. "What was I thinking?"

At the moment she could have slapped his face.

"It amazes me, Steel, how a man with a cyborg brain can sometimes be so clueless!" She stepped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

"I only have cyborg enhancements!" he shouted. "My brain is natural."

Seconds later, the door flew open and she glanced up from where she bent, removing her boots. "Don't you knock?"

"What's going on, Pandora? Is it the meds? We'll have some for you in a few days."

"It's not the meds. It's the unfairness of what's happening to Minah."

"Why does it bother you so much?"

"Why *doesn't* it bother you?"

He held out his arms. "Honey, I can't change the laws of every species in the universe, regardless of whether or not I agree with them."

"Fine. We won't talk about it anymore." She kicked off her pants and underwear then turned on the water in the shower.

"Good. Let's just wash and relax."

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded as he stuck one long, muscular leg into the shower.

"I'm getting in."

"It's my turn, buddy. You get out until I'm finished."

"Since when don't you want to share the shower?"

"Since you've become the spokesman for Lassen dictatorship. Out."

He grinned, a wicked gleam in his eyes. Grasping her face in his hands, he covered her mouth in rough yet sexy kiss that both aroused and irritated her.

Still chuckling, he dropped his hands from her and left the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

## Chapter Ten

The following morning, when Steel awoke, Pandora had already finished dressing and said a quick good morning before leaving for the kitchen. Apparently she was still upset about their conversation the night before. As if there was anything he could do about Lassen culture.

It wasn't that he agreed with their ways, but it wasn't his place to interfere in the business of strangers.

What bothered him most was that she seemed to feel so much for Minah after only knowing the girl for one day, yet she once had a relationship with Steel and hadn't thought twice about stomping on his heart.

His *artificial* heart. Lately she seemed obsessed with reminding him of his cyborg parts.

After showering he dressed and walked to the kitchen where Minah sat at the table. Pandora stood behind her, braiding the young Lassen woman's hair. The twin boys also sat at the table, messily eating their breakfast of cool porridge. Lyz stood by the stove, stirring the contents of a large pot.

Steel greeted the women in both Lassen and human English and they responded with surprisingly cheerful smiles.

"I asked Pandora to braid my hair like hers," Minah said in English. "It is a style I have never seen before. Mother likes it too. Pandora knows much about enhancing the beauty of a woman."

"Yes, she does," Steel agreed, his gaze meeting Pandora's. He offered an inviting smile and she pretended not to notice.

"Breakfast is ready," Lyz told him. "We're just waiting for Bramah."

"I'm here, woman of the house," Bramah said, stepping into the kitchen. He had been wearing a rugged half-smile, but it faded when his gaze fell upon Minah and Pandora. "What is this? A kitchen or a barbershop?"

"Pandora is just braiding my hair, Father."

"It is a foreign style that's inappropriate for a Lassen woman. Remove the braid and fix your hair in the traditional way."

Minah glanced at Lyz who looked from her daughter to her husband.

"It's only a hairstyle, Bramah," Lyz said.

"Then you approve?" he growled.

"I didn't think it was important."

"Which is precisely why your daughter is so headstrong. I will hear no further argument on this. Minah, remove the braid."

A rebellious look passed across the girl's face then faded as she reached up to restrain Pandora's hands.

"My father does not approve of the style," Minah translated. "But thank you anyway."

Pandora's cool gaze moved from Bramah to Steel who narrowed his eyes in warning. She dropped her hands and sat in her chair while Lyz served breakfast.

"Steel, please inform your woman that she is not to influence my daughter with her human ways," Bramah stated. "I have invited you into our home and will not go back on my promise to allow you to stay until your ride comes, but I insist that you respect our ways while you are here."

"That's understandable," Steel said. He turned to Pandora and said, "Bramah requests that you not expose Minah to any more of your human ways. Remember, we're guests here."

Pandora smiled with convincing sweetness. It seemed her acting skills were better than ever, but that's what made her such a skilled assassin. "Of course. Tell Bramah that I beg forgiveness for my ignorance."

Again Steel narrowed his eyes. He didn't trust her sudden subservience, but at the moment he had no choice but to accept it. He repeated her words to Bramah who grunted in reply, but looked appeased. Poor fool. It seemed he was as ignorant of human women as Pandora was of Lassen men and Steel had absolutely no doubt which was more dangerous. Unfortunately Steel, as an innocent bystander, would probably be dragged right into the danger.

When breakfast ended, Minah and Pandora went to work in the fruit-sorting shed, separating the best-quality fruit from the rest while Steel accompanied Bramah to the shipping area. There, cartons of fruits and vegetables were packed onto shuttles and flown to warehouses throughout the galaxy. One of the shipping supervisors was ill and Bramah intended to take over his duties for the day.

A couple of hours into the morning, Tobyn approached the shipping area. Though Bramah took him aside, Steel couldn't help overhearing their conversation, mostly because Bramah spoke loud and clear. He seemed bent on making the private matter public, most likely to humiliate Tobyn.

"You want to speak to me, sir?" Tobyn said.

"Yes. You are well aware that my daughter is betrothed to Chief Guard Vayl."

Tobyn's jaw tightened visibly. "I am."

"I have asked you before not to speak to her unless it's related to work. It has come to my attention you have been practicing human English with her again."

"We only exchanged a few sentences while she was working in my area."

"This is the last time I will tell you not to look at or speak to my daughter outside work. You are a good supervisor, Tobyn, and have the potential to become a farming chief one day. Don't throw away your future for something as foolish as a fickle young girl."

"With all due respect, you undervalue your daughter, sir."

Bramah cast him a quelling look which didn't seem to intimidate Tobyn in the least. Still, the younger man knew there was no way he could fight Bramah. If he did, his relationship with Minah would be destroyed one way or the other.

"Perhaps I place too much value on you," Bramah said sharply. "One more incident and I will banish you from this village. A mark such as this could ruin your chances of finding another farming chief willing to hire you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

Tobyn turned and left, his fists clenched and eyes blazing.

Shaking his head, Bramah returned to the loading area. He continued logging entries into a handheld computer, though Steel sensed his mind wasn't on his work.

Steel picked up a crate and placed it on the conveyer belt leading to the shuttle and said, "This is none of my business, but I'm wondering why you didn't consider marrying your daughter to Tobyn. You seem to like him."

"He's an excellent worker. Strong. Smart. High quality for someone of farming class."

"Then what's the problem?"

Bramah cast him an icy look. "As you said, it's none of your business."

"Very true." Steel bent and lifted another crate.

A few moments later, Bramah said, "If Tobyn had asked for her before Vayl, I would have considered him. I have already given my word to Vayl. By the Lassen code of honor I cannot go back on it."

"Even if your daughter prefers one man to the other?"

"You speak our language well and seem familiar with our laws, but apparently you have no understanding of our code of honor. Once a betrothal is made, it cannot be broken without dishonor to the entire family. Besides, Vayl is a better choice for my daughter. A husband of guard class has more esteem than one of the farming class, even a farming chief. Minah should be glad Vayl made an offer for her." Bramah glanced at Steel. "I'm thinking of my daughter."

"No doubt."

"Are you mocking me?" Bramah practically growled.

"Not at all. As you said, I don't know everything about your people. Besides, it's none of my business."

When Steel spoke those words, he fully believed them. To him the conversation was over. In another day or two, he and Pandora would be on Xenos' ship headed —

Well, he wasn't sure where they'd be headed yet, but it would be someplace where Pandora would be safe from the Laetez. At least as safe as a runaway assassin could be.

After work and before dinner, Steel and Pandora went to their room to wash up.

She seemed to have lost her grudge because once he closed the door behind them, she smiled and slipped her arms around his neck.

"I missed you today," she said.

"We waved across the field a few times," he replied with false nonchalance. His arms slid around her and he bent his head, his lips hovering over hers.

"Those were the highlights of my day."

Steel covered her mouth in a penetrating kiss. He loved the taste and feel of her, the way her wet tongue met his with hungry strokes. She reached up and began unfastening his hair sheath, but they were interrupted by hard pounding on the door.

"Steel!" Bramah shouted. "You and your human slut get downstairs. Now!"

Pandora's gaze turned frosty. "That man needs a personality overhaul."

"Something tells me we should be prepared to leave this house."

"I'd rather. I've just about had it with Farming Chief Big Mouth."

"Just remain calm."

"Steel!" Bramah bellowed.

Raising his eyes to the heavens, Steel turned and opened the door. He led the way down the stairs and into the kitchen where Lyz and Minah also stood, looking upset.

"I told you to keep your woman under control," Bramah said, fury simmering in his eyes. His brow furrowed so that his heavy eyebrows seemed to form a single grim line.

"What's the problem?" Steel asked coolly.

"I told you to make sure she stopped influencing Minah with her disgraceful human ways. Tonight my daughter asked me to break her betrothal to Vayl. Where do you think she got such an idea? I'll tell you. From your slut."

"Steel, I don't understand what he's saying, but I can just about guess," Pandora said, her face etched with anger.

"Do not let her speak out of line!" Bramah shouted.

"Don't call her a slut again," Steel said. "I'm willing to listen to your complaint, but not if you can't act civilized."

Bramah's eyes bulged. "A mongrel like you doesn't have the right to call any Lassen uncivilized."

"Bramah, please," Lyz said.

Pandora stepped forward, her anger almost tangible. Steel touched her arm and met her gaze. "Remain calm. I'll handle this."

"That woman needs punishment. If she were mine, she would feel the sting of my hand. You are in my home, Steel, and unless you see fit to punish her, I will do so in your place."

Steel had finally reached the end of his patience. Leveling his coldest gaze on Bramah, he said, "Lift a hand to her and it will be the last hand you ever lift to anyone."

Lyz and Minah exchanged frantic glances.

"Steel, what's going on?" Pandora demanded.

Ignoring her, Steel continued his staring match with Bramah.

"Was that a challenge?" the farming chief demanded.

"Take it as whatever you want. My woman and I are leaving now." Steel turned to Pandora and said, "Let's pack our stuff. We're getting out of here."

"What is he ranting about?"

Bramah grasped Steel's arm and shoved him against the wall. "Do not turn your back on me after you issue a challenge."

"When and where?" Steel demanded.

"The ninth hour on the loading dock. You are aware of the rules of the Lassen challenge?"

Steel stepped forward so that he was eye to eye and chest to chest with Bramah. "Well aware."

"No, Bramah." Lyz grasped her husband's arm, terror in her eyes. "You cannot do this."

"I have no choice," Bramah said.

"But what about your sons? What about—"

"You speak as if I've already lost, woman. No Lassen male worth his beard will lose to a mongrel like this." He cast a scathing look in Steel's direction, but Steel didn't miss the apprehension deep in his eyes. Over the past two days he had witnessed Steel's strength and endurance at work and no doubt he knew that both Searillas and Drapers were among the greatest warriors in the known universe.

"Father, please. I take back what I said about Vayl," Minah said. "I'll marry him without further question."

"It's too late for that. You have already disrespected me and shamed our family by your flirtation with Tobyn. I have no choice but to defend our honor with this stranger."

"Pandora and I are leaving now," Steel stated.

"Don't think about running away before the challenge."

"It wouldn't enter my mind."

He took Pandora's hand and guided her out of the kitchen. In the guestroom, while they packed their few belongings, Pandora asked, "What happened down there?"

"Tonight at the ninth hour Bramah and I have a fight."

She stopped stuffing clothes into her pack and stared at him. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? Because you couldn't mind your own business. You had to talk that girl into asking him to break the betrothal."

"I did no such thing!"

He held her gaze. "Come on, Pandora. I know you."

"Do you?" she demanded, color rising in her face as her temper grew.

Damn, she looked beautiful, but it was his attraction to her that always seemed to get him into trouble.

She continued, "For your information, I did suggest she talk to her father, but only because she told me that she and her supervisor boyfriend were planning to take off together. She told me the only reason they hadn't run away already was because she loves her family and would miss them. I guess if she and Tobyn left, they could never come back."

Steel sighed. "That's true."

"I've dealt with lots of different cultures in my career, but I've never met any like these Lassens. They're impossible."

"Maybe if you spent more time learning about your Searilla side you'd understand them better. Searillas and Tydisians have a similar code of honor to these Lassens. Humans and Laetez scarcely know what honor means."

"If I'm so dishonorable, wouldn't I have agreed with them running away?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "This is crazy. Two days. We're here two days and you've already started trouble. What's wrong with you, lady?"

"Me? You're the one who challenged Bramah to a fight."

"Because he threatened to punish you."

"Punish me? What did he say exactly?"

"You don't want to know."

"No, I do want to know!" she shouted. Her teeth clenched and he knew she was close to losing her Laetez temper.

"Pandora, I took care of it. I had no intention of letting him touch you."

"Then you saved his life because if he'd laid a hand on me I'd have broken it off and stuck it up his ass."

