

## **SEX RATING: SCORCHING/SEXTREME**

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## **SIREN SEX Rating**

**SENSUAL:** Sensual romance with love scenes comparative to most romance novels published today

**STEAMY:** Heavy sexual tension; graphic details; may contain coarse language

**SIZZLING:** Erotic, graphic sex; explicit sexual language; may offend delicate readers

**SCORCHING:** Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

**SEXTREME:** Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

## An Ike Payne Adventure, Book 1

## For the Love of Payne : Desert Heat : Lust to the Third

The time or place doesn't matter. A cop is still a cop, and a marine is still a marine.

Ikira "Ike" Payne, marine beat-cop for the Empire of Mankind, has love, crime, politics, and interstellar terrorism all on her plate.

# For the Love of Payne

Sergeant Ike Payne: Cop, aspiring author, Marine. She has power, respect, friendship, and the only career she's ever wanted. She also has a locked room murder attempt and 24,000 suspects.

Tensions mount to solve the crime, and Ike is thrown together with Devon Henson, a young lieutenant, to find the killers and protect the crew and civilians aboard His Majesty's Starship Boone.

Ike and Devon's passions rise as shadowy terrorists take over the computers controlling the ship and begin a rampage of death and destruction that pulls Ike and Devon, alone and out-gunned, into a deadly confrontation with the leader of the terrorist group.

No matter the technology, battle always comes down to a woman and a gun. Their survival, and that of everyone on Boone, depends on the Love of Payne.

# FOR THE LOVE OF PAYNE

An Ike Payne Adventure, Book 1

**Melodee Aaron** 



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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## A Note on Capitalization

In Ike Payne's Boone military environment, royal and military titles are capitalized even when used in an indefinite, general manner or in the plural (i.e., several Marines, the young Lieutenant, the Emperor, the Princess, etc.). It is intentional on the author's part.

## For the Love of Payne

An Ike Payne Adventure, Book 1

**By Melodee Aaron** 

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#### **Chapter 1**

#### Assignments

*My name is Payne, and I'm a cop. There are twenty-four thousand stories on Boone, and this is just one of them.* 

*My beat is His Majesty's Starship Warren E. Boone. I don't work like the old gumshoes. Boone is a high-technology place.* 

Ike stared at the screen of her data terminal, shaking her head. "Now, that is crap." She hit the *DELETE* key.

She knew it was crap, but it was also true. Even as a kid, she always wanted to be a cop. While it maybe didn't go the way she'd thought it might, things worked out in the end. A Marine Sergeant and the MP in charge of security for HMSS Boone, the largest ship in the Fleet, Ike handled all the internal matters a cop anywhere would deal with. Most cases were minor. There was the occasional fight, maybe a kid shoplifting from one of the stores in the mall, folks getting a little out of hand outside the adult-only areas of the Observation Deck, and, once in a great while, a domestic dispute with possible assault. Mostly just routine stuff. In the big picture, it didn't boil down to meaning a lot.

Boone had twenty-four thousand crew and civilians on board. In many ways, Boone was like a small town, especially in the fact everyone pretty well knew everyone else. There were

really no strangers on Boone. A gunman would find it hard to holdup someone he knew. More important, exactly where would he hide? An operational spacecraft, Boone effectively became an island in space. An island that moved around a lot. He couldn't even hope to escape at a port of call. Boone, as fast as she was, often took weeks to get from one star system to the next, and her course was subject to change. It wasn't unusual for the crew in general not to know a change had been made.

All this conspired to make Ike's job as a cop just a little boring.

The most important task on her plate was the fact that Boone served as the Emperor's flagship, and she provided protection for him and his family. She often read in her grandfather's journal about how, nearly seven hundred years ago, he investigated the Emperor, then The Lord Admiral of the Fleet, for a possible assault case involving his wife, Marilyn. It turned out the Emperor had accidentally strangled her while they were having sex when he tried to rip her clothes off.

Ike decided recently she'd write a book about being a cop on a spaceship, but so far, she hadn't shown any knack for writing. It was a good thing she hadn't used pen and paper. She would have used up an entire rain forest by now.

Ike turned off the terminal and went to bed.

\* \* \* \*

While she tried to fall asleep, Ike thought about Jacques. He'd been with her for more than six years, and they'd settled into a stable, but boring, relationship. Even now, Ike thought she loved Jacques. Maybe not loved as in spending the rest of her life with him, but she did love him on some level.

Jacques wanted more than Ike could give him, though. He wanted to get married and settle down, leave the Fleet, and have a bunch of kids. That didn't fit with what Ike wanted. With a potential lifespan of over 400 hundred years, Ike couldn't see spending the next 350 in that way.

Jacques said his goodbye and transferred to a duty station on Earth. That was three years ago.

Ike still missed him. She was honest enough with herself to know that she really missed the affection. Sex she could get.

She'd dated a few men and several women since Jacques left, but it was sex only. Ike couldn't make the emotional investment. Not at this point in her life.

In her forty-six years, Jacques had been the only lover Ike had who called her Ikira.

\* \* \* \*

Ike had time to take one sip of her coffee when she reached her office. The intercom buzzed, and the Emperor wanted to see her right away. Ike had been on Boone and around the Emperor all her life. She knew better than to keep the man waiting.

As she walked to the Emperor's office, she wondered what this could be about. Boone wasn't due to make port for more than a month as far as she knew. When she reached the Emperor's office, Ike pushed her way inside through the large, old-fashioned wooden doors.

The Emperor and Admiral Reeves—Zach, not Claire—were at the desk. "Ike. Thanks for coming so soon. Please, have a seat." The Emperor indicated the chair next to the Admiral.

"Thank you, Sir. Good morning, Admiral."

Admiral Zach Reeves, Chief of Fleet Alien Relations, was a hunk. His short black hair, blue eyes, and boyish charm were enchanting. The downside was that while he looked about thirty-five, he was over seven hundred, and was married to the other Admiral Reeves, Claire, Chief of Fleet Medical Operations. He was very married. He was also the son-in-law of the Emperor. There was nothing like a little nepotism. "Morning, Ike."

"I'm sorry to drag you away from your desk, but I wanted to give you a little warning." The Emperor smiled. "We're going to meet a Wengly ship in four days and take on a passenger."

"I assume this passenger is going to need security?"

"Yeah, that's right. The passenger will be the Wengly Ambassador to Palea." Zach leaned back in the chair like he would fall asleep at any moment.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me, Sir?"

The Emperor laughed. He had a great laugh and wasn't all that bad himself. While not big and burly like Zach, Jim Jenkins—or as most people knew him, Emperor James the First, by Grace of God, Emperor to Mankind—was handsome in his own way. But he had four wives, and legend had it, two of them had kicked the ass of an Ensign years ago because she looked at their husband a little too long. "I guess not. The fact of the matter is there's a group who'd like to see the Ambassador never make it to Palea." He looked at Zach.

"We have Intelligence reports showing there may be members of this group who have infiltrated the Fleet."

Ike reviewed the few Paleans on Boone in her head. "So you need me to protect him?"

The Emperor nodded. "Yes, but it's her. Eeto Tinn is her name."

"I've given you access to all the files we have on the Ambassador and the Palean group. They call themselves the Palean Liberation Front." Zach thought for a moment. "If there's anything else you need access to, just let me know."

"How serious do you think this group is about stopping the Ambassador?" Ike protected ambassadors and such in the past, so this was nearly routine.

"I think they're very serious." Zach glanced at the Emperor for a moment. "Death threats have been made that the Palean and Fleet Intelligence departments are taking seriously."

"All right. Let me look at the files and check a few things. We'll be ready when the Ambassador gets here."

The Emperor swung his feet down from his desk. "If you need anything, talk to Zach or myself, and we'll make it happen for you."

As she made her way back to her office, Ike thought this might be a nice change of pace for her.

\* \* \* \*

While Ike reviewed the Intelligence reports, the yeoman buzzed and said Sean Lyons was here to see her. She sighed and told the yeoman to send him in. Sean was Ike's latest something. She wasn't sure exactly what Sean was, though. Lover, boyfriend, flame, boy-toy, walking dildo. They all fit Sean.

"Hi, Ike." He came around the desk and kissed her cheek.

"Hi. What brings you out today?"

"I hoped you could get away for lunch."

Ike looked at the screen for a moment. "Yeah, I need to get away from this for a while. What do you have in mind?"

Sean's eyes twinkled a little. "How about my place?"

"What do you plan to eat for lunch?"

"You."

Now that she thought about it, a nooner didn't sound all that bad. "You've got a deal."

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Sean's cabin door had closed, he pulled her hand, and she spun into his arms. Sean wasn't the big burly type any more than the Emperor was, but it still felt good to be in any arms right now. She kissed him, biting his lower lip. Ike had never been sure if Sean's clothing or his body smelled of coffee. He ran the coffee shop on the mall, and the odor was everywhere. At least it was good coffee.

After they'd stumbled to the sofa, still kissing, Ike removed her uniform. Sean sat down and watched. Ike didn't begrudge him this one idiosyncrasy. He liked to watch her undress. Actually, she enjoyed the attention.

At forty-six, Ike wasn't considered close to middle-aged yet, and four thousand years ago, she would have looked like any woman of twenty-five on the street. Three mornings a week, Ike ran five kilometers, and three evenings a week, she worked out in the gym. Both activities kept her body firm and shapely. Her skin was smooth and soft over the firm muscles. She knew her figure was admirable, and she kept her auburn hair short and curled around her face.

Ike was, however, first and foremost, a Marine. The exercising wasn't to keep her looking good. It was to keep her in fighting trim. Ike rarely wore anything other than her fatigues, and she paid little attention to her appearance as a woman. She didn't need to look good to kick someone's ass. She never wore makeup, shaved her arms and legs only when she couldn't stand them anymore, and had never even seen the inside of the spa in the mall. Ike knew her face and figure were more than able to turn a man's head. She wasn't interested in attracting a man. She didn't need one, other than for sex, and even that had more than one workaround.

She finished undressing, teasing Sean a little as she went. "Lie down." Sean stretched out on the sofa, and Ike put her right leg over the back, lowering herself onto his face. He slowly licked from her ass to her clit, plunging his tongue into her core as he passed. Over and over, he licked her pussy, and Ike felt her wetness spreading and running down her left thigh. She closed her eyes and moved her hips to rub herself on his tongue. When his tongue darted in and out of her pussy, fucking her, his nose rested in the perfect spot to rub against her clit. More important, he didn't hesitate to eat her pussy at any time. He sucked her clit and swirled his tongue around the tip while his hands came up. He put two fingers in her slit while his thumb pressed against her ass. As he worked his fingers faster in her and sucked harder on her clit, she felt herself nearing climax. Ike grabbed his hair, pulled his face into her, and screamed in ecstasy. In the throes of her orgasm, Ike knew her relationship with Sean lacked the passion she had felt with Jacques. The climax felt great, but it ended with the physical feeling.

As she eased herself from the sofa, Ike grabbed Sean's cock through his pants. "Are you packing a blaster, or are you just happy to see me?" Ike's smile felt forced, but Sean didn't seem to notice. Ike knew he just wanted to get off.

"I'm happy to see you." Sean smiled at her, licking his face.

She knelt in front of him and undid his pants. One thing she had to give Sean was that he had a huge dick. More than half-again as long as her hand and too big around to grip with one hand, he was way beyond average. Ike had dildos much smaller than Sean. When his cock sprang from his pants, Ike kissed the head and licked the underside slowly, making sure to keep her eyes on his. He even tasted like coffee. She couldn't remember seeing him ever drink anything other than coffee or beer.

