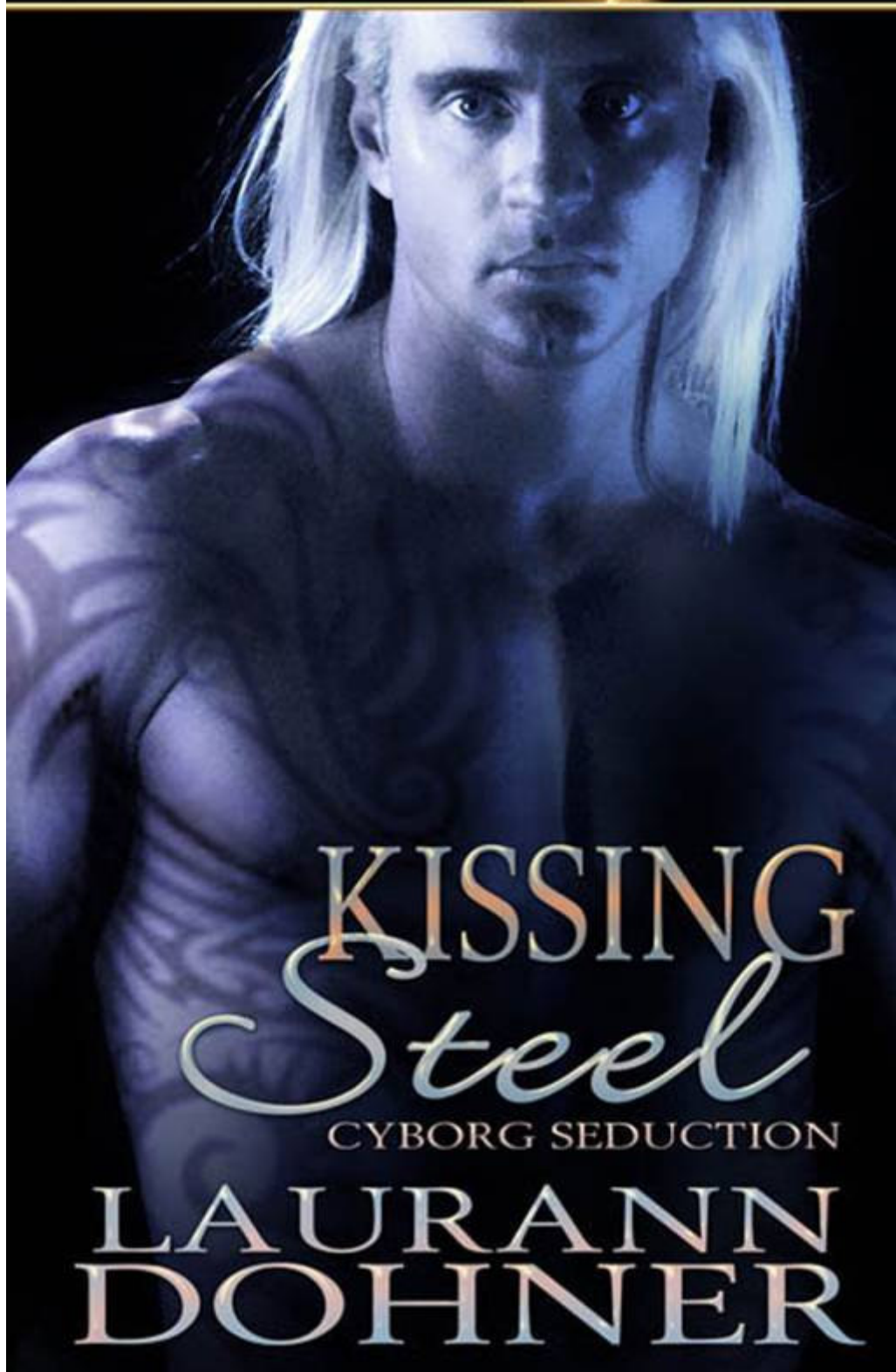


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



KISSING
Steel

CYBORG SEDUCTION

LAURANN
DOHNER

Kissing Steel

Laurann Dohner

Book 2 in the Cyborg Seduction series.

All Rena wanted was to steal back a spaceship and earn enough money to buy her freedom from her travesty of a life. Her mission to recover stolen property from pirates backfired and she became a possession when she encountered cyborgs instead. Now, one of them will own her. Rena is a survivor...and she wants the very tall, big, brutally sexy cyborg who doesn't like to share anything that belongs to him.

Steel is beyond irritated when he is maneuvered into ownership of a fragile human female. She's not nearly big enough to handle his size or strength, yet she's determined to get him into bed—into *her*. Steel realizes just what this little female is capable of when he awakens, chained to his bed, with her riding his very turned-on body. For a man who prides himself on his unyielding control, Steel soon finds Rena stripping him of it an inch at a time.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Kissing Steel

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KISSING STEEL

Laurann Dohner

Dedication

To the man who makes my dreams come true, the love of my life—Mr. Laurann.

A special thank you to my editor, Pamela Campbell—for believing in Cyborgs and teaching me so much. I appreciate you!

Chapter One

“Sir? We are close to the *Star*.”

Standing up, Rena walked toward the man at the helm. The *Bridden* was a small, fast jumper shuttle. The five-man crew and Rena had spent two weeks chasing down the intermittent distress signal from a life pod from the spaceship *Star*. They were farther out in space than Rena ever wanted to go.

Rena’s heart pounded. The *Star* had been heavily insured so, when pirates had stolen it years before, her company had taken a tremendous loss when they paid the claim. Recovering it meant recouping most of the money they’d lost. If they pulled it off it meant a huge bonus that would pay for early retirement, no more shit from her boss, and she’d have enough money to finally buy her freedom from the hell she lived with every day. She was so close to obtaining her dreams, she could almost taste it.

“The last signal we got was six hours ago but it should be repeating at any time. She couldn’t have gotten far since we’re faster.” Dell Harver was the captain of the *Bridden*. He was good-looking, a businessman, and he was as determined as she to recover the stolen ship. He tapped the screen. “Here it is.”

She studied the screen, seeing a blinking light as he pulled up charts of the solar system they were in. “This is so exciting,” she said.

Dell turned his head, his soft brown eyes lighting up with excitement. “You bet your ass, sir.” He flushed a little. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it and I told you that you can cut the ‘sir’ shit. Just because I work in the corporate office shouldn’t mean I outrank you, and this is your ship where you should never apologize to me for cursing. I could meet you word for word since I was a military brat.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “So do you think we’ll really be able to recover her?”

“We’re heavily armed and we’re fast. The emergency signal from the pod computer said pirates had control of the *Star* and the pod relayed that it had been picked up again by the ship. Pirates usually travel in groups of ten or less. They are meaner than shit but not the brightest people you’ll ever meet.”

“But they have the *Star* and I read her listing. She’s a damn fine ship and she’s heavily armored and heavily armed.” That’s what made Rena nervous. “That ship can easily accommodate a hundred people, if not more.”

Dell chuckled. “I know what I’m doing, sir...uh, Ms. Gates. This isn’t the first recovery I’ve ever done and that’s why your company hired me. We’re a five-man crew but don’t let that fool you because we are the best. We’ll be docked to that ship before they realize what hit them, board her and take those assholes out. All you need to do is stay aboard the *Bridden* until the fighting is over.”

She felt nervous. “All I’m saying is the *Star* can hold a hell of a lot of people. What if you’re wrong and going against more than just ten or less?”

The man watched her for a long moment. “May I be blunt?”

“Please.”

“Ninety percent of space pirates are insane. They are that way because their families chose to leave Earth and live in space on older ships that leak radiation, have poor recirculation of their air, and a long list of other hazardous living conditions that mutate them, mess up their brains or just make them nuts. They are vicious killers, totally brutal, but basically animals. We deal with them often and we know what we’re doing so please trust me. I was hired because this is a job I’m more than qualified to do. My men and I can handle a bunch of mutated freaks easily. All right? We enjoy killing them.”

Rena looked at him and realized how chilling he could be as she saw the cold gleam in his eyes when he said that about killing living beings. She was suddenly wary of him and his team, seeing them as a bit bloodthirsty for the first time. “I know Demco just hires the best.”

He grinned at her. “So what are you the best at since you’re high up in Demco Insurance?”

“I was an investigator for ten years.” She hesitated. “One of the investigations turned deadly and I almost died so they promoted me. Nothing says devotion to Demco more than almost giving your life to recover a claim for them.”

He studied her. “And you’re risking your life again.”

“Not if you’re as good as you say you are.” She forced a smile. “Recovering the *Star* is very important to my company.”

“I figured that out with the money they offered me to take this job and the huge bonus they are paying me when we bring her in.” He looked away from her. “Stay onboard.” He reached for his com. “We’re close. Why don’t you strap in? We’re going at them fast and hard.” He turned on the communication system to his crew. “We’re boarding soon so strap down and gear up. We’re about to earn our paycheck, men.”

Feeling nervous, Rena walked to her seat to buckle in tightly. She was nuts to take this assignment when she hated leaving Earth and hated spending nearly two weeks aboard a small jumper shuttle with five men. She’d been hit on but the men had backed off immediately when she’d showed them no interest in return. She nervously rubbed the bare skin where her wedding band had recently been. If all went well she’d never have to wear it again.

The shuttle engines roared to life as the pilot gave them full throttle. She swallowed and closed her eyes, hating the feel of the pull of the shuttle as it shot forward through space.

Dell was talking loudly as he communicated with his team. “In ten minutes we’re going to hit hard and fast. Mark, you’re the lead. Don’t damage the docking door this time.” He chuckled. “These bastards are in for a surprise.”

“Sure, Dell.” It was Paul’s voice that came through the speaker. “And you get to come in last to take all the glory.”

Dell snorted. “That’s why I’m the captain. Try not to leave any of them alive this time. I don’t want any more scars.”

Rena opened her mouth but then closed it, deciding that she didn't want to know. The thought that people were about to die made her feel queasy. It wouldn't be the first time she'd been somewhere that people had lost their lives but she still didn't feel comfortable with it. *Of course it is better the criminals die than the recovery team*, she thought. *Or me.*

"Here we go, boys," Dell sounded tense. "Our shielding didn't effectively cover us. Their sensors picked us up and they are turning but I got us close enough." He paused. "Damn. They are firing. Evasive maneuvers! I'm going for their backside. The intel on the *Star* says she's blind on the bottom tail section. We're going to do a hard dock on their cargo two. Hang on. We're going to kiss their ass literally. Board as soon as you get a seal with the dock."

In seconds, Rena experienced fear as they hit the craft. If she hadn't been strapped in she would have been thrown from her seat. Alarms screamed in the cabin as she heard a loud clank. She saw Dell jump from his seat and dart a look at her before he moved to exit the shuttle. The alarms abruptly went silent.

"Stay put. We're locked to them and docked so they can't shake us loose."

She stared at the retreating man, watching mutely when he grabbed the gun strapped to his thigh as he rushed away. She heard the doors swish open and then closed, leaving her alone. Rena bit her lip as she unbuckled her belt to move to the pilot's chair to watch out the window.

Above her all she could see was a huge hull of a ship the size of a large building. She sat in the captain's chair, eyeing the console but couldn't really understand any of it. She noticed a red light flashing that read docking clamps. *Was that bad that it was flashing?* She was alone on the shuttle with her thoughts and fears. *What if the team fails? What if the pirates get the drop on them?* She didn't know how to pilot a shuttle but she bet it wasn't anything similar to driving a hover vehicle through streets on Earth.

She wished Dell had given her a headset so she could hear his team. She'd asked, but he said he hadn't packed an extra set, which made her nervous. Wouldn't a top-rated outfit keep spare equipment? She eyed the shuttle, determining it was a nice one, a newer model but not top of the line. She sat back in the chair, knowing she couldn't do anything but wait and wonder what was happening aboard the *Star*.

Another blip on the radar screen started to blink near where Dell had shown her the signal of the *Star*. It was on the outer edge of the screen and the red light was getting closer to the one she knew belonged to the *Star*. Fear slammed into her. She wasn't a pilot but she wasn't an idiot either. Another ship was coming at them.

"Computer?" No response. "Shuttle?" Nothing. "Autopilot?"

Silence met her questions and dread swamped her. Obviously the voice commands for the shuttle were either turned off or not in operation. She tried again, thinking there was no way that a modern shuttle had a malfunctioning computer.

"Emergency response."

That was the universal code to activate a computer but the shuttle's computer didn't respond, stunning her. If something happened to Dell and his men she had no idea how to get away with the computer off-line. She watched the blinking light on the monitor coming closer and it was moving fast. She knew it wasn't another recovery team unless

Demco had lied to her but that wasn't unheard of. Her company did shady things from time to time but she'd had to pay Dell's team so she knew how much they earned for this job. She couldn't see Demco paying out more than the small fortune they'd already paid the crew of the *Bridden* for a risky venture.

She lifted her gaze when the blink on the monitor looked as if it were on top of the blink she knew was the *Star*. Staring up at the back of the *Star*, she didn't see a damn thing until she stared in astonishment as another jumper shuttle came into view suddenly, slowly moving toward her, a large gray ship with outer lights on.

Her shock evaporated. "That bastard!"

Fury filled Rena as she saw the other jumper shuttle dock on the other side of the *Star*. It was too far away to really see much but the lights and general size of the jumper shuttle but she knew by its shape that it was damn near a twin of the *Bridden*. Demco had sent out another team with another investigator. It was obvious to her that her asshole boss hadn't trusted her on this recovery and she wanted to scream in frustration.

This was Joe Emmet's doing. Her new supervisor thought all women were incompetent and he'd tried to block her from getting this assignment. The creep had tried to go over his boss's head to Chuck to get her assigned to another recovery but he hadn't been able to do it. He didn't know that Chuck wanted Rena in deep space. They kept their loveless marriage a secret from the lower employees because it was bad policy to let the association known.

No way would Chuck knowingly send a second team so this was definitely something Joe Emmet had done on his own. Chuck didn't want his wife dead but she represented more brownie points to his father who owned Demco if his wife landed the biggest recovery in company history. She shoved away thoughts of Chuck. She was angry enough without thinking about her husband and the ways he used her.

She stood up to pace, knowing she was going to chew Emmet's ass when this was over. No matter what investigator they sent out, she had seniority, this was her recovery and it was her bonus. Chuck had given her the written assurances she'd demanded. She knew better than to trust him as far as she could throw him. She'd learned early in their marriage what a lying bastard he was.

She kept pacing, half tempted to leave the *Bridden* and board the *Star*. A thought stopped her. *What if there are still pirates alive onboard?* The *Star* was a really large ship, a first-class travel model made for deep space exploration and it could take hours for the *Bridden*'s crew to go deck by deck, room by room to make sure they didn't miss anyone. Sure, she was a military brat and had been raised rough. She could handle a little trouble but did she really want to have to defend or risk her life? *No*. She wanted to live too damn much, just out of spite, if for nothing else.

Finally she heard a beep as the doors whished open. She turned, gasping in alarm when it wasn't Dell or his men who walked into the cockpit of the *Bridden*. Her knees went weak and her heart nearly stopped before it started to pound in anxiety. *It just couldn't be*. She blinked a few times, her focus jerking from one large male to the next to stare at all seven of them. Someone softly whimpered, and she realized she'd made that sound.

The man at the front frowned. He had light, nickel-colored skin and his full lips twisted downward. She couldn't look away from his intense dark blue eyes as he stared

back. His gaze scanned the room then returned to sweep her from head to foot with a cold look before locking with hers once again. He did not look happy.

“I’m Flint.” The man had a deep voice. “Explain yourself for attacking my ship.”

She was mute. She had to be seeing things but she knew there wasn’t a damn thing wrong with her eyesight. All seven men in the room with her were cyborgs. But they didn’t exist anymore. Earth had eradicated them decades before. Her father had told her horrible stories about the brutal, vicious, and cunning manmade species. They had genetically enhanced bodies with enough hardware inside them to make them virtual weapons and ultimate warriors.

One of the men to Flint’s left cleared his throat, drawing her attention to him. He was a light-gray-skinned cyborg with dark eyes and black hair. None of the seven males were less than six feet tall and all were probably at least two hundred twenty-five pounds. Muscled, human-looking males, except for their sleek metallic skin tones and their larger bodies. The man’s eyes looked black as he studied her.

“I heard some humans keep an onboard pleasure worker with them. You noticed the men’s expensive clothing and it’s a topnotch ship. Hiring a woman to see to their sexual needs stands to reason, and she isn’t in their crew uniform.”

“Pleasure worker?” Her voice finally worked as she glared at the cyborg. She’d gone from fright to purely offended in a heartbeat. “I’m not a space hooker. How dare you.”

The man frowned. “Then who are you?”

Rena straightened her shoulders. “Who is in charge?”

Flint took a step forward. “I am. The *Star* is my ship. Why did you attack? You sure as hell aren’t pirates unless you’re a group of rich Earth assholes out here to alleviate boredom.”

“I’m Rena Gates and I work for Demco Insurance. This is definitely not your ship, Mr. Flint. By the authority of Earth Transit I have an order to retake the *Star*. She was stolen and I’m here to recover her. When the claim was paid out, the *Star* became the property of Demco Insurance and I represent them in this matter. I demand you release the men who boarded the *Star* and vacate my ship immediately so they can pilot her back to Earth for me.”

Okay, Rena knew that probably wouldn’t go over well but she had to try. She did have an order from Earth transit so everything she’d said was true and it sure beat dropping to her knees to beg them to not kill her. Her father had taught her when in doubt to never show fear so for good measure she glared at the large cyborg. She saw his eyes widen, the dark blue seemed to deepen in color before he barked out a laugh.

“Is this a joke?”

She managed to keep her shoulders from slumping. “No. I’m the primary lead investigator for Demco. The *Star* is a stolen vessel that now belongs to my company under Earth Transit laws. We paid the claim so I’m here to recover her.”

More of them laughed. Flint finally spoke, grinning, showing off perfect white teeth as he did. “As amusing as you are, there’s no way in hell I’m giving up the *Star* to you. You are far from Earth and we don’t give a damn about Earth Transit or Demco. Here’s how my law works. We took it from pirates, so it belongs to us now. You attacked my ship when you boarded without permission.” He scanned the shuttle and then he

glowered at Rena, all humor gone. “Under space law that’s a death sentence and this shuttle now belongs to me along with everything in it, including you.”

A new man arrived, pushing his way forward to the front, shouldering past men so easily she couldn’t miss him. He was taller than the rest, at least six and a half feet in height with light silvery gray skin. His hair was beautiful, a light silver, looking almost illuminated, it was so pale. He was huge—thick chest, massive arms—his big body encased in tight black leather.

“They are all dealt with, Flint.” The man’s voice sounded rough and deep, giving Rena chills just hearing it. “We tried to reason with the two pinned down but they’ve heard that bullshit about us so they wouldn’t surrender.” The man turned his head and a really light blue gaze locked onto Rena and widened in shock.

Flint looked irritated. “I’m glad you arrived when you did. Thank you for the help. Who the hell started those damn rumors anyway? The worst we’ve ever done is take DNA samples so our scientists have something to work with. We don’t kill people unless we have to and we don’t steal their damn organs.”

The largest cyborg was still staring at Rena. “They refused to believe me. I heard you as I came in. You’re sentencing her to death? She’s a woman, Flint. She’s not even wearing weapons and as bitter as I am right now over women, I think killing her is far too harsh a punishment.”

Flint barked out another laugh. “Tired of the women you’ve dealt with, huh?”

The man tore his strange, light blue gaze away from Rena. “It’s not the females we rescued who have pissed me off. Vonlona believed I was dead so she voided me from our family unit to take another man into her bed.” He sounded angry. “If I’d known I was no longer taken then I would have had a much better few months since I haven’t touched a woman in a long time.”

“I’m sorry.” Flint sighed. “I’m sure you can get her back.”

“I don’t want her,” the man rumbled, clearly vehement. “She was resentful that I made that choice because she wants me, but I want no part of her anymore. She can keep her other male.”

“I am sorry, Steel. I know you were happy with her.” Flint turned his attention back to Rena. “I don’t kill women. I’ll have the single males take a look at her, and I’m sure many will want her, so we’ll hold a lottery to give her away.”

Revulsion washed over Rena, knowing they thought she was a pleasure worker and planned to draw numbers to see who got to sleep with her first. She experienced dizziness and her knees nearly collapsed under her weight. She wasn’t a hooker and she didn’t want to be passed around to a bunch of huge cyborg men. She wouldn’t survive long. Forced pleasure workers never did.

“Flint,” one of the shorter cyborgs said softly. “Give her to me. Volt and I are bored in our down time between shifts.” Dark green eyes scanned Rena’s body and his tongue came out to lick his lips. “She would definitely make me look forward to getting off my shifts and Volt will be thrilled as well to have her amuse us.”

Another one snorted. “Forget it, Nile. Teg and I would appreciate her more.” The black-haired cyborg winked at Rena. “Pick me. I could eat you alive.”

One of the cyborgs in the back shoved forward. “If she gets to pick who she belongs to then I want to be in the running.” He smiled at Rena. “I promise not to break you and you’d enjoy living with me and my brother much better than them.”

She tried to remember what her father had told her about cyborgs but just one story came to mind about a prisoner her father had guarded who had been damn possessive of his belongings. He was the biggest cyborg in lockup and he’d beaten anyone who had tried to touch his things. Her gaze flew to the silvery-skinned cyborg with the strange pale blue eyes and beautiful hair that flowed to his shoulders.

He was the biggest of the eight cyborgs, she’d just heard him say he hadn’t had a woman in a long time and he was no longer married because his wife had screwed another man. She stared at him, taking note of his handsome features, his attractive, muscled body, and those full, firm lips.

Something inside her was drawn to this cyborg, perhaps it was the fact that he’d been betrayed by his wife. Rena knew all about spousal betrayal, bitterness, and being lonely. She lived it every day of her life and had for years, trapped in her travesty of a marriage. She saw a kindred soul in those seconds. If she had to go to bed with a man, he was her first choice, as her gaze swept over him again, feeling attraction in ways she hadn’t experienced in years. The thought of having sex with the handsome cyborg made her feel warm and almost eager to explore the reality of how it would feel to be touched by him. She made a sudden decision. She stared at the big cyborg when he turned his head, maybe sensing her desperate focus on him. She barely hesitated.

“Give me to him.” She pointed at Steel, her gaze locked with his. “Please.”

Shock widened Steel’s eyes and his jaw dropped.

Flint laughed. “Done. You now own a human, Steel. Congratulations.”

Steel whipped his head around, glared at Flint. “No.”

Flint turned, still chuckling as he pushed through his men to leave the shuttle. “I’m your best friend. You wouldn’t want to insult me by not accepting a gift, would you?”

Steel growled a curse before he glared at Rena.

Chapter Two

Rena wasn't on the *Star* or the *Bridden*. The irritable cyborg, Steel, had let her grab her things from the shuttle. Keeping hold of her arm the entire time he'd taken her onto the *Star*, he then furiously marched her to the other shuttle. He'd locked her in a holding cell for hours and then had collected her. She'd been shocked when he'd escorted her onto another large ship that wasn't the *Star*. She'd seen the ship's tag on a few places as she was led down hallways, reading that she was on the *Vontage*.

It took her a few minutes but she finally remembered why the name was familiar to her. The *Vontage* had been a traveling pleasure hotel ship that traveled from Earth, to Saturn, and then to the Moon. Demco hadn't insured the ship so she'd never seen the claim for the theft but it had made the news. While in repair dock the *Vontage* had been stolen after a deck fire had caused damage on one of the levels. Her eyes widened as she stared at where Steel had led her.

It was a hotel suite that had a huge four-poster bed. The walls were a bright blue with black carpet and furniture but it was the erotic art hanging on the walls—pictures of human men and women embracing while nude—that prominently covered three of the walls, that stunned her. It looked as if the room had been designed for a romantic getaway for a kinky couple. As she eyed the bed she saw chains and restraints wrapped around the posts of the bed from top to bottom, resembling entwined silver snakes.

"It's..." She was speechless.

"I never changed the décor since I have better things to do with my time. The bed is comfortable." His voice was rough and husky.

She turned her head to meet his gaze, having to look up. He was well over a foot taller than her five-foot-three. She swallowed and brushed her brown hair from her face. "You're still annoyed with me, aren't you?"

"You think so?" He growled the words. "You threw yourself at me."

"I did not. I just asked to be given to you."

"Why?" He growled the word.

"I'm not a pleasure worker and I didn't want to become one."

Those strange eyes locked on her. "What makes you think Flint would have done that to you?"

"I have ears that work." She put her hands on her hips. "I heard what he said about giving me to the cyborgs and holding a lottery for me. I also heard those...men."

"We hold lotteries when women have too many males to choose from and she can't make a decision. Numbers are assigned and one is drawn. The winning number gets her, so you would have been given to one male. If he wanted to share your body with other males it would have been his decision. You are human and that makes you property."

“I’m a person, not property.” Anger poured through her at being considered a thing someone could own as though she were a pair of boots.

“Cyborgs were property on Earth.” He took a few steps toward Rena before stopping just mere feet from her. “When we escaped so we weren’t murdered by humans we took a page right out of your laws and made you property that belongs to us.” He took a deep breath. “Why did you choose me?”

She nervously licked her lips. “I heard what you said, implying you didn’t want me killed. I also assumed that you don’t like to share a woman since you didn’t want your wife back after she slept with another man. You’re really big too.” Her gaze ran up and down him, studying him closely. “You can protect me from other cyborgs.”

A silvery eyebrow arched. “If you are referring to the bullshit stories that we cut up humans for spare parts it is false. We take DNA samples because our gene pool isn’t as varied as we wish. A lot of cyborgs were created from the same DNA samples, making breeding difficult because we must be tested to ensure we aren’t from the same donors before we form a family unit. If a couple is set on becoming a unit even if their DNA is too similar we need spare samples from human donors that we can use to implant the female so the DNA is solid for their offspring.”

She was shocked. “I hadn’t heard that rumor about you cutting up people. I didn’t even know cyborgs still existed. You have children?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes we do. It is required by law that we must increase our numbers to ensure our continuing existence. We are set on our future and to have one we must reproduce so it is greatly encouraged to have as many offspring as possible.”

“So you use artificial wombs and—”

“No.” He stepped a little closer. “We reproduce the same way you do.”

Stunned fear filled her, knowing that he could get her pregnant, that cyborgs could have children. She was pretty certain they weren’t designed to do that. She swallowed hard.

“I’m not on anything. I mean, I’m not using something to prevent pregnancy.”

He frowned as his gaze raked up and down her. “You’re too damn small and fragile to have sex with. I couldn’t get you pregnant anyway since my sperm has not been activated.”

“Activated?”

“We have to take shots to null out what was done to us.” Anger deepened his voice. “Humans didn’t want us to procreate. They sure as hell didn’t want it to happen since some cyborgs were used as sex toys by the sick and perverted assholes who controlled us. We found a way around what they did to us but we have to take shots that last a few months when we plan to have offspring. I was going to be activated for the woman in my family unit when I returned to her but my ship was damaged. I was unable to contact my planet for a while so my female thought I was dead. Now she carries another’s offspring.”

“I’m sorry. Did you love her?”

He hesitated. “Love is a human term. I enjoyed the sex, she was attractive, we got along well and I had a good time when I was on Garden.”

“What is Garden?”

“My home world. We found a planet and settled on it after we fled Earth.”

She was shocked again, assuming they lived similar to nomads in space on the ships they stole. Apparently there was a hell of a lot more to cyborgs than she suspected. She was also relieved that he’d said he didn’t want to have sex with her since he was a big bastard. She had been a little afraid of the idea of him touching her. *What if he wasn’t gentle? What if...* well, she didn’t need to worry about that since he didn’t want her.

“As soon as I’m able, I will find you another male to give you to.” His gaze ran up and down her again. “I have an engineer who is smaller—about six feet tall and not as muscular. He might share you with his bunkmate since they are very close friends who share quarters but they will not abuse you.”

“No!” She stared up at him. “I don’t want to be shared.”

“What you want is irrelevant. What is your name?”

“Rena Gates.”

“Rena Gates, I will give you to another male, and if he shares you, that is his decision. I have work to do and will return in a few hours. Do not unpack or get too comfortable.”

She watched him leave with icy dread settling into her belly. She didn’t want to be given to some guy who was going to share her with other men. She shivered and it wasn’t in the good way. She worked with a woman named Dana who would have loved being shared between men but that wasn’t Rena’s idea of a good time. She moved toward the large bed and glanced at the chains before she sat down heavily on the soft mattress. Her mind started to work toward a solution.

That’s how two hours passed as she watched the clock on his wall before the doors opened and Steel walked back into his quarters. He looked stressed and his silver hair was messy as if he’d finger combed it a hundred times. Irritation flashed in his silvery blue gaze as it landed on her. He carried something in his arm so her focus dropped to the container box when he moved toward her and the bed.

“I thought you might be hungry.” He nearly dropped the box next to her. “Eat. I am going to shower.”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

He had spun away but then he froze. He didn’t turn around, instead chose to keep his back to her. “We have nothing to discuss. I set a meeting with the engineer in the morning when he ends his shift but I’m sure he will take you.” He stormed into the bathroom.

She opened the box and made a face when she saw it was filled with packet food. She lifted one, shocked as she read it was from Earth. She realized she shouldn’t have been surprised at all since the *Vontage* was an Earth floating hotel and obviously the food was from the ship’s massive stores. She sighed, tearing open one that said steak. It wasn’t too bad but it was all she ate. She heard the water shut off in the bathroom and stood up, placing the box and her trash on the floor. She turned to face Steel as she waited for him to enter the room.

He walked out of the bathroom wearing loose, comfortable-looking pants. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at his thickly corded muscles, thinking he had the best damn body she'd ever seen. She saw scars on his chest and a thick one on his left shoulder. He also had weird lines tattooed from the beginning of his collarbone, over the top of his shoulder that disappeared down over his back. More tattoos adorned his rib cage, making very attractive patterns on his skin. His wet hair was just shaken out and looked as though it had some curl when wet. His pale blue eyes fixed on her.

"You can sleep on the floor. You may have one of the blankets and a pillow from my bed."

Heart pounding, fearful, and really uneasy, she kicked off her shoes as she locked her gaze with his. "I'm not sleeping on the floor. You're also not going to give me to some engineer who may or may not decide to pass me around to his friends."

"You are my property and will do as you are told." The man's voice went even deeper, changing from a gravelly tone to an outright growl.