He couldn't control a snort of laughter. "I don't doubt it."

"Not that I want you to fight, Steel, but I'm looking forward to seeing Bramah put in his place. If you ask me, it's long past time."

Would she feel the same way if she understood the seriousness of a Lassen challenge? He considered telling her exactly what was going on, but decided not to. He didn't want to know what her reaction would be.

"Let's get out of here. I need to get ready for that fight."

They left the house and were partway across the village square when Vayl approached them, his expression more arrogant than usual.

"Farming Chief Bramah told me about your challenge. I hope you're not thinking about fleeing before it takes place."

"It wouldn't enter my mind," Steel replied.

"Good. Because whatever is left of you when Bramah is finished belongs to me. Not that I'm expecting much. Though a farmer, he is among the best fighters I've ever known and one of the strongest men. His daughter will make good breeding stock."

"Steel, what's going on?" Pandora asked. "What is he saying?"

"You'd rather not know," Steel told her. "So that's your interest in marrying her."

"Strengthening the bloodline is the only reason to marry."

Steel's stomach clenched. That attitude was uncomfortably similar to the Laetez viewpoint regarding ACT.

"Bramah said how you and your woman tried to interfere in Minah's betrothal to me."

"I couldn't care less about your betrothal," Steel said. "If you want to fight me for whatever reason, you'll have to wait your turn."

Vayl snorted with contempt. "You will not leave the village."

"We'll camp on the outskirts," Steel told him.

The chief guard walked away.

Staring after him, her lip curled, Pandora said, "I pity Minah being stuck with him. It seems the only decent man in the village is Tobyn and because of her father Minah can't have him. I hate to admit it, but I gave her some bad advice. They should have simply run away."

"Come on, Pandora. You and I both know running away is never simple."

She smiled sadly. "You're right. Steel, I've been thinking. My temper got the better of me. Fighting Bramah is stupid. Maybe you should call it off."

"I can't. Like a betrothal, once a challenge is issued it can't be taken back."

"The Lassens don't believe in shades of gray, do they? Everything is either one way or the other to them."

"Now you're starting to understand them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Though Pandora liked the thought of Steel kicking Bramah's ass, and she had no doubt her cyborg crossbreed would, she didn't like the idea of seeing him in a fight. Her bloodthirsty attitude sickened her yet she couldn't help feeling excited by the match.

In her opinion, Bramah had too many people sucking up to him—the workers because he was in charge of the village and his family because he had the power of life and death over them. The control had gone to his head, as it did with some people. And from what she could see, Vayl was little better. She hated to imagine what Minah's life would be like married to him.

After setting up camp, Steel took some time to warm up before the challenge. Just before the ninth hour, they arrived at the loading dock.

It seemed as if the entire settlement waited there to witness the match between their farming chief and the foreign challenger. The bystanders formed a wide circle around the central area of the dock.

Lyz and Minah stood across the circle from Pandora, each carrying one of the twin boys. The women looked worried and though Pandora sympathized, she couldn't help wondering why they didn't seem to gain even a bit of satisfaction from the challenge. They couldn't fight Bramah, but Steel could.

No doubt he would win, regardless of how good a fighter Vayl believed the farming chief was. After Pandora pressured him to tell her what Vayl had said during their confrontation, he had finally succumbed and given her the gist of it.

Bramah stood in the center of the circle, Vayl beside him.

"Take care," Pandora said to Steel before he went to join them. If he heard her, he didn't acknowledge her. No doubt he was completely focused on the fight.

Once Steel and Bramah faced each other, both shirtless, barefoot and wearing trousers, Vayl bellowed for silence. He gave a short speech that Pandora guessed included the rules of the challenge then he stepped away and called for the fight to begin.

Like most Lassens, Bramah was powerfully muscled, more thickly built than Steel. He was a smart fighter and surprisingly quick, though Steel surpassed him in speed and grace of movement. It was the Searilla in him. Most aquatic species moved beautifully, wielding power with movements that appeared almost effortless.

The men traded vicious blows and after several moments, they circled each other. Bramah's lower lip was swollen and his breathing much heavier than Steel's. Not only did Steel have the advantage of his artificial heart, but he had Searilla lungs and an exo-filler spine. The fight wasn't fair, but neither was the way Bramah treated his wife, his daughter and even many of the workers.

Not that Steel remained unscathed. Bramah fought well and landed several blows that would have crushed a lesser man. Blood dripped down the side of Steel's face from a cut over his eye. No doubt it hindered his vision and Pandora tensed, her teeth clenched as Bramah constantly attacked his blind side.

In the midst of a rain of blows from Bramah's meaty fists, Steel landed a punch square in his face that stunned the farming chief. He followed it with a powerful uppercut that sent Bramah to the ground.

Stunned, the Lassen man tried to push himself to his feet.

Several workers shouted while a majority fell silent. Lyz turned away and buried her face against the child in her arms. Minah's face went white and she must have unconsciously tightened her grip on her brother because he gave a sharp cry.

Steel stood, his fists raised in a defensive position as Bramah managed to stand, swaying on his feet.

The men's gazes locked and Pandora could scarcely believe what happened next. Steel lowered his hands and allowed Bramah to land a rather weak punch in his face. Steel dropped to his knees in a position of surrender.

Vayl, his face etched with anger, shouted something that must have meant the end of the fight. Simultaneously, Bramah fell and Steel rose, catching him.

He helped Bramah to a stool brought out by one of the workers, where he sat while Lyz examined his injuries. Surprisingly, Bramah placed an arm around his wife.

Pandora rushed over, standing by Steel's side. He and Bramah exchanged words then Steel bowed his head respectfully and walked away.

"Steel, what's going on?" she demanded. "Why did you forfeit? What's with the bowing? Steel!"

"Quiet, Pandora," he said.

"I want to know what the hell is going on!"

"There was no need for the challenge to go any further."

Vayl stepped between Pandora and Steel and said, "I should have taken you first and saved Bramah this humiliation."

"If you still want a challenge, Vayl, I'm more than ready," Steel said, his lip curled. "But consider this. I can't think of a reason to forfeit to you."

The men glared at each other for several heartbeats then Vayl stepped aside. Apparently he wasn't as certain he could take Steel as he tried to appear.

Steel strode out of the village and Pandora followed at his heels all the way to their camp.

While he pulled off his trousers, Pandora continued, "I still don't understand why you forfeited to Bramah."

"Because I proved my point."

"You proved nothing! Power is all that matters to these people. How could you show respect to a man like that? How could you let him win? What kind of man are you? Hell, I should have fought him."

His eyes blazed and he stepped so close that she was forced to back up a few steps, but instead of letting her put space between them, he kept pushing her backward. "Maybe you should have because I couldn't see any other option but to forfeit."

"What are you talking about?"

"If a Lassen leader accepts a challenge then it's a fight to the death. He's the leader here, so even if I didn't kill him in the fight, if he lost his people would be forced to end his life through a ritualistic killing. As the challenger, I could forfeit to him, giving him his life as well as the continued respect of his people. Yes, I could have killed him for being an arrogant ass and leave his wife a widow and his twin sons fatherless, but I didn't want to do that."

Her jaw set, she folded her arms beneath her breasts and held his gaze. "I didn't know that. I didn't realize it was that serious."

"And if you did, would it matter or do you consider my actions weak, assassin? You see, I still happen to have some respect for life."

Pandora was so enraged that for a moment she could scarcely see straight.

This time she advanced on him and shouted in his face, "I have had it with your insults and snide remarks about my profession, or should I say ex-profession. And as for respecting life, Steel, if it wasn't for me you wouldn't even have a life!"

His brow furrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about fourteen years ago. I loved you, Steel. More than I've ever loved anyone. I wanted nothing more than to marry you, but Chief Re Lord had other plans. I was an ACT slave. They fed me, trained me, kept me and they would not waste my talents by letting me go. Re Lord threatened to kill you if I didn't become an assassin for the Laetez."

Steel looked stunned. Then he shook his head. "That's crazy. Another lie."

"How dare you?" she snapped, anger, pain and frustration overtaking her.

"If it was the truth, you should have told me. We could have fought him. Taken off. Anything."

"He said he would have you killed. He said that if I didn't cooperate, during your next scheduled heart upgrade he would see that you didn't survive the surgery. I had to do what he said."

She closed her eyes and sighed deeply. Now that she'd finally told him, she felt thoroughly drained. She'd kept that horrible secret for so long. Now the only person who ever meant anything to her knew the truth.

After a moment, she met his gaze again. "You don't believe me."

"I don't know what to believe anymore. Everywhere you turn in this life there seems to be lies."

"If you think I'm lying, Steel, then I'm sorry I threw away my entire life for you," she said, tears springing into her eyes, yet she refused to let them flow. She had learned well how to ignore her feelings.

There had been times when she thought she might have stopped feeling entirely, but during those times all she had to do was remember Steel. The man she had loved and idealized had now betrayed her in the worst possible way. Yet how could he believe her? She was an assassin. She had seemed to use him and she had at one time broken his heart. How could she prove she was telling the truth?

Pandora shook her head.

"What?" he demanded.

"I was trying to think of a way to prove what I just said, but now I realize I shouldn't have to. I loved you, Steel, and if you ever loved me you would know in your heart a lie from the truth."

"Pandora," he said simply, caressed her cheek then turned and headed for the lake.

She didn't bother following. While he scrubbed away the dirt and blood from the fight, she sat in their shelter and for the first time in a long time cried. Usually she wasn't given to tears. Most likely not taking her meds had really started to affect her. This was simply another reflection of her scarcely controlled emotions.

When she and Steel weren't fighting, when he was beside her, supporting her, she could handle her Laetez side.

But now...

At the moment she didn't care about controlling herself. It actually felt good to give in.

When she finished weeping, she lay down and fell into a sleep haunted by dreams of her past.

Pandora awoke panting, her heart racing. In her nightmare she had been reliving her first assassination assignment, except this time her victim had turned the tables and was about to cut her throat.

"Mertle," Minah called from outside the shelter. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Pandora said, brushing hair from her face. She emerged from the tent and saw that Minah looked uncharacteristically happy. Radiant, actually.

A short distance away, in the light of the moon, Tobyn stood waiting for Minah. Pandora could only guess that they were about to run away together after all.

"I just wanted to tell you that Tobyn and I were married an hour ago."

"An hour?" Pandora closed her eyes for a moment. "What time is it?"

"The twelfth hour. I wanted to let you know because in spite of how everything turned out with Steel and my father, I know you only wanted to help me."

"I did," she replied truthfully. "Why did your father change his mind?"

"Steel demanded it, to even the score between them. By Lassen law, if one opponent forfeits to another who is losing, a debt is owed. That debt overshadows almost everything, including a betrothal. Thanks to Steel, the name of my family is not tarnished yet I have married the man I love. Steel is a good man. You are lucky to have him."

Pandora smiled sadly. "I'm happy for you and Tobyn."

"Thank you. Tobyn and I must go home now." Minah turned then paused and looked back at Pandora. "I do not fully understand what you and Steel are to each other. When we first met, you told me you are only his woman temporarily. I believe Steel wishes it to be otherwise."

"Yeah." Pandora gave a snort of wry laughter. "Even temporarily is too much."

Minah narrowed her eyes and shook her head slightly. "No. I think he cares about you very much. If that is true, I hope you will be as happy as Tobyn and I are."

"Do you know where Steel is?"

"He witnessed the wedding then he said he wanted to be alone. I think he went for a walk."

"Thank you, Minah."

The young Lassen woman nodded then rejoined her husband. Tobyn slipped an arm around her and walked toward the village square.

Shortly after Minah and Tobyn left, Steel returned to the shelter. Their gazes met and Pandora said, "I heard what you did for Minah and Tobyn. I thought you didn't want to interfere."

"I didn't."

"What changed your mind?"

"No one has the right to keep lovers apart."

Pandora's heartbeat quickened.

"I agree," she whispered. "No one does."

Part of her hoped this meant he believed her about Chief Re Lord. She expected him to elaborate or at least offer a hint about his feelings regarding her confession, but he said nothing. He lay on his back, his arms folded behind his head.

Pandora nearly left the shelter to spend the night outside. Anything to get away from him, but she refused to give him the satisfaction.

She lay with her back to him.

After a moment, he said softly, "Good night, Pandora."

Instead of answering, she pretended to sleep.

## Chapter Eleven

The following morning when Pandora awoke, Steel had already left the tent. A sick feeling washed over her. She wondered about the reasons for his reaction to her confession. Most likely he didn't believe her. She was just a hard-nosed assassin, a murdering *strumpsc*a who had concocted yet another lie to mock his tender feelings toward her. She had no doubt that he did still feel something for her. Why else would he help her?

A twinge of fear struck her. Now that he thought she'd lied again, would he decide to turn her over to the Laetez after all? If so, she should leave immediately and at least try to reach the city alone. There she could find her own transportation off the planet. She had become very resourceful over the years. Someone in her profession had to be. Usually she was clearheaded, but her feelings for Steel had clouded her mind and made her take risks.