Ike didn't mind giving Sean head, especially after he'd eaten her pussy, but she had to watch him. Like many men, he tended to want to shove his cock down her throat, and he was just too big for that. She learned early in their relationship not to suck him off. He was good for one shot every eight hours, and that was all.

While she sucked and licked him, she watched his eyes cross. She kept bringing him near climax, then letting him slip away again. She'd learned to play this game.

Ike stood and pulled Sean's pants from him. She then turned her back and sat in his lap, easing his cock into her still wet pussy. She slid up and down his full length, feeling it fill her completely. As she rode his dick, she rubbed her clit frantically. Ike's mind wandered, as it often did when she had sex with Sean. The physical sensations were great, but she lacked an emotional connection to him. Ike liked him. She certainly didn't love him.

Ike felt herself nearing climax. She bounced in his lap, feeling his stiff cock punching her cervix and the back of her dripping cunt. Sean tensed, and Ike sat down hard as they both climaxed, his fingers digging into her breasts as they shook in a seizure of pleasure.

Ike sat on his rapidly softening cock, her breathing ragged and fast. Once again, the smell of freshly ground coffee filled her nose. Not for the first time, she found the strong odor a little nauseating. She stood and turned to face him, holding his head to her stomach. "You're always so good."

He kissed her firm stomach. "So are you. Let's get showered so we can eat something before you have to go."

She followed Sean to the shower, watching his ass as he walked. At least he was cute. Ike thought *walking dildo* wasn't a bad name for him.

\* \* \* \*

Ike spent the rest of the afternoon reviewing the background checks for the eleven Paleans assigned to Boone. They had all been here for at least a year, and the checks had all been clear. She sent their names off to Intelligence to update the background files.

Ike also reviewed the files on the Ambassador and saw nothing unusual there. In an effort to develop trade between the two worlds, the Wengly assigned the Ambassador to go to Palea, and she had full negotiating authority. The Wengly and the Empire, including Palea, had been at each other's throats just two hundred years ago. The efforts of Admiral Reeves and Captain Ruhl, Princess Charlotte's husband, brought peace, and things had gone well since that time.

The last file Ike looked at was the information on the Palean Liberation Front. Intelligence believed the group to be small, perhaps a few thousand members, but they were fanatics. The group claimed responsibility for, and had been connected by evidence to, several terrorist attacks on Palea, including the bombing of the Wengly Embassy that killed eighty-seven people, mostly Palean. Intelligence, both Palean and Fleet, believed the group had no respect for life and would kill anyone who got in their way.

The file had a problem. No one seemed to know what the PLF wanted. The cause they fought for and were willing to kill and die over remained a mystery.

## Chapter 2 The Ambassador

Ike made assignments among her staff for the details to guard Ambassador Tinn. Boone would rendezvous with the Wengly ship tomorrow. Ike checked the quarters the Ambassador would occupy herself. Everything was in readiness for her arrival. Intelligence had completed the background updates of the Paleans on Boone and found nothing of concern. They were clean as boiled soap.

Ike shifted in her chair a little. She'd spent the night with Sean and, by some miracle, he'd managed to get it up three times. She was a little sore. The intercom buzzed. "Payne."

"Ike, this is Admiral Reeves."

At least he hadn't come to her office. He was more than a little distracting. "Yes, Sir."

"The Emperor asked me to make sure you have everything ready and see if you need anything."

"Everything's ready, Admiral, and I think we're in good shape."

"Very well." Reeves paused a moment. "I didn't know if you were aware, but your greatgrandpa was a good friend of the Emperor."

"Yeah, Grandpa told me that."

"He was a good man, and a good friend. The Emperor trusted him with everything. Jim sees you as an extension of him, and he trusts you, too."

Ike stared at the intercom for a second. "That's good to know. I won't let him down."

"I know you won't." He paused again. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do, Sir. Thanks." Ike clicked the intercom off and wondered what that was all about.

\* \* \* \*

The Wengly ship docked with Boone precisely on schedule. The Wengly were persnickety about punctuality. Ike and her people took up positions in the docking area, and she watched the small crowd gathered there for the official arrival.

Besides the Emperor and Zach, all four of the Empresses, Zach's wife, Captain Ruhl, and his wives, Princess Charlotte and Tomi, were there. Ike fussed a little about the several wives as well as the Emperor being there. The PLF might try something right away. It was made clear to her the entire clan would turn out.

At least the Emperor's son, Jimmy, hadn't shown up. Admiral Jimmy Jenkins was a weasel of a man. He looked just like the Emperor, but he didn't have any people skills. His partner, Edward, was a great guy, but the Admiral was a pain in the ass.

The airlock cycled, and the small honor guard snapped to attention and presented arms. The door opened, and Ambassador Eeto Tinn stepped through.

Strange-looking people, Wengly stood half-again as tall as a human, and most were very slender. They had very long legs, and each of the four long arms made their hands level with their knees. The Wengly evolved from their planet's version of a grasshopper. To Ike, Wengly looked more spider-like and fragile with thin limbs and torsos. To reinforce the spider image, they had large heads and big, dark multiple-pupil eyes. Wengly tended to wear long, flowing clothing that made them seem to float as they walked.

Zach bowed. "Ambassador Tinn. May I present His Royal Majesty James the First, By Grace of God, Emperor to Mankind."

The Ambassador bowed slightly. "I am pleased to meet you, Your Majesty." Her English was perfect and without accent.

"As I am pleased to meet you, Ambassador." The Emperor introduced his wives, daughters, sons-in-law, and every other political type in the room. "Finally, I'd like to present Sergeant Ikira Payne, the commander of the Marine contingent who'll see to security while you're with us."

Ike bowed formally. "Pleased to meet you, Ambassador Tinn."

"As I am you, Sergeant. I feel very safe in your hands."

Zach understood enough about security to know it was time to get the Ambassador out of public areas. "I'm sure you're tired, Ambassador. We'll show you to your quarters so you can relax a little before dinner."

The Emperor and Zach flanked the Ambassador as Ike led the way to her quarters. She and her security crew watched the corridors for assassins.

\* \* \* \*

When they reached the Ambassador's suite, Ike halted the procession at the door as two of her team swept the room. Ike only allowed them to enter after the team found the room clear. Zach and the Emperor made their goodbyes, leaving Ike and the Ambassador alone.

The Ambassador turned to Ike. "Sergeant, I want to thank you again for seeing to my safety."

"You're welcome, Ma'am. Please call me Ike, though."

The exoskeleton made the Ambassador's face almost impossible to read. "Ike?" She froze for a moment. "Ah! From the first two syllables of your name."

"Yes, Ma'am. Were you made aware there might be a threat to you?"

"I was. I am concerned, but that does not sway me from my mission."

"That's good. We want you to be able to move about as freely as we can, but there may be times I'll have to ask you to stay in places where I can ensure your safety."

"I understand. Can you tell me how long it will take to reach Palea?"

"It should take about nine days, Ma'am."

The Ambassador made a clicking sound. "Please call me Eeto. There is no need for you to call me by any title or honorific."

"I'll try, but old habits die hard."

Again there was the clicking noise. "I understand."

"I'm going to step out and check the contingent, and allow you to rest. The Emperor expects us for dinner at 1800. It's just after 1500 ship's time now."

"Yes, I would like to rest before dinner." Eeto looked around the room. "I am afraid our ships are not as large or as comfortable as this."

"Yeah, Boone is a big place." Ike took a small communicator from her pocket and gave it to Eeto. "This is a direct communicator. You could call it a panic button. All you need do is press the button, and it will send a signal to the contingent outside and directly to me. If you feel at all uncomfortable at any time, like you may be in danger, please press the button, and we will respond immediately."

Eeto took the device and examined it for a moment. "I understand. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll be back at 1745 to escort you to dinner."

Ike left the Ambassador to relax.

\* \* \* \*

Ike decided to stop by the coffee shop that Sean managed. As she walked to the mall, Ike wondered about the Intelligence reports and the fact there was no indication of what the PLF wanted. The reports had shown that, over the last five years, the PLF had killed at least five hundred Paleans in several bombings, mostly using suicide bombers.

She wasn't concerned about a bomb, suicide or otherwise, on Boone. The automatic sensors would detect all known explosives in any concentrations large enough to pose a threat. Ike's biggest worry was someone with a small, probably improvised, projectile weapon. If she had something a little more substantial to hang her suspicions on, she'd have the Ambassador in body armor. Eeto seemed nice enough. She was a nice enough woman that Ike wondered why anyone would want to kill her, but she knew the PLF were simple terrorists. They didn't need a reason other than their own fanatically skewed thoughts to justify not only killing, but also dying.

She reached the coffee shop and went to the counter where Sean worked the register. "Hi, Ike. I don't like to see you frown like that. It'll cause you to have wrinkles."

"Yeah, you're probably right. I was just thinking."

Sean looked around, and the crowd at the mall wasn't very bad. "Grab a table and I'll be out in a minute."

Ike found a table at the sidewalk. Sean soon joined her with two cups of coffee. "Thanks. I need this."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just thinking about the Ambassador. I haven't slept well for a few days."

"You're really worried about this, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am. Just this little butterfly feeling in my stomach."

"I know everything will be all right. With you on the job, how could it be otherwise?"

"Yeah, right. At least one of us has faith in me." Ike knew Sean wasn't very good at small talk, but she at least had company now.

"I do. Have you figured out your evening yet?"

"Sort of. I won't be by tonight, though. As much as I'd like to spend the night, I'll be with the Ambassador most of the evening, and then I need to catch up on some paperwork."

"You don't know what you're missing."

"Yeah, I do, and that's what bothers me." She stroked his fragile male ego a little.

"We could slip away for a quickie."

Ike glanced at her watch. "Yeah, I can do that."

Sean stood and took her hand. "Come with me." He led her to the small storeroom of the coffee shop, closing and locking the door behind them. He massaged her breasts. "So little time and so much to do."

All the men Ike had been with, and most of the women as well, had a fascination for her breasts. Large, firm, and with big nipples, her boobs worked to her advantage in her professional work. Two men in a fight tended to forget what they fought about when a woman with big tits and blaster walked up. She reached down and rubbed his crotch. "That's true."

Sean unbuttoned her uniform blouse and nuzzled her neck and shoulder, biting at her bra strap. "How much time do we have?"

Ike rubbed his cock through his pants, feeling it swell under her touch. "Maybe fifteen minutes." Ike rarely understood her own sexuality and why she wanted to do certain things at certain times. Then again, she never tried very hard to understand it. She usually just went with what she wanted at a particular moment. "Do you have your heart set on fucking me? I want to suck your cock."

He laughed. "Hey, whatever you want."

As she knelt on the floor in front of him, she released his dick from his pants. It jumped out at her, its full length and girth showing his erection proudly as it slapped the side of her face. The first time Ike had put her hand down Sean's pants, she was amazed at the treasure she'd found there. The first time she gave him a blowjob, she had, for some stupid reason, actually tried to deep throat him. She damned near choked herself to death.

As Ike slowly licked his cock, she ruminated about the only thing she missed, sexually, about Jacques. His dick had been almost as long as Sean's, but not nearly as wide. Her mind drifted again.

Ike almost laughed when she realized that the smell of roast coffee beans made her want another cup. The blend was a curious mixture of plain and flavored varieties, and the result was very pleasant.

Even though she missed the sensations, there was no way Sean was going to put his huge cock up her ass. Sean lacked the emotional side and Ike knew he would try to fuck her ass too hard, hurting her. Instead of the pleasant sliding of a stiff dick, she would endure a painful experience only to gratify him.