She didn't think he'd hurt her since he hadn't wanted her killed. She reached for her shirt, tearing it over her head. She saw his eyes narrow as his body tensed. Steel's large hands fisted at his sides when she reached back to unfasten her bra even as heat flamed her cheeks. She wasn't the type to ever strip for a stranger but desperate times called for desperate measures. It had been a long time since she'd been touched. The idea of him being the one to lay his hands on her made her a little excited, urging her to keep undressing.

He didn't say a word or move as she dropped her bra. She reached for her pants next and quickly shoved them down her legs, taking her panties with them. Totally naked she straightened up to meet his stunned gaze.

"What are—" His voice broke and he cleared it. "Why have you stripped?"

"I'm intelligent. I can't escape so I'm here for the duration until a real possibility of escape happens and that means I need to survive." She took a step toward him. "You don't like to share women, you're the biggest cyborg that I've seen and I know you don't want me dead. That means that I want to stay with you."

He blinked but didn't move. Rena didn't have that problem, inching forward until she stopped within a few feet of him. "You said you haven't had a woman in a long time. I'm a woman, I'm willing, I'm here and I plan on remaining with you instead of being given away to someone else. I thought we could come to an understanding. If you protect me and keep me safe from the other cyborgs then I'll do almost anything to keep you happy. I don't have a lot...well, any...experience in seduction but I'll try."

His eyes were wide and utterly stunned. "Are you a virgin?"

She laughed. "No. I'm married actually."

His face hardened and his mouth turned down in an angry expression. "You belong to another man but you're so eagerly offering your body to me?"

"I haven't touched my husband in a very long time and I never had an affair, too afraid he'd find out and he'd put me on the street. I married him thinking he was someone he wasn't." She paused. "He has a mistress. Do you know what that is?"

He shook his head.

“A mistress is a woman he pays for sex and is exclusively his to use. He couldn’t marry her because he has an important job with a father he has to impress to gain more money when his father dies. He never loved me, he lied about that and let me think he did. I was naïve but I found out soon enough that he barely tolerates me. He sleeps with other women as much as he can, so I stopped sharing a room with him and live on the other side of the house we share. He won’t let me divorce him because he says it would embarrass him and he likes having a respectable wife in order to garner his father’s favor. He’s my boss, so if I left him he said he’d fire me and make sure no one would ever hire me again. On Earth, without a job, I’d be without a home and do you know what they do with homeless people? They force women into pleasure-worker jobs or they make us grunt government employees. I’d end up picking up trash and living with dozens of other people in a small room. It’s...hell.”

His anger melted away. Steel was still frowning but he unclenched his fists as he reached for her. Rena tensed a little but forced her body to relax when his hands curved her hips. They were large and warm as he gently gripped her. He took a deep breath.

“How many men have you had?”

“Two. I lived with a man I worked with for six years but he was killed when he tried to save me when we were trying to recover stolen property. I was devastated and Chuck, that’s my husband’s name, used it to his advantage to get me to marry him.”

His hands dropped. “Get on the bed.”

“Do we have an understanding then?”

His gaze lowered down her body and then lifted to meet her blue eyes. “Yes.”

She still hesitated. “I want to be clear that I’ll just have sex with you. Do you promise me that you won’t let other men touch me?”

“If I take you as mine no other man will touch you.”

“If?”

“You’re not on the bed yet...unless you want me to take you standing up.”

She turned around quickly, her heart pounding in her chest as she moved for the bed. What kind of lover would the big cyborg be? She prayed he was nothing similar to Chuck. Her not-so-loving husband was damn selfish in bed. If she’d ever slept with Chuck before the marriage there wouldn’t have been a ceremony. He was a “two-minute not so wonder” who didn’t believe in foreplay, not even liking to face Rena when he’d taken her. She climbed on the bed and stretched out on her back.

She turned her head to stare at the cyborg when he didn’t immediately join her. He hadn’t moved from where she’d left him, his gaze was watching her silently. She stared back at him, waiting for him to do something, anything, not sure what else to do.

“You are frightened of me.”

She could lie but he seemed pretty intelligent. “I am. You’re really big and obviously strong. I heard all about cyborg enhancements. You could snap my bones without even straining a muscle. You’re stronger, faster, and bigger than regular men so of course I’m a little afraid of you.”

“What do you know of cyborgs?”

She hesitated and then sat up and she crossed her arms over her breasts to hide them, feeling uncomfortable sitting naked on the big bed. “I know why Earth tried to kill your kind off and what they were afraid of. I know that you’re fighting machines and that you have implants throughout your body and in your brain.” She paused, not sure what he was looking for in her answer.

“Have you ever met my kind?”

She shook her head. “No. Cyborgs were gone from Earth by the time I was three years old unless they were prisoners.”

“So you read about us in your history files?”

She hesitated. “I knew someone who was a military guard for the few cyborg survivors captured after the order went down to stop the cyborg program. Before they were executed.”

He blinked a few times. Steel finally moved, closing the distance to stop at the side of the bed. His gaze ran over her body before he settled for staring into her eyes. “I don’t want you. You’re too small, too frail, and you’re not my type. You may sleep on my bed tonight but in the morning you’re going to go with my engineer.”

Shock rolled through her. “I’m not unattractive.”

He tilted his head. “You are correct. You are very appealing but you aren’t my type. My unit female was six-foot-four with a rounded, solid frame.” His gaze lowered down her body and then lifted. “You’re not sturdy enough for someone like me and I like aggressive females. You will be much better suited for another male.”

“So you’re just turning me down?” Rena was shocked. She had men hit on her all the time when she was clothed but now she was naked in this man’s bed yet he was rejecting her. That burned and was insulting as hell. “You said you haven’t had a woman in a long time. You’d rather go without sex than have it with me?”

He paused. “There are cyborg females on a planet we will arrive at in the morning. Many of them have shown an interest in forming a family unit with me but I had thought I was still contracted to a woman. Now that I know I am free I can contract with another cyborg female so I won’t be without sex for long.”

Biting her lip, she glared at him. “Please don’t give me to someone else.”

He sighed. “You will be treated well.” He turned away to walk to a dresser. In less than a minute he returned, tossing a large gray shirt at her. “Put that on.”

Her hands shook as she put his big shirt on to cover her body. He was going to give her away, her life was going to be pure hell, and the thought of attacking him even came to mind. If she attacked him he might kill her, but she reasoned that dying would be preferable than becoming a ship whore.

“Do not take it personally,” he said softly. “I was a prisoner after it was declared cyborgs should be decommissioned.” He took a deep breath. “I spent six years in prison on Earth until I escaped when they had a system failure after a blizzard. I don’t hate humans but I don’t want to get involved with one. The years I spent locked up made me never want to trust your kind again.”

Shock rolled through her. “You were in a detention center on Earth?”

He nodded. “They had a use for me but when they were done I was slated for execution within sixty-four days.”

Hope hit her hard and fast. He’d been detained, which meant he had been subjected to the same procedure as the cyborgs her father had guarded. *Did he know what they’d done to him? Had he gotten reprogrammed? Had the extra chip been removed from his brain?* Her father said they didn’t tell the cyborgs what had been done to them when they processed them into the detention centers for fear that they’d try to operate on each other. Her thoughts went into overdrive.

“Could you please sit down on the bed so we can talk about this?”

He regarded her uneasily. “You wish to seduce me? It won’t happen. I’m not an Earth male.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing that,” she flat-out lied. “I’d like to hear more about this engineer. I’m scared. Please sit down and at least tell me what you know about him so I’m less terrified. I didn’t do anything to you when you were on Earth. I’m too young to have been a part of that.”

He hesitated, studying her, but he finally moved to the bed and sat all the way at the bottom, away from her. The bed dipped as the mattress took his impressive weight. He took a deep breath and turned his head to look at her. “I am tired but I will answer a few of your questions. Go ahead and ask, but do so quickly.”

Swallowing hard, her heart pounding, she stared into his beautiful eyes. “Are you listening to me, Steel?”

He nodded. “Ask your questions. I will give you five minutes but that is all.”

Terrified, she blurted out the words her father had told her so many times as a child that she’d never forget them. “Spectrum three-three-three-six!”

Steel opened his mouth, probably to ask her what that meant but then his eyes widened as his body went totally limp. Rena lunged for the big cyborg as his body started to slump forward. She wanted him on the bed, not on the floor or she’d never get him back on the mattress. She grabbed his shoulders and tugged hard, grunting as she fought his slack weight but then winning as he fell back toward her, on the bed. As his body landed, the bed bounced a little, almost knocking her on top of him.

She stared down at his closed eyes. “Oh shit. It really worked.”

Her father had told her that cyborgs had been reprogrammed to shut down for ten minutes and he’d given her the code that triggered the defensive program. The chip had been added in case they ever tried to revolt, escape, or if a guard was trapped in a room with one trying to kill him. Cyborgs were super soldiers and their keepers had been afraid they were too damn smart to keep contained, even locked in detention centers, so they’d embedded a chip that shut them down when those words were spoken, sending a jolt to all their hardware, forcing them to totally reboot.

She had ten minutes before the big cyborg’s brain came out of shut-down mode and she could guess that he was going to be killing mad when he realized what she’d done. She released his shoulders and turned her head, staring at the chains wrapped around the bed frame. Her gaze returned to Steel.

She was in deep shit if this didn't work but hell, he was giving her away regardless. What did she really have to lose? She stood up on the bed, carefully moving around his limp body to walk to the posts. Time was ticking away and she had a lot to do.

Chapter Three

Worry made Rena bite her lip after more than ten minutes had passed. She checked the pulse at his throat again, feeling relieved when she found a strong, steady one. His heart was good, his breathing was fine but he hadn't woken up the way he was supposed to. Her father had said ten minutes but it had been closer to fifteen and Steel still wasn't coming out of it.

"Steel? Wake up, please."

She hesitated and then straddled his waist as her hands flattened on his chest. His skin was warm and she noticed again how damn big he was. Her knees barely touched the mattress with her sitting astride him. She knew her weight wouldn't hurt him. She rubbed him, letting her hands glide over his ribs, feeling his muscles even though he was relaxed under her palms and fingertips. They were easy to feel since he had so many of them.

"Steel? Damn it, wake up! Please?"

She gasped when the man under her suddenly jerked violently, his eyes flying wide open as he tried to sit up with her on him. He couldn't move much, the restraints holding him spread-eagle the way she'd put him but it still made her feel terror. Was he strong enough to break the bed or the thin chains that were attached to it? His startled gaze met hers and in the next second she saw pure rage in his eyes as he jerked against the leather restraints around his wrists and ankles.

He started to fight, bucking his hips, twisting trying to break free. Rena had to squeeze her thighs tight against his hips to remain seated on him. She was hoping her weight would help keep him down.

"Stop it!" She rubbed his chest again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He roared in rage, the sound loud in her ears. He didn't calm. If anything he fought harder but luckily the restraints held. She heard the wood creak as though it might snap. She could see his muscles bulging and straining as he tried to pull the bedposts from the frame. He glared at her, his mouth snapping closed as the angry sound died.

"Just calm down."

"Calm down?" He snarled the words. "What did you do to me?"

He wasn't twisting or trying to buck her off anymore. She relaxed, staring into his fierce eyes. "I don't want to be given to someone else."

"So you knocked me out somehow and restrained me to the bed?" He growled at her just as an animal would, surprising her. "If you think you can ransom me to get off the ship, they will kill you the second you leave this room or they will come in here to take you out. Your plan of escape won't work."

"I know that plan won't work," she admitted. "I'm also not stupid. I'm sure the *Vontage* has escape pods but I also know that this ship is first class so it could easily overtake a pod so leaving in one wouldn't assure my freedom. I'm too damn far from

Earth to make it anyway, even if you didn't chase me down. We're weeks out and while I know a pod would eventually get me there I'd be a sitting duck for any pirate who spotted me in one of those slow-moving things."

He glared at her.

She took a deep breath trying to calm her frayed nerves. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea but I'm desperate."

"Release me now and I won't kill you." He pulled on the arm restraints but they held.

"No way in hell am I letting you up until we work some things out."

He growled at her again, glaring. "When I break free you are going to be sorry."

"Probably."

"If you kill me, they will kill you."

"I'm not going to kill you. If I wanted you dead I wouldn't have tried to wake you up. I would have taken you out when you slept. I'm not a killer, damn it."

"What did you do to me?"

She hesitated. "I'm not telling you that. Listen, Steel. I don't want to be given to your engineer. I want to stay with you."

His eyes narrowed. He was totally irate and it showed. "This is your plan? You think you can make me promise you under duress?" He paused. "Fine. Let me up and I swear I will keep you."

Rolling her eyes, Rena sighed. "Sure. Right. I'm stupid. The second I let you up you're going to hurt me."

He scowled. "I don't beat women and I won't kill you, but you are looking at lockup."

"We could go with that plan but I don't want to be locked up."

"What will it take for you to release me?" His eyes narrowed dangerously again as he glared at her. "What do you want?"

"I already told you what I want."

"Then I promise to keep you."

Sighing, she looked away from his eyes to let her gaze wander over his massive chest. The guy had a body that didn't stop. She hesitated and then reached for the bottom of the baggy shirt she wore. She had to ease her ass up a little off him to remove it. She let it drop on the bed next to them and tried to not blush since she was totally naked. Risking a glance at his face, she saw his shock. He wasn't looking at her but instead staring at her bared breasts.

"What are you doing?"

She hesitated. "You think I'm too fragile to have sex with you and you think you won't enjoy it." She paused. "I'm not really good with the seduction thing like I mentioned before, but what the hell." She bent over him, her hands bracing her upper body on his chest until their noses were inches apart. "I figure if I show you that it's possible between us, that you will keep me."

His mouth dropped open and then clenched shut. He glared at her.

“That’s not the response I was looking for.” She smiled at him. “Isn’t it kind of hot that you’re tied down with a naked woman on top of you?”

He growled at her.

“Okay. We’re going to do this the difficult way.” She pushed off him, lowering down his body so she straddled him. Her gaze flew up and she stared into his beautiful eyes. She wiggled a little on his hips, rubbing a thick, very stiff cock trapped under her in his pants. “For someone not interested, you feel that way to me.”

He glared at her. “I don’t want you. My body reacts but it’s just a response, like breathing.”

“Ouch. You know how to kill a woman’s ego, don’t you?”

“Let me go now, Rena Gates.”

“Just call me Rena since, according to you, I belong to you.”

“If you don’t let me up, it will make it worse on you in the long run.”

“Here’s the thing. If I let you go, you’ll lock me up, then probably hand me over to someone else and I don’t want that.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want.”

She blinked. Her plan so wasn’t going the way she thought it would. She was into improvising though. How hard could it be to seduce a guy who hadn’t gotten laid in a long time who was hard? She could feel that bulge under her, no missing that Steel was aroused. She swallowed to clear the lump that formed in her throat. She estimated by feel that he might be scary large by her standards.

“You said you like aggressive women.” She smiled at him. “Has a woman ever taken you out and tied you to a bed? Don’t I get points for that?”

His beautiful pale eyes almost completely closed as his eye narrowed. He took a deep breath, making his impressive chest expand even more. She actually saw little hair on his upper body, just a small amount under his arms, and of course the hair on his head. He either had shaved his face or he didn’t grow hair there. She didn’t know enough about cyborgs to know if they grew facial hair.

Steel’s body tensed under hers and then he started to pull again on the restraints. Shock sizzled through her, realizing when the bed creaked in a few places that he was strong enough to break the damn bed if she didn’t stop him.

She lowered against him and went for his left nipple, happy he didn’t have hair on his chest. Her mouth opened and his large frame jerked under her as she started to suck on his nipple. She let her teeth rake over the hardening areola. He stopped pulling on the bed frame, going still under her.

She suckled on him, doing to him what she enjoyed having done to her. She really was bad at this seduction thing but she’d learn if it saved her from the life as a whore. She saw the irony of it but if she had to sleep with a guy, she wanted it to be the guy under her, who could protect her, who preferred to not share a woman, and he was damn attractive.

Her hands started to explore his skin, opening on his stomach and sliding lower. Her hands brushed material and then her fingers slid inside the waistband of his pants. Steel

softly groaned, his hips arching just slightly, lifting her entire body a few inches off the bed, her knees leaving the mattress. It made her realize again how damn strong he was.

Her hands worked on his pants while he was arched up, tugging them down to reveal more skin. Her mouth left his nipple and she peered down to watch what she was doing. He had hair from a few inches under his bellybutton that left a silvery thin trail lower. She tugged his pants down more until she freed his cock. The sight of that made her gasp softly. She swallowed as she stared at it.

His hips lowered back to the bed as his body went rigid again. She heard the bed creak and her head rose to stare into a pair of furious pale blue eyes that glared at her. He was tensing up again, the muscles in his arms bulging as he pulled hard on the bed frame. Her shock over his thick, long cock—its skin a darker hue than the rest of his body—took a backseat suddenly to the sound of wood popping as he tried to break the posts on the bed.

Her hand went for his cock instantly, her much paler, pinker skin a shocking contrast to his darker shaft as her fingers tried to curl around it. He was thick enough that her fingers weren't even close to touching her thumb. He was so wide that she wondered if he'd even fit inside her. He went still as she gripped him, his eyes narrowing dangerously as she stared into his handsome face.

"Don't," he said in a deep, rumbling voice.

She licked her lips. They were suddenly dry. His gaze tore away from her eyes to watch her tongue moisten her upper and then lower lip. She saw his chest expand as he took a sharp breath. She paused and then ran her tongue over her bottom lip again. His breathing picked up. His thick, impressive cock twitched, revealing that she definitely had his interest.

She tilted her head, staring at him until he met her gaze. "I'll do whatever you want if you promise to keep me." She ran her tongue over her lips again. "Anything at all."

His eyes closed as his mouth settled into a grim line. "I want you to let me go."

Damn, he was stubborn. She lifted her leg and moved so she wasn't on him anymore but between his thighs where his pants bunched just under his exposed cock. She wouldn't be able to free him of his pants unless she unbuckled the restraints on his ankles to close his legs. She wasn't about to do that. Having his legs free would be enough for him to seriously hurt or kill her if he wanted to. His eyes opened and he watched her with narrowed lids and anger. She kept hold of his rigid cock the entire time.

She looked away from him to study his impressive erection. It was really a beautiful one, shocking her since she never really thought a man's sex could be attractive. It was perfectly shaped. Human men's penises got redder when they were really turned-on. It seemed a cyborg's cock turned a darker color of his skin tone. Steel's cock was a beautiful, burnished, almost pewter color. Several shades darker than his silver-toned skin. She leaned over him, inching her mouth closer to it.

"Don't," he ordered her harshly.

She froze, her gaze lifting to lock with his. She ran her tongue over her lips slowly, making a show of doing it. His cock twitched in her hand again. She saw his chest rise rapidly, telling her he was definitely interested. She arched an eyebrow at him, smiling. "Make me."

Shock tore across his face and Rena wanted to kick herself for saying that, taunting the man, and even wondering why she had. Maybe she was a little tired of men controlling her and ordering her around. This one was restrained, so she was in control. It was kind of empowering and the sight of him tied down, muscles straining, turned her on more than she wanted to admit, feeling the wetness between her thighs.

He was so damn sexy and the fact that he was under her power made her hotter. She knew that was disturbing and wrong but it didn't cool her down any. She looked away from him to lower her gaze. She inched closer to his cock, her mouth opening, and realized just how big he really was.

She hesitated, adjusting him in her hand, and then ran her tongue from the base of his shaft upward to the thick crown. The cyborg went unnaturally still, even the sound of his breathing suddenly suspended. She hesitated and then tested the limits of her mouth, taking the tip of him inside. She heard him suck in air then. His cock jerked in her hand and against her tongue. She took a few inches inside her hot mouth, her teeth gently scraping against him since he barely cleared them.

Sweetness teased her taste buds. She licked at the tip of him, tasting a little more of his pre-cum that beaded there. He didn't taste human. She'd given head often to her first boyfriend, although it had been a few years. She'd refused to do that for her husband. He was an asshole and she'd never wanted to get that up-close-and-personal with him after the first time he'd taken her to bed. He was selfish with his own needs so when he'd asked, she'd flat-out refused.

"Stop," Steel rasped.

She licked at him again, enjoying the sweet taste of him. He was saying no but his body was saying yes. She started to work him into her mouth, just a few inches since he was way too big to take more than that inside her mouth. His cock became so rigid that he started to feel just as hard as his name implied—steel. More of his sweet taste eased out of him and she responded by moaning, his cock twitching over the vibrations that moan created against his swollen, aroused flesh.

She moved slowly, steadily, turning her head to take him at new angles, working him just a little deeper inside her mouth as she grew accustomed to his width. She heard his breathing change, going harsh and ragged, and then his hips started to rock just slightly, moving with her mouth. She cupped his large, heavy, hair-free balls with her other hand, feeling them tighten, knowing he was going come. She increased the pace, taking a little more of him. His body went rigid. She tore her mouth away from his cock, lifting her head.

Steel's head was thrown back, his lips parted slightly as he took ragged breaths, his chest rising and falling rapidly. She watched him for a few heartbeats before his jaw jerked down, his eyes snapped open. He was beautiful and wild-looking when passion gripped him. Sweat beaded his brow and she saw he was fisting the chains that held his arms. Her gaze locked with his.

"I want to stay with you."

His mouth snapped closed and his jaw tensed. She knew he was clenching his teeth. The passion in his eyes cooled into a hardness that almost frightened Rena. Maybe she was taking this too far. Maybe she was making him hate her. She didn't want that. She moved, climbing up him, and straddled his waist. She put her hand on his chest, using it

to lift off him to adjust his aroused flesh under her. She stared into his heated eyes and then lowered her body, still gripping his unbelievably hard cock to guide him to her.

She knew she should be embarrassed about how wet she was. The cyborg aroused her, and hearing his panting breaths, tasting him, coaxed her body into a strong desire to have him. Hell, she could barely remember a time she'd ever been this turned-on. Her belly started to feel achy as it quivered and her body was weeping with need. The broad tip of his cock rubbed against her opening—teasing, taunting, promising her things she really wanted. She wanted to be filled by him. The wetness there was definitely almost embarrassing.

His jaw clenched again but he didn't say a word. Rena hesitated for a second before she eased her weight down. Her eyes widened as gravity forced the thick tip of his cock to press against her pussy, alarm hitting her just a little as her vaginal walls tried to expand enough to admit him.

"Don't," he rasped. "You're too small."

Her eyes locked with his. She took a shaky breath and relaxed, letting her weight ease down more. Her eyes widened again as the thick tip of his cock breached her pussy. The sensation of her pussy stretching to take all of him was intense, a mixture of pleasure and pain. She experienced a tiny urge to jerk away but as she stared into his eyes, seeing them narrow, feeling the body under her shiver, she wanted him regardless of whether it hurt. She let more of her weight ease down, feeling his thick cock filling her, inches of him now inside her.

He groaned softly, his eyes shutting as his head was thrown back. The bed creaked as his arms tensed, pulling again on his chains. Rena lifted up, almost pulling off his cock before she relaxed and eased back down, taking even more of him. A soft moan of pleasure left her. The feel of him inside her was wonderful, though it almost bordered on pain. She eased her body down until his cock was fully seated, every magnificent inch of him buried snugly inside her vagina.

He twitched inside her, the movement causing her to quiver in response. Her breathing was a little ragged. She braced her hands at his hips and used her legs, lifting up and then easing back down, slowly riding him, enjoying the sensation of him inside her. He was a whole new level she'd never been to. She wanted to cry out, scream, moan, and just keep feeling the rapture his body was creating. Nothing had ever been so good before. Nothing had even come close to the kind of sheer delight that thick cock of his was doing to her—hitting, rubbing, and sparking every one of her nerve endings.

She closed her eyes, just feeling as she moved up and down on him. Another moan tore from her as she picked up the pace, rocking up and down on his cock as her passion increased. He was so amazingly hard, filling her so tightly that she could feel every generous inch of him rubbing against nerves she never knew she had. Her movements became frantic as her passion burned higher, the promise of climax hovering as she rode him.

The man under her tensed, their bodies lifting from the bed, making her cry out in protest when her knees left the bed. Her eyes flew open. He was gripping the chains, arching off the bed, using them to do it, his head thrown back. She moved her legs, putting the back of her feet on the top of his thighs, and used the leverage there with her hands gripping the tops of his hips to keep moving. Now that she had something to brace

against again she was able to move frantically, bucking on him. The climax slammed through her hard, fast, and almost brutally as ecstasy tore through her.

Someone yelled out and as Rena collapsed on the big body of the man beneath her, she realized it had been him. Inside her Steel started to come hard, shooting his release deep into her. His cock twitched strongly, the way a heartbeat would, against her vaginal walls. Her quivering muscles went crazy, hot warmth filling her as he groaned loudly while he continued to come until he went silent under her. Her cheek ended up resting on his chest, stomach to stomach with him, and he relaxed under her as his body limply fell back onto the bed, causing her knees to hit the mattress again.

They were both breathing heavily. Rena was a little more than shocked as she lay on him, trying to recover from the best damn orgasm she'd ever experienced. Sweat trickled between their bodies but she ignored it. She thought about moving off him but he was big, she figured she wasn't crushing him since he was breathing fine with her weight on him, each breath actually moving her upper body up and down. She also had no urge to separate their bodies where they were joined, feeling fused to him.

A good minute passed. Steel was quiet, not fighting to be free, and as his breathing slowed along with hers she wondered if he'd gone to sleep. Her ex-boyfriend always had conked out after sex. She'd never slept with her husband since he preferred to leave her bed after they had sex—back at the beginning of their marriage—so she didn't know about him. She lifted up, her chin rising to meet a pair of furious pale blue eyes.

"Are you going to release me now?" His tone was gruff and low.

Swallowing, she realized he was still super pissed off. Obviously sex didn't mellow out the cyborg. She stared into his handsome silver-gray face and realized her mistake. He wasn't fully human so expecting him to react similarly had been an error on her part. She loathed the tears that filled her eyes when she came to terms with the fact that nothing she could do or say was going to change his mind about giving her away. She blinked them back but not before she saw him frown. She looked away.

"If you hurt yourself, that isn't my fault." He sounded sullen. "Spare me tears."

Her gaze flew to his. "That's not why I'm upset."

He studied her for a long time. "You regret doing this? You should." He paused. "Release me and I won't harm you. I give you my word."

"You're still going to give me away, aren't you? I can take you, I'm not too damn frail, and you can't say you didn't enjoy the sex." She refused to feel shame or regret.

He hesitated, watching her. "I told you my reasons for not wanting you and they remain the same. I want a family unit and there are plenty of available and willing cyborg women who are interested in me. As a human, you would never be a female who I would consider breeding with. It's my duty to procreate, and under our laws, it is a requirement."

She lowered back onto him, refusing to meet his eyes, and let her cheek rest on his chest again. He was still hard inside her and if she didn't know for sure that he'd gotten off, she'd worry that he hadn't. Normal guys didn't stay that hard but obviously cyborgs could. She wiggled her hips a little, testing it, and he was definitely up and ready for another round.

Tomorrow morning she'd release him. She yawned. Her hands moved on him, rubbing his warm skin. She shifted her legs, getting comfortable against him.

"What are you doing now?" He sounded irritated.

"I'm exhausted. I knew we were going to hit the *Star* so I slept like shit last night. It's been a really difficult day for me. You guys killed all of my team, didn't you?"

His body tensed under hers. "They left us with no choice. When they attacked the *Star* they refused to put their weapons down."

Hot tears filled her eyes and this time she didn't bother trying to stop them when they fell on his chest. "They were nice guys. I didn't know them long but they treated me well." She hesitated but decided to be honest since she held him captive so he had to listen to her. "So few people are ever nice to me."

He said nothing.

She shifted on his big body, getting more comfortable. The sound of his heartbeat under her ear soothed her, as did his warmth. He might not give a damn about her feelings or what she wanted but that didn't mean he couldn't give her solace, willing or not. She wanted to be held and lying on him was the closest she was going to get.

"Release me."

She shook her head. "In the morning I will. I'm sure you have to report to duty or something, so they'll come looking for you if you don't show up." More tears fell. "Can you just shut up and let me have this? I'm a prisoner, my life was shit before and I didn't think it could get worse, but it has. I'm so damn tired and I just want to lie here on you, okay? No pun intended but I feel connected to you and I just need to feel close to someone right now. You're it, whether you like it or not."

He stayed silent and still under her as she fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Movement woke Rena as she was rolled onto her back. Confused, she opened her eyes. A handsome face was inches above hers, looming. She blinked, realizing that a heavy weight was pinning her against something soft, and then her memory returned. Her eyes widened as she stared into a pair of silver-blue eyes. Steel was free, he had her pinned under him on the bed, and hot bare skin was against hot bare skin.

Steel tore his gaze from hers to stare at something over his shoulder. “Thanks, Core. Leave now.”

Rena tried to move but Steel had her totally pinned. His arms were braced, holding her arms, his elbows and forearms trapping her hair, his torso holding her still under him, and his thighs trapped her legs together between and under them. She couldn’t even lift her head in an attempt to see who Steel was talking to.

A male chuckle sounded. “I still want to know why you let her restrain you.”

“Leave now,” Steel sounded threatening. “And if one person hears about this I will hurt you every time someone mentions it to me. Do you understand? This is classified.”

Another male chuckle sounded, farther away this time. “I won’t tell you’re into kink. Next time though you might want to pick a partner you can’t wear out.” He laughed again and then a door opened and shut.

Steel turned his head, his light eyes narrowing as he stared into Rena’s face. She was in deep shit and knew it. Somehow someone had come in and released Steel from the restraints.

“You were so exhausted that the door chime didn’t wake you, nor did I when I called to my friend to enter. You didn’t wake when he released me.” He kept his tone soft but anger sounded in every word. “I had to tell him I let you tie me up and you passed out on me.” Blue eyes narrowed dangerously. “You better hope he keeps his mouth shut. If my men hear about this, they will taunt me.”

She experienced a little fear as she stared into his eyes. “What are you going to do to me?”

He took a deep breath, almost crushing her chest in the process since he had her tightly pinned. “I don’t know. You didn’t harm me, you had no intention of killing me, but I do want to know how you disabled me. I don’t feel any injuries and I didn’t see you move to attack me.”

She was tempted to knock him out again but she was afraid he’d crush her if he totally went limp. He was too heavy to lift. There was no point in it anyway, besides just seriously pissing him off more. Other cyborgs would just come in to free him if she tied him up again and she knew it would be soon since it was obviously morning hours so he would be missed right away. She assumed he had a job to go to today.

“Rena? I’m waiting.”

She met his gaze. “If you keep me and don’t give me away I’ll tell you how I can easily overtake you. Isn’t that worth something? Bargain with me, Steel.”

His jaw clenched. “You know I could torture it out of you, don’t you?”