Her emotional state due to the lack of proper chemical-balancing meds didn't help her situation. These past few days she had depended far too much on Steel to help her deal with her problems. Now she saw that trusting him was the worst mistake she had ever made. She should have stayed on her ship as it crashed instead of boarding his.

She left the shelter and walked to the public showers just outside the village square and washed. The best course of action would be to go to the fields as usual then slip away, undetected. Even with a head start she probably couldn't escape Steel for long. No doubt he would catch up with her, but she would worry about that later.

When she returned to the shelter, she was surprised to find Steel awaiting her, carrying a food container.

"I brought you something to eat," he said. "You must be hungry."

This surprised her. She thought he'd been deliberately ignoring her, but maybe she was wrong.

"I am. Thanks."

"Xenos sent a message this morning. *Nameless* will be here in about an hour. He's sending down a transportation shuttle to pick us up."

Her stomach clenched. It seemed she'd have no chance to escape after all.

"Let's eat." He gestured toward the shelter and they ducked inside.

They sat on the ground and he placed the food container between them and uncovered it. She'd been starving when she'd awakened that morning, but thinking about the problems with Steel had driven off her appetite. She took a piece of sweet fruit and nibbled it.

"Are you all feeling all right?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"You're usually more enthusiastic about meals."

She stared at him and curled her lip. "Meaning what? You never complained about my weight before."

"Who's complaining about your weight? It's just that I've never known you to pick at food."

She forced an ultra-sweet smile. "Why is it that men like you always know just what to say?"

"Men like me?"

"Former grunts."

"There's nothing wrong with grunts. Wars can't be won without them."

"I didn't think you cared about wars anymore. You're the lone bounty hunter. You give your allegiance to no one and you don't owe anyone anything." She held his gaze. "Or so you thought."

Maybe ribbing him wasn't the wise thing to do, but honestly at the moment she was too angry and frustrated to care. The way he'd been ignoring her, not so much as acknowledging what she'd said, thereby insinuating that she'd lied, infuriated her.

He put down the slice of bread he'd been eating, closed his eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. When he opened them, he met her gaze but with an unreadable expression. She'd expected to see coldness in his eyes, or at least an accusation, but this passive look took her off guard.

"I don't want to argue, Pandora."

"You're going to turn me over to the Laetez, aren't you? If I get on *Nameless* with you, it's all over for me."

"If I intended to do that, why would I have introduced you to the Lassens with a false identity? I could have contacted the Laetez directly and had them send a shuttle instead of calling Xenos."

That was true. Still, she'd be a fool to trust him completely. There were too many bad feelings between them.

"Besides, if what you said is true about why you became an assassin then this entire situation is partly my fault. Actually it's all Re Lord's fault but there's not much we can do about it anymore."

"If what I said is true?"

"It doesn't matter. I said I would not turn you over. I keep my word."

"You gave your word to the Laetez that you'd turn me over," she said quietly.

"That wasn't giving my word. It was a business transaction. Not the same thing."

She snorted with laughter. "Does your sense of integrity vary depending on the situation?"

"Yes. You see, in business parties stab each other in the back all the time. If the Laetez thought they could hire a better man than me to track you down, they'd dissolve our agreement in an instant. Giving your word about something personal is different."

"So you still consider me something personal?"

"I consider the promise I made you personal."

That bit of honesty stung more than she wanted to admit. The promise was personal, but she wasn't. Not anymore.

They finished eating in silence then packed their meager belongings. Steel began disassembling the shelter.

Pandora tried to help, but he refused her. "Just sit down and relax. I'll do it."

She sat and watched him work, still unable to figure out what he was thinking. A short time later, Tobyn and Minah joined them to say goodbye.

"Thank you again for your help. Both of you," Tobyn said.

"I hope you have a long, happy life together," Pandora said. At least someone should be happy because for her sharing a life with the man she loved just wasn't in the stars.

"Vayl has requested a transfer to another settlement," Minah said.

"That's probably best," Steel told her.

"Maybe. But my intention wasn't to drive him away. I just didn't want to marry him."

Pandora placed a hand on her shoulder. "I know it isn't what Lassen culture dictates, but you do have a right to happiness with someone you love."

"I think Steel is right," Tobyn said. "If I was in Vayl's place, I couldn't bear to stay here, seeing Minah with another man. If she had been forced to follow through with the marriage, I would have been the one leaving."

"Some things you can't run away from," Steel said quietly. "We'd better get to the docking bay. Our ride will be coming soon."

Tobyn and Minah left for the fields and Pandora and Steel went to the dock. A short time later, a transportation shuttle from *Nameless* landed. A guard boarded to check it out then he and the pilot—a tall, brown-haired human-Laetez crossbreed—stepped off the shuttle.

"Dario!" Steel called to the pilot who offered a smile and a wave as he approached.

"Hey, Steel. How's it going?"

Steel grinned. "Better now that we have a ride out of here." He gestured toward Pandora. "This is—"

"I know who she is," Dario interrupted. "Xenos informed me."

Steel glanced at Pandora and winked. "I knew he'd figure it out."

"If you're ready, we'll leave now. Xenos wants to talk to you once you're aboard *Nameless*."

"Which one of us?" Pandora asked warily.

"Both of you."

Though the pilot looked harmless enough, friendly even, Pandora realized that meant nothing. Xenos was in charge and everyone knew what a bastard he could be.

Steel touched her arm and again held her gaze. "It'll be all right."

"Said the hawk to the mouse."

"You're no mouse."

"But you're a hawk."

They followed Dario into the shuttle where they settled in the passenger seats. During the brief ride to *Nameless*, Pandora's heart raced. Her fate was sealed. Soon she would know if Steel was as trustworthy as she had once known him to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Nameless*, a ship which Xenos helped design, was large, fast and built to withstand the worst blows of battle. It was also fitted with a legendary impenetrable shield—the only one of its kind in the known universe. *Nameless* and her crew had endured the ACT rebellion and though it hadn't ended exactly how they wished, they had survived and prospered.

Xenos and his crew now worked for the Earth government as ambassadors for ACT. They communicated with planets involved in the program and ensured any cruel treatment of products was made public.

In secret, the *Nameless* crew performed other duties that the Earth government wanted no traceable connection to. Though they represented Earth, they were considered private contractors. If caught performing their covert schemes, Xenos would take the blame.

Steel respected the work of Xenos and his crew. During the rebellion he had done all he could to aid them in their cause. Now that the rebellion was over, at least publicly, he still worked with them often, yet he had refused Xenos' offers to join them permanently.

As much as Steel liked Xenos, he knew joining his crew would be a mistake. Taking orders for a short time on specific projects was one thing, but Steel had an independent streak that would eventually cause problems between them. Steel's ship might be small, but at least he was the captain.

Or should he say his ship had been small. Now it was nothing more than a scrap heap in the wilderness of Roum. As soon as possible he'd need to get another ship. A bounty hunter needed the proper tools and a good, fast ship was at the top of the list.

Once the ship docked, Dario brought them to the bridge of *Nameless*. Not that Steel needed a guide. *Nameless* was almost like home.

When they stepped onto the bridge, Xenos glanced at them from the captain's chair. Then he stood and said, "Steel, good to see you. Pandora, it's been a long time."

Pandora nodded. Though she looked outwardly calm, Steel didn't doubt she'd raised all her defenses and prepared herself for the worst. She didn't trust him to keep her safe.

Why should she? When she'd needed him most, he'd failed her.

He still didn't want to believe what she'd told him about her reason for becoming an assassin. It was too painful to think that she had sacrificed her life for him. Remembering all the times he'd called her a *strumpsc*a made him cringe.

"Thanks for the ride, Xenos," Steel said.

"It's nothing you haven't done for me," Xenos replied. "Follow me to my ready room."

They walked across the bridge to another room where Pandora and Steel sat in comfortable chairs.

"Would you like some refreshments?" Xenos asked.

"I'll have some water," Steel said.

Xenos took a couple of bottles from the refrigeration unit. "Pandora? Or should I say Mertle?"

"Nothing. Thank you," she said coolly.

Smiling slightly, Steel said, "I'd hoped you'd figure out it was her."

"It wasn't difficult to guess," Xenos replied, taking a seat across from them. He handed Steel a bottle of water then opened the other for himself and took a swallow.

Being mostly Tydisian, Xenos required massive amounts of water to stay healthy. He could absorb it easily through his amphibious skin, but when out of the water, he needed to ingest it frequently. Though Searillas also needed water to live, they didn't require such large amounts and while Steel had inherited their uneven flesh and powerful lungs, his hydration requirements were more comparable to that of humans or Laetez.

"Since you changed her name on the planet, I'm guessing you've decided not to turn her over to the Laetez?" Xenos continued.

"Yes. I know you and your crew will respect that decision."

"As well as harbor a fugitive?" Xenos' stern blue gaze met Steel's.

"Just as I supplied fugitives with whatever resources they asked for during the rebellion," Steel said. He hated resorting to such tactics, but after what Pandora had told him he would do anything to keep her safe this time.

"Your point is noted," Xenos said. "But threats aren't necessary. Not that they'd work with me anyway, Steel. As you know, I have no love for the Laetez government and I don't doubt Pandora has good reasons for defecting."

From the corner of his eye, Steel noticed Pandora watching Xenos warily. Most likely Xenos noticed too, but he chose not to react.

"Where would you like us to take you?" Xenos asked.

Steel and Pandora exchanged glances.

"We haven't really discussed it yet," Steel said.

"In that case, I'll have someone show you to your rooms. You have time to consider your decision. Right now we're headed to our hideout in the Delilah Sector. *Nameless* requires time to regenerate. Within the past day we had to activate MaSal's shield for an extended period of time. When the energy drain became dangerous, we switched to the Scawlet power pack and drained that too."

Though the legendary shield had thus far lived up to its reputation of being impenetrable, it caused a tremendous drain on the ship's engine. After long-term use of the shield, the ship needed to recharge before the shield could be used again. Scawlets, the latest power systems designed by the Cuthtez, provided high amounts of energy in super-tiny units. They were perfect for running small devices or providing backup power for large ones.

"You finally got a Scawlet?" Steel said.

"Yes. A level three. It works as well as you said and it's the size of my fingertip. As soon as possible I'm getting another, but they're expensive."

"Tell me about it. When I upgraded my memory base's power to a Scawlet it cost me a year's worth of bounties and mine is only a level two. Any bigger and my head would explode." Steel grinned.

"If we're going to the Delilah Sector you can drop me off there," Pandora interrupted.

Xenos studied her, his expression unreadable.

Pandora added coolly, "Unless you plan to turn me over to the Laetez?"

"He won't," Steel said quickly, his gaze fixed on Xenos.

A faint, almost mocking smile touched Xenos' lips. Like Steel, he hated being told what to do. Steel wasn't actually telling him, he was merely *suggesting*. Yet both men knew that if Xenos reported Pandora, there would be hell to pay and his friendship with Steel would be destroyed forever.

Xenos turned his gaze to Pandora and said, "Steel is the bounty hunter. If he chooses to release his prey, I won't interfere."

"Even if that means harboring a fugitive?" she asked. "I thought you were walking the straight and narrow now, Xenos. Working for Earth. Once again on speaking terms with the Laetez. Pardoned for your —"

"If you say crimes I might just put you and my good friend off this ship right now," Xenos stated.

"On the contrary, I don't think what you did can be classified as criminal," she said. "In many ways I've learned to hate ACT as much as you do."

Steel wanted to reach out to her, but he wasn't sure if he should. He sensed her internal struggle but didn't know how to help her ease the unrest in her soul.

"What happened that you needed the shield?" Steel asked, redirecting the conversation before it got too intense. He knew both Pandora and Xenos had short tempers when it came to matters close to their heart.

"You know we were recently sent to discuss ACT with a species called the Mar-Tense who live in a solar system on the other side of The White Zone."

The White Zone was a dead solar system whose planets had been destroyed in a war centuries ago.

Xenos continued, "We could not come to terms with the Mar-Tense and in my report I strongly suggested that Earth as well as Laetez avoid them, not simply regarding ACT but in general."

"Why?" Steel asked. "Are they that bad?"

"They're scavengers, stealing what they can from various races, and they want ACT only to create slaves. Much like the Drapers. No offense intended to you personally, but you know how I feel about the Drapers and their slaves."

"No offense taken," Steel said. "I might have Draper blood, but you know I don't believe in slavery."

"At least the Drapers appear to have some code of honor," Xenos said. "The Mar-Tense have none that I can see. After the negotiations ended, they knew what my recommendation would be. They sent a fleet to attack *Nameless* on her way out of their solar system."

Steel's brow furrowed. "It sounds like they want more than simply to get involved in ACT."