As she sucked the head of his dick into her mouth, Sean reached for her head. She popped her mouth from him. "No, no. You know I can't swallow this thing."

He moaned a little. "I know. Sorry."

She nibbled the end of his cock. "That's OK." Ike didn't blame him. He just did what any man would do, and tried to shove his cock deeper into her hole, no matter which one his dick happened to be in at the moment. Ike rapidly sucked his head as she flicked her tongue around his cock. She didn't feel badly about seeing Sean as a sex object. He saw her the same way. They weren't together for love, but simply for sex and company.

She glanced at her watch. Their fifteen minutes were nearly up. She sucked harder and faster. In minutes, she felt Sean tense and his cum exploded into her mouth, hitting the back of her throat like water from a hydrant. Even the saltiness of his cum was tinged with a coffee flavor. After swallowing his seed, she stood. "That's about all we have time for."

Sweat poured from his face, and he panted rapidly. "That's about all I have stamina for."

She laughed as she dressed. Sean still leaned against a bag of coffee beans. "I'll see you tomorrow." She kissed the end of his nose and left him there with his pants around his ankles.

\* \* \* \*

Ike went to her office to finish a few minor details and prepare herself to escort Eeto to dinner. The intercom buzzed. "Payne."

The Emperor's face swam into focus. "I'm glad I caught you. The Ambassador has asked that you not only escort her to dinner this evening, but that you also join us for dinner. My wives have echoed those feelings."

Didn't these people know she was a cop and had a job to do? Ike didn't have time to play the silly games of the aristocracy. "I'd love to, Sir, but my primary concern is to protect the Ambassador."

"Understood. You can wear your dress uniform and your sidearm. I doubt battle armor will be needed at dinner."

Ike asked her ancestors and the gods above for help, but none seemed forthcoming. "Yes, Sir. I'll do that." What choice did she have? The man was the fucking Emperor!

"That's good. We'll see you at 1800." He clicked off.

Ike stared at the intercom for a few minutes. She decided she should go home and get ready for dinner.

If she could even find her dress uniform.

## Chapter 3 Dinner Parties

Like all Marines, Ike knew how to cuss with the best of them. She ran out of the really good words before she was even ready to start dressing. Just shaving her legs and arms, and plucking her eyebrow—she hadn't tweezed in so long that she only had the one all the way across—had her fuming. She couldn't find her dress pants, so she had to fall back to wearing the skirt. Ike couldn't remember the last time she'd worn a skirt.

As she squinted in the mirror trying to create two eyebrows, she wondered what the aristocrats thought they were doing. They had good reason to believe someone might try to kill the Ambassador, and now they were going to parade her around the ship and a room full of people. Talk about a sitting duck.

Just after 1700, Ike quit plucking at her eyebrows. She had two distinct ones now, and tears poured from her eyes. She looked at the skirt lying on the bed and tried to think of another option. The biggest problem with the skirt, once she got beyond the fact cold air would blow up her twat, was she'd have no place to put the things she needed to carry. The sidearm was no problem. Just strap the bastard on and forget about it. She wanted to take a couple of flash-bang grenades as well as a canister or two of sleepy-gas. That meant she needed her respirator and goggles as well. On top of everything else, she now resigned herself to the fact she needed to carry a purse. This just kept getting fucking better and better.

She dressed, loaded her purse, and strapped on her sidearm. She drew the weapon and checked the charge and settings. After a few moments, she changed the setting to heavy stun with maximum dispersal. She holstered her weapon, slung her purse over her shoulder, and stumbled for the door, nearly twisting her ankle when she fell off the high-heels that went with the uniform.

\* \* \* \*

Ike almost had walking down when she reached the Ambassador's suite. As she waited at the door, she cussed at the idiot man—and it had to be a man—who thought of high-heel shoes.

The two guards outside the Ambassador's door had enough sense to keep their mouths shut and their eyes on the people passing in the corridor.

Eeto opened the door. "Ike, so good to see you again. Please, come in. I'll just be a moment."

"Thank you." Ike stepped through the door, letting it swish closed behind her. She wondered if the two knuckle-draggers outside had been looking at her ass or legs.

Eeto gathered a few items. "You look very different." The clicking noise came again. "You now look much more like I have come to know human females to look."

"Thank you. I think. I don't dress this way very often and, to be honest, I'm a little uncomfortable."

Eeto clicked again. "Thank you for accepting my invitation to dine with us."

"Why did you request that I join you and the others?"

"You make me feel safe." Eeto seemed to freeze in place for a moment. "I am more concerned about these threats than I would like to be."

"Don't worry. That's my job."

Eeto stared at her for several seconds. "Yes, I suppose it is."

\* \* \* \*

As they walked to the Emperor's suite, Ike was happy to see the contingent doing their jobs—not that she ever doubted them. As the group moved through the corridors, the Marines always watched the people, never looking at Eeto and Ike, the guard's eyes moving constantly. When they reached the Emperor's door, the two guards there announced them. The Emperor and his wives all met them at the door.

An interesting man, the Emperor, like the rest of his family, was immortal. The scuttlebutt had it that for the older members of the royal family, a medical procedure of some kind had made them immortal, while his 141 children had been, somehow, born immortal. He looked to be about thirty-five or so, but he was well over seven hundred. His four wives looked to be in their middle twenties, but Ike knew two of them were about the Emperor's age, and the other two, Empresses Marilyn and Tanya, were both around three thousand years old.

The Emperor was a very kind and gentle man. He acted and spoke like anyone else, and not the most powerful man in the galaxy. Ike also knew that when he needed to be, he could be tough as nails. Her great-grandpa told her a few stories about when he served with the Emperor, when the Emperor was still a Commander, on New Liverpool.

"Good to see you, Eeto, and you as well, Ike." The Emperor smiled. "I think the last time I saw you in a skirt, you were a midshipman and about fifteen years old."

Despite herself, Ike smiled back. "That's about the last time I wore a skirt, Sir." Maybe it was the power, or the idea of forbidden fruit, but she had always found the Emperor attractive.

He laughed. "And I still remember the first time I saw you in a skirt. You were two and your great-grandpa brought you up here to meet me."

"I don't remember that one, Sir."

As the Emperor and his wives chatted with Eeto, Ike watched the four Empresses. The radical differences in the four women fascinated her. She often wondered how the Emperor had picked such different women as his wives. The youngest, Paige, was shy and a bit reserved, but Ike imagined she could cut loose now and then. Ike never cared too much for Janelle. She came across a little stuck-up, and gave a holier-than-thou attitude. Tanya was a genius and made most people around her nervous. She was so smart, she seemed to have figured out everything in the conversation sometime last week. Marilyn, however, was likeable. Tall and gorgeous, she flirted, to some extent, with every man she came across. Marilyn also argued with her husband in public. She usually won. Ike could see that Marilyn was the favorite wife of the Emperor. Maybe that was why he tolerated some of her shocking behaviors. Ike thought Marilyn would be a lot of fun to go drinking with. Like that was going to happen.

Joining the group were Admirals Claire and Zach Reeves, Captain Ruhl, and his wives, Princess Charlotte and Tomi. Claire Reeves, the oldest of the many princesses, was as least as smart as Tanya, but she had better people skills, probably learned as a bedside manner as a doctor. Princess Charlotte was a copy of her mother, Empress Marilyn. She knew Charlotte was fun because, many years ago, Ike broke up a fight in the nightclub involving Charlotte and a Lieutenant who had made eyes at Captain Ruhl.

When the seating for dinner was completed, Ike found herself between Charlotte and Marilyn. Ike had known both as long as she could remember. Her great grandpa held Ike's job for years and introduced her to the royal family at a young age.

"Ike, I didn't even know you had legs." Charlotte tried to whisper.

"Yeah, and they go all the way to my ass, too."

Marilyn snickered. "Girls, please! I'm trying to be prim and proper here!"

"Yeah, Mom, sure you are."

The stewards brought around the salads. Ike noticed Charlotte waited to catch her husband's eye. When he looked at her, Charlotte wrapped her tongue around a bit of cabbage and sucked it into her mouth slowly. Marilyn had seen as well. "Char! Stop that!" Ike watched her tomato in hopes that would keep her from laughing. She found the public display of flirtation by Charlotte hilarious. Marilyn's reaction had an equal effect.

"Why? You do it to Daddy."

"And your daddy will kill us both if he sees you!"

"Not me, Mom. Ike will protect me."

Ike decided to risk talking. "Remember, I work for your dad."

Charlotte giggled, and the Emperor looked down the table. "Did you say something, little one?"

Charlotte stared at her salad. "No, Daddy."

"I thought not." He at least smiled.

Marilyn tried to turn the conversation to something with less giggles. "Ike, you look nice this evening. As funny as Char found it, I never knew you had such shapely legs. You should wear skirts more often."

Ike felt her cheeks flush a little. "I'm just not comfortable in anything other than pants, My Lady."

"Don't start with the 'My Lady' crap, please. We've known each other far too long for that. There's an old saying that when you got it, flaunt it." Marilyn smiled a little. "From what I can see, you got it."

Ike didn't answer.

"Are you going out with anyone these days, Ike?" Charlotte seemed to abandon flirting for the moment.

"Just Sean, but you know how that goes."

"Is he really hung like the scuttlebutt says?"

Marilyn gasped. "Char!"

Ike grinned. "Yeah, he is. But he's dumb as a bag of hammers."

Marilyn's face moved from a silly grin to serious several times. She lost the battle to stay prim and proper. "Damn it! Who cares about his mind?"

Charlotte choked on a bit of lettuce and got another look from her father. She smiled and waved. Her father went back to his discussion with Eeto "And you say I'm bad, Mom!"

Marilyn ignored the bait. "Ike, you should really go shopping with us sometime. We could get you some killer outfits."

"No, thank you. I'm a Marine, not a debutante."

"Suit yourself, but I think mom and I could really make you a knockout." Charlotte had another piece of cabbage and waited for the Captain to look her way again.

Marilyn reached in front of Ike and grabbed the cabbage from Charlotte's hand. "Excuse me."

The Emperor caught the motion from the corner of his eye and looked again. "Ike, do I need to separate you three?"

Ike had a giggle way down inside that slowly crawled its way up her throat. "No, Sir."

His smile broadened. "That's good." He again turned his attention back to Eeto and Zach.

"You two are going to get me busted to Private!"

"Nope. Daddy's a pushover. All Mom needs to do is bat her eyes at him, and all's well." Charlotte looked for another bit of cabbage.

Marilyn sighed. "You get him ticked off here, and I'll have to bat my eyes while I'm looking up from my knees."

Ike somehow found the image of the Empress giving the Emperor a blowjob distressing. It was also hilarious. Ike and Charlotte both tried to stifle giggles. "Excuse us, please." Charlotte grabbed Ike's hand, and they almost ran into a side room. "Oh, my God! I can't believe Mom said that!" Ike leaned against the wall. Hiccups interrupted her breath and voice. "That's doubly traumatizing for you." She almost choked on a hiccup. "I just have to cope with the image of the Emperor getting a blowjob, but it's your folks!"

When they had their breathing under control, they decided to abandon that line of discussion before they really got in trouble, and finished dinner with no more outbursts.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, Ike and the Marines escorted Eeto back to her suite. "It is good to see you have a personal relationship with the Empress and Princess." She clicked a little. Ike had come to think of the clicking noise as Wengly laughter.

"We really aren't what anyone would call close friends, but Marilyn and Charlotte are easy to get along with and a lot of fun. I've known them since I was a child."

"I could tell." Eeto was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes, human humor eludes me despite the fact I have studied your people for many years."