She knew that. “Yes.”

“Then answer me. How did you knock me out?”

She hesitated. His hold on her wrists tightened, making her gasp from the pressure. Tears filled her eyes at the pain. She saw something in his gaze flicker and his hold on her instantly eased.

“Tell me now, Rena.”

She blinked back the tears as she moved her fingers. He hadn’t broken her wrists but she knew he could have if he’d wanted to. She shook her head. “It’s all I’ve got to bargain with.”

His jaw clenched. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You don’t have to. Just make the deal with me. I’ll tell you how I did it if you keep me and don’t give me to the engineer guy.” She paused. “Or anyone else for that matter.”

Anger filled his features. “Why don’t you just demand I totally set you free for you to return to Earth?”

“We’re too far from Earth and I’m not stupid. Even if you were willing to let me go all you could do was put me on a pod. I know pirates are thick this far out and my pod would get caught. They aren’t made to be defender units so I’d be easy prey. They are far worse than you are. I could ask you for the shuttle I came here in but I don’t know how to pilot it. If you had a cyborg pilot me to Earth, it would be a suicide mission for any cyborg, since they’d be killed. I know the best I can ask for is to stay with you.”

He took another deep breath, his chest crushing against hers as he stared into her eyes. “Tell me.”

“Make a deal with me. It’s really good information and if there are other cyborgs like you then it’s a goldmine of information.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “Someone like me?”

She could see him thinking, his expression unguarded as they stared at each other. She saw something click for him.

“I was incarcerated. That’s it, isn’t it? Did they do something to us?”

Shit. She’d said too much. She licked her lips and nodded, knowing there was no use denying it. “Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I told you I knew someone who was a guard.”

He studied her features. “Who? Unless you’ve had surgery that I don’t detect, you were too young to have been a guard.” His eyes suddenly widened. “Are there more cyborgs locked up on Earth? How many of them are there? Where are they?”

“Make a deal with me and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Rage flashed across his face and then he lifted off her. Rena was shocked at the sudden movement but then she cried out as he grabbed her. He climbed off the bed, gripping her ankle in one of his big hands, dragging her to the edge of the bed. He flipped

her on her stomach, dragging her until she was bent over it, pinned facedown against the mattress, his knee shoving her legs apart. He came down on her, almost crushing her into that position.

“How many cyborgs are still prisoner and where are they? Tell me now, Rena. This isn’t a damn game. How many of my people are yours still holding captive? We thought humans killed them all long ago. We freed the last of the survivors twenty years ago after I escaped.”

Shock flashed through her. “I don’t know. I mean, I don’t think there are any surviving cyborgs left on Earth. I can’t tell you something I don’t know.”

“You’re a guard, aren’t you? Or your company is in charge of them? You don’t work for an insurance company, do you?”

She turned her head to stare up at his face. The anger she saw there terrified her. He had the wrong damn idea and his imagination was going wild. “My father was a guard, not me, and Demco is an insurance company. I don’t know about any other cyborgs. I swear.”

“I could hurt you.” To prove a point he shifted his hips.

Dread spread through her. A very hard, thick cock pressed against her ass as his legs shifted, forcing her thighs wider apart—enough for him to press against her anus. She stared at him over her shoulder, apprehensive, recognizing the threat.

“Tell me everything, Rena, right now. You know how bad I could hurt you. Talk.”

Tears filled her eyes. “I swear. My father was a guard at a cyborg detention center when I was little. He told me stories growing up about the years he was there. He told me how they implanted all captured cyborgs with chips so that’s how I was able to shut you down. If I say the code words it causes the chip to shut you down for ten minutes and makes all your chips reboot so it takes you longer to get back to full speed. I swear. Please don’t hurt me, Steel.”

He searched her eyes and his body relaxed slightly. The firm press of his cock eased back from her ass as he shifted his hips away from her inner thighs. He took a few deep breaths, still staring into her eyes. He took another deep breath.

“What code words?”

“If I say them you’ll hit the floor.”

“Then why aren’t you saying them? If any of this was true you would have knocked me out by now. Prove it to me.”

She hesitated. “Are you listening to me, Steel?”

He glowered at her.

“Remember you asked.” She took a deep breath, watching his eyes. “Spectrum three-three-three-six!”

She saw him blink and then his eyes rolled back into his head. She braced as his large body collapsed against hers. Naked, hot skin crushed against her back. Gravity though, made him slide down her body and, with a soft thump, he hit the floor. She straightened and turned to stare down at the unconscious cyborg in a naked heap. She let her eyes go to his still-hard cock, seeing that not all of him was down for the count.

She sighed and got a pillow off the bed. She knew the cyborg didn't deserve it but she crouched down next to his body and lifted his head, shoving a pillow under him before she eased his head down. Standing, she found the shirt he'd lent her the night before, and put it on. She hesitated, glancing at him, and then walked to his bathroom.

Rena enjoyed the hot water as she quickly showered. She figured it might be her last for a while if the big cyborg was pissed when he woke. She tried to mentally keep track of time while she towel dried and then walked back into his room. Steel was still unconscious. She walked to her bag from the *Bridden* and got dressed in a pair of comfortable pants and a baggy shirt. If he locked her in a holding cell at least she'd be comfortable. She grabbed her tooth cleaner kit and walked back into his bathroom.

Stepping out of the bathroom a few minutes later, her attention instantly went to the downed cyborg. For some reason Steel stayed out longer than ten minutes. She knew it had to be past that time. Worry gnawed at her again, though he'd woken up fine before after about fifteen minutes. She walked over to him to kneel at his side.

"Steel?"

Something chimed. She realized it had to be someone at his door. The sound echoed again. Rena's gaze dropped to Steel. She reached for him, her hands touching his hot skin as she started to shake him. Someone was at the door and he needed to wake up.

"Steel!"

He didn't move. She heard the door open and lifted her head, peering over the top of the bed as three cyborgs in black uniforms stormed into the room. She swallowed hard as their focus locked on her. They paused and then moved around the bed. It just took them seconds to see Steel on the floor with her crouched next to him, her hands still on his arm and chest.

"He's fine. I can explain. You see—"

One of them moved lightning fast, a hand wrapping around her throat. She tried to scream as she was yanked off her feet. Another hand was under her arm. Alarm and dread, along with pain, jolted through her and then she was thrown through the air until she hit the wall. She couldn't even scream as pain tore through her side where she hit it hard. She fell, landing in a heap on the floor, more pain flashing through her body.

Rena lay there in a haze of pain. She had to struggle to get air to her lungs. Rough hands grabbed her, jerking her up, and it was enough movement for her to suck in air at least. Her eyes opened as she stared up into a malevolent pair of black eyes in a metallic-gray face surrounded by jet-black, wild hair. He gripped her by her upper arms, holding her limp body up before slamming her hard into a wall again.

"He's coming around," a voice said from somewhere behind the enraged cyborg who gripped Rena. The cyborg glared at her and then his hands tightened on her arms.

A scream tore from Rena, caused by the excruciating pain she experienced as the man hurt her until she thought he was going to break her arms. She stared into a pair of utterly cold eyes. In the next instant she saw surprise grip his features a second before he dropped her when he was yanked away. She hit the floor, her legs refusing to hold her weight, collapsing on her ass. Sobs tore through her. She tried to move her arms but they wouldn't lift, hanging dead at her sides. Through her tears she looked up to see Steel,

naked, punching the black-haired cyborg who went crashing to the floor on the other side of the room.

Steel turned to face her, rage on his features. Their gazes locked but he became blurry to her as more tears flooded her eyes. She blinked and as her vision cleared she saw him on his knees in front of her, his hands reaching for her. As Steel touched her arm she screamed in pain. He released her instantly, his head snapping around.

“Get a medic, damn it.” He almost roared the words. “Move now!”

The black-haired cyborg sat up. “She was attacking you. She’s lucky that’s the worst I did to her.”

Steel growled. “Get out, Burn. If you permanently damaged her, I’ll do the same to you.”

“She attacked you.” The black-haired cyborg rose to his feet. “I just disabled her arms. I didn’t break bones. If she’d been a male I would have killed her.”

Steel turned his head, staring into Rena’s eyes. She blinked back more tears. Her arms hurt bad, her side throbbed, and tears kept filling her eyes, making her blink to let them fall down her cheeks. She saw regret on Steel’s features. He reached out to touch her but his hand froze inches from her skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Hold on. He pinched the nerves in your arms. It’s painful but they aren’t seriously damaged.”

She opened her mouth to talk but she just gasped in air instead, fighting more sobs. She couldn’t remember hurting this much, ever. Steel’s features turned harsh, anger making his jaw clench. He reached for her again, this time his large hand cupped her cheek and jawline.

“I’m sorry.”

“You...you told me to do it again to prove that I could. You—”

“I know,” he cut her off. “They thought you’d harmed me somehow.” His head turned. “Where is the damn medic?”

“Wire is on the way,” a blond cyborg said softly. “What the hell is going on here? You were unconscious.”

“She claims to be the daughter of one of the guards assigned to cyborgs on Earth after we were put in detention. She said they implanted us with a chip to incapacitate our kind by voice command.” Steel hesitated. “I asked her to show me, so she shut me down to prove it. She wouldn’t have harmed me. She’s had the opportunity to do that since last night when I brought her onboard.” Steel eyed her with a quick glance. “She just showered and changed her clothes while I was down.”

“Fuck,” Burn hissed, glaring at Rena. “Break her jaw so she can’t do it again, damn it. Most of us on this ship are from those detention centers.” He moved forward. “If you don’t have the stomach to incapacitate her then move aside. I don’t want her opening her mouth and knocking me out.”

Steel released Rena and was on his feet, spinning around in the blink of an eye to grab the advancing cyborg. He grabbed him by his throat. “Touch her and you will suffer.”

The blond took a step closer, looking uncomfortable. “You just said she is able to incapacitate by words. If she’s an Earth operative, she could kill a hell a lot of us, Steel. I know why you don’t want her killed. She needs to tell us more about the chips but I’m with Burn on this. Disable her ability to speak.” He reached behind him and withdrew a knife. “If you don’t want her to suffer then I could permanently disable her voice box with one jab.”

Horror engulfed Rena. She could feel her fingertips, a burning pain shooting down her arms, and realized the nerves must be working again. She tried to move her arm and got her wrist to move. She backed up until she hit the wall. She looked up at Steel’s naked backside. He was silently standing there, staring at the other two cyborgs. Would he let them do that to her?

Steel slowly turned his head, their gazes meeting. Rena was afraid to talk now, afraid to utter a word in case they thought she was attempting to shut them down. She silently pleaded with. He took a deep breath.

“You don’t say a word, all right?”

She nodded.

“I don’t trust humans.” Burn looked pissed. “You need to let one of us disable the threat, Steel.”

The blond ran his eyes over Steel. “They had sex. Maybe he’s not rational.” His attention turned to Rena. “If I was nailing her and she was any good, I’d be a bit protective of her myself. She’s cute and little, not like our women, and it’s probably brought out every protective instinct in him. They would be active in me if she were mine.”

“She’s the perfect operative then,” Burn grunted. “They programmed us to defend the weak. She definitely looks the role. I bet she’s an assassin.”

The door to the room opened, causing Rena to feel dread as another cyborg in black leather uniform walked in. She was astonishment when she saw it was a female cyborg. She had her hair chopped short to her head but there was no mistaking her feminine features, even if she was six feet tall and muscular. She carried a bag with her. The female stopped, her gaze roaming over Steel’s body, a grin curving her lips.

“If you need help, then clear the damn room, Steel. I’ll definitely tend to any damn thing that hurts on you. I heard you were single again.”

“It’s not me, Wire. Tend to the human. Burn thought she was attacking me and harmed her. He pinched her nerves in her arms so give her something for pain.”

Burn took a step forward. “Disable her, Steel.”

Steel glared at Burn. “Wire was never in detention so you’re safe while she’s here. If Rena wanted to disable us she wouldn’t be able to do that to Wire. If you think Wire couldn’t defend you against a human, you tell her she can’t watch your back. Wire would kick your ass if you do. The human is no danger so stay the hell away from her.”

Rena saw Burn glare at her but he didn’t move forward. The female cyborg stared at Steel as he bent over, picked up his pants and then straightened. The woman grinned and turned her head, a pair of bright green eyes flashing amusement until her focus landed on Rena. Her look hardened as she moved forward.

“I heard we had a human onboard. What I want to know is why.” The woman turned her head and glanced at Steel as he pulled up his pants. She snorted. “Never mind. That question is answered. The commander is single again and he decided to celebrate with a little...” Wire’s gaze flashed over Rena. “Oh hell.” She turned her head to Steel, frowning at him. “You’ve got half a dozen women on this ship, me at the top of the list, who would jump on you in a heartbeat and you pick up this little thing? Why? She’s like a snack instead of a meal.”

Steel studied Wire then yanked a shirt over his head to cover up his muscular chest and abs. “She was a gift from Flint. You know how he is. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Wire opened her bag, yanked out a scanner and ran it over Rena’s arms, where red marks showed. Wire watched the screen where the x-rays were displayed. The woman hesitated and then ran it slowly over Rena’s body, studying the screen. She paused at Rena’s hip for long seconds, then moved down her body and then up her back to her neck, pausing again.

She sighed. “Nothing broken but there’s going to be some bad bruising on both arms and on her hip. I’ll dose her with a two-day time capsule of pain meds. That should get her through the worst of it.” She dumped the scanner in the bag, grabbed an injector programming box, and punched in the dosage. In seconds she gave Rena a shot. The woman stood, taking her bag with her.

“Who wants to explain to me what the hell is going on here and why do I need to kick Burn’s ass for thinking I can’t cover his ass?”

“The human has verbal code words that can shut down any cyborg who survived human detention centers. It seems they put bombs in our heads that she can activate.”

Rena gasped as the huge cyborg woman suddenly turned on her, a growl coming from her throat, and took a defensive posture. In the blink of an eye the woman’s foot flew at Rena’s face. She jerked back but Steel intervened first, grabbing hold of the boot and yanking upward, knocking Wire on her ass. Steel stood between Rena and the downed cyborg woman.

“What the hell is she doing breathing?” Wire got up, cursing as she glared at Steel. “She’s a danger to most of the men on this ship. If she can kill with a few words, take her out, damn it.”

“It’s not a literal bomb,” Steel shot a glare at Burn. “According to Rena it’s a shut-down chip that works for about ten minutes, knocking us out cold, making our systems reboot. She can’t kill us with a few words but she can temporarily disable us. Burn is afraid she’ll talk and knock us out. I was reminding him that you’re here and you weren’t in detention. If she were to attempt the vocal commands you’re here to cover our asses.”

Wire rubbed her ass as she stood up. “What did you do to piss off Flint so damn fast, Steel?” She shot Rena a glare. “She could be an Earth assassin. If I were in charge of them I’d totally pick someone like her. She’s little and looks harmless.”

“That’s what I was saying.” Burn glared at Rena. “I say we kill her.”

“No one is going to kill her,” Steel backed up a little, keeping his body between Rena and the other three cyborgs.

The door opened and another black-haired cyborg walked in. This one was in a gray exercise outfit. He carefully observed the room. “What’s going on? I heard you needed a medic.” The man’s blue gaze landed on Rena where she still sat. Black eyebrows rose. “I heard there was a human. Damn, she’s small.” He turned his attention on Steel. “Did you break her?”

Rena listened to Steel explain the situation to the newcomer. The pain was gone from her body, telling her that the shot was working. She moved her arms, feeling her hip where it had hurt but realized it was getting better. She slowly stood, keeping her back to the wall and staying close to Steel, who addressed the new cyborg as Blackie.

Blackie appeared incensed, staring at Rena. “We need to lock her in isolation because she’s a threat to most of our men. I’ll take her myself and interrogate her.” He smiled at Rena coldly. “It will be a pleasure for me. Not so much for you, human.” He turned his gaze on Steel. “I’ll find out everything about her, including if she’s an operative.” He looked back at Rena. “I was never in detention. I escaped with the first wave of cyborgs so you aren’t a danger to me.”

Pure terror gripped Rena and she automatically reached out to grip Steel’s shirt. He turned his head, looked down at her. She opened her mouth to beg him to not let the other cyborg take her but he spun, tearing out of her grasp, his hand covering her mouth gently.

“Don’t,” he said softly. “If you speak, they’ll take it as an attack.”

His hand eased away from her face as they stared at each other while she silently pleaded with him. He hesitated.

“Everyone but Blackie leave the room now. I want to talk to her and that way I’m the only one she poses a threat to.”

“She’s no threat to me,” Wire crossed her arms over her chest. “I want to stay.”

Burn and the blond cyborg left the room. Steel sighed. “What, Rena? You can talk.”

“I’m not a threat. You know damn well I wouldn’t hurt you or anyone else. I’m not a killer.” She shot a frightened look at Wire. “I’m not an assassin either.” She looked at Blackie. “Or an Earth operative. I know what one is. My parents were both military but I’m not a spy.” She met Steel’s gaze. “The only damn reason I used the code on you in the first place was...” She swallowed. “You know why.” She refused to tell the other cyborgs why she’d knocked out Steel. “The second time you asked me to prove I could do it. I just want to stay with you.”

“That isn’t an option until we know what exactly was done to Steel and the men you can influence. For all we know you could kill them with your words.” Blackie sighed. “She needs to be isolated, Steel. You know it as well as I do that she’s a danger to the ship. I’ll get everything out of her, one way or another.”

“Please, Steel.” Rena stared up at him.

He frowned. “Take her, Blackie. Find out what she knows and then we’ll know what was done to us so we can fix it. I don’t like the idea of any human being able to shut me down and take me out while I’m defenseless.”

He may as well have slapped her. Pain flashed through her as he stepped away from her. Blackie moved forward, reaching for her but Steel suddenly gripped the man’s wrist, halting him. He turned his head to give a warning look to the other cyborg.

“Don’t hurt her. She’s mine. Do we understand each other?”

The cyborg’s features showed his disbelief and irritation. “How the hell am I supposed to make her talk? Serve her cookies and milk?”

Steel released his wrist. “Get Gene. He can tell if she’s lying. No one harms her.”

“So no pain? Are those your exact orders, Commander? Anything else goes, right? We just can’t damage her body or cause her pain?”

Steel nodded. “Exactly.”

Blackie grabbed Rena’s arm. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Five

Rena was terrified as she stared into a pair of dark blue eyes, body to body with a big silver-skinned cyborg who had his arms wrapped around her, her feet not touching the floor. She could barely breathe with him holding her so tightly in a bear hug.

“Tell me what you do for a living.” Gene was one scary-buff cyborg. He was about six -one with a bulky body.

“I’m an insurance investigator and recovery agent.”

He took a deep breath, making her aware that he was bare chested and she just wore a bra-like shirt she was given and a pair of panties similar to shorts so they were skin to skin, touching from the waist up. Gene’s dark eyes narrowed. “Explain what you recover and investigate.”

She swallowed again. “When valuable property is stolen, I investigate the crime scene and try to figure out who stole it. If we get a lead on where the property is it’s my job to go out and try to get it back.”

“Why did you go after the *Star*?”

“My company owns it now. We paid the claim on it so it was my job to go get it back.”

He frowned, his intense gaze narrowing. He turned his head to look at Blackie in the small interrogation room. “She’s lying about that last part, about it being her job. Her heart rate increased and her eyes told me she was lying. This one is pretty easy to read.” He looked back at her. “Don’t look away from my eyes and tell me again, this time the truth, why you went after the *Star*.”

She was surprised that he could tell when she was lying, but he could. “Okay, it’s not my job to go into deep space to recover ships but I volunteered for this mission. The bonus, if I recovered the *Star* as lead investigator and recovery agent, was going to be huge.”

He nodded. “The truth. Did you know cyborgs had it?”

“No.”

He blinked. “Did you know that there was a chance you’d run into cyborgs out here?”

“I had no idea I’d run into your kind. I thought you were all gone.”

He frowned. “She’s lying about thinking that we were all dead. She didn’t expect to run into us though.” His hold on her tightened slightly, painfully. “Stop lying to me. You don’t want to piss me off.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Okay.”

“Why the lie? You knew we existed still.”

She hesitated. “My parents were both military. My father was a guard at the detention facilities for ten years. He was harmed in the line of duty and forced behind a desk with a leg disability. My mother...”

He glared at her. “What about your mother? What does she have to do with cyborgs and knowing we survived?”

She blinked back more tears. Pain gripped her chest but it wasn’t from the tight hold the man had on her. “My mother shot my father to release the last five prisoners held where he worked. She was a cyborg sympathizer. She thought my father was at home that night but he’d been called in to cover a shift after she left for the detention center. He was a direct guard of a cyborg and when she came face-to-face with him, he tried to talk her into not freeing them, believing cyborgs were dangerous.” Her voice lowered. “She shot him in the leg to disable him so he wouldn’t die and she escaped with all five prisoners. Once she was off Earth she sent a message to her sister, my aunt, and for years she would contact me through my aunt to tell me she loved me but she believed in her cause.”

Rena would have wiped her tears but she had her arms pinned to her sides so they just fell down her cheeks untended. “She abandoned me to my father, so yes, I knew you survived and existed. She left her two-year-old daughter and her husband to free five cyborgs.”

He blinked, no emotion showing on his features as they stared at each other. “You must hate cyborgs for the loss of your mother.”

She hesitated. “No. I don’t. I did when I was a kid because my father hated cyborgs and blamed them for the loss of his wife, but my aunt was a sympathizer and explained the truth to me. Cyborgs were victims and my mother did what she thought was right, risking her happiness to do what she believed in. I respect that.”

Something softened in the man’s gaze. “She’s telling the truth.” His hold on her eased slightly. “Tell me about what was done to the detained cyborgs.”

“Each was implanted with a chip when they processed them into the detention centers. The chip can send out a current to their brain to knock them out and disable any other chips, forcing them to stay down for ten minutes, and then rebooting them. My father told me the code words, making me remember them as a kid.”

“Why would he do that?”

She hesitated. “I think he was afraid my mother would send a cyborg after me to kidnap me from Earth. He knew she was with those five men she freed so he figured she’d send a cyborg to take me to her. He wanted me to be able to defend myself by being able to say the words to knock him out so I could run to safety by the time he woke.”

Gene frowned. “Did one ever come after you?”

She shook her head. “No. Never.”

He blinked a few times. “Are you planning on killing any cyborgs?”

“No.” She frowned at him. “I’m not a killer.”

He turned his head, meeting Blackie’s eyes. “She’s telling the truth.”

Blackie slowly stood up, staring at Rena. “Tell me how to shut down cyborgs.”

She hesitated. “You can just remove the chips. They didn’t tell the cyborgs what were done to them for fear they’d remove them. Once they are removed then they couldn’t control them anymore.”

“Give me the vocal codes to activate the sleeper chip.”

Rena stared at the man, her eyes narrowing. “Why? It’s irrelevant.”

“Tell me.”

Gene frowned. “She’s right about the trigger not being important. We’ll have to have Wire scan every brain, find what they have in common, and remove that chip.”

Blackie frowned. “Is there just one vocal code? Is shutting down cyborgs the worst that can be done? Are there vocal codes to kill them outright?”

“As far as I know they were given that one chip which shuts them down. I don’t know anything else.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Gene shifted his body, adjusting his hold on Rena and inching her higher on his body. “Are we done here? She’s not heavy but she smells damn good, feels even better, and I’m starting to get annoyed with telling my body to not respond to her, or I’d be so damn hard you could take my pulse with my dick.”

“No, we’re not done here. Stop wasting energy on your body responses and just pay attention to hers. I want her to give me the vocal command, because if we could put one of them on the table while Wire is watching and shut him down while the scanner is on, it will save time. When the chip activates she’ll have it mapped.”

“Logical.” Gene turned his head, staring into Rena’s eyes. “Damn you have pretty eyes, sweetheart. Tell Blackie the vocal codes.”

Distress tore through Rena as the cyborg swelled against her thighs, his arousal obvious, causing her heart rate to increase. The cyborg gripping her grinned at her, studying her face closely and then frowned.

“Not arousal. She’s afraid of me.”

“Good,” Blackie moved behind her. “If he scares you because you turn him on, you’d be terrified if I was holding you since I’ve been hard for half an hour. I miss humans.” His hands cupped her ass. “I remember fucking them and they are a hell of a lot softer than our women.” He kept hold of her ass. “There was this one scientist bitch who would order me to fuck her over and over for so-called endurance testing.”

Rena tried to struggle but she ended up trapped between both men as Blackie slid his hands to grip her hips, his body pressing to her backside, molding to her, pinning her body tightly between both cyborgs. Gene looked away from her to stare over her shoulder, smiling at Blackie.

“I remember too. I had a few female guards who let me nail them when they realized we were big all over. It’s the one and only damn thing I miss on Earth besides some of the places we were sent on assignment.”

Blackie nuzzled her hair, pushing it out of the way so his nose pressed against the back of her throat. He breathed against her skin. “Tell him the codes so we’re done with the interrogation.”

“The code is spectrum three-three-three-six,” she blurted out. “Now let me go.”

“Truth,” Gene said softly, staring into her eyes. “And she’s terrified.” He paused. “Did you fuck Steel?”

She looked away from him and closed her eyes. “Please let me go.”

The hands left her hips to go over Gene’s arms around her waist and then Rena gasped, her eyes flying open as Blackie cupped her breasts on the sides where they weren’t smashed against the other cyborg holding her tightly to his front.

“Answer him now.” Blackie’s tongue darted out to lick the back of her neck. “Even her sweat tastes good. You holding her in this hot room made her overheated.”

“The heat makes sure that she’s not cold. Otherwise it’s easy to mistake a shiver for a lie. Maybe we should take off her clothes.” Gene’s arms tightened around her waist. “If she won’t answer the question we could investigate if she’s had sex.”

“Yes,” she whimpered. “I had sex with Steel. Please let me go.”

Blackie chuckled, his cheek brushing the side of her throat. She jerked away but didn’t have far to go as his hands tightened against her skin. “Well, I think we’re done with the interrogation.”

“Too bad. It was just getting interesting.” Gene loosened his hold on her a little as he looked at Blackie again over her shoulder.

Blackie chuckled. “We’ve learned all we can from her. Steel said he was going to give her to one of the engineers but I think I’ll keep her. I’m willing to share her since she will probably put up a fight. I’ll take her first and then I’ll hold her for you.”

“No,” Rena whimpered. “Let me go.”

Blackie chuckled behind her, his hands releasing her breasts. “Do you know what humans are to us? Property. You’re like a chair ordering us not to sit in it.” He backed away from her.

Rena took a deep breath, relaxing now that Blackie wasn’t touching her, pretty sure they were just trying to scare her. She’d heard Steel order the black-haired cyborg not to hurt her. She gasped when his hands gripped her briefs, his thumbs working into the waist of the material as he slowly started to tug them down. Rena screamed, her hands going up to shove against Gene.

“Stop it.”

Gene frowned at her. “She’s really not interested, Blackie. She’s terrified. She’s not playing coy.”

“I don’t give a damn what she wants.” Blackie tugged her briefs down her thighs, baring her lower body. “I’m more interested in what I want. Hold her around her waist and I’ll take her from behind then I’ll hold her upper body while you take her from the front. I can change her mind.”

Panic gripped Rena. In her teens her father and his military friends had wanted her to be able to defend herself so they’d taught her to fight. She wiggled in Gene’s hold and then grabbed his shoulders. She brought her knee up into the vee of his thighs right as she threw her head back into the man who pressed against her back. His bare skin pressed against her ass now that he’d lowered his pants.

Pain exploded in the back of her head as she made contact with Blackie’s jaw. He grunted, staggering back. Gene reacted by dropping her as pain from her knee slamming

into his balls registered in his brain. She hit the floor and yanked on her shorts, jerking them up her hips, moving into a corner, knowing she was trapped in the small room with two cyborgs.

Gene bent over, grabbing his front, his eyes closing as he hissed out curses. Blackie glared at her, rubbing his jaw, and then turned his head to spit blood. He looked infuriated as he took a step toward her, his pants open enough to show her he didn't wear briefs.

"You want to play rough, human?"

"I don't want to play at all. I heard Steel tell you that you couldn't hurt me."

He let his hand drop from his face. "I am going to seduce you."

"I don't want 'seduced', if that's what you call rape." She pressed snugly against the corner. "Leave me alone."

A grin split Blackie's lips, revealing bloodied teeth. "I like a challenge. I'll try to not hurt you." He opened his arms, inching forward. "If you're not into threesomes just say so and I'll send Gene out. I doubt he's up for it anyway after you hurt his nuts. I'm going to pin you down and make you beg me to fuck you."

"It's too hot in here for hell to have frozen over."

His dark blue eyes twinkled. "I like you."

"It's not a mutual feeling, believe me."

He lunged. Rena pushed away from the corner, diving out of his way, her hands taking her weight as she flipped over to land in a crouch. She turned and kicked out, hitting the surprised cyborg in the ass. He stumbled and slammed face first into the corner wall with a loud grunt. She spun, rushing for the only door.

It was locked, the handle not turning, but she jerked on it again, desperately studying the electric lock, seeing it wasn't a good one. She pulled her hand back, used her palm and hit the thing as hard as she could to crack the cover. She pulled her hand back again but an arm wrapped around her waist, jerking her off her feet.

Rena screamed and clawed at the arm. She heard Blackie cursing as she tore into his skin, making him bleed as eight long cuts opened up under her nails. He dropped her, cursing. She threw her elbow back, hitting the guy in the stomach. She spun, one fist going for his crotch, the other one going for his throat. She punched both, throwing herself back after she made contact. Blackie staggered, gasping curses.

* * * * *

Steel had been irritated since yesterday when Flint had given him the human. His life was screwed up enough without adding a woman into the mix, after women had made his life hell for months. First he'd been stuck with a bunch of them, stranded on a planet until repairs to his ship could be made, and then he'd found out his female in his family unit had voided their contract, taking up with another male.

He walked into the command area and saw some of the cyborgs not at their stations. They were all watching a small screen on the security feed. He frowned.

"Why aren't you at your stations?"

One of the men glanced up, grinning. “Sorry but it’s not every day you see a human woman fighting with Blackie.”

Another cyborg chuckled. “She’s giving him hell too. She drew blood.”

Steel experienced pure rage as he moved forward, shoving one of the men out of the way to stare at a live feed from one of the interrogation rooms. Gene was standing against a wall looking grim while Blackie stumbled back. He had blood on his jaw and down his throat while Rena backed away from him. Steel took in what she was wearing and cursed. They’d stripped her down to underclothing. As he watched, Blackie lunged forward.