"It could be their only reason. They're not an intelligent species. They don't seem to learn anything from the technology they take. However, they have gained several powerful weapons so I've already included a warning in my report to the Earth government. I'm to meet with representatives from Intergalactic Affairs on Earth as soon as possible. However, until my ship has regained full power, I won't be going anywhere but our hideout. The Delilah Sector is closer than Earth, so they'll have to wait."

"Thanks for picking us up," Steel said. "It seems you're waist-deep in your own shit."

"Not a problem. Now I need to get to engineering. I'm working on some improvements to the engine that should help alleviate the power drain when the shield is in use."

"Do you need another pair of hands?" Steel asked.

Xenos gave a snort of laughter. "I don't want you with your mediocre skills tinkering with my engine."

The door beeped, interrupting them.

"Come in," Xenos said and his wife, Moonlight, a dark-haired, dark-eyed human, stepped inside.

"Steel, good to see you," she smiled.

"Hello, Moonlight. This is Pandora."

Moonlight smiled slightly and nodded in Pandora's direction. "Yes."

"Moonlight, Steel and Pandora will be accompanying us to the Delilah Sector. Would you show them to their rooms? I should have been in engineering an hour ago."

"Of course. I came here to ask if you want Tydisian Sea Salad with dinner?"

"That's a given," Xenos replied. He stood and stepped near to his wife. Their gazes met in a look so intimate Steel felt like a voyeur. It amazed him that a man as cold and hard as Xenos had learned to pour so much passion into a single look. Moonlight had done that to him.

Steel was happy Xenos had finally found someone to love, yet he couldn't help feeling a little envious. He and Pandora had missed out on so much. They might still have a chance to rebuild their life together, but it would take time. She didn't trust him. She still thought he intended to turn her over to the Laetez. The hopeful young woman he had once known no longer existed, just as the naïve young man he had once been had disappeared long ago.

He wouldn't blame her if she had grown to hate and resent him after what she had been forced into because of him. Yet she must have loved him very much once. As much as he had loved her.

All those years ago he had sensed she was lying about her reasons for leaving him. If only he had trusted his instincts and pushed harder to reach the truth. But she had been very convincing and he had been young and rather self-absorbed. All he'd been able to think about was how she had broken his heart. He'd lost himself in the void that consumed him when she'd left.

He needed to move carefully now. He had to find a way to convince her they still belonged together. Since their paths had crossed again, the emotions he thought had died completely within him had returned in full force but this time he couldn't think about himself.

Amidst the guilt and desire, anger stirred. If he'd only known what Re Lord was up to, he'd have found a way to kill the bastard. Part of him wished Re Lord wasn't in jail so he could have the satisfaction of snapping his neck.

"Steel?" Pandora touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he said.

"Come with me," Moonlight told them. "I'll show you to your rooms."

"Xenos, there's one more thing we need," Steel said. "Pandora lost most of her chemical-balancing meds when our ships crashed. She's been without the proper dose for several days."

"I'll call ahead to sick bay and let Medic Trissa know you'll be coming. Just stop in once you're settled and she'll assist you," Xenos replied.

"Thank you," Pandora told him.

No doubt she felt relieved. He knew he did, yet they still faced problems. How could he rebuild his relationship with her? And how could he keep her safe from the other bounty hunters who would come as soon as Yashel realized Steel had screwed the Laetez government?

He drew a calming breath and decided the only way to handle the situation was logically, one step at a time.

On their way down the corridor toward the elevator, Pandora studied Moonlight, curious about the woman who had fallen in love with a man like Xenos. She seemed like a normal human female. Brown hair. Large, dark eyes. Cute but not beautiful. Still, she had a certain charm and a kind, friendly manner that made Pandora feel at home. She couldn't help wondering what a woman like this saw in someone as predatory as Xenos.

Of course Moonlight must have a wild streak, otherwise she wouldn't have played such an important role in the ACT products' rebellion.

"I've given you adjoining rooms," Moonlight said.

"That wasn't necessary," Steel told her.

Pandora glanced at him, her heart beating faster. Did he want to share a room with her? She hoped so. The polite though almost detached way he'd been treating her was unbearable. She even preferred their bickering to this behavior. At least then she'd felt some familiarity between them. Now he was like a total stranger.

"You mean you wanted a single?" Moonlight asked. "That's no problem—"

"No. I meant Pandora is welcome to her privacy."

Pandora wondered if her shock and hurt shown on her face. He obviously wanted to end their relationship. There was no other way to interpret his remark.

No matter what he said, he believed she was lying.

Glancing at her, he asked, "Is something wrong?"

"No. And you're right. I would like my privacy."

Moonlight glanced from one to the other then shrugged. "I'll give you another room then, Pandora."

The elevator stopped and they stepped off and proceeded down another long corridor. All the ship's corridors had pale gray walls and blue carpets. They paused in front of a door and Moonlight programmed the control panel with an entry code for Steel.

"Pandora, I'll walk with you to sick bay and while you're with the medic I'll have another room prepared for you."

"I don't mean to put you to any trouble."

"You're not." Moonlight turned to Steel and said, "You've been here often enough to make yourself at home. If you want to join me and Xenos for dinner, you're more than welcome. You too, Pandora."

"I'll be there," Steel said. "Thanks. See you later, Pandora."

She nodded, not wishing to speak to him at the moment. He cast her a lingering glance before stepping into his quarters.

"This way," Moonlight said, gesturing back toward the elevator.

Once aboard, Pandora said, "You and Xenos have been very accommodating. Thank you."

"It's all right. I can only imagine what you've been through since...since leaving the Laetez."

"You mean since defecting."

"Yes."

"You're curious about why."

"It's none of my business."

Pandora sighed again. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. No one else seems to."

Staring pointedly at Pandora, Moonlight said, "Try me."

"It's complicated."

"I'm sure it is."

Pandora's brow furrowed. "Are you serious? Most people aren't quite so eager to hear the criminal's side of the story."

"That depends on whether or not you think the person committed a crime. If you were an assassin then I'm sure you did worse in the name of the government than you did by leaving their service."

"There's more truth to that statement than you probably believe."

Moonlight curled her lip slightly. "I don't say anything I don't mean."

The elevator stopped and the women exited. On their way down the corridor, Pandora said, "I never wanted to be an assassin. I was forced by former Chief Re Lord."

"I'm always ready to believe the worst of him, but how did he force you?"

"He threatened to kill someone I loved very deeply unless I agreed to the career I'd been trained for through ACT." Talking about her past was still painful, yet Pandora felt better discussing it, especially with someone like Moonlight who seemed less judgmental than most people she'd known in her life.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Moonlight said. She then asked softly, "Was that someone Steel?"

Surprised, Pandora demanded, "Why would you say that?"

"Xenos told me you were once engaged to be married. Also, it's obvious by the way you look at each other you're still in love."

"You're very perceptive, Moonlight, at least as far as I'm concerned. I have never loved anyone except Steel." Pandora closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. Why was she telling Moonlight this? She had been trained to hide her emotions. But what had her training gotten her except a life that disgusted her? "I don't think he feels anything for me anymore."

"I wouldn't bet on that. Why else is he protecting you instead of turning you over to the Laetez? He's one of the best bounty hunters in the galaxy, but he's putting your life ahead of his job. For a man like Steel, that's as good as admitting he's in love with you."

"No it's not," Pandora said sharply. "If he loves me then I want to hear it. I want to believe that he thinks I'm telling the truth about what Re Lord did to us. He might say he believes me, but he's not acting like it. Ever since I told him he's been sort of avoiding me."

They paused outside sick bay and Pandora said, "I think you should come to our quarters for dinner tonight. You and Steel need to talk this out. Believe me, I know what it's like dealing with a former ACT soldier. In some ways Steel is a lot like Xenos. It's not that they don't feel emotions. They've just learned to control them."

"I know what that's like. But I don't think I should go tonight."

"Why?"

"If we're being honest, your husband makes me uncomfortable. I don't think he'd appreciate guests."

Moonlight chuckled. "Well, that's direct enough. Xenos doesn't mind company and deep inside – very deep – he's a pussycat."

"A pussycat?" Pandora snorted in disbelief.

"Yeah. A sabertooth pussycat," Moonlight said with a wink.

Sabertooth. An extinct Earth predator with oversized teeth.

Pandora grinned.

"Think about joining us," Moonlight said then walked into sick bay, Pandora behind her.

Inside a female medic in a white uniform greeted them.

"Hey, Trissa," Moonlight said. "This is Pandora."

"Yes. I just talked to Xenos about her. Come on in and I'll examine you and get you the meds."

"Call me when she's finished so I can bring her to her quarters," Moonlight said.

"Sure will. Pandora, the examination room is this way," Trissa said, heading through a door across the room.

Pandora followed and a short time later, Trissa completed the examination.

"Well, considering you've been without your meds for a few days, you've coped remarkably well," Trissa said. "And you're very healthy."

"That's good to know," Pandora replied, though her thoughts focused on Trissa's first sentence. She had coped well without the meds. This was unusual since the few times she had missed doses in the past, her Laetez temper had flared dangerously. The only difference this time was that Steel had been with her. Looking back on her life, whenever she'd been with him, he'd had a soothing effect on her, almost the same as the meds.

"I have a supply of your brand of meds right here." Trissa opened a compartment built into the wall and removed a box with a week's worth of the chemical-balancing meds.

"Thank you," Pandora said, taking the box.

"I'll call Moonlight and she can —"

"Medic, wait a moment. I have a question."

"Of course." Trissa leaned against the counter and focused her attention on Pandora. "Go ahead."

"Is it possible for a person to help an ACT product with Laetez blood simply by being around them? I mean, can the presence of another person help keep their emotions under control?"

Trissa narrowed her eyes. "You mean like a meditation teacher?"

"No. I mean simply by being there."

The medic looked skeptical. "Not that I know of. I've never heard of anything quite like that. You see, with a pure-blooded Laetez, the Er communicates with the Re both telepathically and through the sharing of certain chemicals. Even so, the direct contact of both is necessary. So far ACT labs have only been able to create a few crossbreeds with Re blood who don't require the meds. Very few crossbreeds of Er blood have survived for long. They're usually physically weak with defective organs."

"I see."

"In theory, if a person could balance the emotions of a Laetez crossbreed, he or she would have to be an Er crossbreed whose chemistry matches that of the Re. This is getting complicated. Do you get what I mean? The whole thing is really farfetched anyway."

Pandora nodded. One of the things she found frustrating about medics was how they looked at people as if they were crazy if they hadn't heard of a particular symptom before.

"Did that help?" Trissa asked. Her desire to assist seemed genuine, yet she hadn't the answers to Pandora's questions. Most likely no one ever would.

"Thanks," Pandora said. "I appreciate everything you've done."

"No problem. I'll call Moonlight. You can finish dressing and take your dose of meds."

Trissa left the examination room and moments later, when Pandora stepped out, Moonlight awaited her.

When they reached Pandora's quarters, she paused before stepping inside and said, "Moonlight, if the dinner invitation is still open, I'd like to come."

"Of course it is. I'm glad you changed your mind."

Pandora smiled, nodded and entered her quarters. Already she felt calmer and more centered now that she'd taken the proper dose of chemical-balancing meds. Tonight she could face Steel without depending on him to keep her sane.

Moonlight was right. They needed to sort things out before it was too late. She needed to be certain it was over between her and Steel. Only then could she truly get on with her life.

## Chapter Twelve

Steel spent the morning in his room, using the desk spec to download messages from his home office located on Jungpa Undra, the largest moon of Jungphyre. Few people lived on Jungpa Undra and Steel liked it that way. He also enjoyed living close to his Searilla cousins, some of whom had finally come to accept him.

Yet except for Pandora, acceptance had never been especially important to Steel.

He found it difficult to concentrate on his messages since his thoughts focused on her. He sensed she'd been offended when he had requested that their adjoining rooms be changed. After all the times he'd called her a *strumpsc*, he thought she'd be happy to know he didn't take it for granted that she wanted to continue their sexual relationship. He had meant the gesture as a way of showing respect, but it had backfired.

Since changing his attitude toward her and trying to show his gratitude for her sacrifice, she seemed to have pulled away from him even more. Not that he blamed her. He had been unduly harsh with her, but how could he have known that she had saved his life?

Growling, he slammed his fist into his palm. Steel usually knew exactly what to do when faced with a problem. Of course this situation was highly unusual, especially for a man who had spent his life distancing himself from emotions such as love.

He decided a workout would help clear his mind.

Swimming trunks in hand, he made his way to the ship's gym which Xenos had gone all out in designing. It had a spacious area for fighting practice, various machines for improving strength and stamina and an oversized tank for swimming.

Steel changed in the locker room and when he stepped out, he saw Xenos in the tank, his sleek blue body racing through underwater laps. Xenos was one of the best swimmers Steel had ever seen. He had speed, grace and impressive stamina for someone with a completely natural cardiovascular system.