"I can imagine. We have several simulated humans on Boone who are more than a thousand years old. Some of them don't really have humor down too well yet, either."

"Yes. It is a difficult concept for me." They reached Eeto's door. Two of the Marines went inside and swept the room. "Thank you for accompanying me tonight, Ike."

"My pleasure, and thank you for inviting me to the dinner itself. I had a good time."

Eeto clicked again. "You are welcome. Goodnight." She turned and went into the suite. The Marines took up their positions in the corridor.

\* \* \* \*

Ike made her way home. She thought about dropping by Sean's, but it was nearly 2300, and he'd be asleep. He'd be happy to lay her, but then she'd have to stay the night. She didn't think she could put up with him after he'd served his purpose.

She got to her cabin and stood just inside the door. She thought about Marilyn going home with the Emperor and other Empresses. Charlotte went home with Tomi and Captain Ruhl. Claire, the lucky bitch, had Zach to go home with. Ike didn't even have a cat.

She stood in the semidarkness of the room and thought she could hear echoes in the cabin. Echoes repeating only silence, for there was nothing and no one there but her.

It didn't happen often, but in times like these, Ike questioned her career choice. At fortysix, she could change careers, but she liked her work. She didn't like being alone. She didn't know if the feelings of loneliness applied only to her, to women in general, or if it was a common thread in all people. She knew only that she felt lonely most of the time, even when around others.

Ike liked to think she didn't need anyone. She was a Marine Master Sergeant and, as such, a trained killer. She was, by anyone's measure, tough and self-sufficient. She could make Privates, Corporals, other Sergeants, and most officers faint dead away when she chewed their asses. Ike hadn't found anything she was afraid of yet.

Except maybe this empty cabin.

When she spent time around other women, especially those who weren't Marines, she remembered she was a woman. As such, she had needs. A well-hung boy-toy like Sean couldn't meet Ike's needs. Her trusty vibrator and other toys in the bedside table in her room couldn't meet her needs. No matter how many times she had sex with Sean or what kind of new super power pack she had for the vibrators, they would never be able to meet her emotional needs.

Her thoughts rambled as she watched the darkness of her empty cabin. Sitting next to Charlotte and Marilyn tonight, watching them flirt with their husbands across the room, she felt the weight of her unmet needs. When she'd watched, she even saw the shy Tanya, Paige, and Tomi doing the same. More important, she saw their respective husbands responding. Not with a look of lust on their faces, but with a look of love. She couldn't even imagine what it would feel like to have that kind of love given to her.

It was easy to see Claire was the center of Zach's universe, and why shouldn't she be? He had only one wife to keep track of. Ike watched Captain Ruhl, and she could tell Charlotte and Tomi were equally the center of his universe. He had, somehow, enough love to share between two women. The Emperor was more confusing. He shared his love and affection among four women. It was clear the Emperor and Captain had a favorite among their multiple wives. For the Emperor, it was Marilyn, and for Ruhl, it was Charlotte. Interesting that mother and daughter should be the favorite wife of their respective husbands. Ike wondered if the flirtatious nature Marilyn and Charlotte shared had anything to do with that.

The fact remained that Ike stood in an empty, dark cabin. Alone.

She grabbed a fresh set of batteries from the drawer and went to bed. She could at least satisfy one need.

## Chapter 4

## A Shot in the Dark

The buzzing of the intercom woke her. As she rolled to answer, she saw it was 0317. "Payne."

It was Kelli Witt, the Corporal on the duty desk. "Ike, I'm sorry to wake you, but you're needed at the Ambassador's suite."

"What's up?"

"Unknown. The men on watch heard a noise, and the Ambassador hasn't answered the door."

"All right. I'm on my way."

"Should I contact Admiral Reeves?"

Ike thought a moment. "Negative. Notify the Bridge Duty Officer that you called me, and I'm on my way to assess the situation."

"Right." Kelli clicked off.

Eeto probably knocked over a lamp or something. Ike pulled on her uniform, grabbed her sidearm, and was out the door.

\* \* \* \*

When Ike reached the Ambassador's door, the two regular guards were there, plus two others and Kelli. "What's going on?"

"We were just standing here, Sergeant, when we heard a popping sound from inside. We rang the bell and knocked, but the Ambassador hasn't answered the door." The Private didn't look at all comfortable talking to the Master Sergeant, especially when the Master Sergeant had been dragged out of bed in the middle of the night.

"Did anyone try the intercom?"

"Yeah. No answer there." Ike thought Kelli was a cute little thing, but she was for guys only.

Ike stared at the door for a moment. "Since the door's still closed, I assume you haven't used the override."

"No, Sergeant." The second Private didn't look much more comfortable than the first.

"On my orders, Ike. We decided to wait for you." Kelli listened to her communicator.

"How long ago did you hear the noise?"

The first Private looked at his watch. "Nineteen minutes ago."

Ike nodded. She rang the bell. After a moment, she hammered on the door with her fist. There was no response from inside. Ike tried the intercom on the wall, and Eeto didn't answer. "Override the door, Kelli." Kelli punched numbers into the door panel, and nothing happened. She tried again, and still, nothing happened. "Let me." Ike entered the standard override code. The door didn't budge. She tried her master override code, the one that opened even the Emperor's door. Nothing happened. Ike began to get worried.

Ike tapped the intercom and called the Bridge.

"Bridge, Bowen."

"Lieutenant, this is Sergeant Payne. Please override the door to Ambassador Tinn's quarters. Authorization code two-seven-alpha-niner-gamma."

"Copy, Sergeant. Standby." She waited while the Bridge commanded the ship's computers to open the door. "Sergeant, we're getting an access denied result."

Ike was really worried now. "Please alert Admirals Reeves, both of them, and have medical and engineering teams respond. There will be friendly fire in this section."

"Copy, Sergeant."

Ike closed the link. "Kelli, get a trouble team down here now. Prepare to blast this door open."

Kelli used her communicator. "Team responding. They'll be here in 120 seconds."

The Privates closed the corridor and set charges around the door. They waited for the team.

Just as the team of ten Marines in body armor came around the corner, Ike's communicator chirped. "Payne."

"Ike, Zach Reeves. What's going on?"

"I don't know yet, Admiral. The Ambassador isn't answering her door or intercom, and the door won't override to open. We're waiting for medical to respond. I'm going to blow the door."

"Very well. Medical should be there soon. Claire and I are on the way. You're in command. Proceed as you see fit."

"Aye, aye, Sir." She closed the link. The medical team came down the corridor.

Kelli glanced at the crew assembled. "We're ready, Ike."

"All right, people, we have no idea what's in there. I want targets verified before anyone starts shooting." She looked around at the team. "Let's do this."

"Oohrah!"

"Fire in the hole!" The Private pressed the detonator's switch.

The door of the suite blew outward and slammed against the opposite bulkhead. Ten armed Marines in body armor swarmed into the room, weapons ready.

Ike and Kelli leaned against the wall on either side of the door, and medical waited a short distance down the corridor. "Kelli, stay out here and keep those two damned Admirals out of the way until we secure this suite."

"Right."

The Corporal commanding the trouble team used the communicator to coordinate his assault. "Sitting room secured, Sergeant."

Ike swept into the room, her weapon in her hand. She checked the room quickly and saw nothing other than armed Marines. She glanced at her watch. Twenty-seven minutes had passed since the guards heard the noise.

The Corporal's voice spoke through her communicator. "Alpha squad, take the bedroom. Delta, provide cover."

As the team swept into the bedroom, Ike heard the words she dreaded. "Medic! Civilian down!" A Marine secured his weapon and went into the bedroom as others checked the bathroom and closets.

"Bedroom secured, Sergeant."

Ike went to the bedroom where the medic applied pressure dressings to Eeto's chest. Dull orange Wengly blood covered the bed and floor. Blood also had splattered on the outer bulkhead and on the window. "Is she alive, Private?"

"Yes, Sergeant, but we need medical. I have no fucking idea what I'm doing with a Wengly."

"Understood. Do your best. We'll get medical in here as soon as we can." Ike flipped the communications set on with her tongue. "Corporal Davis, we need this suite secured yesterday, and we need medical in here."

"Copy, Sergeant. One more closet to check." Ike waited a moment. "Suite secured. Medical, clear to enter, civilian down in bedroom area."

The medical team, Claire with them, ran to the bedroom under the watchful eyes of the assault team. Ike's communicator chirped again. "Ike, what's going on?"

"The Ambassador is down, Admiral, but she's alive. We may have an assassin in this suite, Sir. You need to stay out there."

"Understood."

She closed the link. "Claire, you, your team, and your patient need to get out of here. This place isn't safe yet."

"All right. I need to get her to sickbay fast." Claire looked at her team. "OK, let's move." The medical team left carrying Eeto on a stretcher.

Ike tongued her communicator. "Kelli, get another team here. No one goes in or out of this suite without visual confirmation."

"Right, Ike."

Corporal Davis was on the communications link. "We need engineering."

As the engineers and assault teams took the walls apart in the suite, Ike went to where Zach waited. "Any word from sickbay, Sir?"

"Nothing yet. What the hell happened here?"

Ike thought furiously. "I have no idea. We're taking the room apart, but there's no one in there."

"She looked to have a laser wound. Could she have done this herself?"

"It could be. We haven't looked closely yet, but I didn't see any weapons."

"I'd like to go in and take a look."

"No, Sir. The area's not secured, and I'm treating this as a crime scene."

Zach smiled. "Hey, you can't blame a guy for trying."

"No, Sir. I don't blame you."

\* \* \* \*

A complete search of everything and every place in the suite failed to find either a shooter or a weapon. Zach called Ike from sickbay to let her know she was investigating an assault. Despite her burns from the laser blast, Claire expected Eeto to live. Ike asked, but Claire wouldn't allow an interview until Eeto was more stable.

While the crime lab technicians worked the suite for evidence, Ike went for a walk. Sometimes, walking helped her get a handle on things. She desperately needed a handle. Way out of her league, she still had a case to work. She had an attempted murder to solve, and she had no suspects.

More correctly, she had twenty-four thousand suspects.

She wandered aimlessly around the ship and soon found herself walking down the mall area. It was just after 0500. The shops were closed and dark. The streetlights and the artificial night sky gave the only light. Normally, the mall was a busy shopping center, but in the predawn hours, it was dark and quiet. As Ike walked, the only sounds were her own footsteps echoing in the silence.

Ike heard the clink of metal against metal. She froze instantly, and tried to determine the direction, but she'd missed the first echo. She remained poised in mid-step. The sound came again. It was ahead and to her right. She moved silently in that direction. Ike considered calling for backup, but she smiled to herself. The events of the night had her a little spooked and on edge. She probably heard a cat.

The ancient sailors on the seas of Earth had problems with rats and mice. Many ships in the Fleet had a rodent problem, not always of Earthly origins. Boone had a cat problem. Every so often, a Science Officer would get bored and run a scan for *felis domesticus*. The typical number seemed to hover around eight thousand. From time to time, someone would get the idea of opening parts of Boone to space to kill off the cats, but Empress Marilyn would come unglued. The ship's resident eco-freak, she didn't want the cats hurt. Being the Empress meant the cats didn't get hurt.

As Ike moved quietly toward the sound, she felt herself relaxing. So long as the cat didn't jump in her face, she had nothing to worry about. At the same time, she saw a glint of light and a much louder crash of things falling. So much for the cat theory, unless the cats had learned to turn on lights.

Ike held her sidearm in her hand. She moved quickly and silently among the trees that lined the walks of the mall. She saw the light now, coming from one of the service area doors ahead. The streetlights, made to simulate old-fashioned gaslights, cast flickering twisted shadows through the trees. These mixed with the glare of the bright artificial lights, and made an eerie blend of both modern and ancient shadow demons.