“She didn’t like it when they tried to fuck her,” one of his men chuckled. “I don’t think she’s cyborg friendly. They had her pinned between them and began stripping her when she started to fight. She’s fucking hot. I can’t wait until they are done playing with her to wear her down a little before they take her.”

Steel spun away from the screen. He realized he was running as he reached the lift, punching the panel in his haste to hit the right level. He’d ordered Blackie not to hurt the human. She was his. Blackie knew it, yet they’d tried to do more than interrogate her.

He ran out of the lift, toward the interrogation room where they held Rena. He pressed his hand to the door, heard it buzz, and then shoved it not waiting for it to automatically swing open.

* * * * *

Rena gasped as her back hit the wall with enough force to knock the air from her lungs. Blackie had grabbed her, lifted her off her feet and then spun her, slamming her into the wall. She stared into his eyes as he suddenly forced his legs between hers while she was stunned. His body pressed tight against hers, his hands gripping her wrists that he jerked above her head. He managed to grip both of them together with one hand, freeing up one of his hands while she gasped in air.

He grinned at her. “What are you going to do now, sweetheart? You can kick, but with me between your thighs, it’s not effective. I’m holding you low enough that all you can hit is my chest if you decide to headbutt me.” He paused. “If you bite, I’m going to bite you back so let’s be nice to each other.”

“Let me go.”

He shook his head. “And waste someone with your spirit on an engineer? No way. You just need handled right and I’m going to make you want me.” He put his hand on her breast, curving around it to give it a gentle squeeze. “I was trained for seduction. You might be difficult to break but I’ve got all the time in the world. I was bored, so this will be fun. Do you want to make a bet on how long it takes me to turn you on until you’re begging me to be inside you?”

“Go to hell.”

“I’ve lived in it most of my life.” His smile died. “I made a mistake by asking Gene to share you. You’re not that kind of woman, are you? You just appeared so relaxed in his arms that I thought you’d accept us both. That was my mistake.”

“I was relaxed because Steel said you couldn’t hurt me. Let me go.” She struggled but wasn’t able to break free. “I don’t want you.”

“But you will.” He lowered his face, staring into her eyes. “I’m going to strip you, touch you until I learn what turns you on and then I’m going to take you over and over. When I’m done I’m going to start again. I’ve really missed humans. I’m keeping you. You’re going to belong to me body and soul until I get bored with you.”

“I’ll leave,” Gene sighed.

“Stay. You might learn something.” Blackie grinned. “Besides, I might need help holding her down if she’s really tough to break.” He paused. “Actually I’m so turned-on that I want to skip a few steps. Come here.”

Dismay filled Rena as she saw Gene walk closer. His eyes were on her body and not her face. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you between her and the wall and I’m going to transfer her wrists to you. Cross your arms over her waist and hold her. I’m going to strip her and then show her what my mouth can do to her. She’s going to be begging me to take her in five minutes or less. Want to bet on it?”

Gene hesitated. “I’ll give her ten minutes. She’s stubborn.”

“You’re on. Count of three. Ready? She’s fast.”

“Mark,” Gene whispered.

It happened instantly. Rena could barely gasp before she was jerked away from the wall and then slammed back into Gene’s big body. They’d lied and not counted at all. He had her wrists before she knew it, holding her upper weight. She tried to kick at Blackie in front of her but he gripped her thighs, his big hands pushing her legs together. He went to his knees in front of her, grinning up at her horrified expression. He was going to go down on her and she knew it. She screamed out but she couldn’t get away.

Blackie suddenly leaned into her legs, pinning them between his body and the cyborg’s behind her, holding her. His hands were free to reach up to grip her panties. He winked at her, his face suddenly against her belly to plant a kiss under her navel, his tongue swiping her skin, making her jerk at the shock of it. He tugged her shorts down an inch, letting his mouth follow.

The door to the room suddenly burst open. Rena stared in relief at Steel as he stormed into the room. He never glanced at her but instead glared down at Blackie who turned his head, his mouth leaving Rena’s lower stomach.

“Let her go now.”

Blackie frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you,” Steel almost growled the words. “Not to harm her.”

“I don’t plan on hurting her.”

“I order you to let her go.” Steel took a menacing step forward.

Relief swept through Rena as she was eased down Gene’s body until her feet touched the floor again, totally releasing her. She inched away from both men and ran to Steel, getting behind him so he was between her and the two men. He still didn’t look at her, his full attention on the men he glared at.

“She’s mine and you tried to use her body, which belongs to me.”

Blackie slowly rose to his feet, frowning. “You said yesterday you didn’t want her and stated you are giving her away to an engineer. I want her and I’m even willing to buy her from you, Steel. I don’t know why you’re so agitated.”

Rena experienced fear at the prospect of Steel selling her to that asshole, praying he wouldn’t do it since she knew she had no say in it. She inched closer to him, touching him, her hands opening up on his back as she peered around him to glare at Blackie and Gene. They frowned at Steel.

“That was yesterday,” Steel finally said softly. “She’s not for sale and I’m not giving her away. She’s mine just like I said before. Am I clear?”

Blackie smirked. “Perfectly.”

“Good. You got the answers from her, right?”

“Yes,” Gene nodded.

Steel turned and let his gaze roam down Rena’s body. “Where are her clothes?”

“Destroyed,” Gene said.

Steel’s mouth tensed. He reached for his shirt, unzipping the leather top, and tore it off his body and thrust it at Rena. “Put that on. I’m taking you back to my quarters now.”

“Not so fast,” Blackie chuckled. “You can’t take her until you get the chip removed from your head. Until it’s gone, your little human there can knock you out.”

Spinning around, Steel glared at Blackie. “She won’t want me incapacitated. Unlike you, I don’t have to force her to do what I want. She wants me awake and conscious to protect her against males like you and Gene.”

Rena zipped up the huge shirt. It dwarfed her body, fell to thighs, but she was happy to be covered up. Steel turned to her again, jerking his head toward the open door.

“Move.”

She turned gratefully and walked out of the small room. She glanced up as Steel gripped her arm gently as he walked next to her, guiding her past an amused guard and down a hallway to a lift. Once inside, Steel released her to punch a button but didn’t look at her.

“Are you unharmed?”

Tears filled her eyes. “Thank you.”

He glanced down at her, frowning. “Don’t thank me yet. I don’t know what the hell to do with you but I don’t want you harmed.”

“So I can stay with you, right?”

He hesitated. “For now.”

Chapter Six

Steel was really quiet as he paced the room while Rena watched him. He hadn't spoken to her since he'd returned her to his room. She was perched on the edge of the bed where he'd pointed when they'd entered. A good five minutes had passed while he moved back and forth by the door, deep in thought, the only thing he'd done in that time was put on a shirt. He finally stopped walking and turned to face her, his blue gaze locking with hers.

"You could have easily killed me both times when I was disabled, yet you didn't. You were just doing your job when you came after the *Star* thinking you were going to retrieve it from pirates, a mutual enemy of humans and cyborgs, so it wasn't a personal attack against my kind." He paused, watching her with narrowed eyes. "You don't want to be given to other male cyborgs so I'm going to grant your request to stay with me."

Rena stared at his grim expression. "But? You look like you aren't happy to keep me."

"You're correct. No cyborg female will agree to be in a family unit with me if I have a human female in my bed. Our females are pampered that way."

Eyebrow arching, Rena just stared at him. *Pampered that way? What the hell does that even mean?* He seemed to realize he'd lost her in the conversation as he walked a little closer.

"Cyborg females are rarer than our males. In a family unit there is one female and usually three to four males who share that female. It is not..." His fists tightened. "It was not the way we wished it to be but it was decided unfair for over two thirds of our population to not have access to our females if we went with a traditional family unit. We try to schedule it so no males are with her at the same time." He paused again. "We don't share well when we are faced with the reality of it on a day-to-day basis. The females are shared between the males in the family unit but it is not tolerated for those males to seek out other women. Our women would refuse to enter into a family unit with me if they thought I was sharing my body with you."

Rena was absolutely stunned. "But you didn't want your wife anymore because she cheated on you. If—"

He cut her off. "She had two other males in our family unit. One is an ambassador who travels extensively while just spending a few weeks a year on Garden with her. The other male is damaged extensively. He can't share her body, just her conversation skills." He paused. "I could tolerate the family unit I signed into because she was exclusively mine except for those few weeks a year. I travel often with my job so she made sure I didn't know when the ambassador was on Garden. Now she has another male in our family unit, one who lives on Garden and one I would have to share her with on a daily basis when I am on the planet." He paused. "Do you understand?"

She was a little horrified and a lot disturbed by this information but she nodded. “What about whatever woman you start a new family unit with? Won’t you have to share her too?”

He hesitated. “We found more cyborg survivors, most of them females we thought were lost to us after we fled Earth. Their ship disappeared and we couldn’t find them. They had malfunctions that caused them to crash off course. The mission I am on right now is bringing those females home to Garden, making it so all new family units formed with those females will be two males to one female.” He paused. “I am hoping that I can find a female willing to accept another ambassador as her other male so that I can be happy with the arrangement.”

Rena stared at him, a little more than dazed and a lot confused. He wanted to marry a woman, knowing she’d have to be married to another cyborg besides him when he was obviously the possessive type. She knew all about being married to someone who slept with another person. It had devastated her to find out her marriage was a farce and her husband was a two-timing bastard. Even the thought of Chuck touching her, knowing he slept with other women, made her stomach turn.

“You may stay with me under my protection, but on our way home we will pass Outpost Five, a trading space station.” He hesitated, watching her. “I’ll give you your freedom since you didn’t harm me, Rena. I’ll even give you enough money to pay for your passage home when one of many supply shuttles arrives there that can give you a lift back to Earth.”

Staring at him, Rena was surprised. “Really?”

He nodded. “I do not lie. We will be at this planet for a few days, repairing their ship and my own for distance travel, but then we’ll be returning to Garden. I will set you free once we’re near Outpost Five. I can let you have one of our pods and I’ll keep you monitored to make sure you dock there safely.”

“Why?”

He blinked. “You could have killed me but you didn’t. I uploaded the transcripts from your interrogation when we walked in the door and I am aware of how you lost your mother to her cause to free my kind. If any human deserves to be freed, it is you.” He paused. “You may sleep on the floor in here and I will protect you until I can safely release you.” He paused again. “I would ask that you not mention anything about your contact with us.”

Staring at him, Rena let his words sink in. “They might try to find your planet and attack if I let them know so many of you survived.”

He nodded, looking grim. “It would be a mistake on their part if they come after us. We are heavily defended where we are. We have been preparing our defenses since we settled there so anyone attacking would never see the surface alive.”

Steel was willing to trust her to do the right thing. She understood that, even if he didn’t say it. She stared at him and nodded. “I don’t want them to come after you. I think what was done to cyborgs was wrong. Humans created them and when they couldn’t control them they committed a worse crime of trying to destroy them.”

“Yes.”

They stared at each other for a long time. She finally spoke. “How did you read the transcripts? You haven’t been near a terminal long enough to access them. We just walked in here and you started to pace.”

He hesitated. “I have programmed the *Vontage* main computer to send me information updates so when I entered my room they were transmitted to me when we walked in.” He hesitated. “I’m not like you.”

Staring at him she let it sink in. “You have some kind of auto-uploading data processor you receive by signal?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

Blinking, she let that sink in. His skin told her he was a cyborg but she’d forgotten about the kind of things he must have in his body that could download information to his mind in an instant.

“So at just a touch...”

He nodded. “I can download files that are waiting for me. As long as I’m thirty feet within range of the terminal I’m able to receive the data transfers when my touch prompts them to be sent.”

“Can you send data as well?”

“If I keep the connection active. It is maintained until I disconnect.”

She blinked. The guy had a damn computer in his brain. That knowledge left her feeling a little uneasy. He turned away from her, walking to the dresser.

“You may have a blanket and pillow from the bed. I’m analyzing reports so I need some silence. I can communicate with you at the same time but I admit it is distracting. I just ordered food that will be delivered shortly.”

“With your thoughts?”

He hesitated, turning to stare at her. “It’s similar to writing a program or a document and then uploading it into the computer.”

She stared at him until he frowned, turning away from her. He opened one of the drawers and removed something, turning to face her again as his leg bumped the drawer shut. He threw a bundle at her that she barely caught. She stared down at the drawstring pants and shirt in her hands.

“Put those on. Your legs must be chilled and that shirt is probably not comfortable for you. Humans enjoy warmer temperatures so I’ve adjusted the room controls to accommodate you but it will take about ten minutes for the climate controls to respond. They are sluggish.”

“Thank you. That’s very thoughtful.”

He walked over to the wall by the door, close to the terminal, and put his back to the wall. “After what happened between us, I find myself oddly considerate of your needs.” He paused. “I don’t feel at ease with it.”

Speechless, she stared at him, watching him close his eyes.

“I have data to evaluate, reports to write, and requests to review. Please put those on and rest until the food arrives.”

He stood there silently, unmoving, as she dressed. Her attention kept flicking to him. He was working? She stared at his chest to make sure he was breathing. Eyeing him from the bed she wondered how he stayed in such great shape if he mimicked a statue when he was working. She cocked her head, smiling at the thought of Steel as sculpture. His skin reminded her of a light stone color. Bored after a few minutes, she slipped from the bed and slowly walked to him.

He didn't so much as twitch as she gently touched his arm, her fingers curling around his wrist. Rena waited for his eyes to open, but when they didn't she adjusted his arm up. It stayed put where she positioned it. Grinning, she turned his arm upward and used her other hand to curl his fingers. She chuckled, thinking if he flexed he'd be showing her his biceps muscle in the pose she had him in. She let go, thinking his arm would drop but it didn't. She moved to his other side, stepping there to take his other hand and put it on his hip.

Stepping back she grinned at him. *This is kind of fun*, she thought. He was totally in shut-down mode, which was eerie to her, so playing with his limbs made it amusing at least. She'd rather find something to chuckle over than stare at a breathing statue who freaked her out. She reached for the buttons on his shirt and opened each one.

He looked kind of sexy as she spread his shirt a few inches apart to reveal that muscular chest and his ridged abs. She reached up for his lifted arm, bringing it down to his hip so both hands were mirrored, letting her gaze run over him.

If she had to look at him she may as well look at a sexy statue. She hesitated and reached for his belt. She slid the belt out of its loops and let it fall to the floor. She looked up, staring at his expressionless face and closed eyes, then turned her attention to the front of his pants. She gripped the fasteners, undoing the top one and then a second one until skin and the enticing trail of silvery body hair showed—from his bellybutton lower down his body, delving into the vee of his open pants. Smiling, she viewed her handiwork. "Very nice."

"What are you doing?"

She gasped, jumped as her head jerked up to stare into a pair of narrowed blue eyes. His hands left his waist to grip her hips in a firm hold. His full lips curled downward as he watched her from beneath hooded eyes. Her mouth opened but nothing came out.

"I asked you what you were doing to me. I ignored it when you touched me at first, reasoning that you were concerned over my lack of motion, but there was no reason to open my shirt or remove my belt."

"Shit. You were totally aware of all that?"

His eyebrow arched. "Explain what you were doing."

Heat warmed her cheeks as embarrassment spread through her. Did she dare tell him the truth? She wasn't sure if it would insult him or not. "I..."

"I'm waiting."

"Well, you kind of looked like a statue and you seemed totally out of it and I was bored. You said food was coming but it hasn't arrived."

"So you loosened my clothing?" He didn't look amused at all as his frown deepened.

She tried to back away from him but his hands tightened on her. She hesitated. “You were freaking me out just a little bit so I thought if I had to see you that way I could at least make you look like a sexy statue.”

Rena gasped as she was lifted and spun. Her back hit the wall but not hard enough to hurt her, more of a jarring thump, and then she was pinned between irritated cyborg male and hard, solid wall. She hung off her feet where he’d lifted her, their noses almost touching. She stared into Steel’s eyes, deciding he didn’t look amused one damn bit by her antics.

He moved his thigh, pressing it between hers. Rena didn’t resist, instead spread her legs enough to let him fit between them when he gently applied pressure. Her heart started to hammer in her chest and her fingers curled around his shoulders, gripping him firmly as they stared at each other.

He was a big bastard, strong, and his body was pressed against hers tightly. With his thigh between her legs, the vee of her pants was pressed against Steel’s warm thigh. Staring into his beautiful eyes made her remember how nice it was to be that close to him, how wonderful it had been to be skin to skin with the hot male cyborg.

Rena made a split-second decision. She wanted him and wanted to know how it would feel to be touched by Steel, made love to, if cyborgs did that. She even wanted him to just flat-out fuck her without him being tied down. Her hands slid down his shoulders, down his chest. Her hands lifted from him to slide between his skin and shirt, pushing it out of her way to touch his hot flesh.

Steel’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

She moved her other thigh, lifting it and wrapping it around his hip, down the back of his leg. Now she was practically straddling him while upright. “Kiss me.”

Surprise widened his eyes as his body tensed and his hold on her tightened.

“I don’t bite.” She smiled at him. “At least not hard.”

His beautiful eyes narrowed suddenly. “What kind of game are you playing with me? I’m not amused.”

“I’m not playing. I really want you to kiss me.”

They stared at each other. He didn’t bring his lips to her so she took hers to his, closing her eyes right as she tilted her head, a breath from touching him. Her mouth brushed his closed one, pressing there, waiting for him to open up to her, but when he didn’t, she opened her mouth, letting her tongue slip out to swipe against his lower lip.

When he still didn’t open up to her she fought a wave of frustration until an idea hit her. She went for his bottom lip, sucking it into her mouth. He gasped but didn’t jerk away while she nibbled on his lower lip, teasing him as she gently sucked and used her lips, teeth and tongue to play with it.

A groan came from him before his lip jerked from her mouth. Opening her eyes Rena stared into a pair of gorgeous blue eyes as their gazes locked.

“I told you that I’m going to find a female to contract with in a family unit. This won’t change that.”

“I didn’t ask you to change a damn thing. I asked you to kiss me.”

He didn't hesitate this time, his mouth going for hers. Rena closed her eyes and opened her mouth under his, their tongues meeting as they tasted each other, learned each other's mouths. He tasted of coffee and chocolate, a surprise for her. Steel deepened the kiss, his hold on her shifting until he was gripping her ass with his large, hot hands.

He kissed her the way a starving man would, delving into her welcoming mouth, his tongue dominating hers. His hips ground against her spread-open legs, letting her feel the hard length of his cock trapped in his pants, rubbing against her clit when he used his hold on her ass to move her up and down on him. Passion and longing rushed through her, knowing she was getting really wet where they rubbed together. A moan came from her into his mouth, met by him growling back at her.

Tearing his mouth from hers suddenly, Steel moved, turning away from the wall, still gripping her. Rena frantically grabbed his shirt, clinging to it until gravity tore her from his body when he bent a little, dumping her onto his bed on her back. She stared up at him in astonishment that he'd just released her.

Breathing hard, their gazes locked together. She reached for the front of her pants, pulling her knees up to push them down her hips, hooking her thumbs in her shorts and taking them down her hips with them. She removed them totally, tossing them aside. Her feet flattened on the bed, her legs still bent as she sat up a little, removing her shirt. Tossing it to the floor she went for the bra-like top next, tearing it over her head. She dropped back, flat on his bed, meeting his passion-filled gaze.

"Take your clothes off."

He let his attention slowly wander down her naked body. Her heart pounded as she watched his face. *Will he refuse?* She knew he was aroused but he wasn't a typical man. *Will he decide to not have sex with me?* Her body ached for him. He stood there, motionless except for his gaze moving over her, so she spread her thighs apart, showing him all of her, exposing the part of her that hurt with need for him.

Steel's mouth opened, his tongue darting out to swipe his lips. He looked up at her face again. Rena almost cursed at the intrusion when a buzz sounded in the room.

"The food is here," Steel said softly. "I have to get that or they will think you've done something to me again. Go in the bathroom now unless you want someone else to see you bare." He turned away from her, walking toward his door.

She cursed softly, sitting up quickly to climb off his bed. She darted naked for the door in the opposite corner, barely reaching the room before she heard Steel's entry door opening. She didn't close the bathroom door totally, leaving it cracked slightly to stand hidden behind the door. The second the person left she was going to walk back out there and finish what they had started. *Steel had a preference for aggressive women and damn it*, she thought, *I am willing to go after him on this*. She wanted him to touch her in the worst way.

"Commander Steel," the voice was female. "I brought your dinner meal. I apologize for the delay but the shift change was slow today for the training sessions you ordered earlier."

"Thank you, Fusion."

Silence stretched for a few seconds. "I heard what happened with Vonlona. I am sorry that she gave up hope of your return to Garden."

“Thank you.” Steel’s voice deepened. “It was a logical assumption after the months we were unable to communicate with them.”

“Agreed.” There was a pause. “Were you aware that I have an incomplete family unit? The application is still open since I’m just contracted to two males. I want you to consider me for a potential choice. We work together, we spend months together onboard and I think it would work out well between us.”

Distress struck Rena as she stood there naked, eavesdropping. That medic Wire had flirted with Steel and now the woman who brought his meals was offering her body to him too.

“I appreciate the offer,” Steel said softly. “I will keep it under consideration.”

“My two other family unit males are rarely around, Steel. Darton is on the *Morlier* and Crottion was assigned on *Trea One* for mining operations. I know that you enjoyed having Vonlona to yourself most of the time without the other males present. I could give you that and we’re assigned together so our duties wouldn’t keep us apart. I’m very attracted to you.”

“I just discovered I’m no longer contracted,” Steel’s voice was so soft Rena had to strain to hear him. “It is still a surprise to me after being with Vonlona for ten years and it was an arrangement I had adjusted to well. Give me some time to evaluate my options and then I will let you know if I’ll apply to your family unit.” He paused. “It is a very tempting offer and I am honored that you’ve asked.”

“I think we should find out if we’re compatible.” There were long seconds of silence.

“Not now,” Steel’s voice sounded tense. “Perhaps another time.”

“I want you.”

“Do not undress. It is not the time to test if we have sexual chemistry, Fusion.”

Undress? Anger spread through Rena and then something else reared its head inside her, an emotion acting a hell of a lot akin to jealousy. She pushed at the door, not caring if she was naked as she stormed out of the bathroom. She saw a tall, muscular dark-gray-skinned woman with shoulder-length, blue-black silky hair with her back to Rena and damned if the woman wasn’t opening up her uniform top.

Steel was by the door still, arms crossed over his chest, his gaze focused on the cyborg’s chest as she revealed it to him. Shock and anger slammed Rena hard.

“Excuse me,” she said loudly.

The cyborg woman started, spinning around. Rena got an eyeful when the woman turned since cyborg females didn’t wear bras. Rena saw a set of small, high, dark gray, perfect breasts. She jerked her startled gaze upward to the woman’s face, seeing surprise showing in a pair of green eyes. Fusion was beautiful but with her pale green eyes and dark gray skin, the colors clashed a little.

“Hi.” Rena put her hands on her hips. “Nice to meet you, Fusion. I’m Rena Gates and as you can see, Steel is right. Now is not the time and you really should close your shirt. He’s already got a naked woman in his room.”

Fusion jerked her uniform top together, frowning as she fastened it back up, her head turning to glare at Steel. “The human onboard is for you? I heard we had one but I

assumed someone else had acquired one.” Her tone was disapproving. “Is she the equivalent of getting drunk?”

Rena was sure she’d just been insulted. *What the hell was up with women cyborgs insulting human ones? Wire had done the same damn thing.* Ignoring her nudity, she glared at the cyborg woman who was purposely ignoring her. Steel frowned.

“She was a gift from Flint.”

Fusion put her hands on her hips and took a deep breath, let it out. “I see.”

The cyborg woman wasn’t leaving so Rena moved to her discarded shirt and bent over, grabbing it up to cover her upper body. She was barely decent but covered to her mid thighs as she yanked the shirt down. A large food tray was sitting by the front door on the entry table. Rena glanced at Steel and Fusion only to notice that both of them watched her now.

“She’s attractive.” Fusion was giving Rena a quick once over.

“I’m aware,” Steel said softly.

Fusion nodded. “I’m sure that you are.” She tore her attention from Rena and walked directly to Steel, stopping just a foot in front of him, almost going chest to chest with him, showing that she was a tall woman since Steel just had a few inches of height on the female cyborg. “I didn’t know you possessed so much control. You’d have to have a hell of a lot of it to not damage her.”

Steel studied the woman’s eyes, not saying a word.

Rena was getting irritated that the cyborg woman was flirting outrageously with Steel right in front of her. Rena experienced indignation as Fusion reached up with both hands and caressed Steel’s exposed chest where his shirt was still open, the woman’s hands touching him slowly, rubbing his skin.

“I’d let you keep her if you agreed to contract with me.”

Steel didn’t react, other than a subtle rise of his eyebrows.

Fusion smiled, turning her head, her scrutiny slowly traveling down to Rena’s exposed legs. “I am drawn to females sexually as well.” She turned back to wink at Steel. “Cyborg women aren’t to my tastes always either. There’s nothing better than playing with humans. It’s such a turn-on to know the kind of control we command over them, watching the fear in their eyes, knowing we can do whatever we want to them.” She leaned in closer to Steel’s body, pressing against him. “Do you get aroused knowing she can’t fight you off no matter what you want to do to her? That you can do any twisted thing you want and she’s not strong enough to stop you? It turns me on until I’m burning up. I used to fantasize about turning the tables on our captors and when the day came when we were free, I discovered torturing them really flipped my switch. Let’s play with her a bit, draw a little of her blood, and then fuck each other. It will be so hot, Steel.”

Rena stumbled back a bit in revulsion. What kind of sick bitch was Fusion? The fact that she thought Rena was attractive made her afraid of the female cyborg and she’d used the words torture and blood drawing. Staring at Steel she saw him shift his gaze from Fusion to her. Her fear grew as his cold, emotionless gaze met hers. *Is he going to do something awful to me with Fusion?* She backed up more.

Steel suddenly moved, gripping the cyborg woman's arms and shoved her back but kept hold of her so the woman didn't hit the floor. His gaze tore from Rena to narrow as he met Fusion's.

"You need to be mentally evaluated, Fusion." Steel's voice was soft as he spoke, staring intently into the woman's eyes. "Leave now and I expect to hear from Riker that you made an appointment with him before your next shift." He released her as quickly as he'd grabbed her. "Go now."

Fusion growled low before storming out of the room, never looking back once. Rena stared at Steel as he watched the door close behind the livid cyborg woman. He sighed and then turned to look at her.

"The food is here. Eat. I have to finish my work." He turned away from her, stepping to face the wall by the door, his hand touching the terminal there.

She watched him close his eyes, his head lowered, and she tried to stop the tremors that made her shake. Fusion had really upset her and frightened her. Rena ignored the food and just stayed where she was, trying to calm down. Did the idea of hurting her turn Steel on? She really hoped not. She knew humans had mistreated cyborgs but had they made Steel hate her kind?

Chapter Seven

“You haven’t touched your food.”

Rena started at the sound of Steel’s voice so close behind her. She was sitting cross-legged on his bed and she’d almost forgotten he was there. She’d been lost in her thoughts for a good hour while he’d faced away from her. She looked up at him where he stood next to the bed.

“Do you hate me? Does the idea of hurting me turn you on?”

Steel frowned. “I am going to free you and I stopped my men from hurting you. Are those the actions of someone who hates you and wishes you to suffer?”

“But you don’t like me, either, do you? I offered myself to you and you turned me down. I had to tie you to a bed to show you that we’re sexually compatible. When Fusion left you could have finished what we started but you went back to doing your job instead.”

He tilted his head, staring at her, slowly sitting on the edge of the bed. “It’s not that I don’t like you, Rena. It’s just that I told you what my intentions are so I am confused on why you wanted me to kiss you in the first place. I’ve offered to keep you under my protection so you no longer should wish for me to touch you. Sex isn’t a requirement any longer so why you offered it to me isn’t logical. Perhaps I wasn’t clear on that. You don’t need to offer your body to me as payment for protecting you.”

Steel has such beautiful eyes, Rena thought. “Did you ever consider that maybe I just wanted you?”

He studied her for a long minute. “No.”

She looked at her hands, curled together in her lap.

“Humans always have a reason to interact with cyborgs. It’s a lesson that I’ve learned. I knew you were motivated to disable me to have intercourse with me as a way of manipulating me into keeping you so you could have my protection. I’m at a loss for why you initiated it with me after I had agreed to free you while keeping you safe.”

Nodding, she refused to look at him. She’d hit on him twice and he’d rejected her both times. She could take a hint. While the sex with him had been great for her, he obviously didn’t share that opinion or have the urge to repeat it. She wouldn’t make that mistake again. The rejection was embarrassing and worse, it hurt more than she wanted to admit.

“Rena?”

She glanced up, meeting his blue eyes.

“Do you want me?”

She looked away. “Don’t worry, Steel. I’m human, but I learn quickly. I’m not going to humiliate myself again.”

“It’s humiliating to want a cyborg?” His voice deepened, anger filling his tone.

She looked at him again, frowning. “Don’t twist my damn words and get that look right off your face. I meant I’m not going to throw myself at you again to get rejected. Did you miss that conversation we had when I said I wasn’t good at seduction, had never had to seduce a man before and obviously I am terrible at it. You want a cyborg woman, not me, and its humiliating being shot down by a man.” She paused. “Notice I didn’t say cyborg? You make those distinctions, not me.”

His features softened, his beautiful eyes narrowed slightly. “Take off your shirt, Rena.” He stood up, facing her.

“Why?” she whispered, feeling confused as he stared down at her.

“I want you. That’s the damn problem. I shouldn’t and I know I need to keep my hands to myself, but you draw me.” He reached up, gripping his open shirt and yanked it down his arms, dropping it on the floor. His hands went for his pants next. “If you don’t want me tell me no right now.”

He was so damn sexy with his muscular build, his silvery hair, and those damn eyes of his that were just gorgeous. She shouldn’t want him either, he was a cyborg, the thing her father hated most and had tried to make her hate as well. She almost hurt herself tearing the shirt over her head to throw it out of the way, feeling the material digging into her side where it scraped in her haste to be rid of it.

Rena couldn’t look away from him as he stripped bare. He was just perfection and his sculpted body was something she wanted to touch. No one had ever made her feel the way he did when he touched her and she’d never wanted a man more. Maybe her marriage had left her starved for a man’s attention but she’d avoided men who hit on her for years, never wanting to let anyone get close to her again. Chuck had deceived her, hurt her, even broken her a bit by using her. *Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to Steel*, she thought. *He is brutally honest even if everything he says isn’t something I want to hear. It’s real, he’s real, and when he touches me I feel alive for the first time in forever.*

Steel was naked and aroused when he put one of his knees on the bed to climb on it and hover over her, using one of his hands to gently push her on her back as he came down on top of her. His large body didn’t crush her though as he braced his upper-body weight on one of his arms. His hand gripped her hip to hold her in place as their gazes locked together.