After climbing up the ladder to the top of the tank, Steel dropped into the water and joined his friend in swimming laps. It was nice having an aquatic partner to challenge him during a workout. Xenos seemed to enjoy the competition as well.

When they finally stopped and broke the surface of the tank, even Steel with his cyborg improvements was breathing harder than usual.

"You're still one fast bastard." Steel grinned.

"Not so bad yourself," Xenos panted. "Another lap and you'd have buried me."

"It's the new heart. Like I told Pandora. I could fall into a volcano and this sucker would still be beating."

Xenos gave a snort of laughter and said, "Speaking of Pandora, what's going on with her? I thought you said it was over between you."

Closing his eyes for a moment, Steel sighed deeply. "Actually I wouldn't mind some advice."

"About her? I'm not exactly the best person to ask about relationships."

"Why not? You and Moonlight seem to be doing fine."

"Because she is an exceptional woman."

"So is Pandora. You have no idea how exceptional she is."

Xenos cast him a warning look and Steel held up a hand in defense. "I know what you're thinking."

"That every time she comes into your life you fall apart? Yes. That's exactly what I'm thinking."

Steel's jaw tightened and he stared hard at Xenos. "Are you going to listen for once in your life or jump to conclusions like you always do? If that's the case, then thanks but no thanks, buddy."

"Let's get out of this tank and go somewhere else." Xenos climbed up the ladder and when he reached the top, glanced at Steel.

Raising his eyes to the heavens, Steel followed.

In the locker room, several crewmembers were in various stages of undress. Xenos and Steel showered quickly to rid their skin of the chemicals from the tank. Xenos in particular needed to be careful with his amphibious flesh that was known for absorbing toxins.

Steel was glad Searilla flesh wasn't nearly as sensitive. Instead it was known for its durability. Still, he had to admit it wasn't as attractive as the silky, multihued Tydisian skin. He wondered if Pandora minded the uneven look of his silvery Searilla flesh.

After dressing, the men went to Xenos' ready room so he could be near the bridge. Until the ship's engine regenerated, Xenos wouldn't relax and Steel didn't blame him. The captain and crew of *Nameless* had more than their share of enemies and the impenetrable shield had saved their lives many times.

"So what's going on?" Xenos asked once they were alone.

For a moment Steel remained silent, trying to decide where to begin. Finally he told Xenos what Pandora had told him about their breakup fourteen years ago and former Chief Re Lord.

When Steel finished, Xenos said, "I take it you believe her."

"Yes," Steel said.

"It is possible she's lying."

"Anything is possible, but I know she's telling the truth."

Xenos drew a breath, held it a moment, as if deep in thought then released it and said, "I wouldn't put anything past Re Lord. He is conniving and unscrupulous."

However, she must have similar traits because no assassin could survive fourteen years in that profession if she was not."

Steel tried to remain calm. He knew Xenos was trying to point out possibilities, yet how could a man like that understand what it was to be so deeply connected to another person? At times he had thought the worst of Moonlight and she had often risked her very life for him. Just like Pandora had done for Steel. It had taken much for Xenos to learn how to trust Moonlight implicitly, so why would he simply accept Pandora's word?

"The point is, Xenos, she didn't want to be in that profession. She did it to save my life. That's hard for me to handle. I've never owed anyone anything. I don't like owing her for my life."

"If what she claims is true then you do owe her a great debt. I understand how you feel about not wanting to owe anyone. Is that why you're not sending her to Yashel?"

"No. Even before she told me I had no intention of turning her over to the Laetez. You and I both know what they'd do to her."

Xenos gestured with his webbed hand. "She is technically a traitor."

"Just like you and me."

"In a way. I suppose my question is this, why did she continue as a spy even after you left the ACT Corps to become a bounty hunter?"

"I don't know. Maybe Re Lord had other threats hanging over her head. All I know is that fourteen years ago I sensed something was wrong and I should have pursued it."

"And if Re Lord wanted you dead, you wouldn't have had a chance."

"I would have rather been dead than allow her to spend her life doing something she hated."

"She has always been your weakness."

Steel held his friend's gaze. "Maybe she's always been my strength, Xenos. Haven't you found strength in Moonlight?"

Xenos glanced toward the portal and watched the stars for a moment before speaking softly, as if to himself. "I have found unimaginable things in Moonlight."

"Then maybe you do know how I feel."

Turning back to Steel, Xenos said, "Even if what she says is true, unless you somehow convince the Laetez government to pardon her, she will spend the rest of her life on the run. And if I know you, that means you'll be on the run with her."

"If there was only some way to get Re Lord to confess."

"I could talk to Yashel."

Steel sighed. "All right, but wait until Pandora is off this ship. If Yashel suspects she's here —"

"You're risking much."

"Xenos," Steel said, staring hard at his friend. "I'm trying to tell you how important this is to me. If you won't do this —"

"You risked much for me and my crew during the rebellion. Like you, I repay my debts. My loyalty isn't to any particular government, but to the truth."

Steel nodded. Xenos lived by his own rules, but he did have a strong code of honor. Steel trusted few people and Xenos was among them.

That evening when Steel arrived at Xenos and Moonlight's quarters for dinner, he was surprised to find Pandora had joined them.

"Perfect timing, Steel," Moonlight said with a smile. "We were just about to have the Tydisian Sea Salad."

"Sounds great. Glad to see you, Pandora," he said, his gaze fixed on her.

"I thought you'd have the opposite reaction," she said.

They took their places at the table while Xenos and Moonlight brought over the salad and bowls. Steel also caught the delicious aroma of homemade pizza. One thing about Moonlight—she was an excellent cook. As much as Steel enjoyed Tydisian food, nothing tasted as good as Earth pizza. The last time he was aboard *Nameless*, he'd eaten it so often that Moonlight had teasingly made him an honorary human.

"Why wouldn't I be glad to see you?" he asked.

"When you refused the adjoining rooms I got the feeling you didn't want anything to do with me anymore."

Xenos held up a blue glass container. "Dressing, anyone?"

"Xenos," Moonlight whispered and shook her head slightly.

He cast his wife an annoyed look but fell silent.

"I thought you might like privacy," Steel continued, never taking his gaze from Pandora. He hated the idea of having this discussion in front of an audience, yet he sensed that ignoring her comments was the wrong thing to do. "I was thinking about you, Pandora."

"Really? I suppose by avoiding me as much as possible you've been thinking about me too? You don't have to worry, Steel. I didn't say what I said on Roum because I expect anything from you."

"Why shouldn't you expect something?" he asked, his jaw tight. This was neither the time nor the place for such an intimate conversation.

"Xenos, let's go for a walk," Moonlight said softly.

Xenos, who had been eating his salad while pretending to ignore the discussion, glared at her.

"Come on," Moonlight pressed, her eyes widening to make her point.

"No, you don't have to leave your own quarters," Pandora said.

"It's no problem," Moonlight told her. She grasped Xenos' arm and tugged. He stood, growled softly and followed her toward the door. Before stepping into the

corridor, he paused, walked back to the table and picked up his salad. Then he and Moonlight left.

Once alone with Steel, Pandora said, "I feel ridiculous having them leave their own quarters."

"We should have left."

"Then why didn't you suggest it? Or were you trying to avoid being alone with me again? Do I sicken you that much because you think I'm lying?"

"Do you think I'm such a fool that I don't know the truth when I hear it? I'm trying to show you the respect you deserve for once. I've never owed anyone anything, but I owe you my life, Pandora. I only wish you had told me when Re Lord made his threats."

"He'd have killed you if you tried to confront him."

"I would have found a way!"

"There was no way with him. If you had seen what I've seen going on in the Laetez government —"

"You think I don't know what they're capable of? If you didn't notice, Xenos and these rebels fought them and won. I was part of that too."

"This was not my fault. Don't try to erase whatever you're feeling by making me out to be the villain."

"I'm not trying to do that. Damn it, Pandora." He inhaled deeply, his fists clenched. What was it about her that stirred his emotions? Without her, his life was a cold, empty void, but with her even emotions like anger and frustration brought warmth and comfort. "After I left the ACT Corps and was out of Re Lord's reach, why didn't you quit?"

The pained look in her beautiful eyes hurt him deeply. He had no right to raise any guilt in her, yet she obviously felt regret about her decisions.

"There are lots of reasons for being an assassin," she said. "But no excuses."

"Talk to me, Pandora. A long time ago you wouldn't confide in me. You kept your secrets because you felt you had to. Trust me this time. What were your reasons for staying?"

"Re Lord threatened to kill you. If I didn't live the life he had planned for me, I knew he would hunt you down and destroy you regardless of whether or not you were in the ACT Corps. You were never out of his reach. Think about it, Steel. Superior Yashel located you to hunt me. If he did that then Re Lord could have found you too."

"So instead you spent fourteen years killing others for the Laetez?"

"The men I killed were scum. They would have slaughtered anyone to suit themselves and they weren't fighting for a cause like Xenos, but destroying lives strictly for their own benefit. They were like Re Lord. A thousand of them weren't worth one of you."

Steel stared at her, torn between love and disgust. Love for him had brought her nothing but pain.

"And I would have died a thousand times to save you from that kind of life, Pandora."

"No one can save you from your fate. I was bred to be an assassin. You were bred to be a hunter. At least you broke away from the Laetez. You're hunting criminals. You're doing something to help clean up the universe."

"Shit, Pandora. Don't do that. Don't make me out to be something I'm not. Take a good look at me. I'm a bounty hunter with an artificial heart."

"I spent a lot of time with Moonlight today and she told me you've also helped a lot of criminals stay on the straight and narrow. She told me you're selective in the fugitives you hunt."

"That doesn't change the fact that I'm a hunter, like you said. But this isn't about me. You said we can't change our fate, but if you believe that you wouldn't have defected as soon as Re Lord was imprisoned."

"There's more," she said. "After my first few assignments, killing got easier. I learned to shut off my emotions. Of course the meds helped with that, but what I'm trying to say is even though I'm no longer the woman I was, after all I've done, can you..."

Steel leaned closer, his heartbeat quickening in a way only she could inspire. "What?"

"Can you love me again?"

"Again? I never stopped. I don't know how to explain this but without you I'm a robot instead of a cyborg. It's like I can't feel anything, but with you I can feel everything, almost as if I'm feeling through you. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes gleaming with emotion. "I always said you had a calming effect on me. If you hadn't been with me on Roum, I'd have gone crazy without the meds. It was as if your calmness and strength flowed into me and because of that I kept control. Steel, I have loved you my entire life. You're the only person I have ever loved."

Her words overwhelmed him. He'd always dreamed of being with her. This time nothing or no one would come between them.

Simultaneously they stood. Steel pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. "We're never going to be apart again, Pandora. Just say you'll marry me."

"I'm a fugitive."

"From here on out so am I, but we do have a chance. Xenos said once we leave this ship, he'll contact Yashel and ask him to have Re Lord questioned in regards to your story."

"He'll never tell the truth."

"The Laetez have interrogation drugs for that. I'm sure you know all about them."

"Why would Yashel do that for me?"

"He wouldn't, but he might do it for Xenos. When we reach the Delilah Sector, will you marry me?"

"Yes." She smiled and hugged him closer. "Yes, I'll marry you."

Closing his eyes, he tightened his grip on her a bit more, careful not to hurt her.

"Want to go somewhere private and have the wedding night now? Or would that make me a *strumpsc*?" she teased.

He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "I am so sorry for calling you that. I was such an—"

"Ass?"

"That's putting it mildly."

"Let's just forget it. I'd rather you show me how much you love me."

He grinned. "It will be my pleasure."

They left Xenos and Moonlight's quarters and went to Steel's where they shed their clothes and tumbled into bed.

Steel stretched out on his back and tugged Pandora on top of him. He relished the feel of her soft, warm breasts upon his chest and the gentle swell of her belly against him. He loved the smoothness of her legs entwining with his.

Holding her and looking into her eyes made his heart beat faster. Only heavy exertion or intense emotions, such as he felt when making love with Pandora, could quicken the pace of his cyborg heart.

Somehow being with her brought forth his deepest emotions—love, lust, protectiveness and joy such as he'd never known, except with her.

Her gleaming gaze met his and she smiled then kissed him and caressed his face.

Steel opened his mouth to her searching tongue. He stroked it with his, relishing her taste and warmth. He ran his hands down her back and grasped her buttocks, pressing her even closer. Trapped against her silken body, his cock swelled, aching with the need to plunge deep inside her pussy.

Yet tonight he was so aroused that he knew once he entered her it wouldn't take long for him to come. He wanted to prolong the moment, to show her through his kisses and touches how much he loved her.

Burying his hands in her hair, he gently bit and sucked her lower lip.

Pandora moaned softly. The sound of her voice stirred him even more. She slid her hands behind his head and began unfastening his hair sheath. Steel lifted his neck, making it easier for her to continue her work.