The sound hadn't repeated as Ike moved closer to the light. She stood less than six meters from the door leading to the service area behind the shops. The door stood partially open, and the yellow-green light poured from inside. Ike stepped from the tree she hid behind. Someone kicked the door open suddenly, and she saw a figure outlined in the bright light.

"Freeze! Security!" She always wanted to say that.

The figure came through the door backwards, its arms full of something that it now dropped to the floor with a loud clattering. The arms went up. "Ike?"

"Sean?"

"Yeah! Don't shoot!"

Ike moved her weapon so it pointed at the overhead. "Shit! I almost fucking shot you! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Can I put my arms down now?"

"Damn it, Sean! Yes, put your fucking arms down." She put her weapon on safe and slipped it back in the holster. "It's only 0530! What are you doing?" Her breath raced through her throat.

He'd lowered his arms and turned to face Ike. "We had a coffee spill last night. Instead of staying late to clean up, I came in early to take care of the mess." He gave her a shaky smile. "You scared the living fuck out of me."

"You didn't do much for my heart, either." She looked at the pile of cleaning supplies on the floor around Sean's feet.

"What are you doing here this time of the morning?"

She sighed. The fright had actually been a bit of a relief because she'd forgotten, for a few minutes, the problems she faced. "Things are all fucked up. Someone tried to kill the Ambassador a few hours ago."

"Tried to kill her? Does that mean she's all right? Do you have someone in custody?"

"Yes, yes, and no. Someone shot her with a laser, but she'll be OK. I don't even have a suspect yet."

"Did she recognize who shot her?" Sean gathered his dropped items.

Ike bent to help him. "I don't know because the doctor won't let me talk to her yet. I was just walking, trying to think."

They walked toward the coffee shop. "I'm glad she's all right."

"Yeah, me, too. She made the comment at dinner last night that she felt safe with me looking after her. So much for that idea."

"Just pull the gate open. It's already unlocked."

Ike lifted the security gate on the coffee shop, and they went inside.

Sean sat the cleaning supplies on the counter. "Be careful in back. I imagine the goop is dry by now, but you might slip."

She turned on the lights. A large, sticky stain covered the floor behind the counter. "This is a hell of a mess."

"Yeah, it is." He began to mop the floor. "All of this morning aside, did you enjoy dinner?"

"You know, I actually did."

"That's good. You didn't seem to be looking forward to it too much."

"I guess I wasn't, but it was fun. I sat with Marilyn and Charlotte. They're a hoot."

He laughed as he reached into the corners with the soapy mop. "I wouldn't know, but I'm glad you enjoyed it."

She watched him for a moment, his arms and back flexing as he swabbed the deck. "Thanks." She couldn't decide if his chatter about dinner showed a total lack of understanding of the urgency of the situation or a rare flicker of tact in distracting her from the problem for a few moments.

"No problems, Ike. I guess you'll be pretty busy the next few days."

"Yeah, I will." She studied his ass as he pushed the mop back and forth. "You know you can sleep with anyone you want. It's not like we have any kind of exclusive agreement or anything."

"I know, and the same goes for you." He stood facing her, leaning on the mop, an empty smile on his face.

She stared at him for a moment. He was great in bed, but the guy just wasn't able to do more than small talk. Once he shot his wad, he was either asleep or, for a nooner, back to work in a matter of minutes. He was, as she always thought, just a walking dildo.

## Chapter 5 Investigation

Ike sat in her office going over the crime scene information. The lab boys found a few fingerprints, but most were Eeto's, a few were Ike's, and the rest belonged to members of the guard details and assault teams. They snagged a few hairs and fibers, again all from known sources that should be there. The only body fluid they found was the blood from Eeto in the bedroom. Wengly had a hang-up about privacy, so the cameras and other sensors in the suite itself had been turned off. The cameras in the corridors showed no one entering or leaving the suite from the time Ike had left Eeto at 2234 until the door was blown open and the assault team entered at 0331. The sensors in the ventilation system recorded nothing but air, and the security screens were all in place.

The preliminary blood spatter analysis showed Eeto had been standing between her bed and the outer bulkhead, facing the wall. When shot, she fell backwards onto the bed. That put the shooter in a two-meter opening between the bulkhead and the bed, along with Eeto. Claire hadn't allowed anyone to see Eeto yet, and the medical reports wouldn't be available for analysis until later in the day.

Ike knew the reports, pictures, lab results, and everything else boiled down to a locked-room mystery.

She also knew she had a potential killer loose on Boone.

Ike called the Science Officer on the Bridge to request a life sign scan of the ship by species. That would at least tell her if there was an extra person on board or not.

\* \* \* \*

Ike went to Eeto's suite. She wandered around the rooms, trying to get something to bounce loose in her head, when her communicator chirped. "Payne."

"Ike, this is the Emperor. I don't want to interrupt your work, but would you be able to come to my office?"

Ike sighed to herself. "Yes, Sir. I'm on my way." She clicked off and headed for his office.

The meeting was small. Just the Emperor, Ike, and Zach. "Thanks, Ike. Like I said, I don't want to interrupt, and your work is top priority right now. Anything you need, you get. If anyone is slow let me know, and I'll take care of it."

"No problems, Sir. Everyone is being very helpful."

"Claire should have the medical reports to you by 1500, but it'll probably be tomorrow before you'll be able to interview the Ambassador." Zach frowned. "I know that's not what you want to hear."

"No, that's not good." Ike studied the two men for a second. "You already know this, but we have an attempted murderer running around loose on this ship, and no idea who it might be."

The Emperor leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on the desk. "Yeah, we know. It frankly scares the living shit out of me."

"Me, too. I have a team watching the Ambassador, and I've doubled the guard on you and your wives." Ike looked to Zach. "I've also assigned people to you and your wife, Admiral." She paused for a moment. "I haven't done so yet, but I'm thinking of assigning people to Captain Ruhl and his wives as well."

Zach considered. "I think that might be a good idea. He's been in this work with the Wengly since day one. Someone might blame him."

"Will do. Otherwise, all I have right now is a locked room with no one other than the victim inside. Have you heard anything about anyone, particularly the PLF, claiming responsibility?"

The Emperor slowly rocked in his chair. "No, nothing. We've notified the Wengly about this, but we've said nothing to the Paleans. We're going to slow down and keep heading for Palea, using a cover story that we have some heating in the hyperspace drives. We can give you pretty much all the time you need, within reason. I want this solved here."

"Yes, Sir." She thought for a moment. "I could use some help from Intelligence in correlating the information."

"You've got it." The Emperor looked at Zach. "Get someone assigned to help her. Ike, this is your case, and you're in charge."

"Yes, Sir."

The Emperor sighed. "I don't have to tell either of you this situation is serious. We need to resolve this as soon as we can." He watched the two for a moment. "All right, let's all get back to work. Dismissed."

\* \* \* \*

Ike headed back to her office when the Science Officer called. "Sergeant, we don't have anyone extra, but we're short one Palean."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. We're short one person overall, and we have only ten Paleans. We should have eleven."

"That's interesting. My Duty Officer will get with you for locations on the ten you have. I want to know which one has gone missing."

"Understood."

Ike cleared the link. As she walked into the Security Office, she told the Duty Officer to get teams on the task right away.

Forty-five minutes later, the Duty Officer came into Ike's office. "We've accounted for all ten of the Paleans. We're missing a fellow named Kal'Orma."

"Good work. Now, all we need to do is find him."

"Yeah. I sent teams out to search, but we've already checked his cabin and his employer. He lives alone, and his boss hasn't seen him since yesterday morning. He's not scheduled to work again until tomorrow morning."

"Where does he work?"

"At the coffee shop in the mall."

Ike stared for a moment. There was only one coffee shop in the mall. Sean was the manager. "OK. Let me know what you find."

\* \* \* \*

The medical report had some surprises about Eeto's wounds. The wound was in Eeto's upper left chest. The frequency signature of the laser matched nothing in the database. Claire had assumed a power output for the laser as about that of a typical hand-held weapon and, from the depth of the wound, estimated the shooter was about sixty meters away. Lastly, Claire said the wound spread, meaning the center of the wound looked like a close range shot, but the edges had less damage, like the shooter was moving away from Eeto at a high speed.

Ike liked things simple for her own mind. She boiled the eighty-three page report from medical down to saying the shooter was sixty meters away when he pulled the trigger of an unknown type of laser, and moved away from Eeto at three meters per second.

The only part that wasn't impossible was the unknown laser weapon. It was easy to modify a laser to hide the frequency and power output. Ike sent the full report on to the crime lab so they could plug in the wound information to their blood spatter analysis. She called sickbay to talk to Reeves. Ike needed to talk to Eeto very soon.

"Ike, I really do understand your need to talk to the Ambassador, but I can't allow it just now. She's still unconscious, and needs to stay that way. I can't wake her without risking her health."

"Doc, I'm not sure you really do understand. Someone tried to kill her, and he's running around Boone. He may be after you and your husband—or even your folks—right now."

"I do understand, but the answer is still no."

Ike considered going over the doctor's head to the Emperor, but that probably wouldn't work either. "All right, Doc. When can I talk to her?"

Claire paused for a moment in thought. "Tomorrow afternoon, about 1500, she should be awake."

"I don't like it, Doc, but we'll go that way." Ike hesitated. "Claire, stay on your toes. I've got people with you and your family, but be careful."

"We will." Claire clicked off.

Ike hadn't even looked away from the intercom when Sean called. "Hi, Ike. I know you're busy, but I'm hoping you can get away for lunch."

She glanced at the clock. It was only 1210. This day already seemed a week long. "Yeah, I need to eat and get out of here for a while. What did you have in mind?"

"Great! How about the bistro?"

Ike actually expected a nooner. "Sounds good. I'll see you in about fifteen minutes."

He smiled his idiot smile and clicked off.

She had to get a new dildo.

\* \* \* \*

She met Sean at the bistro on the Observation Deck. "What was that about your people asking if I know where Kal is?"

"We're just trying to find him. He seems to have gone missing."

"Is he in some kind of trouble?" Sean blew noisily on his latte.

"We don't know. He's just missing."

"Like I told your investigators, I haven't seen him since yesterday, but that doesn't mean much. I never see him away from work. Is he connected to the shooting?"

Ike really wanted to talk about something else. "I have no idea right now."

"He's been a good employee. Never misses a day and never late. He works hard, and is nice to the customers." Sean watched her for a moment. "I wish I had about six more people just like him. It seems odd for him to just disappear like this."

"Sometimes people do some odd things."

"Yeah, I guess they do." The waiter bringing lunch was a good interruption and moved the conversation in a different direction. "Will you be coming over tonight?"

It just wasn't a direction Ike wanted to go now. "No, I don't think so. I don't know if I'll even being going home or not."

Sean watched her for a moment, his silly smile in place. For some reason she couldn't quite grasp, Ike found his smile annoying. "That's OK. You're busy."

"Yeah, I am." Ike felt herself becoming distant from Sean. She knew that meant his days as a part of her life were numbered. She'd seen it in herself before. She found the fact that he showed no reaction other than his silly smile infuriating.

\* \* \* \*

She sat in her office until 1800. So far, the search teams found nothing about Kal'Orma. No one had seen him since about noon yesterday, and he was nowhere to be found. The Science Officer did a specific scan of the ship, but it didn't seem Kal'Orma was even aboard Boone. Sickbay updated Ike on Eeto's condition. She was stable, but unconscious, and tomorrow afternoon was still the soonest Ike would be able to speak to her.