He moved, not going for her mouth the way she wanted since she longed to kiss him again. He tucked his chin to lower his face enough for his hot, wet mouth to encircle one of her nipples. A soft gasp left Rena at the sensation of the hard tugs of suction on it. There was nothing gentle or slow about Steel’s attention to her breast.

She spread her thighs when he shifted to move between them. He slid down her, going flat on top of her, his weight settling down to pin her flat. Rena didn’t care that she was caged under Steel. She bent her knees, wrapping them around his waist, her calves bracing against his firm ass since he was lower on her body as his mouth teased and taunted her breast. Her fingers went for his hair, shoving them into his beautiful, thick, silky-feeling silver strands. Tipping her chin back, she moaned. “That feels so damn good!”

He released her breast on and went for the other one. She arched her back, pressing against his hungry mouth as he sucked on her nipple.

“Steel...”

He released her with his mouth, lifting his head until they stared at each other. She licked her lips.

“I want you. Please don’t tease.”

He smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “This is the only way I want to torture you, Rena. I want you hot and hurting for me to possess you.”

“I’m there.”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

She gasped as he adjusted his big body again, sliding lower down hers, forcing her legs to release him. His hands gripped her inner thighs, pressing them to the mattress so she was spread completely open to his attention. He braced his weight on his elbows, his hands firmly grasping her so she couldn’t get away.

She didn’t want to look away from him as he stared down at her body. His breath was hot against her exposed pussy. She watched his eyes as he took in the sight of what he’d exposed. A low growl came from deep in his throat a second before he lowered his face. Rena gasped and threw her head back as his thick, strong tongue slowly slid across her clit. It was an intensely pleasurable sensation when his lips closed over the sensitive bud to suck on her gently, his tongue flicking against her.

“Oh god...” she moaned. “That feels so...” Words were beyond her at the bliss she was feeling as his mouth worked on her.

Her hands clawed at his bedding now that she’d lost hold of his hair when he’d moved down her body. She was panting, moaning, and just able to focus on his tongue as the pleasure intensified to almost a raw pain of need. She knew she was going to come, could feel her inner muscles clenching, anticipating the release. He stopped flicking her clit with his tongue, instead applying pressure to quickly rub up and down with it.

Crying out loudly, thrashing her head, Rena knew she said his name as the climax overtook her. Pleasure jolted through her, her vaginal muscles clenching and her body quivering. The mattress shifted with his weight and then Steel was coming down on her, his big body trapping her between him and the bed. Opening her eyes she stared into his passion-gaze. *His eyes are so damn beautiful*, she thought, *so blue and intense*.

Steel adjusted his hips, not needing to use his hand to guide his really hard cock to her pussy where she was wet and totally ready to accept him. The blunt, thick tip of his shaft drifted lightly across her slit, teasing a little as it slid about an inch up and down. He never looked away from her as he slowly started to push into her welcoming depths.

Wrapping her arms around his neck and wrapping her legs around his waist, a loud moan tore from her as Steel entered her in one sure drive of his hips, her body stretching to accommodate all of him that drove in deeper until he was fully seated, his cock *there*, filling her fully, making her feel stretched. He paused, his eyes closing.

“You’re so tight and hot.” His voice was soft, a little raspy, and sexy to Rena.

“You’re so damn hard and big.” She wrapped around him tighter. “I’ve never been more turned-on in my damn life, Steel. You make me feel so damn much.”

His eyes opened to half mast. “Tell me if I hurt you.”

It was the only warning she got before he withdrew almost totally out of her and then thrust into her. She cried out in pleasure at the sensation of the fast movement. Steel froze on her. She met his frown with a smile.

“It feels good. That’s not pain.”

The tension left his face. “You’re more vocal and responsive than a cyborg and I am afraid I am hurting you when you cry out.”

“You’re not hurting me unless you don’t move.” She bucked her hips. “Please, Steel. I need you.”

He lowered his face, nuzzling the crook of her neck. He started to drive in and out of her in rapid thrusts. Steel was strong, his cock thick and hard, delving deep, making Rena moan from the bliss the friction was creating. When he moved even faster, his knees bracing on the bed to hold her thighs wider apart to take a little more of him, pleasure and pain blurred together until she could just cling to him. The sexual tension built inside her until she screamed out his name as she climaxed hard, ecstasy spreading throughout her entire body.

Steel groaned loudly as he let go of his control, coming deep in her body, a throbbing heartbeat in her womb with every burst of his release. He slowed his hips against her and the resulting warmth of him spilling into her made Rena smile, realizing how much he’d come too.

They were both breathing heavily when Steel relaxed on her in the aftermath. He kept his arms braced so he didn’t totally make breathing impossible from his much heavier weight but she was definitely pinned, knowing she couldn’t move him until he decided to adjust his body. She opened her eyes, realizing she’d closed them when she’d come. Her gaze met Steel’s.

“That was amazing.”

He actually smiled at her, his features relaxing, a sparkle showing in his striking eyes. “It was. The pleasure was very powerful and satisfying, Rena.”

Arching an eyebrow at him, her smile widened. “Is that cyborg talk for we blew each other’s minds? You sure blew mine.”

He had a sexy, deep chuckle. “I haven’t heard that Earth expression in a long time. They still use it?”

She shrugged. “I was raised by older people. Of course they never used that term for this context.” She grinned. “I’ve never had an opportunity to use that saying for sex since I’ve never had a reason to.”

His smile faded. “What does that mean?”

“I wasn’t insulting you. Will you quit trying to put words in my mouth? It just means that I’ve never felt this way after sex.”

He stared at her, frowning.

“The sex wasn’t that great before, all right?”

He relaxed, smiling again. “Cyborgs do everything better than humans.” He winked at her.

She was surprised at his teasing but she grinned. “I’d have to agree.”

He shifted a little over her, lowering his body as he eased his cock out of her vagina, and put his chest on her lower stomach. He shifted his arm, bracing his weight with his elbow, freeing his hand to brush her hair back from her cheek as their gazes remained locked together.

“I will tell you that I enjoy sex with you more than with a cyborg woman.”

That surprised Rena but she also was a little proud too. “Really?”

His smile faded somewhat. “We’re trained to hide our emotions and to keep a tight rein on our physical responses. During intercourse we relax some of that control, of course, but the training is always there. Your honest responses to my touch, your lack of restraint, inspires me to let go of some of mine.”

She put her hands on his chest, loving the feel of his solid, warm skin. His chest was massive, making her feel small and feminine under him. “Do you have to get married soon, Steel?” She refused to meet his eyes, instead letting her focus stay on his chest. “Is it some law that you have to be in a family unit?”

He took a deep breath. “No.”

She looked up, met his eyes. “You said we’d be here for a few days while you get repairs done on your ship and that other one. I’m guessing this station you want to drop me off at isn’t real close either?”

He frowned. “It’s a few days from here.”

The frown isn’t encouraging but hell, I’d started this conversation so I may as well finish it. The worst he can say is no, Rena thought. She took a deep breath. “I don’t want to sleep on the floor when I’d much rather sleep with you until you let me go. I know I don’t have to be with you this way for you to protect me but I want to be.”

She waited for him to say anything, show some emotion but she kept forgetting he wasn’t a typical man. Steel masked his features, even his eyes not showing a hint of his thoughts. She waited for him to say something, anything, but when he didn’t, she forged on.

“I know it can’t go anywhere since I’m human, but when we’re alone can’t we just...I don’t know, sleep together? I’m really attracted to you and I want to be with you.”

His only response was to blink.

Rena looked away from him, turning her head, her hands dropping from his chest. She closed her eyes and just lay under him, regretting that she’d put herself out there since he hadn’t said a damn word. It hurt. Steel’s rejection of her was painful in so many ways.

“Rena?” His voice was soft.

“What?” She refused to look at him.

“I’m considering.”

“Forget it.” She wished she could roll away from him, put distance between their bodies, but he held her under his big body, effectively pinning her there.

“I’ve wounded your pride?”

That got Rena to open her eyes. “No, Steel. Not my pride, but I’m done reaching out to you.”

A frown marred his features. “You confuse me. I’m trying to think logically but you aren’t logical.”

“I’m all human and not a cyborg, remember?”

“I can’t forget it. Just looking at your pale skin and your small size reminds me of our differences. We are not the same and we will never be equal.”

“I know. I’m comparable to a chair, right? That’s what Blackie said. Please get off me. I’ll sleep on the floor and try to not bother you for the remaining time we have to spend together. I’ll try to be a better piece of property to you until you let me go.”

“I didn’t say no to your offer of sharing my bed.”

Anger flared. “You didn’t say yes either. Get the hell off me and let me up. I’m going to go shower and then I’ll eat some of that food you had brought to us. Maybe the next time Fusion or Wire come in here you can take them up on their offers to have sex with you. I bet they are logical to you and your equals as well.”

“Your anger isn’t logical either. I was weighing the cons and pros of what you offered.”

Pushing on his chest, she fought the urge to smack him. “Get off me.”

Steel didn’t budge as his gorgeous eyes watched her, studied her, and his full lips were curved downward in a frown. Frustration rose in Rena as she helplessly pushed against his wide chest, not able to move him an inch. It was like trying to lift a car off her.

“There is no need for you to get emotional,” he finally said. “I’m not the same as your males. I was just running scenarios in my mind while I evaluated the relevant facts.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “Why? You either want me or you don’t. It’s that damn simple, Steel.”

He shook his head. “It is anything but simple.” He paused. “What do you know of my kind?”

“Just what my father and his friends told me. After my mother left he had his buddies over all the time so it was like having a dozen fathers, so someone was always with me. They all hated cyborgs and told me chilling stories about how you were brutal killers.”

A muscle in Steel’s face twitched. “When we were created they kept us in a kind of stasis until we were physically the size of a human teenage male, our growth accelerated so from Petri dish to the time we were awakened was just a matter of months. They thought we’d be blank slates, mindless brains they could program.”

Rena hadn’t known that. She was horrified and sympathy welled inside her over the image of waking up to life in a teenage body without parents, without love, without any of the things she’d had.

“We evolved into what they were not expecting. We had thoughts and emotions.” He paused. “They put chips into our minds that would shut off access to parts of our brains but we worked around those blocks, learning how to turn them on or off at will, to secretly hide that we were more in control of ourselves than they realized. They said we didn’t have souls but we did.”

“That’s why they wanted to destroy your kind. They realized they couldn’t totally be in command of you and make you the way they wanted you to be.”

Steel took a deep breath. “Yes, that is why. Did you hear me? I can turn off parts of my body, Rena. I can deaden my arm, for example, so we can’t be tortured effectively. An enemy couldn’t make me suffer enough pain to tell them what they wanted to know if they cut off fingers because I would just block all sensation to that arm.”

Speechless, Rena didn’t say a word.

“When I awoke to being restrained on the bed with you on top of me I could have turned off sensation to my lower body.”

Shock seeped into her mind as she realized what he was saying. Steel had grown hard under her when she’d straddled him and tried to seduce him. Gene had said he was resisting his body when he’d held her to detect if she was telling the truth or not, but when he’d admitted it was difficult to control his body and had stopped, he’d gotten an instant erection. She swallowed.

“I don’t know why but I found you appealing, and the fact that you had me restrained turned me on. I chose to allow myself to experience the sensations and respond.” Steel cocked his head. “When you cried I could have deactivated my emotions but I chose not to. I held still and allowed you to find comfort with me. I lay there without fighting to break free any longer because I liked you sleeping on top of me and I felt protective of you. It isn’t a logical response and it disturbs me that something about you draws me, Rena.”

Staring into his eyes, thoughts ran through her mind. *Why is he admitting this? Why hadn’t he just shut himself off? He wouldn’t have gotten hard and we wouldn’t have been able to have sex. Afterward he lay still and just allowed me to cry myself to sleep, stopped pulling on the bed or trying to break the frame.* Her mouth opened.

“That is why I hesitate to answer you without giving it some thought and consideration,” he said quickly. “I’m acting in an irrational manner and it disturbs me. I don’t know if spending more time with you will make me more irrational or if it will give me the answer to why I’m so drawn to you so that I can no longer have you in my thoughts constantly. You are a mystery to me.”

“What is the worst that can happen if we continue to sleep together until we reach Outpost Five?”

Steel hesitated. He lifted off her, separating their bodies as he climbed from the bed. Rena thought he wasn’t going to answer her as he started to head for the bathroom but then he paused by the door, turning slowly to gaze at her with his beautiful eyes. “I could change my mind about giving you your freedom and keep you.” He took a deep breath. “Come get clean with me and then we’ll share a meal. I know we both are hungry.”

As he disappeared out of her sight into the bathroom, Rena sat up slowly, swallowing the lump that formed in her throat. Steel even saying that he might keep her should have made her want to avoid his touch since right now he was set on letting her go. The thought of saying goodbye to the tall, sexy cyborg made her heart squeeze in her chest. No man she’d ever met made her feel anything close to the way he did.

She moved to get off the bed, following him almost eagerly. The *Vontage* had real water showers, a rarity on spaceships but it had been built to be a luxury hotel. *The water tanks on the ship have to be huge*, she thought, walking toward the bathroom. *If I have a brain in my head, I’ll avoid Steel to make sure he doesn’t change his mind about letting*

me go. She stepped into the bathroom to see Steel bent over, filling the large tub. Her focus fixed on his rounded, firm ass, watching muscles flex there as he straightened to turn his head. Her gaze lifted to his, her heart pounding when he smiled at her.

You're not the only one being totally irrational, Steel, her mind whispered, as she moved toward the big cyborg.

Chapter Eight

The planet wasn't similar to Earth one bit. Rena inched closer to Steel wondering again why the hell he had made her go down to the surface with him. She glanced up at his face where he stood next to her but his attention was focused on the cyborg women surrounding them, a deep frown on his face.

Peering at the hundreds of cyborg females was a shock to Rena's system. The women looked similar to ancient Amazons with their warrior-sized muscular bodies covered in tattered clothing that barely hid their girl parts, not much else, and they were all about six feet tall, their skin tones were darker shades of gray than the cyborg men from the ship, probably made that way from all the exposure to the sun.

The few cyborg males were barely dressed as well, wearing loincloths, their large, muscled bodies also darker from the sun. They looked barbaric and some of them carried swords that were obviously fashioned from metal scraps.

They stood at the edge of a large camp surrounded by woods. The trees were big blue cottony things resembling weird weeping willows. The homes the women had built were mostly constructed from metal pieces that they'd salvaged from the ship they'd crashed into a nearby moon and had shuttled to the surface of the nearest planet, the one they stood on now. It was as if Rena had stepped back in time as she looked around her at the very basic living conditions of the camp, the only difference was that these were cyborgs.

A redheaded cyborg woman, who looked to be about six-foot-four, stepped forward, gripping one of those homemade swords, an angry expression on her face, her bright green eyes fixed on Rena. "What is that?"

"My human. Hello, Fiona. I assured you that I would return within a few days. Are your people packed? The repairs will be done in a matter of days. We want to start transferring your people within the next forty hours to slowly settle them aboard your ship where life support and basic functions have been reestablished."

Fury gripped Fiona's features. "You dared bring a human near us?" She took another step forward, gripping her sword in her fist. "We hate humans. We had to leave Earth and we were marooned here for all these years, too afraid to use the last of our fuel to venture into space seeking help for fear of them discovering us to finish us off like they tried to do on Earth."

Steel stepped in front of Rena, putting himself in the path of the enraged cyborg female, protecting Rena. He tensed and his hands fisted at his sides. "Back up and lower your weapon."

"She's a human." The woman turned her head and spit on the ground.

"She's mine." Steel nearly growled the words. "You will respect my property. You have humans here."

“Five of them but they were strong supporters of us.” Fiona stepped back, lowering her sword. “Is she a supporter?”

“She has no animosity for cyborgs.”

“Then why is she your property? Human supporters are our friends and comrades but you said she was your human.”

Sighing, Steel relaxed. “On Garden all humans are property, but you wouldn’t know that since you’ve never been there and are unaware of our laws. It doesn’t mean they are a danger to us or that they are a threat. It just means they have that status.”

Fiona didn’t look happy as she returned her attention back to Rena, curling her lip. “I never trust them, even the supporters.”

Still frowning, Steel tilted his head. “She can’t harm you.” He paused. “I’ll protect you from the fearsome little human.” Sarcasm nearly dripped from his lips as he spoke.

Dark green eyes narrowed in response while Fiona handed off her sword to another large female who stood behind her and then faced Steel head-on as she took a step toward him and then another until they were just a foot apart. The redheaded cyborg woman glared up the few inches into Steel’s handsome face. One hand rose to place it on Steel’s chest.

“I heard you are no longer contracted to a woman.”

Steel’s body tensed. “How did you hear about that?”

“Word travels and crew from both ships have been going back and forth to the surface.” She inched closer. “We would make a great match. You know I’ve wanted you since you discovered us and now you no longer have a reason to deny me.”

Fury overwhelmed Rena. She opened her mouth and then slammed it closed, knowing she had no claim on Steel and that they weren’t in a relationship so she couldn’t exactly tell the Amazon bitch to take her hand off her man. It burned though and when Steel didn’t jerk away from the woman’s touch that anger turned to pain. A horrible thought struck her as she stood there tense and waiting to see what would happen next. Would Steel take the bitch up on her offer and sleep with Fiona?

“Let’s take a walk,” Fiona’s other hand came up to curl around Steel’s biceps, squeezing the thick muscles there. “We’ll test out our chemistry.”

Steel turned to look at Rena. She stared up at him with her lips pressed tightly together and she realized her hands were fisted at her sides. She unclenched them without looking away from him and crossed her arms over her chest. If he walked off with that cyborg woman she didn’t know what she’d do, but she knew one thing for damn sure—Steel would never touch her again. She wouldn’t allow it.

“Are you looking at her to get permission?” Anger rolled off Fiona’s tongue. “Your little human looks a bit pale now, Steel. With her body language speaking for her, I would say she doesn’t take well to me touching you. Interesting. Who owns who, Steel?”

Steel turned to glare down at Fiona. “I own her.”

“Then prove it and let’s go test our chemistry. No one here will harm your little human while you are gone and she can help out while we get to know each other physically. We’re mostly packed but we could always use a slave to help with closing up

the camp.” Fiona jerked her head at someone behind Rena. “Take her to my home and have her pack my clothing and clean the cooking dishes.”

A hand clamped down on Rena’s arm in a bruising hold, startling her. Steel didn’t even turn his head. Rena stared up at the cyborg woman dressed in ragged clothing who was touching her. “Get your hand off me, please. I know how to walk on my own.”

The woman arched an eyebrow but didn’t release Rena. Instead her hand clamped tighter on her upper arm, making Rena gasp in pain, feeling as though her arm was being crushed. The urge to kick the woman was strong, but before Rena could act on it, a hand clamped over the one on her arm—a large masculine hand that tore the woman’s hold from her. Steel glared at the cyborg woman, his other hand opened on Rena’s stomach as he nudged her back and then stepped in front of her.

“Never touch what is mine. Is that clear?”

“It’s perfectly clear.” Fiona was the one who answered, sounding indignant. “You’re possessive of her and you aren’t going to go for a walk with me, are you?”

“I appreciate your offer but the answer is no at this time.”

“You’re having intercourse with her?” Fiona looked a little stunned. “That’s it, isn’t it? You’ve let it into your bed?”

A muscle in Steel’s jaw jumped. “Get your people ready to leave the surface as soon as possible and we’ll start shuttling them to your ship as soon as they are ready. I’ll leave Blackie in charge of coordinating with you until the last of your people are safely transferred.”

Fiona shook her head. “It’s a sad day when our kind prefers one of *them* over his own people, considering our history with those murderers.”

Steel grabbed Rena’s arm, jerked her around and stormed away, leaving her to run beside him to keep up. His grip wasn’t painful but he had a firm hold of her as he moved quickly through the weird-looking trees back to the shuttle they’d taken to the surface. She was out of breath and panting when Steel half dragged her up the ramp. Inside the shuttle he released her, giving her a gentle push into the nearest seat by the back doors. He walked toward the front without looking at her once.

“Take us back to the *Vontage*,” he ordered the pilot.

In minutes the shuttle left the surface and Rena was left to stare up at the cockpit area where Steel took a seat in the copilot seat. He refused to look back at her and she refused to meet the eyes of the other three cyborg males in the back of the shuttle with her but she sensed them watching her. It seemed to take forever until they docked with the larger ship. Steel stood up and walked past her.

“Let’s go.”

She had to jog after him, with his damn long legs, until they came to one of the lifts to take them to the floor where Steel’s quarters were. There was another cyborg in the lift with them who openly leered at Rena’s body the entire four floor levels they traveled. When the doors slid open Steel strode out leaving Rena to chase after him.

At Steel’s door he slammed his palm against the scanner to open his room and then just moved out of the way. “Get inside now.”

She walked in and turned, frowning as Steel stepped into the room after her, the door closing as soon as his large frame cleared it. Steel was very angry. His lips formed a tight line and his eyes were cold as she gazed into them.

“Why are you mad at me?”

He stepped around her and walked to the center of the room before he turned. One of his hands lifted to run his fingers through his shoulder-length silver hair, clearly frustrated as he locked gazes with her. His hand dropped where he fisted both at his sides. “This isn’t going to work.”

Rena’s heart skipped a beat, afraid he was going to give her away to another cyborg again. He’d told her that he was going to keep her safe but would he change his mind? She bit her lip and then sighed loudly.

“You care what that Fiona thinks? She’s a bitch, Steel. You’re damn lucky to not be in the woods with her.”

A silver eyebrow arched but his fists unclenched at his sides. “How do you figure that, logically? She is a strong woman who took charge of her people and has kept them all alive on a harsh planet for over twenty-five years. She’s attractive, healthy, strong, and an ideal female to enter into a family unit with since she has no other males she is contracted to as of yet.”

Rena walked to the bed and sat down on the edge of it, watching as Steel turned to face her. She hesitated and then took a deep breath. “Is that all you’re looking for in a woman? That she’s healthy and strong with killer survival skills? What about emotions?”

“Irrelevant.”

“But...” Her mouth slammed closed. She just stared at him for a good minute, trying to collect her thoughts. “Don’t you want to be happy? Don’t you want to be with a woman who...I don’t know, feels something for you and you feel something for her?”

“I was in a family unit for ten years without emotional attachment. It worked well.”

“Have you ever been with a woman who has feelings for you?”

His chest rose as he took a deep breath, expelling it slowly. “On Earth I wasn’t allowed to form relationships with anyone and after I escaped from there I was too busy working and trying to ensure the survival of my kind. Vonlona and I got along well and we had no issues so the contract between us was mutually acceptable.”

Pushing up from the bed, Rena slowly inched toward him, staring into his beautiful eyes. “You stood up to Earth Government because you had feelings and emotions, were not the soulless being they wanted you to be, and you fought for your independence to have what humans have, right?”

“Correct.”

“You’re all about logic, Steel. Why don’t you tell me where it was logical to fight for your independence to feel and think when you committed yourself to that kind of emotionless relationship?” She hesitated and then walked to him, reaching up to put her hands on the curve of his shoulders. “Kiss me, Steel. Feel for me.”

Steel hesitated for seconds but then his hands were on her as he gripped her hips and lifted her up his body. Rena didn’t gasp when it brought her face closer to his though she was surprised at his action. She wrapped her arms around his neck and just went for his

mouth, pressing her lips to his, her body flush against his larger frame. When he opened his mouth she didn't hesitate, just met his tongue with hers. The kiss deepened and Steel's hands slid from her hips to wrap around her waist. He freed a hand to cup and grip one of her ass cheeks, massaging it firmly enough for her to moan in pleasure. Rena wrapped her legs around his hips, finding it difficult to concentrate on trying to get her shoes off when Steel's kiss was playing havoc on her system. The man kissed her so passionately that her body responded as if she were igniting in flames, his tongue dominating her mouth, tasting and teasing her.

She managed to kick off her shoes and wrapped her legs tighter around his waist, hugging his hips with her thighs. Steel's hand released her ass, slid upward and his fingers dug between material and her skin at her spine. With one firm tug she heard fabric tear as he tore open the back of her pants. In her haze of passion she didn't give a damn if he shredded all of her clothing off her. She rubbed her body against him, using her hold on him to grip his body, to cling.

Steel jerked his mouth from hers, both of them breathless, and on Rena's part, very turned-on. She stared into a pair of gorgeous silvery blue eyes that looked wild and passionate. Steel's tongue swiped his lips then white teeth dented his full lower lip drawing Rena's attention.

"You don't want me to turn off all my control, Rena."

Her gaze lifted back to his eyes and she nodded. "Give me all you have, Steel. I can take it and I want it."

He growled something, his voice deep and rough, the words lost in his desire. He took a few steps and then Rena found herself hitting the bed, a big cyborg coming down on top of her, pinning her firmly to the mattress. He shifted his body and tugged at her pants again, the sound loud over their ragged breathing when remaining fabric split. She saw that something had changed in his eyes.

"I'll try to be gentle."

"I don't give a damn if you are or not," she admitted, lifting her hips up as much as she could with his body still over hers, to help him free her of her clothes as he jerked away the remaining material as if it were paper. Air hit her body as he tore away her pants. "I hurt for you to be inside me," she admitted. "No one has ever turned me on like you do."

His hand gripped her briefs and with one tug they tore from her body to be tossed away. Shifting again Steel reached between them, the sound of his zipper loud as he jerked it down. "This isn't logical."

A smile played at Rena's lips. "But it feels great, doesn't it? Are you as hot for me as I am for you? Is your heart pounding? Do you ache for me like I do for you? I'm so wet just from you kissing me, Steel, from you touching me and our bodies touching. I want you inside me so desperately that it goes beyond desire. I need you."

"What do you do to me?"

She didn't have an answer for him but she really wished at that second that she could read his mind. His face was contorted a little and she couldn't tell if he was still angry or not.

He didn't bother to remove his pants, just shoved them down a few inches to free his rigid cock. Rena shifted her hips, spreading her thighs and put her heels on the back of his pants, below his ass, feeling the line between the material and his hot skin. His cock nudged where she was soaked, brushing along her slit as their eyes remained locked and then he was entering her slowly.

Pleasure tore through Rena, drawing a loud moan from her lips as her body stretched to fit his thick shaft, accepting him inside. He came down on her fully again, his body pressing hers to the mattress as he totally took possession of her, burying himself deep into her pussy.

"Oh god," Rena gasped. "Yes! You feel so damn big and right, Steel, so damn good." She couldn't look away, watching as his eyes narrowed.

He froze there, not moving on her except for his breathing and he blinked. His hips moved then as he partially withdrew to thrust down into her fast. Ecstasy gripped Rena, her fingers clawing at his shirt, loving the feel of him moving inside her as he proceeded to drive in and out of her at a rapid pace, their gazes still locked. She loved watching the emotions play over his handsome features, pleasure apparent as he bit down on his full lip again. She went for his mouth, wanting to kiss him, and he met her kiss.

Steel was a powerhouse of strength and stamina as he moved on her, plowing her softer body with his hard one, driving her passion up by harmonizing the movements of his tongue with his cock, forcing moans from her. Rena's vaginal walls clenched, tightening with pleasure and impending release. Steel groaned into her mouth, tearing his lips from hers in the next heartbeat, and buried his face in the crook of her shoulder, his hot breath tickling her neck.

"Come for me," he rasped. "I can't hold off unless I activate myself to do so."

The idea of him not using any of his cyborg functions turned her on more, expanding her pleasure, knowing she was getting all of the human side of the cyborg making love to her. Rena cried out as her climax swamped her senses, feeling sheer rapture sear through her body, starting at her pussy and flashing through her from head to toe. She cried out Steel's name.

His entire body jerked over Rena's as Steel groaned loudly, coming deep inside her, his semen shooting hard and hot enough that she could feel every burst of release from him. He jerked again, groaning louder as he continued to come, her inner muscles milking him as they twitched and fluttered in the aftermath of her orgasm. Slowly his body relaxed over hers and both of them lay there trying to catch their breath, locked together.

Rena realized they were still totally dressed from the waist up. A button on Flint's shirt was digging into her lower stomach a little where the material had ridden up while he was fucking her. Steel was damn heavy. He rested over her from hip to chest but he'd braced his arms just enough so she could breathe without difficulty. She was loosely gripping his shoulders so she moved her hands, reaching up to run her fingers through his really soft and wonderful hair, loving the feel of it between her fingers and using her fingertips to massage his scalp.

"What are you doing?" Steel turned his head a little, resting it on the mattress, his lips brushing the side of her throat as he spoke. "Don't you want me to get up? Your legs are still locked around my hips or I would have moved off you already."

A grin split Rena's mouth as she tightened her hold around his hips, crossing her ankles to make certain he knew she had no intention of letting him go. "I'm enjoying you right where you are so don't you dare move. Don't you cuddle after sex?"

"No."

A laugh bubbled out of her at his horrified tone. "You do now."

He tried to lift his head but she tightened her hold, keeping him in place. He took a deep breath relaxed on her. "Why? What is the point?"

"Relax, babe. We're joined together. Feel my body still shivering a little from what you did to me? I feel so damn close to you right now and I want to hold you. I don't give a damn about your logic or if there's a real point to it. I'm feeling, just enjoying you and me together, and all you have to do is lie where you are and let me touch you." To emphasize her point she released his head and shifted her arms around his ribs under his arms. She slid her hands down the back of his shirt and jerked it up enough to reach his lower back where she let her fingernails lightly rake his skin.

A sigh came from Steel as his body relaxed more. "That feels good."

"If you had that damn shirt off it would feel better. Take it off for me."

To her amazement, he lifted his upper body away from hers to give her enough room to work open his shirt. Between the two of them they rid him of his shirt and he settled back down on her, putting his face against the side of her neck. Rena smiled as she touched Steel, letting her hands and fingernails explore his broad back, enjoying the feel of the big man still on top of her, his body hot. The only thing wrong was she still wore a shirt but she wasn't going to have him try to help her get it off since she couldn't think of a way to do that without him having to withdraw from her body where they were still locked together.

"You're still hard inside me."

"I'll stay that way if I allow myself. You feel good around my cock," he admitted very softly.

"This cuddling thing isn't so bad, is it?"

He paused. "I'm enjoying it."

"Me too, babe. Me too."

He sighed. "Why do you call me that?"

She turned her head, nuzzling her cheek against his. "Babe? It's a form of endearment."

"I know what it is. Why use it on me?"