Soon her deft fingers removed the hair sheath. When she raised herself slightly and stretched toward the nightstand to place the sheath upon it, he took her breasts in his hands. Lightly pressing them together, he rolled his tongue over her nipples. Back and forth he slid his tongue over the large, dusky nubs.

"Oh, Steel," she breathed. He felt her trembling with desire and his cock stiffened, throbbing with need.

He sucked one of her nipples and used his thumb to caress the other in little circles.

Pandora gasped and writhed. She drew her knees up to his sides and straddled him. Bracing a hand on either side of his head to keep her balance, she leaned over him so he could continue teasing her breasts. He felt dampness from her pussy against his thigh and the softness of her clit rubbing against his cock.

"This feels so good, Steel. Please don't stop," she panted.

He sucked her other nipple and gently pinched the opposite one. The stiff yet delicate flesh was still damp with his saliva, making it even more sensitive to his touch. He loved teasing her, fucking her, loving her.

To enflame his passion more, she leaned down on her forearms and wove her fingers through his hair, tugging it gently. His Draper hair was nearly as sensitive as his cock.

Groaning with desire, he closed his eyes, his lower back arching a bit. He wanted her so badly it was almost painful. By the raggedness of her breathing and the way she moaned and squirmed, she wanted him just as much.

"Oh, Steel," she murmured, raising herself onto her knees, grasping his cock and guiding it inside her.

Steel growled softly and grasped her hips as she began rocking on top of him, controlling their pleasure. At the moment he didn't mind. Just looking at her, so beautiful with her eyes closed and a joyous smile on her parted lips, sent his desire off the scale.

Her passion grew and she rocked faster. Steel caressed her hips and grasped her smooth ass. His finger slid between the indentation and pressed against her tight sphincter, feeling it pulse to the same rhythm as her drenched pussy throbbed around his cock.

With a wild cry of unleashed passion, Pandora came.

Steel's neck arched back, his heart pounding and cock on the verge of exploding. His self-control impressed him as he managed to hold back until her orgasm waned.

He guided her onto her back and covered her body with his. This time he led their way toward ultimate pleasure. Over and over he thrust his cock into her hot, wet pussy.

"Pandora, I thought I could live without you," he murmured. "But I'm only alive when I'm with you. When we're apart, I'm just surviving."

"Yes, Steel. That's how it is for me too," she said, staring into his eyes.

For several moments he pumped at a slow, steady pace, but soon his lust grew almost uncontrollable. His motions quickened and she wrapped her legs around him, hanging on through a wild ride. In spite of his lust, he was careful not to hurt her. He was quite strong and compared to him she was small and delicate. The last thing he wanted was to harm her. All he wanted her to feel from his body was pleasure.

Her eyes closed and she called his name, her body pulsing in orgasm. Steel's muscles stiffened and he lunged into her. The climax was one of the strongest he'd ever experienced.

When it ended, he rolled onto his back, panting and fulfilled. He held Pandora close while they rested.

Stroking Pandora's shoulder, Steel said, "I asked you to confide in me earlier. Now there's something I must confess to you."

She tilted her face to meet his gaze. "What is it?"

"I'm an Er."

Her brow furrowed. "What?"

"You know the Laetez have always said they never created a crossbreed with Er blood who can live outside the lab, but that's not true. Years ago, when I first had upgrades done at Wormhide, the medics there discovered I don't have Re characteristics, but Er ones. The Laetez kept this a secret for some reason. I can only believe they did because I was a failure. No others came after me."

"An Er," she murmured.

"Does that change anything between us?" he asked. "I know it's strange."

"Why would that change anything?" She looked almost offended. She sat up and took his face in her hands. "I love you. And remember I'm an ACT product too. We belong together, Steel. Two Searilla crossbreeds who can only make love with each other. And make love very well I might add."

He chuckled with relief and gently pinned her to the mattress. He brushed his nose against hers and said, "Very well."

"Who else knows about this?" she asked.

"I've never told anyone. Not even Xenos. Personally I don't even like to think about it. It's almost creepy knowing I'm the parasite who shares the Re's brain. Not only that, I think even though I didn't turn out as they expected, the Laetez wanted to continue studying me. All those cyborg surgeries, all the upgrades they gave me were no doubt recorded."

"Medic Trissa said most Er products have faulty organs and that's part of the reason they don't survive very long."

"I guess I'm lucky my body never rejected the cyborg improvements. When I resigned from the ACT Corps, my superiors, except for Xenos, made it very difficult for me to leave. That's another reason why I kept the secret of my origins. I think if I spoke about my Er blood, they would have—" He stopped at the horror in her expression.

"You see what I mean?" she demanded. "You thought they might try to kill you because of your origins. Now do you understand why I couldn't risk your life because of me?"

"Pandora, I said they might try. I never said they'd succeed."

"But how do you know? Believe me, conspiracies happen all the time."

"No one pursued me after I left the ACT Corps." He raised his eyes to the heavens. Why had he brought up his old suspicions?

"Steel, I just thought of something," Pandora murmured. "I wonder if you have such a calming effect on me because you're an Er."

He narrowed his eyes. "Doubtful. I've never affected any other ACT product in the way you describe. Besides, the Re and Er are connected physically."

"I guess you're right. Maybe I'm just trying to explain our bond. I should know it's love." She caressed his cheek.

Steel's lips hovered over hers. He was about to kiss her when a purple light flashed through the room.

Purple alert meant emergency.

"What's going on?" Pandora asked.

"Don't know," Steel said. He stood and reached for his trousers then picked up Pandora's shirt and pants and tossed them to her.

Seconds later, Xenos' voice rang out over the inter-ship spec.

"Xenos here. This is a purple alert. We are being pursued by two Butchcade pirate vessels. Prepare for attack. All security personnel to battle stations. Everyone else general quarters."

Moments later, the first blow struck the ship. It lurched, throwing Pandora against Steel. He caught her and braced his legs against the impact.

The next attack sent them crashing to the floor.

"Obviously the ship's engine and the Scawlet aren't regenerated enough to run MaSal's shield," Steel said.

"If we're being attacked by full-sized Butchcade pirate ships, we're in trouble."

"No shit."

The desk spec beeped and Steel staggered toward it through more violent rocking of the ship.

"Yeah?" he demanded.

"It's Xenos. Steel, I need your navigation skills on the bridge. Several of my bridge crew have been injured."

"I'll be right there," Steel said. He glanced at Pandora. "Will you be all right?"

"Yeah. Just go. Hurry. You're one of the best damn pilots in the galaxy. If anyone can help them, it's you."

"I love you," he said then left quickly.

As Steel made his way to the bridge, the ship took several more hits. Emergency lights flashed in the corridors and from behind the closed doors, Steel heard people shouting.

Finally he strode onto the bridge. Xenos had taken over navigation while Dario handled weapons. One other member of the bridge crew darted between two monitors. The others sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Steel approached Xenos, prepared to take over navigation, but Xenos remained at the station.

"What's the situation?" Steel asked, moving instead to help the crewman handling two monitors.

"We destroyed one of the Butchcade vessels and damaged the other, but there are now five out there. We're surrounded."

"Sir, our regular shields aren't holding," Dario said.

"I know, but we don't have the power for MaSal's shield."

"The Scawlet hasn't recharged yet?" Steel asked.

"No."

"What about that weapon you have that can destroy a small planet?"

Again the ship rocked and the men steadied themselves against their monitors.

"I can't use it on small targets that are this close to other planets," Xenos said. "It would obliterate the ship as well as anything else in the area. We're going to have to fight our way out with traditional weapons."

"We won't make it," Dario said. "The engine is damaged. If we don't get out now, we're done."

"If you can get MaSal's shield up even for a few minutes, you'll be able to blast all five of these bastards into oblivion, right?" Steel demanded.

"Yes. But that's not an option," Xenos said.

The ship dipped then zigzagged. Somehow Xenos managed to avoid two potentially deadly shots. He was probably the only pilot in the galaxy who matched Steel's skill. Steel had to admit he might even be a little better.

"Yes it is," Steel said, bracing his hands against the sides of the monitor as the ship rocked again. "You can run MaSal's shield through the Scawlet in my memory base."

"Absolutely not," Xenos said.

"What choice do we have? We're getting our asses kicked."

"That Scawlet is linked directly to your brain. Try running the shield through that and it'll kill you."

"Possibly, but if it only runs for a few moments I know the Scawlet can handle it."

"What about you? You're a cyborg, not a fucking robot," Xenos reminded him.

"Sir, that last hit tore a hole in the dock," Dario reported.

"Xenos, one way or another I'm going to fry," Steel said. "One way I fry alone, the other way everyone else fries with me."

"Get down to engineering," Xenos stated.

Steel left in a hurry, his heartbeat quickening with fear. Xenos was right. The shield could quite literally blow his mind, but they were out of options.

He stopped at his quarters to pick up his optical insert so he could connect with the shield.

When he stepped in, Pandora ran to him, her face etched with concern. "What's happening?"

"Five Butchcade ships."

"What are you doing?" she demanded, watching him take his memory kit from his bag.

"We're going to run MaSal's shield through my Scawlet power pack."

She looked horrified. "Isn't that attached to your brain?"

"Yes." He headed for the door and she followed.

"I'm coming with you."

Steel turned to her. "No. I'm not sure what's going to happen. If it gets ugly, I don't want you to see it."

"Steel, I don't give a damn how ugly it gets. I'm going with you." Her beautiful eyes gleamed with emotion and it tugged at his soul.

They didn't have time for this.

Shaking his head, he continued down the corridor. Pandora followed.

Xenos must have called ahead to engineering because when he arrived, the chief engineer as well as Medic Trissa awaited him.

"This is insane, you know," Trissa warned.

"No, it's just crazy," Steel said, trying to lighten the moment.

He took his connection cord and was about to insert it when the ship jolted again.

"I wish Xenos would hold this ship steady while I insert this," Steel growled. "Or else I'll damage my eye then we'll really be in trouble."

Steel inserted the tiny wire into his artificial eye then sat in a chair near the shield device. The chief engineer attached the opposite end of the wire to the device while Trissa used a medical wand to monitor Steel's vital signs and brain activity.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Pandora watched, her stomach clenched with anxiety, as the chief engineer activated the shield. Steel drew a sharp breath and his hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

"How are you feeling, Steel?" asked Medic Trissa.

"Like a racing shuttle is running through my head," he said.

"You're doing well," Trissa reassured him. "Vital signs slightly elevated."

The chief engineer used the spec to contact Xenos. "Sir, the shield is powered up and ready to activate at your command."

"Proceed," Xenos replied.

Steel's natural eye closed and his breathing became shallow.

Glancing nervously at the readings on the medical wand, Trissa whispered, "Hurry up, Xenos."

Moments later, Xenos said, "Excellent. We're clear of the Butchcades and headed full speed to the Delilah Sector."

"Disconnect him," Trissa ordered the engineer who immediately cut power to the shield and removed Steel's connection cord.

Steel sat, a blank look on his face.

"What's wrong with him?" Pandora asked, panic tightening her chest.

"Steel," Trissa asked, touching his arm.

He glanced at her and narrowed his eyes. "I need to connect to the shield."

"You already did," Trissa told him.

His brow furrowed and he glanced around.

"Can you tell me your name?" the medic asked, once again scanning him with her medical wand.

"My name is Steel."

"How are you feeling?"

"I have a headache, but nothing major." He stood.

Pandora stepped closer and he smiled at her. "Hey, Pandora."

"You're sure you're okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I need to connect to the shield before the ship..." His voice trailed off and a questioning look passed over his face. "There's a reason I need to do that. Refresh my memory, will you?"

"We were surrounded by Butchcade pirates. Because of you we've escaped," Pandora said.

"Right."

"I think you should come with me to sick bay and rest for a while," Trissa said. "I need to go there anyway. There are casualties."

At that moment, Xenos called on the chief engineer's spec. "How is Steel?"

"They're taking him to sick bay, sir," replied the chief. "He seems to be having some memory problems."

"Is that Xenos?" Steel asked.

"Yes," Pandora said. "It's Xenos."

"I told him I was going to do something." Steel sighed and closed his eyes. He opened them, turned toward the chief engineer and said, "I have to make a connection to the shield."

"Shooting asteroids," Pandora murmured, staring helplessly at Trissa. "What's wrong with him?"

"Let's get to sick bay. I'll check him out further there," Trissa said.

"Come on, Steel." Pandora grasped his arm and tugged him toward the exit.

No sooner had they stepped into the corridor than he turned back toward engineering and said, "I need to see the chief engineer. I have to make a connection to the shield."

Torn between concern and frustration, Pandora kept hold of his arm while Trissa took his other one. The women turned him in the right direction.

"Are we on the way to engineering?" Steel asked.

"We're going where we need to be," Trissa replied in a soothing voice.