The lab refined the blood spatter analysis, and things went from odd to weird. Eeto faced the window when she was shot, less than a half meter away from the bulkhead. The spatter also had her bent over a little, probably at the knees, to bring her head down to the level of the window, like she was looking out. When the lab technicians checked the window, they found a small distortion in the battle glass, compatible with laser fire through the glass. Engineering removed the glass for the lab to examine, and the lab found the laser shot had come from the outside to the inside.

The shooter had been outside Boone, in open space.

As Ike headed for home, she didn't want to go there. She wanted to have a drink, but she knew Sean would probably be trolling for a piece of ass at the Café. While she tried to decide what to do and where to go, she bumped into Cory and Carlo Simmons.

Cory and Carlo had been married seven years and claimed to be gay. Ike had her doubts. She'd spent more than a few nights with them, both before and after the men had married. At least Ike had never heard of gay men doing the things they did with her. Ike just wrote it off to them actually being bisexual and let it ride.

"Ike! Long time, no see! How have you been?" Cory was his normal, bubbly self.

"Hi, Cory. Carlo. Busy, but not too bad. How about you?"

Carlo slipped his arm around Cory's waist. "Not too bad, babe. Hey, we're going to the Dog and Pony Show. Why don't you come along and have a drink?"

Ike considered. The Dog and Pony Show was the acknowledged gay bar on Boone. At least she wouldn't have to worry about Sean being there. He was the biggest homophobe in the galaxy. "Sure, why not? I was looking for a drink."

Carlo and Cory linked arms with Ike, and they were off to the bar.

\* \* \* \*

Ike was glad she went. The Dog and Pony Show had a small dance floor. She had several drinks, and even danced a little. No one hit on her, and she could relax. She hoped relaxing would let her mind just do free association, and some pieces of the puzzle would fall into place.

Carlo smiled at Cory. "Babe, are you still seeing Sean?"

"I'm not sure seeing is the right word. I'm still fucking him on a regular basis."

Carlo laughed. "You like the big boys, eh?"

"It has some advantages, but not really all that many." Ike thought it had far fewer advantages than disadvantages.

"Ike, don't try to kid us! This is Cory and Carlo! We know how much you like the big sticks." Cory winked at Carlo.

"For some things, but how would you two know? It's not like either of you have cocks like that."

Carlo sighed. "Yeah. I guess I'll just have to wonder about being able to get fucked and give head to the same guy at the same time."

Cory elbowed him in the ribs. "Now after a good night, you walk funny for three days!"

"Yeah, that's true." Carlo kissed Cory on the cheek. "Why aren't you with the elephant man tonight, babe?"

"I guess all that dick keeps blood from getting to his brain." Ike sipped her beer. "He's a nice guy, but Lord, is he stupid. And he has no sense of romance at all. It's pure wham, bam, thank you, ma'am." She frowned. "And most of the time, he doesn't even say thank you."

Cory giggled. "Yeah, I know the feeling."

"Bullshit, Cory! I always cuddle you after fucking you!"

"Yeah, but you never kiss me after a blowjob."

Ike laughed. "You two are a mess."

"Maybe we are, Babe." Carlo glanced at Cory. "So, how about coming home with us tonight?"

Ike blinked several times. "Nothing like the direct approach." Ike felt a tingle in her pelvis.

"No, there's not." Cory paused for a few moments. "Ike, we've been friends a long time. We heard about the shooting, and I know that's wearing on you. What Carlo really tried to say is if you need someone to be with tonight, other than the brainless pecker, we're here for you. I may not be much of a man, but my dick works, and I know how to cuddle."

Carlo smiled. "Besides, it's been a long time since I had any good, tight holes to fuck." Cory elbowed him again.

Ike stared at her friends for a minute. "You know, guys, I think I'd like that." She grinned. "I promise I won't try to turn either of you straight."

\* \* \* \*

While neither Cory nor Carlo had cocks near the size of Sean's, they were both a little better than average. As Ike gave them head just inside the door to their cabin, it amazed her how much she missed feeling a man's dick in her throat. Cory's cock bobbed up and down in Ike's throat as she stroked Carlo's dick with its slight left-hand curve. She had them both quivering with their pants around their ankles. "Where to, guys?"

"Fuck!" Cory leaned against the wall. "I'd forgotten just how good of a blowjob you could give!"

"Nothing against you, Cory, but you need to take a few lessons." Carlo panted.

Ike laughed and took their hands, leading them to the sofa. The progress was slow because they both had to take tiny steps around their pants. Ike slipped out of her uniform and sat between them. She grabbed their hard cocks in her hands and slowly pumped both of them. "So, who's first?"

Carlo smiled slyly. "Both of us, babe."

"All right, whoever stays on the sofa gets sucked while I get fucked."

Carlo jumped, kicking his pants off. "Me first!"

Cory lay on the sofa as Ike stood at the end, leaning far over to suck his cock, leaving her ass high in the air. Carlo stepped behind her and, in one thrust, had his entire shaft inside her wet pussy. Ike gasped a little, but it was good going from empty to being fucked that fast. With Sean, she had to work him into her slowly. She seemed to find new problems with Sean very often today.

Ike popped Cory's dick out of her mouth with a smack. "Oh, yes! Fuck me!" She sucked frantically on Cory's hard cock.

Carlo slammed himself in her. "You got it, babe!"

She felt Cory move, and suddenly, he rubbed her clit with his toe. He grabbed her hair, pumping her head up and down on his dick. "Swallow my cock! That's it!" She felt the head of his cock hit the back of her mouth, and then slip down her throat. Ike found herself missing the sensations of pure pleasure the three now shared. The passionate sex and the friendly affection had been absent from her life for three years. No one could say that she, Cory, and Carlo were in love, but they were friends. Ike suddenly realized that she and Sean weren't even friends. They were fuck buddies, and that was all.

Carlo rammed his dick into her so hard that she almost lost her footing each time his balls hit her thighs. His fingers dug into the skin of her hips, and his hips hit her like a jackhammer.

With Cory's cock down her throat and his nuts pressed tight against her chin, Ike couldn't scream when her orgasm started. Her pussy clamped tightly on Carlo's dick. "Here you go, babe!" He shoved his cock deeper into her dripping pussy and Ike felt him, like a fire hose, filling her with cum.

Cory pulled her hair, and his dick came out of her mouth with a pop. He shot his cum on her lips as she tried frantically to get as much as she could in her mouth. As Ike tried to lick the last of Cory's seed from her face, they collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Ike lay between them, gently stoking and rubbing their half-erect cocks. "My God, guys. That was great!" She kissed them both and slipped them a little tongue. "I really needed that."

"Babe, anytime." Carlo rubbed Ike's shoulder.

Cory laughed. "Carlo, you are a slut."

Ike smiled softly. "Slut is good."

They lay together for a time, and the kisses became more frequent and more passionate. Carlo kissed Ike, his tongue moving wildly in her mouth. Cory moved to lay behind her. He rapidly buried his dick in her soaked pussy and thrust against her.

As Cory moved rhythmically inside her, Ike sucked on Carlo's tongue. Her voice was choppy with soft grunts as Cory's cock rammed the back of her pussy. "Carlo, how about if I suck on something more productive than your tongue?"

"I'd like that, babe." He knelt next to her head, and Ike swallowed his shaft, tasting her juices mixed with his cum lingering there. Carlo's cock started only half hard, but under the skill of her tongue and throat, it soon raged and filled her mouth. Ike had been with Sean for so long,

she'd almost forgotten the pleasant surprise she learned many years ago—Cory and Carlo were both multi-orgasmic.

With every thrust Cory made into her, Ike felt Carlo's dick slide farther down her throat. Soon, the two men rammed their dicks into her in unison, pinning her between a solid dick in her wet pussy and a throbbing cock in her hot mouth.

Ike's climax came like a wave hitting the rocks of the shore. All she could do was grunt because her mouth was full of a cock spurting hot cum down her throat. She felt Cory's warm juice fill her pussy and squirt out around his pulsing dick.

Ike ended with her head resting on Cory's shoulder. "I know I promised, but would one or both of you consider going straight?"

Her leg rested across Carlo's back. It bounced when he laughed. "Babe, we've already gone bi for you."

They laughed and talked and touched for a while. Ike saw their erections stand up a bit straighter. "Guys, I don't want to be demanding or anything, but could I ask for something special?"

"Anything, Ike." Cory laughed. "That's what friends are for."

She giggled. "I really miss it, and there's no way Sean will fit in my ass." She paused for a moment. "Would you fuck my ass?"

"I love it when you beg, babe." Carlo stood. "Come with me." Cory stood and followed them to the dining table. Carlo looked at Cory. "Heads or tails?"

"Oh, tails!"

Cory lay back on the table and helped Ike position herself with the head of his cock against her asshole. "OK, as fast as you want it, Ike."

She bit her lip and eased herself down onto his stiffness, feeling his cock sliding ever deeper into her ass. "God, that feels good!" The pleasant shock of her ass being full of dick made Ike's wetness flow again, and she shivered with the sensation. She knew she had missed the sensation, but not this much.

When she had Cory's cock fully in her ass, he helped her lean back a little onto his chest, and Carlo stood between her legs. He looked down where Cory's dick spread her asshole wide. "That looks like fun."

Ike moved slowly up and down Cory's cock. "Are you going to talk or are you going to fuck?"

Carlo smiled and shoved his cock fully into Ike's pussy. "Is that better?" He pumped back and forth.

"God, yes, that's better!" She looked into Carlo's eyes. "Don't cum in my pussy! I want you to fuck my ass after Cory!"

Cory moaned. "Your ass is so tight, I may just stay right here!"

Carlo grunted with his thrusting. "If it's been more than two years since you were butt-fucked, you're an ass virgin again."

Ike gritted her teeth. "Good!" She felt her breath pulsing from her in rhythm to the thrusting cocks inside of her. "My God, that's great!"

Ike knew the thought of having two cocks ramming into her drove her orgasm as much as the reality of having two hard dicks in her. This time, her screams were unimpaired as her head lolled back and sweat covered her face.

Carlo pulled his cock out of her pussy and it slapped against Ike's thigh. Cory stiffened and shot his load up her ass. Ike almost jumped from the table and bent over Cory's chest, kissing him deeply. "Now, Carlo! Fuck my ass!"

He rammed his cock quickly up Ike's asshole until his balls slapped her. He made hard, fast strokes of his full length. "Oh, God!" Carlo delivered his hot cum deeply up her tight ass.

They lay together for a long time, touching and kissing. After a while, Ike sighed heavily. "Guys, don't take this wrong, but thanks."

"Is there a wrong way to take that?" Carlo laughed. "You know, sometimes I miss doing it with a woman."

Cory sighed. "As much as I hate to admit it, me too."

Ike kissed them both gently. "All you have to do is whistle. You do know how to whistle, don't you?"

Carlo squeezed her left nipple, sending a tremor through Ike's body. "Yeah, babe. Just pucker up and blow."

# Chapter 6 Findings

Ike tried to sit still at her desk. Her ass and pussy were both a little sore after her workouts last night. Her vagina felt like her arms did after she lifted weights just a little too long, and to top it all off, every time she thought about last night, she felt her pussy getting wet and her ass craving to be filled.

Before she left Cory and Carlo's cabin this morning, she gave them both a slow blowjob lasting almost thirty minutes each. There was none of the frantic face fucking from last night, just her slowly and firmly sucking them until they left their loads in her mouth.

Ike felt more relaxed and satisfied than she had in three years. About 1000, just when Ike wondered if she might leave a mark on her office chair, the Duty Officer called.

They'd found Kal'Orma.