Part of Rena's heart broke but no easy answer came to her. He almost sounded the way a lost little boy would, asking that question, his tone showing that it confused him. Hadn't anyone ever shown him the least bit of care? *I damn well will. He's an amazing man.*

"I just feel things for you," she admitted softly. "Is it bad to be called babe? Do you mind?"

He was quiet for so long that she wondered if he was going to answer her at all but then he spoke. "None of this is required for me to protect you."

Pain sliced through Rena's chest for him, a man who was suspicious and thought everyone needed a reason to show him any real emotion or warmth.

She hugged him, her arms and legs tightening around him. "I know that, babe. I want to touch you, I want to be this close to you, and I love holding you. Don't question everything, just feel."

"I don't know how."

Massaging his back, Rena pushed aside her sadness for the things this man had never known. "Then I'll show you how to relax and we'll work on you not being so in control all the damn time. That can't be good for anyone, I don't care how you were made to be, we both know you're a hell of a lot more than just a cyborg."

Steel lifted his head, staring down into Rena's eyes. "What else am I?"

She didn't hesitate. "You're a wonderful man, babe. You're honest to a fault, you're a decent man and I know that. You didn't even know anything about me but you stuck up for me by not wanting your friend Flint to kill me. You rescued me from your cyborg buddies who interrogated me and then decided to play with me. You even stood up for me on that planet when those women weren't real happy to see me. You didn't have to do any of that but you did and it speaks volumes to me about your character."

He continued to stare at her. "I don't understand your motivation."

"Do you have to question everything? It's not all about logic, reason, or motivation sometimes. It's more about following your gut and listening to your feelings which is what I'm doing right now. I want to get to know you and I want to get closer to you."

Slowly Steel relaxed, his head lowered and he put his lips against her throat. "You know if we stay in this position that I'm going to fuck you again, don't you? If you want honest responses from me you are going to get them when I start to move inside you to regain that pleasure you cause me to experience."

Rena moved her hips, wiggling them, urging him on. "I'm all yours, babe. If you want me, take me."

Steel lifted his head again, staring at her, and seemed to search her eyes for something. He shifted his arms, bracing his elbows on the bed and then started to move on her.

Rena softly moaned, her hands going for his hair to draw his lips down to hers. "Kiss me. I love kissing you."

Steel's lips lowered until their breathing mingled as he slowly fucked her, his tongue darting out to flick against her upper lip. Rena opened up wide to him, swallowing his groan as his mouth fit over hers and their tongues met, moving in tune. Her hips bucked in rhythm to Steel's.

They kissed while he continued slow, deep thrusts, drawing Rena to pleasure again minutes later. This time the climax was softer but no less satisfying as bliss spread through her body and Steel whispered her name as he found his own release. He let her hold him without complaint afterward, her wrapped around him as he relaxed over her.

Chapter Nine

Fusion looked annoyed as she walked into Steel's quarters the next morning carrying a tray of food. Rena studied the cyborg woman with dread, wishing that Steel was in his quarters but he'd left hours before to go to work, leaving Rena with access to his entertainment screen to watch older Earth three-dimensional holographic movie crystals.

Rena was tempted to ask the other woman how her session with Riker, the ship's shrink, had gone but she stayed silent, keeping her distance from the other woman. Fusion set the tray down but didn't leave the room, instead glancing at the paused holo projections of two Earth actors standing in a portion of the room. Fusion moved toward them, stopping next to them with a frown.

"They are so much smaller than us."

"Well, to be fair, those two men are six feet tall. Cyborgs were obviously designed bigger."

Shrugging, Fusion turned her strange green gaze on Rena. "Why are you watching these? We have them in all of our rooms but they bore me."

"I hardly ever had time to see movies so I now have tons of time and Steel has a lot of them loaded into the entertainment screen. They are almost like being there."

"Not accurate. I once visited a dimensional theater where the floor moved and you could feel the wind on your face when they played these movie crystals. That was almost like being there if you removed the smell of food and could overlook the fact that it wasn't real."

"True. Watching these beat staring at the walls while waiting for Steel to get off his shift. It's not as though I have anything else to do since he refused to give me access to the ship's computer so I could read a book."

"He had to go down to the planet after there was a problem with a few of the survivalists having issues on what has to be left behind."

That news didn't sit well with Rena one bit, wondering if Steel would have to interact with Fiona again, hoping the cyborg wouldn't hit on him again. She hated feeling jealousy but she couldn't deny it was there. Last night had been spent in Steel's arms while they made love, getting to know each other's bodies. She'd had fun with him, enjoyed the fact that he seemed to really enjoy the after-sex cuddling that she wanted from him and then he'd slept with her in his arms.

"Your regulated breathing has changed. Are you afraid that I'll drag you to an airlock to vacuum your body out into space?" Fusion chuckled. "As tempting as that is since you're sharing a bed with the male of my choice I wouldn't get away with it since there are vid cameras on every floor so security would see me take you from his rooms. You are his property and therefore untouchable without severe punishment."

Rena was speechless, too appalled that Fusion would even say such a thing to even find a response.

“He could push me into an airlock as well if I disposed of you that way as an equal punishment for destroying valuable property that can’t be replaced.”

Opening her mouth to speak, Rena still had nothing to say so she closed it.

Fusion wasn’t without words. “Steel is a much-desired male for his intelligence, age, physical strength, and fighting skills. We value that in our males, along with their breeding abilities. To combine our DNA to create strong children is very desirable to us.” The cyborg backed away from the holograms to cross her arms, watching Rena closely as she stared at her. “He has a very valued job as well with many privileges so the female in his life would have access to what he has. I think it is a waste that he’s sharing his body with you.”

“He obviously doesn’t agree,” Rena got out. “Can you please leave now? Thank you for bringing me lunch.”

Fusion didn’t look happy as she moved toward the door. When she reached it she turned to shoot a glare at Rena, placing her palm on the scanner to open the door. “You should watch your step, human, for I am not the only female who is irritated with Steel’s sexual preferences. Perhaps he didn’t share all the information about himself with you but are you aware of breeding pacts our males have? Ask Steel about it. If he won’t have me I’ll choose a male in Steel’s breeding pact, a male who has defective sperm, and then Steel will have to come to my bed.”

Rena sensed the threat as the other woman left, knowing damn well that if Fusion had access to her, other cyborg women might as well. She thought of the medic, Wire. She walked over to the entertainment system and shut down the movie, no longer in the mood to watch. She walked over to the tray, wondering if Fusion had poisoned the food, then discarded that idea. According to the cyborg woman, she was irreplaceable, valuable property and harming her would cause severe punishment. She lifted the tray and walked to the bed to sit there waiting for Steel as she picked at the food.

Four hours later the door opened to admit Steel. He was wearing his black uniform and he looked irritated as his gaze landed on Rena, lying across the bed. She sat up slowly, staring at him as he glanced at the tray by the door. He looked back at her.

“You didn’t eat much.”

“Fusion delivered the food and after her discussion with me I kind of lost my appetite.”

“Did she threaten you?” Anger simmered in his eyes.

“No. She did mention that if she threw me out of an airlock that you could do the same to her so she must have thought about that option.” She got off the bed and slowly moved toward him. “How was your day, honey?”

His small smile disappeared as fast as it had flashed. “Honey? Another endearment?”

Rena stopped before him and reached for the front of his uniform shirt, her fingers making quick work of the buttons to open it wide to reveal his muscular chest and abs. She pushed the material apart and had to go on her tiptoes to shove it off his broad shoulders, tugging the shirt down over thick biceps. Steel’s eyebrows arched but he didn’t try to stop her as she removed his shirt. She went for his belt next, flicking it open and slowly drawing it from the loops. She dropped it on the floor and looked down at his boots.

“Kick those off for me.”

“What are you doing, Rena?”

Looking up at him, she blindly reached for his zipper, easing it down. “What does it look like I’m doing? I was thinking about how much I missed you today while you were gone. I want to be on top this time.”

Strong hands gripped hers to halt her attempt to strip him of the rest of his clothing. Rena tried to tug her hands out of his but his grip tightened, holding onto her and he refused to let her go. She watched his face closely as she waited for him to say something or tell her why he was stopping her from undressing him.

“We’re ahead of schedule and the engineers believe we can lift the *Moonslip* from the surface where it crashed as early as fifteen hours from now. I just returned from the surface after informing Fiona and the other survivors that they all need to transfer to their ship within seven hours so we can get them settled for travel.”

Dread settled in the pit of Rena’s stomach. “But you said—”

“No one expected the repairs to be done that quickly and the damage was less extensive than we first believed. Taking the females to Garden is much anticipated and my orders are to get underway as soon as it is possible.”

“That means we’re going to lose a day together, right?” She wanted him to confirm it.

“Yes.”

I’m going to miss him. “I see.”

“I am still going to drop you in an escape pod when we get within range of Outpost Five and I’ve ordered one of my men to notify them so they know to hold a ship if one passes there heading for Earth. You won’t be stranded there for any longer than necessary. I also had one of my men take money out of our ship safe so that you’ll have no trouble paying for your passage home.”

She just stared up at him, not sure how to react. Part of her was glad that he was going to keep his word about giving her freedom back but she’d be returning to Earth without the *Star*, without her recovery bonus, and Chuck would be waiting there along with her shitty life. Her boss, Joe Emmit, would make her life a living hell at work, now that she’d failed her mission. He hadn’t wanted her going on the recovery mission in the first place. Chuck was going to be incensed that Demco had paid out money to the recovery team that had failed and given their lives trying to take the *Star*.

“I believed this would make you content knowing that you are just two days away from being released.”

She wasn’t sure how to explain to Steel the kind of hell her life had become in the years since she’d made the mistake of marrying Chuck. Before Joe Emmit had become her supervisor she’d had her job to escape to but now, with the boss from hell, that had turned into a nightmare too.

She had no home life except to stay as far from her cold husband as she could, which meant staying in her bedroom on the other side of the house, trying to remain invisible, fearful of drawing his unwanted sexual attention. A drunk, horny Chuck was a nightmare and she’d spent more than one evening locked in her bedroom to keep him from coming

in after her, with him yelling at her that it was her responsibility to bend over for him and take it.

Chuck was never going to allow her to divorce him without destroying her work reputation so no one would ever hire her and she'd end up homeless and at the mercy of the cruel system that Earth Government had become for the unemployed. She knew her husband wouldn't hesitate to destroy her. Swallowing hard, she realized that Steel was watching her very closely.

"You don't look content at all, Rena. Why is that?"

"It's hard to explain. I thought when I returned to Earth I'd be taking the *Star* back with me and it was going to buy my freedom from having to work and live where I do."

He sighed. "I am not giving you the *Star* and you aren't going to be able to take it from Flint no matter how many mercenaries you hire at a future date in an attempt to go after it. You will just get more humans killed and you would be captured again."

"I wouldn't do that now that I know who has her, and hell, after I return I won't ever be given the chance to recover anything again. Demco paid out a lot of money to the *Bridden* crew so their failure will be counted as mine."

"Have your pal Flint deactivate Pod 3 because it's transmitting to Earth the *Star*'s location and that's how we found it to track them. I'm sure Demco will be sending out other recovery teams, just not ones led by me. The *Star* is far too valuable to them to just write it off. As long as they have a way to find it, they will just keep sending more teams to retrieve it."

"Why share this information with me?" He frowned.

"I don't want the *Star* taken from your people." She shrugged her shoulders, turning away from him to pace. "It's better off in your hands than it would be in Demco's any day. They will just auction it off, trying to recoup their money and then you'd run the risk of someone getting word out that so many cyborgs survived." She turned to face him. "I don't want any harm to come to any of you." *Especially you.*

Steel leaned down and removed his boots, dropping them on the carpet. When he straightened, he said, "I need to get clean and then I want you in my bed waiting for me without your clothes."

Suspicion gripped her and so did pain at his words. She was married to a cheating bastard and one thing he'd always done was take showers before coming to her bed to clean away the scent of whatever woman he'd been with. It hurt her to think Steel must have had sex with Fiona and wanted to cleanse her scent from his body. It made sense now why he'd halted her from taking him to bed.

Steel studied her expression closely, his hands going to his hips. "What is wrong?"

She turned away from him. "I'll sleep on the floor from now on, Steel."

"I thought you wished for us to have a sexual relationship while we were together. What changed your mind?"

Rena refused to look at him as she leaned over the bed to remove the top cover. It really hurt that he'd fucked another woman but she knew they didn't have commitments to each other. She was the one who had insisted on them getting physical. The night before had meant a lot to her and she'd become close to Steel—too close, she realized.

She felt things for him that she knew couldn't amount to anything. She was a human, he was a cyborg, and he wanted a cyborg woman to form a family unit with.

"Rena?"

Her back stiffened at hearing him right behind her, so close that she turned very slowly for fear of touching him. She was right when she saw that he was just a foot from her, his big frame so close to her that she had to tilt her chin all the way up to meet his confused look.

"My husband always had to take showers too when he came home to me in the early days when we still had sex. He was afraid I'd know he was just with another woman." She turned away and moved around the bed. "How is Fiona?"

A hand clamped down on her shoulder and spun her around to face him. He glared into her surprised eyes. "I did not have intercourse with Fiona or any other female. It was hot on the planet and my uniform made me warm enough that I allowed my body to sweat so I didn't get overheated. I wished to remove the sweat from my body and that is the only reason I wanted to cleanse myself before I climbed into my bed with you."

"I want to believe you," she admitted. "But I married the world's biggest liar and cheater."

"I do not lie and I couldn't cheat on you since that would imply I had made commitments to you that we do not have in place, yet I still refused offers today from six different females who wished to share their bodies with mine in an attempt to test our chemistry."

She wanted to believe him desperately and that in itself made her a little sad. Steel's significance to her was too much, too fast. She knew she was lonely and she loathed admitting that she'd spent years wishing to be close to another person so she was guessing that maybe she'd latched onto the sexy cyborg too quickly. She hesitated and then reached for the front of his pants. This time Steel didn't stop her, just released her shoulder to stand there staring down at her with a tight expression, his eyes hooded.

Unfastening his pants, she eased them down his hips, shoving them down his thighs where they pooled at his feet. He didn't move or lift a leg to help, just regarded her warily as he stood still for her. She gave her full attention to his briefs, her fingers working into the waistband and lowering them down his hips too. Steel wasn't aroused as she freed his cock from the fabric but when she went to her knees that changed quickly as his blood surged to his cock.

"What are you doing?"

She reached for him, one hand sliding between his slightly parted thighs to brush her knuckles along the underside of his scrotum, feeling the soft, hairless skin there. Steel's cock twitched as it stiffened, straightened, and enlarged as he obviously responded to her touch and her position on her knees before him.

"I asked you what you are doing." His voice was low and deeper than normal.

"What does it look like?"

"You're inspecting me to make sure I did not have intercourse? Proceed, Rena. I do not lie but if you need proof, there it is. You will smell sweat and male but you won't find the scent of a female on me."

Guilt ate at her a bit as she realized he was right and that she'd been doing just that, inspecting him and making sure he hadn't had sex, which he hadn't. Gazing up at him she saw the tense expression he allowed her to see, not trying to shield his emotions from her. She licked her lips just to have Steel's body respond to the sight of her tongue darting out of her mouth. She inched closer, her other hand gripping his rigid sex and opened her mouth, letting her tongue touch the crown of his shaft.

"You won't taste another female on me either," he groaned. "I do not lie."

Taking Steel into her mouth, she worked him with her tongue and lips, almost smiling as another groan of satisfaction came from Steel. His hand brushed her cheek, pushing back her hair and she looked up at him as she sucked on his excited flesh. With his guard down, Steel's passion was there for her to see—his lips were parted, his cheeks a little darker from being flushed, and his eyes looked sexy as hell to her.

"I won't last long," he said softly. "You're too good at that. I believe you said you want to straddle me. Rise and release me."

Hesitant to do that, she slowly eased him from between her lips and started to get to her feet but Steel was faster, bending forward, his hands gripping her upper arms to help her to her feet. He kicked off his pants and briefs as he moved to the bed, sat down on the edge and held out both hands to her.

She moved toward him in a heartbeat, tearing at her clothing to get free of them, wanting nothing between her skin and his. Steel patiently waited, his cock standing at full attention between his slightly parted thighs and then she stepped between those thighs.

His strength never ceased to amaze Rena he firmly grasped her hips, lifting her easily to put her on his lap where she straddled his hips. She was the one to reach between them, grip his cock, and guide him to the entrance of her body, but right before she could adjust to ease down on him, Steel surprised her by moving her again, tossing her on the bed next to where he sat.

"What—"

Steel gripped her thighs with his hands right behind her knees, shoving her legs up and apart, baring her pussy to him where he leaned over her, his face above her stomach. His eyes had gone cold.

"You did not believe me when I told you the truth. Perhaps you were with another male while I was gone."

"Are you kidding? I was locked in your room."

His expression softened. "It is not pleasant to be accused of something you did not do, is it, Rena?"

She took a deep breath, feeling her cheeks warm with embarrassment. "I get it and you've made your point."

A silvery eyebrow arched. "Have I? Perhaps I won't believe your words and will investigate your sex to make certain that no male scents are there."

Her heart was beating quickly but as his words sank in it sped up just a bit more, knowing what he was going to do. "Go ahead."

Steel spread her thighs wider, lowering his face closer to her wide-open pussy. "You owe me an apology for not trusting in my word since I have never told you a falsehood."

“I’m sorry, babe.” She meant it. “It’s just that it’s really hard for me to trust a man after being married to one who lied to me every time he opened his mouth.”

Steel hesitated so close to her pussy that his hot breath teased her throbbing clit that ached for his tongue. “This is the man who you belong to on Earth, the one you will be returned to?”

“I don’t want to talk about him right now. You wanted to inspect me, remember?” She forced a smile. “I’m turned-on and if we keep talking about that subject it’s going to kill my mood so fast it won’t be funny.”

“I wouldn’t want that,” he said softly. “I am so hard for you after you taunted me with your mouth.”

A soft moan came from Rena as Steel brushed a surprising kiss on her inner thigh as he turned his head, nuzzling her with his cheek where his lips had touched her. He took a deep breath, inhaling her aroused scent, a barely audible groan coming from him.

“I can’t smell any males on you.”

She arched her hips up, lifting her ass from the bed to offer her body to him. “Please, babe. Stop teasing. I’m sorry, all right?”

He didn’t speak but his mouth did the talking for him as his tongue slid across her clit, hot and wet against her bundle of nerves, making her aware of the differences between a slight lick and then a slower one that applied pressure. Her fingers clutched for the bedding but she had the urge to fist his hair to keep him in place as his tongue licked her repeatedly from down to up.

“That feels so good.”

He stopped. “I should do this for a while to see how wet I can make you and to teach you to never question my word. Make you wait.”

“Please don’t. I said I was sorry.”

“Ummm.” He licked her again, his tongue rasping across her clit in one slow, long lick.

He was torturing her, Rena realized, making her pay for questioning his honesty as he went at her as if she were ice cream, one lick at a time in the same repeated fashion that was driving her passion higher but not enough to make her come right away. She really wanted to get off in the worst way. She wiggled her ass on the bed but Steel’s hold on her thighs pushed her flat. She was just able to writhe in need from the hips up, feeling incredibly empty inside to the point of near pain.

“Please, babe,” she nearly whimpered. “More pressure, faster, or fuck me.”

Steel suddenly lifted up from between her thighs and threw himself on his back. “Ride me now, my little siren.”

She was more than happy to do that now that she was free. Her gaze swept down Steel’s sexy big body, loving every inch of him, thinking he was pure perfection as she straddled his hips, her hand gripping his cock and guiding it to her pussy. She met his gaze as she eased down. Rena cried out in rapture as Steel slid home into her welcoming depths. Her body was on fire. She threw her head back, her hands opening on his chest where she was slightly bent over. She started to move on him, frantically lifting up to slam back down, taking him hard, fast, and as deep as she could.

Her clit brushed against his body as she rode him, his hands gripping her hips to help her move even faster, lifting her and jerking her down. His legs moved, his knees bending, feet flattening on the bed, and then he was thrusting up into her quicker, his hands gripping her and holding her still where her knees braced her. The sound of their ragged breathing, their bodies slapping together, and Rena's moans filled the room. Steel's cock was creating amazing sensations inside her and the faster he moved, the better it was until her muscles quivered, her pussy clamping down around his cock, and then a scream tore from her as the orgasm burst through her.

Steel roared out a loud sound that wasn't exactly a word. Rena was too overwhelmed by her frenzied climax and the resulting euphoria to do more than collapse on his broad chest, panting, and smiling as his arms wrapped around her as he continued to come inside her, jerking under her, a softer groan coming from his parted lips. "Wow."

His hands ran from her back downward until he cupped both of her ass cheeks, massaging them gently and then gripping them, holding onto her there. She enjoyed the feel of his hands on her, loved the fact that she was totally on his chest but he was able to breathe, making her body rise and fall with every deep breath he took. Her breathing slowed along with his as the minutes passed and her vaginal walls finally stopped twitching and her brain started to function properly now that she wasn't gripped with lust.

"Did you call me your little siren?" She lifted her head, staring down at Steel, not sure she'd heard him right.

His gorgeous eyes sparkled with amusement. "It is a term of endearment."

"Siren? Aren't those mythical creatures that lured men to their deaths? That doesn't sound too endearing."

Steel chuckled, shaking his head, and looked even more amused. "A siren is a seductress, a thing of beauty, charming, a temptress—perfectly descriptive of you."

Rena couldn't help but grin back at him. "That's the nicest name anyone has ever called me then."

He tugged her down flat, one hand leaving her ass to curve around her waist, holding her against him. "I do not lie, my little siren. You are all of those things to me."

The side of her face pressed against his chest, his heartbeat music to her ears as she relaxed on top of him, joy filling her slowly, spreading through her mind and her heart. Her cyborg had just thought up a wonderful nickname to call her to express his affection for her. Steel Cyborg was turning into Mr. Romantic and she knew her resolve melted even more when it came to keeping Steel at a distance from her heart.

Chapter Ten

Their time ran shorter and shorter, two days passed way too quickly for Rena. Steel walked in the door looking frustrated and she hid a smile as she tried to not openly stare at his messed-up hair. It was apparent that he'd run his fingers through it often.

"Frustrating day at the office?"

Steel paused, tilted his head and then slowly smiled. "You know I do not work in an office."

She crossed the room, just wearing one of his shirts. "I know, it was just a saying that I thought would make you smile, which it did. I take it that you didn't have a good day?"

"No. The *Moonslip* has had some issues since we began our flight home and Fiona refuses to allow one of our men to command her ship. She hasn't been in charge of a large vessel in twenty-five years but she refuses to relinquish control to someone else."

"I'm sorry." She walked right up to him until she could touch him. "I know what will help."

A grin easily curved Steel's lips. "A kiss?"

"A kiss, getting you out of that uniform, and getting you into bed." She put her hands on his shirt. "You look like a man who could use a nap."

She laughed as he lifted her off her feet and headed for the bed, his beautiful silvery blue eyes sparkling with humor.

"A nap is for young children. The last thing I am thinking about is going to sleep when we take our clothing off to share a bed."

The door chime sounded and Steel sighed as he lowered Rena back to her feet. "I almost forgot that I ordered a special meal for us."

Rena arched her eyebrows as Steel walked to the door, opened it, and allowed two cyborg men inside. She saw a lot of food and two bottles of wine as the men set two trays on the table by the door, both taking a second to glance her way before Steel ushered them quickly out of the room.

"Is that really wine?"

He nodded. "I thought since this was our last night together that we'd have a special dinner and I know on Earth wine with the meal is symbolic for romantic."

Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. "Tomorrow we'll reach Outpost Five then?" She'd purposely not asked, not wanting to know exactly when they would part ways.

All traces of humor were gone from Steel. "We'll be close enough in ten hours to put you in a pod and send you on your way. I wanted you in range of the *Vontage* long enough to make certain you reach it safely so that is when I calculated that you'll need to leave."

Ten hours? Oh god. Rena nodded and turned away to blink back tears that filled her eyes before he could spot them. *I don't want to let him go. I don't want to leave Steel.* Just the thought was enough to make more tears fill her eyes. *I'll never see him again. I'll never—*

“Rena?”

His voice drew her from her panicked thoughts. She blinked rapidly, forced a smile that made her cheeks hurt, and turned back to face him. “Yes?”

“Flint and I discussed how to handle this and the plan we came up with is very simple. One of his men flew Pod 3 from the *Star* and docked it with the *Vontage* so you can have it when you go. The memory banks on it have been altered so anyone checking the logs will see what we programmed them to reveal.” He watched her as he spoke, his face expressionless. “That will fit the cover that we came up with for you. You said you followed that pod’s signal so you will tell anyone who asks that you found the *Star* but it was damaged in the firefight your recovery team had with the pirates that helmed the *Star*. You need to tell them that both ships were destroyed along with every life aboard except you managed to get to the lone functioning pod and jettison away.” He paused. “Can you say that? It will hopefully make your company stop hunting the *Star* and explain why you don’t have the *Bridden* since we plan to keep it. Your recovery team really spent a lot on upgrades we don’t have available to us to shield it so it’s virtually undetectable until it’s within visual range of its target.”

“You’ve really thought about this plan,” was all she could manage to get out. “What about when you contacted Outpost Five? Aren’t they expecting me?”

“I never told them why I wanted to know if an Earth transport was in the area. They won’t associate my request with you showing up in a pod.”

“So everything is all figured out.” It depressed her.

“If you agree to go along with our plan to tie up all the loose ends it will be in our favor.”

“Of course I will.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t want anyone tracking you.”

“Thank you, Rena.” He waved to the food. “Let’s eat.”

“Sure.” She numbly moved forward and hoped he didn’t notice how dejected her mood was, her mind fixed on the fact that she had a mere ten hours left with the man-cyborg who had wiggled his way straight into her heart. “I’m starving.” She flat-out lied, her appetite completely gone.

They sat at the small table that took up one corner of his room. Steel removed his boots, socks and shirt, and sat across from her and opened up the bottle of wine. She glanced at it and realized it was the same expensive brand her husband kept in his wine cellar at their house, one she was never allowed to touch since Chuck said it would be wasted on her. It reminded her again how much better Steel treated her as his property than Chuck ever had as his wife.

Rena ate everything on her plate, barely registering that someone had gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a really nice dinner for the two of them. She avoided Steel’s persistent gaze as they finished their meal. She was careful to not consume more than a single glass of wine, terrified if she allowed herself to get intoxicated that she’d become a fool and beg him to keep her.

“You are quiet.”

She stared into his beautiful eyes and knew they would haunt her for a really long time. “I’m going to miss you,” she admitted. It wasn’t a confession of undying love but it was something she could admit to without embarrassment or fear of him realizing just how deeply she’d fallen for him.

“I will miss you as well.” He hesitated. “I considered asking you to stay with me.”

Hope soared just to be quickly dashed as he looked away from her, reached for his wine to sip it, and then avoided looking at her as he focused on his dessert.

“You know how set I am on having a family unit with a cyborg woman. After the past few months when I lost contact with my people while we were trapped on the planet’s surface doing repairs to my ship, I realized that I would have failed my kind if I’d died. It is my duty to reproduce so we don’t die out as a race.”

He looked up, glanced at her, before he gave his attention back to the piece of chocolate cake. He took a bite, chewed it slowly and swallowed.

“The continuing existence of my race is a priority to my people and me, Rena, a common goal we all share and one we value more than our lives. We must create a future. We all must do our duty, and unfortunately, the females are few while the males are many. We have lost a lot of male lives in the past ten years, ones who had not produced offspring to replace their lives in our society. It burdens the rest to produce even more and the strain on our females is greater, making it more difficult to be productive to achieve success.” Their gazes locked. Steel let his emotionless mask slip a little as he frowned and his expression was a bit sad. “Otherwise I would ask you to stay with me.”

Nodding, she looked down. “I understand,” she said softly. Part of her did but another part of her wanted to tell him it wasn’t fair that his people had put that kind of pressure on him—forced to get married and forced to have children.

“I made inquiries about joining a family unit with you.”

Jerking her chin up, she stared at him in surprise.

He sighed, looking away from her. “I contacted Garden this morning to talk to our leading scientist about what would happen if I tried to impregnate you instead of one of our females. He told me with utmost clarity that it would be disastrous, our child would be born with many defects, most of which even our technology couldn’t fix, and that child would suffer a painfully short lifespan.”

It hurt, hearing all of her hopes dashed. There would be no last-minute declaration that he couldn’t let her go or that she could stay with him if she wanted to. He was going to have to let her go because his honor and his sense of duty wouldn’t allow him to keep her.

“Thank you for considering it at least and going to the trouble you must have gone to contacting your scientists to ask those questions.”

“Rena?”

“Yes?”

“Look at me.”

She hesitated but then lifted her gaze to his. “Yes?”

“I wish that I could keep you but it wasn’t meant to be that way.”

Oh, it hurts so much, she thought. *I’ve let myself fall in love with him, damn it. It was so damn stupid to let my guard down and just asking for heartbreak to let him get so close to me.* “I understand.”

“I don’t.” Frustration made his face grim. “It irritates me because I was hoping that was the easy solution to our problem. I have thought of all the variables and scenarios. The only one that was close to being viable would be to take Fusion up on her offer since she said I could keep you if I formed a family unit with her.”

Fear and revulsion tore through Rena. “She’s a sick bitch.”

“That’s why I discarded that idea. I would be afraid that she would kill you or make you suffer at the very least. When I contract to a woman my property becomes hers as well, which would mean that you would belong to her, giving her leeway to do anything she could imagine to you.”

Rena didn’t want to ponder all the sick and twisted ways that Fusion could make her life a living hell. Fusion could make her years with Chuck a fond memory and that was saying a lot—if the woman didn’t kill her outright.

“I do appreciate you trying to figure out a way though, Steel.”

He sighed loudly. “It was just not meant to be.”

It wasn’t comforting to Rena at all, hearing those words, but she knew what he said was true. She’d been raised by a father who hated cyborgs, obsessed with wanting all of them hunted down and destroyed. The irony wasn’t lost on her. She never thought she’d run into them when she’d signed on to recover the *Star*. She’d honestly thought that the cyborgs had probably either traveled so far out into space that they’d never be heard from again or that they had died out. It had been her belief after her mother had stopped contacting her sister on Earth that her mother had died and probably the male cyborgs she’d rescued along with her.

“May I ask you something?”

“Anything, Rena.”

“When you return to Garden can you look up what happened to my mother, if it’s possible, and maybe send me word through a third party? I don’t think she’s alive still but I was sure cyborgs weren’t around anymore either. She stopped contacting her sister so we believed she died. I just want to know how and when did she pass.”

He hesitated. “I would do that for you. What was her name?”

“Rora Marie Gates.”