"Yeah, because I need to connect to the shield."

"He's driving me crazy," Pandora whispered.

"It's probably temporary," Trissa told her. "His memory base overloaded and it affected his short-term memory."

Pandora hoped so. The idea of Steel losing his mind was unbearable, especially now that they finally had a chance for a life together.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pandora paced outside sick bay since the waiting room was overcrowded with people who had been injured during the battle with the pirates. Steel had been inside for nearly an hour and Pandora was really getting worried.

Xenos approached and asked, "How is he?"

"I haven't heard anything," Pandora replied. Though she knew it had been Steel's idea to power the shield himself, she couldn't help feeling a little angry at Xenos for allowing it.

The door opened and Trissa, looking concerned, joined them.

"Report," Xenos said.

"We lost two crewmen who were in the docking bay. I believe everyone else will survive. As for Steel, we need to get him to Wormhide as soon as possible. It's the closest medical facility that can handle his type of implant and the medics there have provided his upgrades since he left the ACT Corps. His memory base is more advanced than anything I've ever worked with, but I've had limited experience with cyborgs."

"Do you know what's wrong with him?" Pandora asked.

"As far as I can tell, his artificial memory system suffered severe burnout due to powering the shield. The memory base is damaged and it's affecting his brain. If it's not removed right away, there's no telling what might happen. I'm trying to stabilize him until we reach Wormhide, but I've never dealt with a crossbreed like him before. He's definitely Draper and Searilla. He is Laetez, but seems to have Er characteristics."

"He is an Er," Pandora said. Now wasn't the time to keep a secret that could cost Steel's life.

Xenos and Trissa glanced at her sharply.

"What?" Xenos demanded.

"He told me. The Wormhide medics found out long ago but he never said anything about it."

"I tried getting his medical records from Wormhide, but they won't send them to me," Trissa said. "Xenos, if you can get me his old records from the ACT Corps, they might provide information that can help me stabilize him."

"I'll contact Yashel immediately," Xenos said, turned on his heel and left.

Three hours later, the waiting room at sick bay had cleared out enough for Pandora to sit inside as she waited for word about Steel's condition.

Finally Trissa called for her to step into her office.

"How is he?" Pandora demanded, once seated in a chair across from Trissa's desk.

"He's stabilized," Trissa replied.

"Can I see him?"

"In a few minutes. There's something I need to talk to you about first. I want Xenos to hear it too. He'll be right down."

"I don't know why I can't see Steel now."

"Pandora, I swear he's stable. He's also sedated because he kept trying to leave sick bay and make his damn connection to the shield, so he won't know if you're there at the moment. After this you can stay with him until we get to Wormhide."

Nodding, Pandora tried to keep calm. She'd faced her own death many times, but never had she felt this panicked.

Moments later, Xenos stepped into the office and took a seat beside Pandora.

"What is it?" Xenos asked.

"As I told Pandora, Steel is stabilized and ready for surgery as soon as we arrive at Wormhide. I want to talk to you about what I found in those medical records Yashel sent over. As he probably already told you, they were sealed and classified as top secret after Steel left the ACT Corps. I can see why."

"What are you talking about?" Xenos demanded.

The medic drew a deep breath and began, "Steel is an Er. In fact at this time he's the only known living Er crossbreed in the entire intergalactic ACT program. His DNA was supplied by the Er connected to the Re who provided the DNA for Pandora."

Pandora felt momentarily lightheaded.

The medic continued, "They were placed together in Aquavalley to see if any connection developed between them. It did. Even though they inhabited separate bodies, as children they displayed the same Re-Er connection as pureblooded Laetez."

"That explains a lot," Xenos said. "When she was taken from Aquavalley, he seemed to lose his mind. He said his life was like an abyss but when she was with him the void was filled."

"That makes sense," Trissa said. "Ers experience emotion through the Re and it's how they help the Re keep a clear mind. Pandora, when you first came aboard you asked me if the presence of another person could keep a Laetez crossbreed under control. You were referring to you and Steel, weren't you?"

Her throat constricted with unshed tears and Pandora could only nod.

Trissa cast her a sympathetic look, but Pandora quickly mastered herself. She needed to remain strong because this was quite possibly the most emotional moment of her life. The truth of how deeply the Laetez government had betrayed them made her furious, but with Steel injured, she had to remain focused on him. Right now he was all that mattered.

"I'm sure Re Lord knew about this," Xenos said flatly. "Just when I think the ACT program can't get any worse, something like this happens to prove me wrong."

"I agree it's disgusting," Trissa said. "To separate a connected Re and Er is—"

"Unforgivable," Pandora said. "My priority now is Steel. Trissa, will he be all right?"

"I believe he has a good chance if we get to Wormhide in time."

"We'll be there within the hour," Xenos said.

"Why would they do this?" Pandora asked softly.

"Probably because they feared the Laetez people would protest the continuation of the ACT program if they disclosed the fact that a separate living Er requires extensive

surgery and organ replacements to survive," Trissa said. "According to Steel's file, there were two others like him. They required similar surgeries and they were mentally unstable. Even with the surgeries they weren't as strong as Steel. Both died before the age of twenty."

Pandora could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

The medic continued, "For years the Laetez government has told the people their main purpose was to separate the Re and the Er. However, the other benefits of the program like disease research, creating genetically engineered soldiers and selling ACT technology to the highest bidders are what matter most. According to polls, most of the Laetez don't like ACT, but to a few select people it's a way of gaining money and power."

"If Steel knew that, he'd have disclosed his origins long ago," Pandora said. "He didn't realize."

"Your theory is sound, Trissa, but even if Steel sends out a message on an intergalactic newscast it won't change anything. ACT is unfortunately here to stay. We tried to rid the universe of it and failed. Now the best we can hope for is to monitor it," Xenos said.

Pandora turned to him, her brow furrowed. "You sound like you're giving up. I never thought I'd hear that."

"I will never give up," Xenos said coolly. "But it's doubtful I'll see ACT extinguished in my lifetime."

"You're right," Pandora said. "But now more than ever I respect what you did last year."

If Xenos had eyebrows, one would have been raised. "Are you calling a truce?"

"We're not at war. At least not with each other. But if you ever need my particular skills for your work against ACT, I'm yours."

A slight smile flickered across Xenos' lips. "I'll remember that, Pandora."

\* \* \* \* \*

Though *Nameless* was in desperate need of repairs, Xenos pressed forward toward the Delilah Sector. Time was of the essence regarding Steel's condition, and once at Wormhide, he could get the proper care and *Nameless* could also be repaired.

Pandora sat by Steel's cot in sick bay, but he remained unconscious for the entire trip.

When they arrived at Wormhide, Xenos paid the rather steep fee to the medics who refused to begin Steel's surgery without payment. Pandora intended to repay him as soon as she withdrew the money from her account in a private bank in the Delilah Sector. She had been well paid as an assassin and possessed a sizeable amount of currency.

Though Xenos needed to return to *Nameless* to work on repairs, Moonlight offered to wait with Pandora at Wormhide.

After several hours in the rectangular waiting room, Moonlight asked, "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"No. Thanks," Pandora said. The last thing on her mind was food.

"Pandora, Steel is tough. He's a lot like Xenos. They're both survivors. If anyone can pull through this, it's Steel."

"I know. I just...I love him so much. And after finding out how deep our connection really is, I want to have a chance to explore it."

"I really do understand."

Pandora held Moonlight's gaze. Even though she was human, she knew what it was like to love an ACT product. She and Xenos had been through a lot, much like Pandora and Steel.

"This isn't something I talk about often, but I can sympathize with what Steel's going through. I used to have a translator implant for alien languages," Moonlight said. "It nearly killed me and had to be removed."

"I didn't know you're a cyborg."

"I'm not. I'm just a language junkie. When I was younger I got the implant illegally. It's not nearly as complex as the technology in Steel's memory base."

"Sounds like you were always a rebel."

Moonlight smiled. "I guess so."

The women sat in silence for a few moments then Pandora said, "Thank you for staying here with me. I'm usually a very independent person. I can't say I've made many friends in my life. Actually other than Steel I don't have any."

"Well, you have me," Moonlight said with a reassuring smile.

"That means a lot."

"And Xenos cares about Steel too. I know you and my husband have never gotten along very well, but he is a good man to have on your side. And believe it or not, Pandora, he is on your side and Steel's."

"I know. Steel has always thought very highly of him and...with good reason," she admitted.

The door across the room opened and a tall Laetez medic, dressed in a gray surgical uniform, stepped in.

Pandora rose to her feet and asked, "How is Steel?"

"He is in recovery and doing very well. We have removed the damaged sections of his memory base and replaced his Scawlet power pack. As soon as he has healed, we can reconstruct his memory base if he would like it done," the medic said. "He was very lucky. If you had gotten here any later, he might not have survived."

"Has his mind been affected?" Pandora asked.

"We won't know for sure until he wakes up, but everything looks good. There will be some memory loss, but most of it will probably return in time. Whatever information was held in his memory base at the time of injury is of course lost."

Pandora nodded, relief rolling through her. She turned to Moonlight and said, "I think he had a language file in."

"That's easy enough to replace," Moonlight said.

"As soon as he's ready for visitors, an assistant medic will escort you to the recovery area," the medic said and left.

"Oh Moonlight." Pandora smiled, closing her eyes for a moment. "Thank goodness."

Moonlight hugged her and Pandora returned the embrace. At least Steel had survived. Hopefully when he awoke, his mind would be intact.

Not long after, an assistant medic arrived and brought Pandora to see Steel who had been moved to a private room. To give them time alone, Moonlight remained in the waiting room and Pandora was grateful for her consideration.

"His mind seems to be working fine," the assistant medic said during the walk to the room. "He doesn't recall making the connection to the ship's shield and most of his memories of the past day are fuzzy, but other than that he hasn't had problems recalling information."

"Excellent."

"It will be a couple of days at least before his next surgery, but the medic will talk to him about that later."

Pandora nodded and stepped through the door the assistant medic indicated.

In the small gray room, Steel was sitting up in bed. His gaze riveted to her and he smiled.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi." She bent and brushed a tender kiss across his mouth then sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand. She noticed the area around his artificial eye was bruised and swollen, but the medics had worked through his eye, so that was to be expected. At least he hadn't gone through the pain of having his sensitive Draper hair shaved. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. My memory base is down."

"Probably because you're supposed to be resting."

"The medic said in a day or two he can reconstruct it. By the way, who paid for this?"

"Xenos, but I'm paying him back."

"No way. Do I look like a *chumpsca*?"

Pandora grinned. *Chumpsca* was the Searilla equivalent of a gigolo.

"That depends. Do you mean when you're wearing your hair down or not?" she teased.

He tugged her closer for another kiss.

"Pandora, I have to ask you something."

"Yes?" She couldn't keep the smile from her face nor could she stop gazing at him. The love she felt was almost overwhelming, but in a beautiful way. This was without doubt the happiest moment of her life.

"My mind is a little fuzzy so I might have imagined this, but did you say you'd marry me?"

"Yes. You asked and I wholeheartedly agreed."

"Good." He sighed. "I'm sure glad I didn't lose that particular memory."

"So am I." Her smile faded and she squeezed his hand a little tighter. She wasn't sure if this was the right time to tell him about their Er-Re connection.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Why do you ask? You're all right. That means everything is wonderful."

"One thing I've always been able to do is sense what you're feeling. Don't lie to me."

She drew a deep breath and caressed his face. "Steel, I have something to tell you. It's probably the most important thing I've ever found out."

"Are you pregnant?"

"No." She chuckled and shook her head.

"All right. Just checking. What is it then?"

"After you made the connection to the shield, Xenos asked Yashel to release your medical records to Trissa so she could stabilize you. When she read them, she found out..."

"What?" he demanded.

"She found out that the Er you were created from belonged to the Re I was created from."

He held her gaze for a long moment then swallowed rather noisily. Finally he said, "I'm not surprised. Actually I'm glad to know that because it explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she whispered, tears springing into her eyes. She blinked them back and he tugged her into his arms.

For several moments they simply held each other tightly. Pandora closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his body against hers. For the first time she allowed herself to surrender completely to the mental and emotional link between them, for she knew it was real. It was natural. She and Steel had been born for each other and only death could part them.

"I love you, Pandora," he said. "Never leave me."

"I won't. Without you my life is meaningless, Steel."

He gently grasped her shoulders and held her at arm's length, his beautiful eyes intent on hers. "Without you I'm nothing, Pandora, but a shell of a man. You are the living, feeling heart that was taken from me at birth."

"And you're my stability. Without you, Steel, I'm a wild animal. Out of control and without direction. Er Steel," she whispered, cupping his cheek. "How can the Laetez want to be separated? Don't they know the gift they've been given? To have their Er with them always?"

"They don't. But there are some advantages to our situation, Pandora." He ran his thumb gently over her lips. "If I lived in your head then I couldn't make love to you."