\* \* \* \*

When Ike reached cargo bay nine, the yellow crime scene tape was already in place. Kal'Orma was behind a stack of boxes in the corner. He was face up on the floor, his eyes wide open in death. Near him was a small suitcase and, on the floor, an empty syringe.

Claire Reeves looked up from the body as Ike approached.

"What do we have, Doc?"

"One dead Palean. He looks to have been dead around twenty-four hours. I'm thinking he injected something, but I need to run toxicology tests to be sure." The crime lab guys gathered the evidence, including the syringe.

Ike looked to the Corporal in charge. "What's in the suitcase?"

"Not sure, Sergeant. The lab boys haven't got to it yet."

Ike frowned. "It's not going to blow the fuck up, is it?"

"No, we sniffed everything."

The lab techs opened the valise and found a hand-held laser weapon. "This is too easy." The Corporal looked his question at Ike. "Have the weapon checked. It's the one that shot the Ambassador." She nodded toward the body. "But he didn't do it."

\* \* \* \*

When Ike got back to her office, a Lieutenant waited to see her. She felt a quick jolt that startled her and stared at him for a second too long. She waved at him. He followed her into her office. She sat, looking at him for a moment. She was not easily flustered and found her voice a little more brusque than necessary. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I'm Lieutenant Devon Henson from Intelligence. Admiral Reeves placed me at your service."

As Ike looked him up and down a time or two, she thought service might just be the operative word. Henson stood a little taller than she, and he had good muscles, though not like a bodybuilder. He looked to be maybe thirty or so and had sandy brown hair, just a little on the long side. His pale blue eyes were sharp and clear.

They stared at each other for a moment too long before Ike dragged her gaze away deliberately. "Have a seat." She reached across the desk and shook his hand. "Officially, I'm Sergeant Ikira Payne, head of Security. Everybody calls me Ike." Ike felt a chill run through her as their hands touched.

"All right, Ike. I'm Devon, then." He seemed to hesitate for a moment. "I'm kind of new at all this security stuff, though. My main training is in cryptography." He looked a lot more confident than he sounded.

"That's all right. I need someone who can sort through the mess you Intelligence types call files. I need the information faster than I can get it learning your system as I go along."

He smiled a very nice smile. She glanced away for a second to stop staring at his mouth. "That I can do for you, Ike." She looked back and smiled in response.

"Good. Are you certified for a sidearm?"

"Me? Hell, no! The things scare me!"

Ike just stared. This was great. "We'll take care of that. You may need one."

He looked puzzled. "I understood you found the killer's body today."

"Attempted killer, and it wasn't him."

"How do you know?"

"Call it feminine intuition."

He smiled again. "I don't think I've ever known a woman security director before."

She laughed. "Probably not. There are only six of us in the Fleet."

"That's neat. So, what do we do first?"

She glanced at her watch. It was 1135. "We do lunch first. After that, we'll start rattling the cage in sickbay so we can talk to the Ambassador."

\* \* \* \*

#### Melodee Aaron

As they walked to the mess hall for lunch, Devon occasionally studied the interesting woman next to him. She looked and acted like a Marine. Her walk steady, with measured steps, her eyes moved constantly, watching the people around her. She wore the fatigue uniform of a noncommissioned officer and a formidable blaster on her right hip. Her pockets bulged with things he couldn't see. A large knife rested in a sheath on her right leg at the level of her calf.

Everything about Ike's appearance said she was all business, but Devon sensed something else about her. In her remarkable steel-blue eyes, he saw tenderness down inside. He felt no surprise at that. He thought anyone who made a career of being a cop must have a certain amount of empathy and caring for people.

Ike was a beautiful woman. Her body was trim and firm, no doubt from Marine exercises. When they shook hands, he found her grip strong, and he saw the muscles in her arm working. Her face was pretty, with a cute little nose. Devon always liked long hair on a woman, but somehow, Ike's short auburn hair looked great.

He glanced at her and his gaze moved down her body. Her breasts, waist, and hips were well proportioned. He watched her hips move as she walked.

She turned and caught him staring at her. "What are you looking at?"

The last thing he wanted to do was to get this woman angry. "Sorry. I was just wondering what you have in your pockets."

A small smile flitted across her face. "Right. Just Marine toys." She reached into her left pants pocket and pulled out a small grenade with a radiation hazard symbol on the side. "See?"

The woman had nuclear devices in her pants. "I'll bet you're a fun date."

She chuckled as she dropped the grenade back in her pocket. "You have no idea."

\* \* \* \*

While they ate lunch, she became acutely aware of the fact she wore her fatigue uniform. Ike realized she worried about impressing this man.

Devon watched her. "I looked over your case files while I was waiting, and I didn't see anything where you might need my help."

"You're right. Most of the stuff I need checked isn't in the file." Ike tapped her temple. "It's still in here. Just a few loose ends that need clarifying."

"I read a lot. Some of the stories I read are murder mysteries." He shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't help thinking you have a classic here."

"Yeah, that's true, but things in the real world rarely work out like a novel." She smiled. "Not only murder mysteries, but fairy tales, as well."

"I guess there isn't really any happily ever after, is there?"

"No, at least not that I've found yet." She watched his face as he smiled at her. More than just his lips smiled. His eyes sparkled in fascinating ways. The man was gorgeous.

His smile slowly faded. "You said you're going to talk to the Ambassador this afternoon."

The change in topic left Ike feeling like she'd missed something. "Yeah, but we'll be talking to her, not just me. You Intelligence types do interrogations, don't you?"

"I went through the training, but I've never asked anyone more than what the time was."

Ike thought this kept getting better and better. What had Reeves done to her? "I guess you'll have to learn fast."

Yes, the man was definitely gorgeous.

\* \* \* \*

Claire wouldn't budge. "Ike, I told you 1500 and I meant 1500, not 1330."

"Doc, this is getting stranger by the minute, and we need to talk to the Ambassador."

"I agree with you. You do need to talk to her, and you will talk to her. In an hour and a half."

Ike wasn't very good with this sort of thing. "We've got one person nearly dead and one completely dead. And neither of them are the killer."

Claire looked at Ike for a moment. "Ike, 1500 is the time. If you want to talk to Daddy, you can use my office, but we both know what the outcome will be. Besides, by the time you get done running all over the place getting turned down, it'll be 1500."

Ike knew she was right. She sighed. "Have you found anything on the dead Palean?"

"Actually, I was just sending the preliminary report to your office. The syringe contained anamostat."

"I'm happy for it. What the hell is that?"

"It's a powerful cardiac stimulant. I don't have the toxicology on our late friend back yet, but the cause of death was a massive myocardial infarction."

"A what?"

"Heart attack."

"I assume an overdose of this goop in the syringe would cause a heart attack."

"Yeah, it would. A big one, and our Palean friend had a big one. And he has a needle mark in his right jugular vein I'm not sure he could have done himself." Claire frowned. "He also had a bump on his head that was pretty fresh."

"How fresh, Doctor?" Devon looked at Ike. "Sorry."

Claire smiled. "Maybe an hour or so before he died."

"What time did he die?"

"I'd say between 0800 and 0830 yesterday."

Ike sighed. "How long would it take this animal-whatever to kill him?"

"Anamostat. That depends on the dose. It looks like the syringe was about half-full, and at that dose, he'd have been dead in less than ten seconds."

Ike chewed her lower lip.

Devon looked from Ike to Claire several times. "Doctor, how sure are you he died from the drug?"

"At least ninety percent."

"OK, Doc. Thanks. We'll see you later." Ike smiled at Claire. "How about 1515?"

"Perfect."

\* \* \* \*

"Let's go for a walk." Ike couldn't tell if she had a piece of the puzzle or if she was simply distracted. In either case, she needed to think.

"All right, Ike. Where are we going?"

"I have no idea. I'm just walking." She walked in silence for a while. "Devon..." She paused. "Can I call you Dev?"

"Sure."

"Good." She chewed her lip. "Any thoughts, Dev?"

"Yeah, several. You're right."

"About what?"

"Kal'Orma didn't shoot the Ambassador. Someone else did. She then killed Kal'Orma."

"Why did you say 'she'?"

"I had to pick a singular pronoun. Luck of the draw."

"Oh. I think you're right on the scenario. Now, we need proper nouns to replace the pronouns."

He chuckled. "You're talking like you're writing a book."

"Actually, I've been trying to do just that. I'm a terrible writer, though, so I'm not going to quit my day job anytime soon."

"I'd like to read it when you're done." Ike felt a rush of excitement at the thought he might actually want to read her book. At least when something more than the cover page existed.

Ike led them to Eeto's cabin. The security lock still secured the door. Ike tapped her communicator. "Payne, Ikira and Henson, Devon. Authorized entry to Ambassador Eeto Tinn's suite."

"Entry granted." The door swished open at the computer's command.

They wandered around the bedroom for a while. Ike tried to imagine Eeto standing next to her bed, probably getting ready to lie down. Her head, while standing, would be about twenty-five centimeters above the top edge of the window. Eeto would have no reason to look outside deliberately. That meant that as she sat down on the bed, she saw something. She bent her knees and looked out, her eyes maybe two or three centimeters below the window's edge. Then, bang! Someone shot her, and she fell backward onto the bed. The logs recorded the rest of the story.

As she pondered the possible events at the crime scene, Ike acted out the scene as though she were Eeto. She reclined face up on the bed, staring at the overhead. Dev sat down on the bed next to her. He leaned over her a little. "Any revelations?" When she looked into his eyes, Ike felt a tingle, like an electric shock. It started behind her eyes and quickly spread through her body. She imaged her hands and feet jerking as the sensation whipped down her extremities. Oh, hell no! Ike sat up suddenly. "Um, no, not really." She stood and danced back and forth in the corner for a few moments before being able to dart by his legs to get in the open.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." Other than the erect nipples and the spreading warmth in her pelvis. "Let's get some coffee."

They left the suite and went to the mall.

\* \* \* \*

The mall was crowded today, so they took a table in front of the coffee shop. The waitress came to take their orders. "Hello Ike, Lieutenant."

Ike smiled up at her. "Hi, Lor'Lera. Is Sean around?"

"No, he's not." The Palean looked a little puzzled. "Actually, he said he was meeting you."

Ike frowned. "Not me. Just coffee, please."

"Same here," Dev said. The waitress went to get their order. "Who's Sean?"

"He's the manager here. I guess he and I are sort of lovers."

He frowned deeply. "What are 'sort of' lovers?"

"We sleep together now and then." She smiled. "Jealous?" As soon as she said it, Ike felt like an idiot. She flirted with him, but didn't feel like she could stop, even if she wanted to.

Dev laughed. "Not yet." He frowned for a moment. "Why would he tell the waitress he was with you?"

"Damned if I know. He and I aren't exclusive, or even steady. Maybe he's meeting someone else, and it was easier to say that than to explain to the hired help."

Dev's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Isn't this where Kal'Orma worked?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I don't know. Something is trying to tell me this might be important, though." Dev had taken up chewing his lip.

Lor'Lera brought their coffee. "Has there been any word about Kal? He was supposed to work today, but Sean called me to cover for him when he didn't show up."

Ike thought for a moment. There'd been no news released that Kal'Orma had been found dead or otherwise. "No, Lor'Lera, nothing yet."

"He's a nice man. I hope he's all right." She smiled and left the table.

Dev laughed. "Palea has been in the Empire so long, you can't tell a Palean from a human unless you check the skin color or count fingers."

### Melodee Aaron

Ike wondered what Sean told Lor'Lera about her missing coworker. Dev's banter distracted her, however. "Yeah. The ones that work here are all nice."