Cocking his head to the side, Steel studied her. “Your name is Gates. You told me you were married on Earth and you had a husband.”

“I never took his last name. I work at the company his father owns, and while the man is aware that we’re married, they didn’t think it would be a good idea to let the other employees know about it. I believed that when we married and Chuck asked me to retain my last name instead of taking his. Of course later I realized he just didn’t think I was good enough to carry the last name of Demco.”

Anger tightened Steel’s mouth and it showed in his intense look. “If I kept you I’d have my name branded on your body, clearly stating you are mine.” He reached up to

touch the tattoos that ran over the top of his shoulders, strange black lines that were damn attractive. “This is the cyborg language that we created and it is my name. I would brand you with my name so everyone who looked at you would know how much I value you.”

He was breaking her heart. “Thank you for saying that and I know you mean it.”

Steel slowly rose to his feet, dropping his napkin to the table, his gaze locked on her. “I want to take you to my bed and enjoy the hours we have left together so I may memorize every minute we share.”

Rena stood and dropped her napkin, turning to walk to the bed as she discarded her shirt. When she reached the bed she turned to watch Steel remove his pants. Watching him strip was a sight she would also miss, one that would haunt her as well. Everything about Steel was going to stay with her long after he was a part of her past.

He closed the distance between them when he was naked, his hands going for her face instantly, cupping her head in his hands and lifting her chin. She met his kiss eagerly, opening her mouth as soon as their lips sealed together.

“You’re addictive,” he muttered, breaking the kiss. His mouth moved to nibble down the column of her throat.

“So are you,” Rena groaned, gripping his shoulders as his hands cupped her ass, lifting her off her feet then pressing her against the bed.

“Open your thighs for me.” He released her hips.

Lying back on the bed, Rena stared up at the fierce but sexy cyborg with his gorgeous eyes and that beautiful silvery mane. “I want you to know how amazingly sexy I think you are.”

Full lips curved upward into a smile. “I look at you and I’ve never wanted a woman more.”

He went to his knees, gripping her ankles to place them on the top of his shoulders as he leaned in, her knees bending and spreading her thighs open for his inspection where his gaze locked, taking in the view of her. He released her ankles and his fingers spread her labia, exposing all of her.

“So delicate and pink,” he said softly. His thumb lightly brushed along her mound, tracing downward to the delicate skin between her clit and her vagina, exploring every crease back up to her sensitive bud. “So soft.”

“Steel...” She breathed his name, her body responding to him in every way. Her breasts started to feel heavy and an ache began to make its presence known as her vaginal walls fluttered.

He leaned forward, his thumb leaving her to be replaced by the tip of his hot, wet tongue. A moan broke from Rena as she realized he was kissing her sex the way he kissed her mouth, swirling his tongue in circles as his lips rubbed the tender tissue around it. Then he was applying more pressure, sucking and licking on her clit, which he had captured with that wonderful mouth of his.

The pleasure was powerful, building and spreading throughout her body. The dull ache inside turned into full-blown, painful need to feel Steel inside her. His cock, his fingers, she didn’t care as she arched her back, pressing her pussy tighter against his face,

her moans growing louder as what he was doing to her became more intense, more passionate, and then Steel groaned, vibrating against her swelling nub.

“Fuck me. Please. I need you inside me.”

His hold on her changed and two fingers pressed against her entrance, the wetness there easing his entry as both digits slid deep inside her, stretching and filling her aching pussy. Ecstasy was instant and Rena clawed the bed, her hips bucking under his hungry mouth and driving fingers as he moved them inside her fast and hard, creating havoc with her senses.

She was going to come. She tensed, her muscles clenching in eagerness right before her climax burst, exhilaration radiating throughout her body. Steel slowly eased his fingers out and released her with his mouth, his large body climbing up over hers. Rena opened her eyes to stare into his passion-filled gaze right as the crown of his cock pushed against her opening, stretching her to take all of his shaft as he eased down on her and deeply into her.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, clawing his skin. “Yes!”

Steel’s eyelids lowered and he hissed out a groan. “You’re so damn tight, so damn wet and hot. Sheer heaven, my little siren.”

He wasn’t moving inside her so Rena wrapped her legs around his waist, bending her knees up high near her shoulders, and used her hold on him to move. The sensation of him moving even that little bit increased her pleasure, her vaginal walls still twitching from her release. Steel’s eyes closed, his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip. Rena went for it, lifting up enough to press her mouth over his, gently nipping where he’d licked before she met his kiss.

He started to move his hips in a teasing, shallow movement that rubbed Rena in all the right ways. He kept the pace steady, drawing up her passion again, ignoring her urging to move faster when she tried to use her heels against his ass. He broke the kiss, chuckling.

“I’m not a horse you can kick into a gallop. I’m enjoying you, memorizing how you feel around me and under me. I want to take my time savoring you.”

“We have all night.”

He stopped moving on her, something in his eyes darkening and growing a little cold. “I wish we did but the hours are passing too quickly, Rena.”

He moved then, nearly withdrawing completely from her body before he thrust forward quickly, driving into her hard and fast, the way she loved. He was strong as he moved over her, the pace increasing and the sensation of it drawing Rena into a haze of sexual euphoria. He was hitting those amazing spots that only he had ever found, rubbing her in all the right ways, and the pleasure built again, renewing that wonderful anticipation that she knew would lead to mind-blowing orgasms.

Steel rasped her name, twisting his hips, his shaft rubbing over her clit as he lifted up a little to take her at a slightly different angle. He was powering in and out of her, the bed slamming into the wall, the sound barely audible to her over both of them panting and moaning. His strength turned her on more, drove up the excitement level for her. Though he was being a bit rough, he wasn’t hurting her. Throwing her head back, Rena arched her hips, tensed, her body shaking with desire, and then cried out Steel’s name as she

came. Steel roared out her name as he followed her to that tranquil place she found once the spasms in her pussy stopped.

Rena gasped when Steel used one hand to unlock her limp legs around his hips, rolling them both over, his arm locking around her waist to haul her on top of his body where she sprawled on his chest. Lifting her head, she opened her eyes to gaze into his smiling face.

“Amazing.”

“Not the word I’d use but it will do.”

“What word would you use?” She grinned.

“Home.”

“I don’t understand.” Her grin faltered.

He reached up to push back a thick lock of hair from her face, his hand cupping her jaw and part of her cheek. She pressed her face against his hand a little tighter, loving him touching her and enjoying the warmth on the side of her face.

“You feel like home to me, a place where I feel most relaxed and at ease. I don’t know how to explain it any better but that is what I am experiencing and the word that came to mind to describe you.”

Don’t cry, she ordered herself, blinking back tears.

“Did I upset you? You try to hide your emotions from me but you are bad at it.” He released her face to rub her bare back, his hand massaging her skin from butt to shoulder blade. “Did I make you experience sadness? You have very expressive eyes and you tense your mouth, making tiny lines.”

“I’m just going to miss you and I’ve never felt this way about someone before, Steel. I am sad.” There was no point in denying it, she figured. “I’m trying to not cry because I’m human and hell, we do a lot of that. We—I—suck at hiding my emotions, I guess.”

He took a deep breath. “I would take you to Garden but you wouldn’t be happy there, Rena. I have considered this, as I told you. I know you would want equality and I will never be able to give you that.”

“Because I’m property and that isn’t going to change on your world?”

He gave a sharp nod. “You would grow to hate me in time and I don’t want to break your spirit. It would be only a short time before I need to form a family unit and it would be more difficult on each of us to separate if we spent more time together.”

“Right.”

“I am honor bound, my little siren. I can’t change what I am even if I wanted to. We come from different worlds now and neither of them is receptive to the other.”

“I get it. I hate it, but I do understand.”

“It is very unfortunate.”

“Damn straight.” She paused. “By the way, watch your ass with Fusion, okay? She’s determined to have you and she said she could make you sleep with her.” She paused. “What is a breeding pact?”

Steel’s entire body went rigid under hers and anger radiated from his eyes. “She told you that term?”

“She said to ask you about it and then said she’d get you, even if she had to contract with someone in your breeding pact who had bad sperm.”

He lay staring at the ceiling then looked at her, his expression masked. “You know it’s our duty to produce children and I told you that some of our males do not have viable sperm to impregnate a female. Twelve males sign a pact, a contract. If the males in a family unit cannot impregnate their female, they can call upon another pact member to do so. We do not consider them our children, we are just donors, only able to claim the children we produce with the women in our family unit as our offspring.”

She tried to hide her dismay. “You’ve impregnated women in other family units then?”

His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed. “I realize, to humans, this sounds cold, but I do feel conflicted over this subject. It is for the good of all, though, so I deal with the unwanted negative emotions.”

“I’m not judging. I was asking a question.”

He sucked in air, slowly exhaling, never looking away from her curious gaze. “I am a healthy breeder and have been contacted nine times to donate.”

“Twelve men and they needed you that many times?”

“Yes. Producing as many children as possible is greatly encouraged.”

“So you had to sleep with nine women? That’s a lot of males out of that dozen who can’t produce babies. Is that common?”

“There were just five females in all that I needed to service, some multiple times.” He paused. “I was successful eight times out of those nine, donating my sperm. Natural breeding has a higher successful rate if you think to ask me why we don’t use alternative methods. We attempted it and the failure rate was unacceptably high.”

Her mind was reeling, trying to understand all the implications, accepting that he’d just told her he’d helped create eight children. “Is that why you want to be in a family unit? So you don’t have to knock up other women to make babies you can’t claim as your own?” She hurt for him, not able to imagine the pain of having children she couldn’t keep, now understanding why he was so determined to get married.

Steel frowned. “That doesn’t matter. If I am in a family unit or not, I am always under the obligation of the pact.”

“So you slept with other women when you were married? And your wife slept with other men she was contracted to in a family unit?”

Steel gripped her suddenly, lifting her off him to roll onto his side. He stared at her, a frown firmly in place. “It’s not how we wish things were but it is about survival and what we must do. That is another reason I won’t be taking you to Garden with me, Rena. I saw your reaction to Fusion undressing in front of me and again on the planet surface when Fiona offered to test our physical chemistry. I had the choice to deny them access to my body but that isn’t the case with women in the family units of the men in my breeding pact. It will be my duty if they need me to donate. Do you understand?”

She looked down at his broad chest. “It means you can never be faithful.” She closed her eyes, inching closer to him to curl into his larger body, letting him soothe her pain as he pulled her into his arms.

“I can’t be faithful,” he said softly. “I’m a breeder who wants a woman I can’t have children with.” He sighed loudly. “Irony, isn’t it?”

A smile played at her lips. “Yeah. Life is a bitch sometimes.”

He nodded, his chin brushing the top of her head. “Our remaining time together is slipping by too quickly.”

She lifted her head, meeting his gaze. “Let’s make the most of the time we have.”

She took his mouth, kissing Steel, and shutting out the pain of knowing they were saying goodbye to each other. She wanted to make the most of it, memorize every second, every touch, everything about the man she couldn’t have yet wanted to remain with more than she wanted her next breath.

Chapter Eleven

The pod was a lot bigger than Rena would have guessed as she stared around it from the pilot seat, her belt on and her heart broken. Saying goodbye to Steel had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Tears filled her eyes but she blinked them back. *It's for the best. You know it,* she thought. *He needs to have little cyborg babies with one of his big cyborg women.*

"Fuck," she whispered as she forced her attention to the controls. "Pod 3, respond."

"Orders?"

Rena really hated autopilot systems, never sure exactly how to talk to them, but she knew she had to give it a shot. Steel had assured her that the pod knew where it was taking her, that there would be no errors on destination. She knew Steel was tracking her long distance by a droid they had following her to relay information to the *Vontage*, which wasn't in range of Outpost Five. No one would be able to detect the ship.

"State orders."

Right. "Distance to Outpost Five in time, please."

There was hesitation on the computer's response. "At current rate of speed, two hours, fourteen minutes, thirty-two seconds."

"Thank you."

"Orders?"

I hate autopilot. "That is all."

"Pod 3 going silent."

"Thank you!"

She turned in her seat, staring at the empty seats in the back of the pod, experiencing an eerie feeling being alone in something designed for at least a few dozen people. In just over two hours she was going to reach Outpost Five, get on the first transport to Earth that became available, and then she'd be back on Earth before she knew it, back to the hell she had left.

She suddenly yawned, surprising her, but she knew she shouldn't be, not after spending all night without sleep. Her heart ached at the image of Steel that filled her mind—his gorgeous silver-blue eyes, and his full lips that made him incredibly handsome when he smiled at her. She'd miss his voice, his laugh, and even his frowns. Depression hit her hard and caused her to unfasten her seat belt and leave the pilot's chair. She paced, hoping to grow so tired she'd stop obsessively thinking about a man she was better off forgetting as soon as possible.

She'd committed adultery. Rena snorted, not worried about it since her marriage was a farce to begin with. Chuck cheated all the damn time and it wasn't as if he'd ever know since she could never admit to anyone that Steel even existed. He was her secret until the

day she died, knowing it would always be too dangerous to ever trust telling a soul what had really happened to the *Bridden* or what had happened when she'd reached the *Star*.

Mentally, she went over her story again and again, not wanting to screw anything up. She paced, rehearsed what she'd say to Joe Emmet and to Chuck when they wanted to know why the hell the company had lost money and she didn't have a ship to show for it. Another yawn and she turned to go sit down finally, ready to get off her feet.

"Proximity warning." Pod 3 spoke suddenly, startling Rena enough that she jumped.

"To what?" She dropped into the pilot chair. Confused, she said, "Open the window shields and let me see out there." The pod's range scanners wouldn't have picked up the outpost yet. Steel had told her that when one of his men reprogrammed the pod memory he'd made its sensors blind to the *Star*, the *Vontage*, and their shuttles so it wouldn't record them. That meant it also wouldn't be able to give warning if those were the ships in range.

The window shields opened as the computer started to speak. "Vessel identified as the *Gordon Lee One-Two-Seven*, Earth Government, Class B. They are hailing."

Rena stared out into space but didn't see anything. When she peered down at the scanner board she saw a blue beep on the upper right side of the screen. The ship was still far off but it definitely was in range and closing.

"They are hailing us," Pod 3 informed her again. "Orders?"

"What the hell is a government ship doing this far out?"

"Information not available," the computer stated.

She had to fight to not roll her eyes. "I was speaking to myself." She bit her lip and then sighed. "Open communication."

"This is General Vern Mellhorn of Earth Government," a man's deep voice filled the speakers. "Adjust your course immediately to dock with the *Gordon Lee* or we will blow you out of space."

"Um..." She was stunned. "I'm Rena Gates, an insurance recovery agent with Demco insurance." She paused. "I'm not a pirate though I'm sure you're reading the designation of this pod and it's been reported stolen. I was able to recover it from the ship it belonged to."

There was a long moment of silence. "Confirm your identity again. State your full name and employee identification number."

Taking a deep breath, Rena started talking, knowing that their computer would be running her voice and verifying her identification with Demco. She waited as she figured they attempted to contact Earth. This far out in space could take some time but she was surprised when within two minutes the general's voice came back.

"Your identity has been confirmed, Ms. Gates. Who else is on that pod with you?"

"I'm the sole survivor." She took a deep breath, knowing now was the time to start using that made-up story. "I'm a recovery agent for Demco and I went after the *Star* with a hired recovery crew on a shuttle named *Bridden*. We located and boarded our target but there were a lot more pirates aboard than we estimated." She took another deep breath, hoping that she sounded believable. "My crew was outnumbered, they fought hard, but we were overtaken by the pirate crew. The last thing those men did was fight hard

enough to get me to one of the *Star*'s pods where I launched to safety. I watched both ships explode as I jettisoned away to escape but my men never made it to another one of the pods like they were supposed to. They gave their lives for me."

"Did you personally see these pirates?"

"Of course I did. I just stated that I left the *Bridden*, boarded the *Star* with my crew, and we were outnumbered when we were attacked."

"You saw pirates yourself?" The general sounded angry, his voice tight.

"Yes," she lied easily.

"Describe the pirates in detail now."

What the hell was this guy's problem? What kind of question was that anyway? "They are ugly, deformed, smell bad, and are insane, judging by the way they fought." She'd seen the news and heard the stories enough to know that much about them. "They killed my crew."

"So that is going to be your official statement? You discovered pirates onboard the *Star* and they killed your crew?"

"Yes," she said, not liking the sarcastic tone of the man speaking to her or that he didn't even try to hide it from her.

"Under Earth Government order you are under arrest, Ms. Gates. Have your pod change course immediately to dock with us. If you try to run we will chase you down and blow up your escape pod. Do you understand?"

She was beyond stunned. "What am I under arrest for?"

The general's voice shook with rage when he answered her. "Do you know why I am in this vicinity? My nephew sent out an emergency transmission before I assume he was captured, telling me he was onboard the *Star*, their general location, and that cyborgs attacked him."

Rena's heart nearly stopped. "What?"

"You heard me, Ms. Gates. My nephew's ship computer relayed the message from his com and sent out a long-range beacon repeating his last message to me. That computer belonged to the *Bridden* and my nephew is Dell Harver, meaning that you were his boss on that mission. Why are you lying about what happened to him? I heard him say cyborgs with my own ears and I'm going to make you listen to the message when you're in lockup." He paused in his vocal assault. "I don't know why you are lying, Ms. Gates, but be assured that I will get the truth out of you."

Rena sat back in her seat, her mind reeling with the implications. Dell had gotten a message out? How? The computer on the *Bridden* hadn't responded to her commands even though she'd used the emergency response command. She bit her lip, at a loss, but then a horrible thought struck her. What if the computer had been programmed to just respond to Dell's commands? It was possible that he might have been linked with his coms to the computer, able to get out a message and if so... *Shit!*

"Ms. Gates?" The general sounded livid. "Why are you lying? Are you a cyborg sympathizer? We've gotten reports of their existence for years but until I got that message from my nephew we never put stock in what we believed were false rumors. I demand you answer me."

She took a deep breath. “I assure you that I saw pirates,” she lied. “Maybe before the ships blew up they forced Dell to lie to protect themselves by blaming someone else for having stolen the *Star* and attacking us. I don’t know what to tell you. We ran into pirates onboard that ship and I got a good damn view of them. They were mutated human beings and definitely not cyborgs. My father was military, Sir, and he guarded them at a detention center so I know what a cyborg looks like. There was no mistake on my part about who I saw attacking us.”

Rage came across the speakers as the man spoke. “I’m reviewing your full file, Ms. Gates. Your mother was a traitor to Earth Government and she stole five cyborg units from the detention center she worked at and shot her husband helping those killers escape.”

Fuck. Talk about my past coming back to bite me on the ass. This guy is never going to believe me. She took a deep breath. “Sir, with all due respect, don’t you think I would hate their kind with that history? I grew up with a father who was bitter about his injury and he lost his wife. I lost my mother and all because she felt sorry for cyborgs.”

“Order your pod to change course immediately to dock with the *Gordon Lee*,” the man’s voice shook. “I will get the whole story out of you because I know Dell was telling the truth. I don’t care if you’re a woman, Ms. Gates. I’m going to see you in hell if you don’t tell me the truth and tell me where the hell those bastards are so I can find my nephew to see if he’s still alive. I will order my men to cut the damn truth from you if that’s what it takes to make you tell me where Dell is, so in the time it takes your pod to dock, you’d better have a change of tune, young woman. End of communications.”

“Transmission ended,” Pod 3 stated. “Orders?”

“Full stop,” Rena said softly.

“Repeat order?”

“I said come to a full stop. Cut the engines. I need time to think, damn it. If the general wants me, he can come get me. I’ll be damned if I have you pilot me closer to him.”

“Order confirmed.”

She heard the engines cut off, the soft hum dying, but in seconds they executed again and she knew the pod was reversing engines to slow their momentum. The sound died within a minute and left her in utter and total silence, able to hear her own breathing. She was dead in space.

“Orders?”

“Silence.”

“Confirmed.”

She took deep breaths, hearing each one in the eerie and unnatural quiet. The general wasn’t going to believe her after pulling up her history. He was a man who had lost a nephew, obviously not reasonable by the way he’d sounded over the com, and determined to make her talk even by means of having her tortured. She hugged her chest tightly, trying to find comfort in her own embrace. Earth Government was known to be ruthless to humans they deemed traitors. She had no doubt the general would order his men to do whatever it took to make her talk.

Shutting her eyes, she tried to calm her pounding heart, knowing that this couldn't end well for her or for Steel and his people. She'd be tortured until they broke her. *I know too much! But I don't know where their planet is, thankfully.* That was her single comforting thought.

* * * * *

"Calm down," Gene ordered Steel as he watched his commander, in a rage, nearly beat one of the control panels to pieces with his fists. "There is nothing we can do for your human. The best we can hope for is that she doesn't break if they do torture her."

Turning to give the other man an icy glare, Steel took a ragged breath. "Open communications to the pod now."

Blackie shook his head. "If we heard their communications then they will hear us as well if you try to talk with your human. They will know we are in range even though they can't pick us up on their long-range scanners thanks to the droid extending the signal from the pod to us."

"The pod has stopped advancing," a black-haired cyborg said quietly. "She seems to have come to a halt for some reason. Do you think she will try to flee? That is a class-B starship and will catch her easily. She would burn her fuel up and even if she reached Outpost Five they would just search it to arrest her." He frowned at Steel. "She wouldn't reverse course to get back to us, would she? She has to know we're no longer where we were when we parted with her hours ago."

Steel shook his head. "She wouldn't risk exposing us."

"She's human." Blackie sounded disgusted. "Why did you release her in the first place? We are all at risk now. She is going to tell everything she knows about us to Earth Government."

"No," Gene said softly. "I read her when I held her during interrogation. She is a fighter and she feels fondness for Steel. She will do with the humans what she did with us. She will fight until she forces them to kill her."

Pain lanced through Steel's chest, regret over letting Rena go a strong emotion that gripped him. But he had been certain at the time that she would be safe. He had been wrong. He turned to glare at Blackie. "I'm taking the *Bridden*. She's still docked to us for the crew to go over her specifications and to reprogram her computer. Tell them to start the engines and clear out unless they want to test her capabilities with me."

"Halt," Blackie ordered. "Why are you taking the *Bridden*?"

Steel turned. "It's heavily shielded, it's a jumper shuttle so it's faster than a large ship, and the *Star* didn't detect it until it was almost on them." He paused. "I'm going to attempt to reach her first and hope I make it before the *Gordon Lee* is in visual range and can detect me. The pod won't see the *Bridden* at all since we programmed it so all of our ships are invisible to its sensors."

Blackie's mouth tensed. "No. You're risking a jumper shuttle we need, the lives of cyborgs, and for a what? A human? I realize she knows too much about us but it's too great of a risk to take. Stand down, Steel."

Clenching his jaw, Steel shook his head. “I won’t let her die that way. I was held in their detention centers and she won’t survive long. I’m going after her.”

“You’re being irrational,” Gene said softly. “You realize this, correct?”

Steel turned his head and met the other cyborg’s calm stare. “I’m in charge right now and I gave you an order. Tell the programming crew to start the engines on the *Bridden* and to clear out the males who don’t want to go on this mission.” He headed for the door at almost a run.

“Steel!”

Steel came to a halt, turned, and glared at Blackie. “What?”

“If you do this I’ll have to file a report and the cyborg council we answer to could punish you. The *Bridden* isn’t your property to take, nor are any cyborg lives you’ll put at risk if any of our men go with you. Is your human worth losing your status and possibly your freedom if they deem your actions criminal?”

Steel spun around, moving fast for the lift that would take him down to where the *Bridden* was docked, no hesitation in his actions. The cyborg council wouldn’t agree with what he was doing but he didn’t give a damn. Rena was in trouble, she needed to be rescued, and he was going to try his best to reach her before the *Gordon Lee* did.

Dread assailed him as he entered the *Bridden*. He faced off against four cyborg males, all looking at him grimly. One of them opened his mouth. Steel tensed, waiting for them to deny him access to the helm, considering the possibility that Blackie had ordered them to stop him. He glanced at each man, knowing a fight it would be a close call with those odds, but he would fight if that’s what it took.

“Commander Steel,” Bricon addressed him. “The engines are warmed, we are fueled, and I would be honored to pilot.”

The cyborg next to him smiled. “We’re going to open her up all the way and get to see what she can do. I’m very excited.”

The third one smiled slowly. “This will be the ultimate test of our new programming and to see what the shielding is capable of. I request to go with you.”

The fourth cyborg shrugged. “I’m bored and this should be fun. I’ll man the ammunitions system in case we come under fire.”

Relief washed through Steel. “Let’s go.”

* * * * *

Rena stood, paced, and tried to think. She could fight but she didn’t have a weapon. She turned and eyed the interior, a shudder running down her spine at the concept of being captured. The pod couldn’t outrun a class-B ship.

“Pod 3? Time before the *Gordon Lee* reaches us?”

“Calculating their rate of speed.” It paused. “Thirty-seven minutes, nineteen seconds.”

Surprised, she asked, “That soon?”

“They are traveling at their highest estimated rate of speed to reach our current location.”

I can make a run for it but where will I go? The only thing out there was Outpost Five and they would easily be able to search it to find her, even if the officials at the outpost didn't arrest her on sight at the orders of the general. "I'm so screwed."

"Order not understood."

"Shut up," Rena ordered the pod.

"Confirmed. Going silent."

What am I going to do? Demco wasn't going to help her, she knew that, not after failing in her mission to recover the *Star*. Chuck would be embarrassed so he wouldn't lift a finger, her father-in-law made Chuck seem warm, and her boss would probably testify against her if there were a trial. Rena walked to the pilot's chair. "Pod 3, respond."

"Orders?"

"Give me a five-minute warning before the *Gordon Lee* reaches us."

"Confirmed. Five minute warning to be issued."

Sighing loudly, Rena sat down and stared out into space. Space was beautiful in a chilling kind of lonely way and this is where she'd die if she didn't think of a plan. They'd torture her, force her to talk, lock her up because she'd be considered a traitor to the government and what was left of her life would be a living hell until they executed her.

Her thoughts went to Steel. He'd try to find out how her mother died and he'd send word to Earth for her. That was one message she'd never get. She hoped that he never found out that she'd died after leaving him, not wanting him to think he was in any way responsible. Closing her eyes to the view, she leaned back and let her shoulders sag.

Her entire life, she'd never known the kind of happiness that she'd had in the days she'd spent with Steel in his quarters. She took comfort in that. Opening her eyes, she stared into space again, wondering if a moon was nearby. She kicked off her shoes, wiggling her toes against the smooth, cool metal surface of the floor. Swallowing hard, she straightened.

"Pod 3, respond. Are we near a moon we could hide on?"

"Negative."

Damn. There went that plan.

"Orders?"

"How much time in minutes is left before the *Gordon Lee* reaches us?"

"Fourteen minutes, fifty-one seconds."

She was stunned that she'd stared out the window that long. Time was running out. "Fuck, this sucks."

"Order not understood."

"I know, you clueless computer. Be silent, Pod 3. I'm talking to myself."

"Pod 3 going silent."

"You're a shitty conversationalist."

Rena realized what she faced. They were going to capture her. She'd fight to the end, refuse to break, and maybe they wouldn't be able to torture the information out of her. She was tough, damn it, she reminded herself. She let the image of Steel fill her thoughts.

He was smiling at her, his eyes alight with amusement. That's the way she wanted to remember him and that would be her motivation.

She'd die before she gave Earth Government enough information to hunt the cyborgs. She knew about Garden and which ships they had stolen. It was too damn much, Earth would put bounties on every one of those ships and if they so much as went near anything civilized they'd be captured. It would be all her fault. She had to do something, damn it, rather than just sit waiting for those bastards.

"Pod 3, get ready to fire up your thrusters. We're going to run, damn it. I want you to scan for a livable planet. I'll even take a moon with craters. We're looking for anything that will hide us or something that would be difficult for a class B to follow us through. Do you understand?"

"Scanning."

"Awesome. Also check for other ships too, preferably pirates. Maybe if we run into a group of them it will distract the *Gordon Lee* enough to buy us some more time."

She reached up and grabbed for the seatbelt. "Pod 3, respond. Give me the arrival time in minutes of the *Gordon Lee*."

"Nine minutes, twelve seconds. Pod 3 has scanned and found nothing you requested in immediate range."

"Thank you. Now you can be silent."

"Pod 3 going silent."

"This sucks monkey butt," she sighed, trying to remain calm and think clearly. She'd just have to run and hope the scanners picked up something soon. "I can do this. I can totally do this," she coached softly. "For Steel."

"Pod 3? On my mark I want you to full burn us away from that ship. Do not let up even if we use enough fuel for it to become dangerous. Stay ahead of them. Do you understand my orders?"

"Affirmative."

Closing her eyes, she fixed on the memory of Steel, naked and sexy, walking toward her while she waited for him on his bed. She'd keep running until she was caught or the damn pod blew up from full burning on empty tanks before she'd put his life in danger. She twisted a little in her seat to hook her seatbelt.

"I fell in love with you," she whispered. "Bye, babe. Have a good li—"

Something hit the pod hard, tearing her hand from the belt and sending Rena flying away from the seat to sprawl on the floor.

"Collision," the pod computer announced as an alarm started beeping.

She lay there. "With what? An asteroid? If there's a field close, I'm ordering you to steer us into the path of it." She pushed up with her hands. "The *Gordon Lee* can't follow us through one of those without getting serious damage but we're small enough to avoid getting creamed with our autopilot skills."

"Negative. Source unknown." It paused. "Docking clamps have been activated."

"Is it the *Gordon Lee*?" she asked, alarmed.

"Negative. Source unknown. My sensors detect nothing."

She turned her head, staring at the hatch, her mouth opening as her mind spun. The pod couldn't see cyborg ships and something had just bumped into them, docked to them, that the pod couldn't identify. Hope soared so hard inside her that it caused actual pain in her chest.

The hatch was yanked open and a large silver-haired cyborg ducked and stormed inside the pod. A grin spread on Rena's face as she stared up at the best damn sight she'd ever seen in her life—wearing a black, kick-ass uniform.

“Steel.”

He moved toward her fast, just bending and grabbing her. He swung her up in his arms and spun on his heel, almost running for the hatch, ducking down and then they were in a short sleeve docking them to another shuttle.

She stared up at him as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “You came for me.”

He didn't look at her, instead giving his attention to a cyborg man she'd never seen before who waited in the cargo area. “Seal the door and blow the pod so they don't know what happened to her. Make it look as though it was an accidental explosion. Let's get the hell out of here.” He leaned against a wall, releasing her legs so they slid down his length but he kept one arm firmly around her waist to keep her tight against his body. He grabbed hold of one of the beams.