She smiled. "That's very true."

"And as soon as I'm recovered I do plan on making love to you. Long, hard and often."

A ripple of pleasure shot through her. "I can scarcely wait."

Someone knocked on the door and seconds later Xenos stepped inside.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Better. Thank you. Xenos, I'm going to pay you back for this surgery."

Xenos shook his head. "A small price to pay for the safety of my ship. We wouldn't have survived without you."

"We'll discuss the money later."

"The discussion is over," Xenos stated. "And I didn't come here to talk about money. I have something to tell you. Prime Re Terran has pardoned you, Pandora. You're no longer a fugitive."

Pandora felt Steel stiffen and he asked, "Why would he do that? Not that it isn't great news."

"When I asked Yashel to send us your medical records, I also asked him to question Re Lord about Pandora's story. I told him it was urgent. Yashel agreed to do so and with the use of truth drugs, Re Lord confessed."

"Good," Pandora said. "That bastard."

"After Trissa disclosed your Re-Er connection, I convinced Yashel that with so much information in Pandora's favor, he could persuade Re Terran to pardon her," Xenos said. "Of course I didn't expect it to happen this fast, but Yashel is a personal friend of Re Terran. Though Yashel and I haven't seen eye to eye in the past, he is in full agreement that what was done to you under the former Laetez leadership was wrong."

"You promised not to do anything until after she left the ship," Steel said to Xenos.

"I know you believed her, but I also know you've never been rational when it came to her, or so I thought. When I asked Yashel to interrogate Re Lord, I didn't know about your Er-Re connection."

Steel's eyes blazed and he started to reprimand Xenos, but Pandora interrupted, "I think Xenos acted in your best interest. He's a very loyal friend."

"Who didn't respect my wishes," Steel said.

"I think helping arrange my pardon has more than made up for it."

Steel glanced at her and sighed. "You're right."

"Well, I must get back to my ship," Xenos said. He nodded in Steel's direction and turned toward the door.

"Xenos," Steel called and the Tydisian crossbreed turned to him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Xenos left and Pandora said, "Don't look so angry, Steel."

"What if you had been lying? He could have been responsible for turning you over to the Laetez."

"I thought you believed me?"

"I did, but he didn't so therefore he didn't know how this would turn out."

"He was trying to protect you."

"I don't need protection, least of all from Xenos."

"You would have done the same for him."

Steel smiled slightly and shook his head. "You got me there."

"Enough about Xenos." She edged closer and kissed him. "From now on let's concentrate on us."

"That's a promise."

Their lips met in a gentle kiss, but Pandora sensed that in spite of their recent good fortune, Steel wasn't at ease.

"What is it?" she whispered, her gaze holding his.

"I can't help wondering."

"About?"

"About how many other fucked-up Er products actually exist that we don't know about. No matter what goes wrong or what goes right, I don't think ACT will ever end."

She sighed deeply. He was correct.

"I'm sorry." He tugged her into his arms. "I don't want to ruin today. My brain is almost back to normal —"

"Almost?"

"I won't feel right until I have my memory base back. It's a cyborg thing."

"Oh well, excuse me for being a mere biological creature," she teased.

"Don't be a brat." He kissed her lips. "And let me finish. My brain is almost normal and you're free, so today we should just be happy and forget about everything else."

Pandora couldn't agree more. He kissed her again and she closed her eyes, surrendering to the gentle pressure of his mouth against hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as Steel recovered from his memory base replacement, he and Pandora were married in the Delilah Sector. They spent their wedding night in one of the most exotic suites at Kayndle.

Bangle personally brought them a bottle of fine Laetez wine.

"So tell me, bounty hunter, is the void filled?" Bangle asked with a knowing smile.

Pandora's brow furrowed and she turned to Steel and asked, "Did you tell him?"

"No, I guessed," Bangle replied. He bent and kissed Pandora's cheek. "Have a happy life, my friend." He turned to Steel, his dark gaze sweeping the sexy crossbreed from head to toe. "I'm sure at least your sex life will be happy."

"Uh, he's taken," Pandora reminded her flirtatious friend.

Bangle grinned. "Do I look suicidal? You Searillas are deadly between the sheets."

"Not to each other," Steel said, placing an arm around Pandora and holding her close to his big, hard body.

A thrill of desire shot through her and she pressed even nearer to him.

"Yes, you were made for each other," Bangle observed. Then sighed and glanced at the soul mate bracelet tattooed to his wrist.

Pandora knew he was thinking about the man who wore the match to his tattoo. She hoped that one day he and his runaway lover would find their way back to each other. Seeing Bangle reminded her that Re Lord hadn't only interfered in her life, but had ruined many others as well.

"Have a nice night," Bangle said and left them alone.

Steel closed the door and held Pandora's gaze. Lust and love shone in his beautiful gray eyes.

He took her in his arms, brushed his nose against hers and kissed her. Her eyes closed, Pandora surrendered completely to the passion and love between them. They no longer had any secrets from each other and they knew without doubt they belonged together.

When the kiss broke, she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Do you remember the first time we made love?" she asked.

"Like it was yesterday. It went something like this." He grasped her bottom and lifted her off the ground.

Laughing, she wrapped her legs around his waist and tightened her grip on his neck.

"Yeah. That's what I recall," she said.

With her clinging to him, he walked to the bed and lowered her onto it. Looming above her, a hand braced on either side of her head, he said, "If I remember correctly, we fucked liked maniacs the first time. I'm not quite as young as I used to be."

"Fishing for compliments, are you?" she teased, unfastening his hair sheath. "Your lovemaking skills have only gotten better, Steel."

"That's because you've only gotten sexier."

Pandora tossed aside the sheath and caressed his hair, loving the feel of it between her fingers. Closing his eyes, Steel moaned with pleasure.

After a moment, he slid down her body and pushed her skirt up to her waist. He slipped his fingers into the waistband of her panties and tugged them off then settled between her legs.

He blew warm breath over her clit and she arched her hips, longing for the touch of his lips and tongue on her ultrasensitive flesh. He eased his hands under her buttocks, gently kneading them, and lowered his mouth to her clit.

With a soft gasp, she clutched his hair again, careful not to pull too hard. She stroked and tugged upon it while he lapped her clit. The swollen nub ached and throbbed. Every swipe of his hot, wet tongue drove her a little closer to orgasm. Her heart pounded and nipples tightened. The muscles in her belly clenched rhythmically and her legs trembled as she neared her peak.

"Oh, Steel! Yes!" she cried, lost in the throes of almost unbearable pleasure.

His talented mouth left her, but only so he could cover her body with his and fill her with a long, slow thrust of his rock-hard cock. Over and over he filled her and withdrew then swooped back inside her drenched, throbbing pussy.

Pandora clung to him, almost dizzy with pleasure. His thrusts pushed her toward another orgasm and she knew this one would be even more intense than the first.

Her fingers bit into his hard back muscles and her hips rolled upward, meeting his thrusts. The second orgasm struck even more quickly than she'd imagined it would. Wave after wave crashed over her. Pandora could only gasp and writhe, so overcome by emotion that she couldn't form words.

This time he didn't leave her even for a second. He remained buried to the hilt inside her as she throbbed around his thick erection.

Finally the spasms stopped and she lay, nearly unconscious but thoroughly satisfied.

He thrust a few more times and she opened her eyes, meeting his heated gaze.

"Waiting for something?" she asked with a sleepy yet teasing smile.

"Just for you to recover because I'm not finished yet."

Pandora slid her hands between them and caressed his powerful chest, feeling his heart beating against her palms. She slipped her arms around his neck and lifted herself upward to kiss him. He thrust his tongue into her mouth and hers met it with hungry strokes.

Growling softly, Steel pressed her deeper into the mattress. He ran his lips down the side of her neck and moved even lower. Capturing one of her nipples in his mouth, he licked and tugged upon it. Pandora mewled with pleasure and wrapped her arms around his head, holding him even closer.

He slid a hand between her legs and stroked her soft mound. Two of his fingers slid inside her then he withdrew them and rubbed their wet tips over her clit. It felt so wonderful—his teeth, tongue and lips on her breast and his long, slender fingers petting her, teasing her, once again stirring her passion.

Just when she teetered on the edge again, he rolled her onto her stomach. He nipped and kissed her ass. One hand slid beneath her and continued fondling her clit. At the same time he dipped his tongue between the indentation of her ass and used the tip of it to tickle her sphincter. The sensitive little ring of muscle tightened and throbbed.

Pandora's heart pounded out of control. She moaned and grasped the sheets.

"Pandora, do you have any idea how much I love turning you on? I love how your skin heats up and your sexy little ass wiggles. I love how you pulse against my tongue and when I slide my fingers inside you, like this," he pushed two fingers into her pussy and explored, "I love how hot and wet you are."

"How can I not be wet with you making love to me?" she panted. "You know just how to touch me."

"You know what I love most of all?"

"Please tell me," she said, her body tingling with anticipation.

She felt his weight upon her from behind and felt his cock sliding into her.

"I love the feel of your pussy tight and soft around me," he said, his voice a husky whisper. "Like wet satin. Then you make those sexy little sounds."

She moaned and practically purred with pleasure as he began thrusting in that wonderful rhythm.

"That's it," he said.

"You know what I love?" she panted.

"I can't wait to hear."

"How thick and hard you are. How perfectly you fill me. I love the feel of your body over mine, making me feel safe and protected. Loved."

"I do love you, Pandora," he breathed, his thrusts faster now as he finally reached the end of his control.

"I love you too, Steel."

Several more thrusts and she cried out in ecstasy. Almost simultaneously he came as well. They were so close, so connected, that it was like sharing the same body, which was perfect because they had always shared the same soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Pandora left the bed carefully, thinking Steel was still asleep. He startled her by grasping her wrist.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his drowsy gray eyes meeting hers.

"To unpack our things. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

He kissed her hand then let go of her wrist. She bent and kissed him before leaving the bed. Since his travel bag was smaller, she began unpacking it first. After removing his shirts, she came across something quite unexpected. A braided lock of reddish hair.

"What's this?" she asked, holding it up.

"It's yours. I saved some from the time I cut your hair on Roum."

This touched her deeply. She rejoined him in bed and slid into his arms. "I never thought you'd keep my hair."

"I couldn't resist. Just in case it didn't work out between us, I'd at least have a little part of you."

"You always had part of me, just as I've always had part of you, Er Steel." She smiled.

"That's true, Re Pandora." He cupped her face and kissed her.

## **Epilogue**

*Three Months Later*

Pandora sat in the study at Steel's house on Jungpa Undra and looked over their finances on the computer. After their marriage, she had become his partner in the bounty hunting business. They combined their currency accounts for personal and business expenses and found they had enough to finance another project close to their hearts.

They founded a shelter in the Delilah Sector for ACT products who had lost their way but wished to change the direction of their lives. Bangle invested in the shelter as well. He knew many young crossbreeds in need of guidance who could benefit from the project.

Pandora paused a moment and glanced around the comfortable room. Steel's house was decorated in browns, greens and blues—colors that reminded her of the oceans of Jungphyre and Tydepth. She found the décor soothing, but was glad he hadn't objected to some of the feminine touches she'd added.

She stood and stretched then made her way to the indoor pool where Steel was swimming laps. Standing by the edge of the pool, she undressed and smiled slightly, watching him swim underwater like a sleek silvery shuttle.

It was nice having a few days off to spend relaxing together. All too soon they'd be out on another bounty.

Her smile faded when she thought about the intergalactic political situation. Since Xenos' report about the attacks by the Mar-Tense, tension had been high among many planets. Though war hadn't broken out, it hovered on the horizon. The Mar-Tense still showed keen interest in ACT, though so far no other planets had wanted to work with them after their attack on *Nameless*.

Contact with this new species could change life for everyone.

Now wasn't the time to worry about it. Regardless of what happened, she and Steel would face it together.

He stopped swimming and broke the surface. Heavens, he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen. Water glistened on his silvery Searilla flesh. He'd bound his reddish Draper hair to keep it out of his way during his swim. Now he reached up and unfastened it from the binding. It clung to his powerful shoulders and trailed in the water. She longed to run her fingers through it.

Steel's ravenous gaze lingered on her naked body and a thrill of passion shot through her.

Since learning about their Er-Re connection, they had surrendered to each other completely and now they could often communicate without words. They *felt* each other.

Pandora dropped into the water and he walked toward her. She slipped her arms around his neck and he held her, their gazes locked. Smiling slightly, she concentrated on her love for him and she knew he sensed it because she felt his love in return, wrapping around her, warming her and making her feel safe.

*I love you.*

*Now and always.*

*The End*

## **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 e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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Horsemen 4: Winter Stallion  
Horsemen 5: Victory Stallion  
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Knights of the Ruby Order 2: Crag  
Knights of the Ruby Order 3: Lock  
Knights of the Ruby Order 4: Mica  
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