Steel finally looked at her. He slowly smiled. “Hi, siren. Did you miss me?”

“You have no damn idea how much.”

He chuckled. “Hold on. We're going to have to blast the hell out of here. The *Gordon Lee* is almost on top of us.”

She locked her arms tighter around his neck seconds before the engines roared loudly and then she was almost torn from Steel's arms as the shuttle executed a full burn, launching them rapidly away from the pod.

Rena buried her face in the leather of Steel's shirt. He'd come for her.

Chapter Twelve

Rena snuggled on Steel's lap in the same seat she'd used for weeks when she'd been aboard the *Bridden*. Four other cyborgs were in the piloting area with them. The one in the copilot seat expelled air loudly.

"They aren't following us and they haven't tried to raise us. I don't think they can see us on their sensors."

The cyborg sitting at one of the side stations chuckled. "Three, two, one...firing." He paused for seconds, watching a screen in front of him. "The pod is destroyed."

Steel nodded. "That should confuse them and the debris field should keep them back until they can slow enough to edge closer without fear of puncturing their hull."

"You came for me," Rena said softly.

Steel turned his head and looked into her eyes. "We heard when the *Gordon Lee* opened transmissions with you."

Some of her joy faded. "Oh." No one could ever accuse Rena of being slow witted. "So you came for me just because I needed to be saved?"

"You know too much," one of the cyborgs offered. "If you were captured by our enemy you could have given them vital information."

Pain lanced through her as she looked away from Steel, suddenly moving to get off his lap. *So much for coming after me because he changed his damn mind and figured out he didn't want to be without me.*

The strong arm around her waist tightened, jerking her ass back down on his lap, surprising. A frown marred his handsome features.

"I wanted to come after you and it was a damn good excuse."

Some of her hurt eased at his words. "You don't lie."

"I don't lie."

"What are you going to do with her? Keep her?" The cyborg who had blown up the pod spoke.

Rena wondered about that too. And would he keep her? That thought of staying with him didn't upset her or make her want to wiggle off his lap to put distance between them. She'd wanted to leave Earth to start a new life when she earned her big bonus but she'd always thought she'd end up living on Moon City, far from Chuck and out of his reach. So many questions filled her head.

"What happens next?"

"I don't know." Steel showed his emotions to her, not masking his uncertain expression. "If you return to Earth, they will arrest you and interrogate you to discover what really happened on the *Star* and to the crew of the *Bridden*. You going back there would be suicide."

"I'll buy your human from you," the pilot said suddenly. "I'd enjoy owning her."

Steel shot him a cold glare. “No. Return us to the *Vontage*. I take it we are not being pursued?”

“No,” the man turned in his seat to stare at his controls. “We are clear and they weren’t alerted to our presence. They stopped near the wreckage, probably scratching their human heads over how it malfunctioned and exploded.”

“Steel?”

He met her questioning look. “I don’t have answers, Rena. Somehow we’ll have to work the issues out later when we are alone.”

Issues? She wanted to groan. That was such an understatement. He wanted to marry someone else, a cyborg, but he’d said a cyborg woman wouldn’t let him keep her. Not to mention there was that whole monogamy issue that was going to be a big damn problem between them. She wouldn’t agree to be his mistress, refused to be with a man who slept with her and with other women, even if it was because of his cyborg patriotism. If she was with another man it wouldn’t be anything like her marriage to Chuck had been.

“We’ll work it out somehow,” he said softly, holding her tighter. “I haven’t run the scenarios for this situation yet but I’m working on a solution.” He paused. “I won’t give you up again.”

She pressed tighter into him, curling into his chest. She had to fight a smile at the way his mind worked. Maybe he could find some loophole in his laws and contracts. He was the smartest man she’d ever met. Plus, he had all those enhancements so if there was a way, he’d figure it out.

“Are you all right, Rena? You are very quiet and your heart rate is normal which I find disconcerting since you should be stressed. Are you depressed?”

“No.” She shook her head against his shoulder. “I’m relaxed actually, relieved that I’m with you, and I am refusing to stress, as you put it. I’m just damn happy to be alive and in your arms.”

His arms tightened around her. “Good.”

She dozed a few times, jerking awake to find Steel still holding her. The cyborgs didn’t talk at all, silently sharing the room but obviously not feeling the need to carry on a conversation. The sound of the engines lulled her back to sleep.

“We are docking with the *Vontage*,” Steel informed her softly, helping her stand.

“I didn’t sleep last night.” She grinned up at him. “Someone kept me awake. Sorry I fell asleep on you.”

“I’ll take you to bed and turn my work shift over to another so I may sleep with you. I want to hold you and appreciate that you are back.”

There was a soft bump as the *Bridden* docked to the *Vontage*, nothing more than a tiny sway of her body but Steel gripped her instantly to steady her just in case. Rena grinned up at him, appreciating how quick his reflexes were. He released her to hold out his hand, offering it to her.

She was gripping Steel’s hand as they exited the shuttle but what awaited them shocked her. Judging by the way Steel came to an abrupt halt, a frown on his face, she wasn’t alone. He tightened his hold on her.

Wire, Fusion, Blackie, Gene, and a half dozen other cyborgs waited in the cargo area. That didn't alarm Rena but the weapons pointed at Steel sure did as she stared at the unfamiliar black weapons the cyborgs held.

"You're arresting me?" Steel's tone was calm, almost curious.

"This wasn't my order," Blackie replied, jerking his head toward Fusion. "She contacted her biological donor to report that you'd taken the newly acquired shuttle."

Steel's attention turned to Fusion. She glowered at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "He's council member Zorus. He was quite interested in hearing that you risked such an important asset when it was not for the gain of Garden or our people but instead to save a human."

A muscle in his jaw jumped but his face remained emotionless as he continued to regard her. "I see."

"I don't," Rena said softly. "What is going on, Steel?"

"I went after you and obviously the council didn't agree with my decision. I'm being arrested and will be taken before them to defend my actions."

"But Earth Government would have tortured information out of me about your people. Don't they know that?"

"They will." Steel tore his focus away from her to scowl at Fusion. "Is this because I refused your offer to join your family unit?"

Fury darkened Fusion's skin, her hands fisting at her sides as she dropped her arms. "Yes it is. If you won't be with me, I refuse to allow a human to have you. If you reconsider I'll contact Zorus and tell him I was misinformed of the situation so he will have the charges dropped."

"Blackmail?" Steel's eyebrow arched. "That's very irrational and unstable behavior. I refuse to join into a contract with you."

Rage gripped the female cyborg's features. "Take him to holding and his human as well. They can enjoy each other's company in separate cells."

"That's uncalled for." Gene frowned at Fusion. "She's not a prisoner."

"They want to be together so let them." Fusion spun on her heel and stomped away. "Under council order, I am now in charge of the *Vontage* until we reach Garden. Follow my orders."

"I'm sorry," Blackie said softly. "I didn't file that report but when she did, they stripped me of command. Fusion made it sound as if we blindly follow you so our logic is flawed as a whole. I can have your guards treat you both with the utmost respect. It's all I can do until your trial. I will speak on your behalf. In the meantime, Wire has started to remove the implanted chips. They are located at the base of the back of the neck so it will be an easy procedure for our men. I'll make sure Wire gets access to you while you are here so she can remove yours." Blackie glanced at Rena. "She will not pose a threat to our men any longer."

Steel nodded at Blackie then squared his shoulders and turned away. "Let's go, Rena. I'll clear this up on Garden but until then we need to go with them to the holding cells."

She was too stunned to say anything, just let Steel and the armed cyborgs lead her out of the cargo area, down a hallway, to a lift. They traveled to what must have been the bowels of the ship, judging by how many levels they dropped before the lift stopped and opened to reveal a large room.

It was an open space with three large cages, beds and cleansing units set up in each one. Steel kept his head up, his shoulders straight as he led her into the closest cage, allowing one of the men to close the door between them before he moved to the cell next to hers. The sounds of the cages closing were loud and scary to Rena as she stared at the bars surrounding them and above their heads. The cage was about fifteen by ten feet with two-inch thick metal bars on all sides.

“Will you bring us blankets? She can’t regulate her body to adjust to the colder air down here.” Steel addressed one of the guards.

The man gave a jerk of his head, turned, and walked away. Steel turned to face Rena and reached through the bars to take her hand again.

“It will be fine. We’ll arrive at Garden in a matter of days.”

She closed the distance to latch onto him with both hands around his. “You got into trouble over me. I’m so sorry.”

“I have no regrets. You are here with me instead of captured and being hurt, so I achieved my goal.”

“What is going to happen to you if they don’t think what you did was the best thing?”

He hesitated. “I won’t be killed if that is your fear. This isn’t Earth Government and we don’t terminate other cyborgs except in extreme cases. Most likely I would be stripped of my position and I could be sentenced to do hard labor in one of the jobs that are very undesirable if I am found guilty of a crime.” He paused. “You didn’t ask what would happen to you.”

“I’m more concerned with your fate.”

A small smile played at his lips. “Thank you.” That smile died. “You belong to me and they can’t strip me of ownership of you so they’ll take you to my home where I’ll set up deliveries to care for you until I’m released, if I am found guilty.”

She was speechless.

“You will be a prisoner there but my home is comfortable and I have friends who will protect you.” He paused. “I will have you branded as mine so do not fight if someone arrives to do that. It will be on my orders.”

“But they won’t touch me, will they? Protect isn’t a nice word for saying they will try to have sex with me, right?”

He chuckled. “They wouldn’t dare attempt it. You are mine, Rena. I want you marked so all know it. Do you agree to carry my brand on your body?”

Her relief was instant. In cyborg language, she figured that was almost as good as a marriage proposal. “Yes! I’m so damn sorry about all of this. I feel responsible.”

“You are not. Fusion is irritated with my decision to refuse her and she is being vindictive.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “We are sometimes emotional and clearly let it show at times like these.”

One of the guards returned carrying a few folded blankets. He unlocked the cage door and stepped inside. Rena reluctantly released Steel's hand to accept them. The guard surveyed her body, smiling.

"If you are cold I will be more than happy to warm you up."

Rena backed away, gripping the blankets as Steel spoke, his voice harsh, deep, and icy cold. "Touch her and I'll kill you the first chance I get. I haven't been found guilty yet, Bortno, so keep that in mind."

Bortno gave a sharp nod, backing up. "I understand. She is yours."

"She is mine," Steel confirmed.

The guard left the cage and walked away, leaving them alone in the large room.

"Thank you."

"You're mine to protect."

"I guess we're going to get to know each other really well if we're going to be here for a while."

He smiled. "Yes."

She moved to her cot and gripped it, throwing her weight into it as she started to drag it toward the wall of his cell. The cot wasn't more than seventy or eighty pounds so she managed to maneuver it without too much trouble, pushing it up tight to the bars. She sat down cross-legged, facing the bars. Steel was watching her, amusement etching his features. He moved his own cot, mirroring its position to hers so the bars separated their mattresses. He removed his boots and sat down, mimicking her position.

"If we can't sleep together at least we're close. She reached through the bars to rub his knee. "And we can touch."

"I wish we could do more."

"Me too." She laughed.

"Sleep, you look tired."

"I'm exhausted actually but I'm also worked up, my mind is going a mile a minute."

"A mile a minute?" He laughed. "That is another Earth saying that is amusing. Thoughts are not measured in distance."

Laughing, she squeezed his knee. "That's good to know."

Steel moved suddenly, stretching out on his side on the cot, making her release her hold on him until he settled down, inches from the bars. "Lie down. Rest, my little siren. We have a lot of time to catch up on your sleep cycle and for talking."

She lay on her side, facing him. Steel reached through the bars and took her hand. She gripped his as their gazes locked.

"Do you think you'll beat the charges?"

"I have confidence that I can make them see the logic of my decision to go after you."

"And cyborgs are logical."

“For the most part.” He smiled. “Do not worry. The worst they will do is issue a difficult task for me to accomplish for a period of time. I can handle whatever punishment they deem appropriate.”

A yawn surprised her.

Steel smiled. “Sleep. Rest. I am here.”

Nodding, she closed her eyes. Steel was holding her hand, inches from her and she had to believe things would work out. She didn’t want to ponder any other options.

Chapter Thirteen

Garden was very similar to Earth with its lush vegetation and clear blue sky but the city was vastly different as Rena stared at the uniform blue buildings that all looked to be constructed from the same plans. The streets were remarkably clean, another huge difference from cities at home. She was afraid as they were led into one of the buildings. Steel was in front of her but they didn't have him in chains. Four large cyborgs surrounded them.

The city wasn't that large, perhaps the size of a small Earth city but a seventy-five-foot wall separated it from the woods surrounding it. Steel had informed her it was to keep the city protected from the natural inhabitants of the planet, a humanoid-amphibian race that so far they hadn't had much luck communicating with. The amphibians had tried to attack a few times but no deaths had resulted.

The room they were taken to was a courtroom, identifiable to Rena as she stared at the rows of chairs on one side, an open space, and then a higher large desk-like structure in the front of the room. Nine males and three female cyborgs sat behind that taller desk, their faces emotionless, and all wore matching white shirts. The guards led Steel to a lone chair in the center of the room where he stood. Rena was motioned to sit in a chair along the wall away from the rows of seats. The room was eerily silent.

"Let them in," one of the men behind the desk said.

"Yes, Councilman Zorus," the guard stated, turning to nod at another guard by a set of doors on the other side of the room.

Cyborgs came into the room in pairs. Their clothing varied, some in uniforms similar to the one Steel wore, while others were dressed in casual two-piece sets in various colors. Every face looked grim as Rena glanced at the strangers. They filled the five rows of seats in a quick and efficient manner. It was obvious they were there to watch the proceedings. Rena saw a few familiar faces, one of which she shot a glare at as Fusion took a front-row seat.

Blackie and Gene sat next to Fusion and two of the males from the *Bridden* were present—the pilot who had shuttled it to rescue Rena and the one who had blown up the pod. Not one of them looked at her so she focused her attention back on Steel. He stood there calmly, a bored expression on his face. Rena wished he'd look at her but he never turned his head, just leaving her to stare at his profile.

"Begin," one of the females behind the desk said softly.

Zorus nodded. He turned his head, his dark brown glare fixing on Rena. "We are the cyborg council of twelve. I am Zorus. You are to be a witness and you will be honest. Is that understood? We will be watching you closely and if we believe you are trying to deceive us, we will order you to be held during testimony, to monitor your responses. Do you understand?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

The cyborg frowned. "It's councilman."

"Yes, Councilman."

He nodded and turned to glare at Steel. "Explain yourself."

"What would you like me to explain? I retrieved her when it became apparent that Earth Government realized she had been in contact with us and they made it clear they would torture her to divulge that information. I realized she could not withstand their methods for long. The choice was to allow her to be captured or to avoid the situation by getting her back. I believe I made the correct choice."

That was all Steel planned to say in his defense? Rena's stomach was a bit queasy. There was so much he hadn't explained to help clear him of the charges. Why hadn't Steel told them all of it? She bit her lip, staring at the council members, trying to judge their reactions. She looked at each face but they masked whatever they were thinking or feeling.

"We've read all the reports," one of the women members stated. "I saw your logic." She turned her head to study Zorus with an intense look. "I don't know why we are here. We don't want Earth to know we have a home planet or that we were the ones who liberated some of their vessels from deep space. It was a sound plan to retrieve the human."

Zorus' features twisted with frustration as his mouth turned downward and his eyes narrowed. "Then you also read the reports about the specifications of the *Bridden*. We could clone the shielding technology from it and use that knowledge to help protect ourselves, yet he risked losing that potential asset over a human life."

A blond cyborg councilman frowned as his blue gaze locked on Zorus. "Yet his mission was successful without any damage to the *Bridden*. We have the human and Earth does not. Why are we here?"

Zorus looked enraged as his skin darkened noticeably. "He risked what doesn't belong to him for a human. Am I the only one to see this?"

The blond male stood and so did the black-haired cyborg to his immediate left. The blond spoke. "We are all aware you hate humans but you are wasting our time going after an honorable member of our society with your personal cause."

"He risked an asset for a human!" Zorus stood. "You both are the ones championing your own causes here today with your preference for those useless beings."

Both men sat down almost in unison. "Don't go there, old friend." The blond's voice had dropped to a harsh tone.

Zorus faced Steel. "Fine. They don't want to punish you for taking the *Bridden* but there is the issue of you freeing the human after she was captured. Why did you do that? By doing so you put us at risk for her to expose us in the first place."

"She is no threat to us." Steel looked tense as he spoke. "She had earned her freedom and those reasons are not up for debate here. I don't have to explain why I would free my own slave. It was no harm to us to release her."

"Then why did you have to retrieve her if it was so safe to let her go?"

Steel's jaw clenched. "We were unaware that Earth knew we had the *Star* so that factor wasn't part of my calculations when I deemed it was safe to let her go."

“Fine. You released her so she is no longer your property. She is now property of this council since you used the *Bridden* to retrieve her.”

“No,” Steel took a step toward the front of the room before he suddenly halted. “She is mine.”

“You released her,” Zorus smiled coldly. “Then you used a shuttle you were not authorized to take to capture her again. Under code five-four-six that makes her general property under the authority of the council.”

“As my job contract states, I am permitted to claim property as my own and she falls under that claim.” Steel’s voice had gone deep and harsh. “If you want to throw code out there, keep in mind that she wasn’t actually part of my salvage rights, but Flint’s. He gave her to me as a gift.”

“Then you released her, making her free. That voids out your ownership. She may as well have been garbage you discarded. She doesn’t fall under your salvage right claim since you weren’t on duty when you took her the second time. The human is now council property.”

Rena panicked. “What does that mean?”

Steel’s fists were balled at his sides. “No. She’s mine.”

“Steel?” Rena looked at him in distress over the notion they could take her from him.

The blond stood up. “I regret to inform you of this, Steel, but unfortunately Zorus is correct. You released her, absolving your rights of ownership and you don’t have salvage claim on her for unapproved missions. I wish I could think of a way for you to retain her but the law is clear.”

Zorus smiled. “Guards, take the human to the council house. I’m sure I can think up many duties for her to perform.”

The guard gripped Rena’s arm and tugged her to her feet. Her horrified gaze locked on Steel. As he turned she saw how pale he’d gone.

“I’ll buy her,” Steel said loudly. “I’ll indenture myself to service. Whatever you want, but sell her to me.”

“No.” Zorus shook his head. “Humans are a damaging influence on cyborgs. The fact that you want her is evidence enough to make my point. You are acting irrational to offer your freedom in any way for a mere human. Take her away.”

The guard tugged Rena toward the door they’d entered, taking her further from Steel. She realized what was happening, horrified that she’d gone from belonging to Steel to becoming the property of a group of strangers, her future totally in their hands.

“Steel!” She jerked out of the guard’s hold and ran toward him.

He turned and opened his arms wide so when she slammed into him, he held her. “I’ll get you back somehow,” he said softly. “Don’t fight them or they could harm you.”

Hot tears burned her eyes as she lifted her head. “Okay.”

“Rena Gates, I make a promise to you that I will get you back. That’s as good as a contract and you know how important those are to me. I will bargain for you, brand you as my own and you will be with me again very soon.”

She nodded, still fearful but aware of how determined Steel was. He’d get her back one way or another. “Okay.”

“Gates?”

It was the black-haired cyborg sitting next to the blond one who spoke suddenly. “Your last name is Gates? Your name is Rena Gates?”

She turned her head, staring at the man. “Yes.”

The black-haired man and the blond glanced at each other before both of them turned their attention to her. Both stood up. How they moved in unison was something Rena found unsettling.

“Give us the first name of your mother now.”

She frowned at the blond male but answered him. “Rora. Why?”

The blond caught his weight on the desk when he leaned forward. “What is your father’s first name?”

“Dean. Why do you want to know? Why are you asking me this?” She was confused about why they would want to know who her parents were.

The black-haired cyborg closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them. “She does not belong to the council. She belongs to Rais and me.”

“That’s impossible,” Zorus growled. “What code are you using to attempt to take sole possession of her?”

The blond straightened and moved as he walked toward the door nearest to him. He opened it and disappeared. The room was silent. Steel’s hold on her tightened when Rena looked up at him for answers, even more confused. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know what is going on either.”

“I demand an explanation,” Zorus ordered the black-haired cyborg. “Tell me now, Coval. What is your claim to the human?”

The door opened behind the council desk and drew Rena’s attention. There was a small woman, a pale-skinned human one with long black hair who walked in front of the blond. As she moved around the tall desks to take steps down to the floor, the blond cyborg remained behind her, gripping her arm. The woman’s head rose and a pair of dark brown eyes fixed on Rena.

A tingle ran along her spine. That woman looked very similar to her Aunt Marge, her mother’s sister. So much so that... Rena’s knees went weak and Steel had to grip her harder to keep her on her feet as the woman drew nearer.

“Rena?” The woman’s voice shook.

Hot tears spilled down Rena’s face. “Mom? Is that who you are? Are you my mother? You look like my Aunt Marge.”

The woman froze and tears ran down her cheeks as well. “It is you. Do you remember me?”

Shock rolled through Rena. “No. I was too young when you left but Aunt Marge told me all about you and showed me your pictures often. You’re alive. I thought you died when you stopped contacting her and sending us messages.”

“It became too risky once we settled here on Garden.” The blond male said softly. “She grieved heavily for your loss. I am Rais and he is Coval. We are contracted to your

mother in a family unit.” He turned his head to glare at Zorus. “She is the biological child of Rora so therefore this human belongs to us.”

Zorus fumed. “This is not the last you will hear of this.” He spun and stormed away, leaving the room quickly in a fit of frustrated rage.

Rora reached out a shaky hand and touched Rena’s face. “You’re so beautiful.”

Rena was still in shock as she gawked at the woman she thought was long dead.

“She’s mine,” Steel said softly. “I won’t let her go. We are together.” He paused. “We love each other.”

Rena’s head jerked up to stare at Steel. He looked down, his beautiful silvery blue eyes sparkling.

“I love you,” he said softly. “You love me. There is no denying that is what is between us. The more time we spend together the stronger our bond grows.”

Rais frowned. “We’ll work this out later. Right now let’s get out of here. You will both come with us.”

Steel didn’t budge. “You’re council. I have demands and you can fulfill them. You are obviously pro-human and you are in a family unit with one. I refuse to give up Rena.”

Rais’ gaze narrowed on Steel. “What is it you want?”

“Rena belongs to me. Reinstate my property rights to her and I want to be removed from my current breeding pact and put in one with all healthy breeders so there is never a need for me to be called to donate. Rena would be emotionally harmed if I had to breed with other women. I also need a special consideration to be allowed to not breed my own children. I have successfully donated eight times so my DNA is added to the general pool but I don’t wish to contract in a family unit with any female but Rena. She’s human so I realize having children isn’t an option.”

Rora let her hand drop away from Rena as she looked up at Steel. “You can have children with my daughter. We,” She motioned between herself and the two cyborgs beside her, “have had four healthy sons so breeding between human and cyborg is successful.”

Steel frowned. “I was informed this wasn’t possible since the children would be too damaged.”

“They lied. There are many here who do not approve of cyborgs and humans mating and will go to great lengths to keep that secret.” Coval, the dark-haired cyborg had come forward, speaking very softly. “Our sons are very healthy. You could breed with her if she’s willing.” He looked at Rena. “You care for him?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I love him.”

Rais looked down at his wife. “Rora? It’s your call, our love.”

“Whatever makes her happy. I owe her that.”

“Let’s go somewhere private.” Coval sighed. “We’re being watched.”

Rena turned her head and noticed that the courtroom was still filled with a lot of curious cyborgs. She still reeled from the astonishing fact that her mother was alive, that she had two stepfathers, and she had four half-cyborg brothers if her mother had given birth to them. It left her so stunned that Steel had to guide her up the stairs and through the council doors into a large office.

“I told you it would work out,” Steel said softly. “Your mother is contracted to two of the strongest council members who can make sure we get contracts in place that assure our happiness together. They can take me out of my current breeding pact so I can offer you monogamy, and they are stating our breeding together would work. It is all we could want.”

The other council members had already cleared the room when they entered so they had the privacy they needed to talk. Rena stood across a table facing her mother and both her stepfathers. Steel took a seat and tugged her down on his lap.

“I’m so sorry for leaving you,” Rora said softly. She glanced at Coval and then Rais before she looked back at Rena. “I once loved your father but our marriage wasn’t a happy one. We were too different and I tried to make it work but it didn’t. I believed in my cause to save cyborgs while your father wanted them all destroyed. I always loved you the most over everything, but I had to save their lives. I couldn’t live with doing nothing and watching them die. I wanted to take you with me but it was too dangerous, we didn’t think we’d survive long, and you had a better chance at a happy, long life on Earth. After I helped them escape we were together all the time and we fell in love.”

Coval took Rora’s hand. “She’s everything to Rais and me.” Coval’s other hand reached out to brush Rais’ cheek, both men sharing a tender look before he let his hand drop. “The three of us are in love with each other.”

Rais nodded. He turned his attention to Steel. “You must swear to protect and honor her as if she were a cyborg woman, not just property, if you want us to transfer her ownership back to you. We have tried to change the laws of humans being owned, but cyborg memory of Earth is far reaching and long. Rora is still property status but it matters not. She is our equal in every way.”

“I give my word.” Steel agreed.

“Then you have permission to marry my daughter if she’ll have you,” Rora said softly, staring at Rena. “Life is good here.”

Rena turned her head to smile at Steel. “I believe that.”

“My husbands will draw up a family unit contract and Coval will replace you in your breeding pact so you won’t be used to donate your sperm anymore.” Rora smiled at them both.

“Done,” Coval said softly but then laughed. “It’s not like we haven’t done this before. It’s harder to do, but we pulled ourselves out of breeding pacts entirely.” He smiled at Rena. “The pacts are in groups of twelve. We have odd numbers out and those are easier to get displaced. They are considered floaters until we have twelve of them to put into a pact.” He smiled at Steel. “They can’t add you if you aren’t on the waiting list. You’re about to get lost in the system.”

Joyously, Rena focused on Steel. “So we can get married— Contract a family unit and you don’t have to sleep with other people? Is that what’s he’s saying?”

Steel smiled. “Correct. I told you that it would work out.”

“You didn’t run this scenario, Steel,” she teased, looking away from him to turn her attention on her mother, still amazed over her being alive. “Nobody could have seen this one coming.”

* * * * *

Rena listened with half an ear as she watched her mother interact with her two husbands while they laughed and joked with Steel. They used their desk station to draw up the family unit contract and change Steel's breeding status in the pact. The love was apparent as she watched one of the men reach over to touch her mother's hand, the soft smile she gave him, and the way the other man leaned in to brush his arm against her shoulder, drawing another smile from Rora.

Two husbands? Rena glanced at Steel, happy she just had one big guy in her heart and in her future. She'd wanted to get away from Chuck, wanted a new life, and that's why she'd left Earth. She'd never suspected she'd find love, family, and happiness when she'd nervously boarded the *Bridden*. Tears filled her eyes.

Steel went silent, cutting off what he was saying immediately to cup her face, turning her chin to lift her eyes to his worried gaze. "Are you all right, my little siren?"

"Yes. I was just thinking about how blessed I feel to have met you."

A warm, wonderful smile adorned his handsome face. "I feel the same. You've taught me that I may have fought to have a life of my own but I wasn't living it until you demanded I be given to you."

Rena turned her head to smile at her mother. "I am going to love getting to know you but Steel and I have spent days locked up next to each other unable to touch, if you know what I mean. Can we get together later? I really want to be alone with him."

If she thought she'd upset her mother, Rena was wrong. Rora chuckled.

"Days, huh? What are you still doing here? We'll have dinner tomorrow." Dark eyes sparkled with amusement. "He just needs to sign the papers and then you can go with your new husband."

Rena watched Steel sign the family unit contract. She didn't have to sign anything as his property, legally unable to disagree with him even if she wanted to, which she didn't. It wasn't a wedding ceremony but she'd had that with Chuck, with their unhappy marriage. She pushed that thought away. He was part of her past—one she didn't want to revisit. Steel took her hand, nodded at the three other people in the room and then he led Rena out onto the street.

"Wow, this place is incredible. It's so damn clean." She ignored the cyborgs who stopped to stare at the small human woman holding the big silver-haired cyborg's hand. "Are we going back to the *Vontage* now?"

"I have a home here at the top of one of these buildings and it contains a big bed."

Rena chuckled, squeezing his hand. "Walk faster. Take me to your bed."

"Our bed." He stopped walking suddenly and grinned as he looked around them.

Rena had to stop when he did. "What?"

"They are all watching us."

"I was trying to ignore that. I feel like a bug under a microscope."

Steel peered down at her, still grinning. "Touching in public is frowned upon here but it isn't a law." He moved suddenly as he released her hand and swept her into his

arms to hold her against him. “Maybe if they see happiness and emotion they will try to experience it as well.” He leaned his head forward.

Rena wrapped her arms around his neck as she lifted her lips to his, aware that many cyborgs watched them. She didn’t give a damn how many people gawked as his mouth took possession of hers.

She’d missed this, missed being so damn close to Steel that she could feel his heartbeat against her chest. He used his tongue to tease and taunt her mouth, sucking on her in the way he tugged on her clit, sending signals down to her sex, making it throb with need. Her body warmed, her nipples hardened and she started to ache between her thighs, wetness dampening her underwear. She wanted to get into his bed in the worst way as she got lost in that kiss, her hands sliding up into his hair to fist it, pulling his mouth down to hers. They were both breathing hard when Steel broke the kiss.

“If I don’t stop I’ll take you right here, fuck you in front of all of them, just to be inside you.”

“Kiss me like that again and I’d let you,” she laughed. “Walk, babe. Carry me or put me down to walk beside you, but let’s go. I want to get naked with you.”

“We’re going home, my little siren.”

Steel shifted her in his arms, adjusting his hold on her, and grinned as he walked past dozens of stunned cyborgs on the street.

Rena tucked her cheek against his shoulder, loving that he could easily carry her, making her feel sexy and cherished. Excitement raced through her. Soon she’d get to see her new home and then she’d be kissing Steel, making love to him.

Yeah, life is great, she thought.

About the Author

I'm a full time "in-house supervisor" (sounds *much* better than plain ol' housewife), mother and writer. I'm addicted to caramel iced coffee, the occasional candy bar (or two) and trying to get at least five hours of sleep at night.

I love to write all kinds of stories. I think the best part about writing is the fact that real life is always uncertain, always tossing things at us that we have no control over, but when you write, you can make sure there's always a happy ending. I *love* that about writing. I love it when I sit down at my computer desk and put on my headphones to listen to loud music to block out the world around me, so I can create worlds in front of me.

Laurann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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