"Did you know Kal'Orma?"

"No. He worked in the back, so I never saw him except through the little cubby hole in the wall."

They sat in silence and watched the shoppers strolling by on the walkway. Occasionally, their eyes met and held. They stared at each other and then looked away.

"Ike, it looks like we're going to be messing with this case for a while. If you don't mind my asking, you said you and Sean are lovers, at least part-time. Are you married?"

Ike laughed. "No, not me. I doubt anyone could put up with me that long. What about you?"

"Me, neither. I almost got married about four years ago, but I caught her in bed with my sister."

"Ouch. I can see how that would cause a bit of friction. Any kids?"

"Not yet. I'd like to have kids sometime, but I've got to find a woman I'd want to be their mother first. What about you? Is there a little girl just like you out there?"

"Poor kid!" Ike forced her hand back to the table from where it played with her hair like some nervous schoolgirl. "I've never really thought too much about kids, actually. They say every woman wants to have kids, and I guess I do. I just don't know when or how I'll have the time."

"I know the feeling." He seemed to consider something for a moment. "Why does everyone call you Ike?"

She shrugged. "Ike is easier to pronounce than Ikira."

"I'll grant you that, but Ikira is a beautiful name." He smiled. "Sort of feels good to say it, too. Ikira..." He got it right, too. Three syllables, long I at the start, short I in the middle, and a slight rolling of the R on his tongue.

Just the way he said her name made her feel tingly and flustered. Ike felt the spreading warmth on her face.

Dev stared at her for a while. "Before I decided to be a cryptologist, I went to school to be a psychologist. What are you are afraid of?"

"Nothing." She smiled a little. "I'm a Marine. They took my sense of self-preservation away when I was in basic."

He didn't return her smile but sat staring at her again. A smile slowly crept to his face. "OK. I can take a hint." His smile broadened a bit. "Where are you from?"

She felt happy moving away from that subject, but her hand tried to get to her hair again. If it didn't stop, she was going to use her belt to lash the fucking thing to the table. She was acting like an infatuated teenager. "I was born here on Boone. My great-grandpa had this job." Her hand stayed put now that she'd threatened it. "What about you?" Dev watched her hand. "I was born on Earth, but my folks moved to New Moscow when I was still a baby."

Ike considered a second. "You said you went to school to be a headshrinker before you went into Intelligence. Just how old are you?" She smiled at him. "And remember, I can get to your file."

He laughed heartily, and Ike found it filled the air around them. His laughter made the tingles in her body vibrate faster. "Before I answer that, how old do you think I am?"

"I'd guess you to be around twenty-five. Maybe thirty or so."

He smiled. "I guess the workouts are helping. I'm forty-one. I won't ask your age because that's not a proper thing for a man to ask a woman."

Her hand escaped the table to make a dismissive motion, and then obediently returned to where it belonged. "That's OK. I'm forty-six."

"Liar."

She blinked rapidly. "What?"

"You can't be forty-six. Maybe thirty-six. Maybe."

Her fucking hand moved to her hair again. "Flatterer!"

Dev had a pensive look. "You're serious, aren't you? I'm really not trying to flatter you, but you don't look forty-six."

His eyes flickered to her chest and away again. Ike knew her nipples were still hard. She didn't realize until she glanced down that they looked like two rolls of one-credit coins poking through her shirt. And her hand still played with her hair. "Thanks. I try to stay in shape."

"We'll have to workout together sometime."

Yeah, that would work well. "That might be fun." An image of him in a tight workout suit flashed to her mind. She swallowed hard and tried to push the image down. She wanted to look at it later when she had time to make sense of her intense awareness of this man.

Lor'Lera made her second trip to refill their cups. Dev looked up at her. "Lor'Lera, are you and Kal'Orma the only Paleans working here?"

"Oh, no, Lieutenant. There are three others." She went back to the counter.

"Out of eleven Paleans on the ship, five of them work here?"

At least her hand got the fuck out of her hair. "I never thought of that." Ike knew this detail might be important, but she felt too distracted by him to worry about that right now.

They chatted for a while longer, but her hand behaved itself. They both kept staring at each other a bit too long. Finally, the two of them headed to sickbay at 1500.

# Chapter 7 Interviews

"She's awake, but she's having a lot of pain. How long do you think this will take, Ike?"

"I really can't say, Doc, but I hope not too long. Maybe thirty minutes, tops."

Claire considered. "All right. I won't put an arbitrary limit on things, but try to keep it as short as you can."

"I will. Thanks."

Claire led them to Eeto's room. "I'll be right out here if you need me."

Ike and Dev went into the room. Eeto looked to be asleep. She had two IV lines in and several other tubes Ike couldn't identify. Her eyes flickered a bit and slowly opened. She managed a weak smile. "The doctor said you would be here."

Ike sat in the chair next to the bed. "Eeto, I'm so sorry."

"Do not feel badly. This was not your fault."

Ike smiled at her. "This is Lieutenant Devon Henson of Fleet Intelligence. He's helping me investigate this and trying to find who did this to you."

Eeto looked to where Dev had sat on the other side of the bed. "Good to meet you, Lieutenant."

"Likewise, Ma'am."

"I don't want to tire you." Ike wondered about the best way to get the most information in the least time. "What can you tell me about what happened to you?"

Eeto seemed to shiver a bit. "I was going to bed, and I..."

"Yes?"

"It is impossible. I saw someone outside the ship, just hanging in space, perhaps fifty meters away. I saw him raise his hands and then a flash of red light." She looked from Ike to Dev. "I woke up here."

Ike took Eeto's hand in hers. She had never touched a Wengly before. Her skin wasn't skin at all, but a hard shell with joints. "Did you recognize the person?"

Eeto hesitated a long time. "No, I did not, but I should have."

Dev frowned. "Why is that, Ambassador?"

She looked at them both again. "You will think I am mad, but the person was not wearing an environment suit."

Ike frowned. "No space suit?"

Eeto again looked from Dev to Ike. "Yes, that is correct."

Dev's frown matched Ike's. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am. I can see him when I close my eyes. He was floating in space, wearing only white clothing, he raised his hands, and I saw the flash of red."

Claire came in. "Ambassador, are you all right? Your heart rate is fast."

"Yes, doctor. These are difficult things for me to think about."

Claire manipulated one of the IV lines and injected something into the line. "Ike, you should wrap this up."

"Will do, Doc." Ike looked back at Eeto. "Just one more question. If you saw the person again, do you think you could identify them?"

Eeto paused. "No, I could not. I know the person was not Wengly, but I could not say their species other than that."

Dev stood. "Thank you, Ambassador."

Ike rubbed Eeto's hand. "You're safe here. I have an entire trouble team outside this room."

"Thank you, Ike."

Dev and Ike went back to her office with more questions than they started with.

\* \* \* \*

"This just keeps getting better every minute. Now, not only do we have an impossible murder attempt, but we have a killer who doesn't breathe."

Dev chuckled. "It's not that bad. She just didn't see the suit. How long could she have seen him? A second? Maybe two? She either just missed it, or she hasn't remembered seeing it yet."

"I don't know. She seemed pretty sure of herself and sincere."

"I don't doubt her sincerity. I think she's confabulating. She has blanks in her memory, and her mind is just filling in the holes. The earmark of confabulation is that they're like dreams

and often seem very bizarre to others." Dev smiled. "Let's face it, an assassin floating in space with no suit, holding his breath and waiting for a shot is pretty bizarre."

Ike laughed. "Yeah, it is, especially when you put it that way." She leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on her desk.

"You're going to fall over backward."

"You'll help me."

"Yeah, I will." Dev checked his watch. It was 1645. "I need to run. Since you're all excited about me getting a weapon certificate, I have to be there at 1700." He paused for a second. "How about I buy you dinner?"

"Sure. Mess hall twenty-nine?"

"No, I thought The Imperial Café."

Ike almost did fall over backward. "Um, sure."

"Great. I'll pick you up at your place at 1900. See you then."

He left her office, and Ike knew she was in deep shit.

\* \* \* \*

Ike had no idea what else to do, so she called Empress Marilyn. "Marilyn! You have to help me!"

"Calm down! What's wrong?"

"I've got a...well, I think I have a date."

"That's wonderful!"

"Bullshit! I look like a jarhead, and I have no clothes other than uniforms!"

"That's not a problem! When is your date?"

Ike glanced at the clock. "A little better than two hours from now."

"Oh shit oh dear." She was lost in thought for a moment. "All right. Get moving, and meet me at the spa in the mall."

"Why?"

"Just move your ass, girl!"

Ike was out the door before the screen faded to black.

\* \* \* \*

When Ike reached the spa, Marilyn waited with Charlotte and Claire. "Come on, Ike! We need to move. We'll talk while they're working." Marilyn bounced in place.

The Empress and two princesses dragged her into the spa and went straight to the back. The stylist waited, and Charlotte took charge. "Lauren, this is a rush job. Nails and hair." Charlotte looked at Ike's eyebrows. "All the hair. And wax the critical places."

Lauren smiled. "Yes, Princess."

Ike frowned. "Wax?"

Claire patted Ike's hand. "Don't worry."

As the crew worked on Ike's hair and nails, Marilyn sat down beside her. "Now, tell me all about it."

Ike told them about Dev and how he'd asked her to dinner at the Café and how her hand kept playing with her hair.

Claire giggled. "You're acting like a schoolgirl!"

Marilyn smiled. "Ain't it cool?"

When the teams finished Ike's hair and nails, Lauren smiled. "Now we'll go to the wax room."

Ike watched as Lauren spread yellow wax on various parts of her body and pressed cloth into the gooey mix. The wax felt warm. Ike smiled a little thinking that it felt good against her skin and might work well to ease the pain of a bruise or sprain. After a few minutes, Lauren grabbed the cloth that rested over her pubic area and yanked. "Son of a bitch!"

Charlotte patted Ike's hand. "They're about done."

\* \* \* \*

As they ran to the dress shop, Marilyn's excitement kept her shaking. "Come on, Ike! We need to move!"

"I can barely fucking walk!"

Claire managed to hide her laughter. "Yeah, but it looks great."

"Maybe." Ike hobbled as fast as she could.

At the dress shop, Marilyn frowned a little. "What size do you wear, Ike?"

"Twenty-four."

Charlotte laughed. "Not pants. What size dress?"

Ike blinked. "Dress? I don't know."

Claire pulled Ike to the dressing room. "Try a seven." Charlotte and Marilyn took off into the racks. Soon, the two returned with several outfits over their arms.

Marilyn handed Ike one of the outfits. "Try this on."

Ike looked at it. "Where are the pants to go with this shirt?"

"That's a dress." Charlotte looked through the other outfits.

"What dress? There's not enough here."

"There's more than enough there." Claire frowned as she dropped a pink outfit on the floor.

Ike tried on several shirts the trio claimed were dresses. They were all very short, very tight, and extremely sexy. Finally, Ike put on a blue dress just a shade lighter than her eyes. A severe, angled cut marked the hem of the dress, running from just below her right knee to more

than thirty centimeters above her left. The neckline plunged nearly to her navel. The material felt soft and begged to be touched. Her three fashion consultants nodded. The dress was soon in a box and they ran for another store.

The next stop was the lingerie shop. The clerk quickly fitted Ike for a set of frilly, as the clerk called them, undergarments. The girls pulled her to the sleepwear department. Ike pointed at a so-called sleep ensemble that consisted of about six square centimeters of transparent lace and some string. "What the hell is that for?"

Charlotte giggled. "It's not for sleeping."

"No shit!"

Marilyn sighed. "This is if you need it." They made the selection for Ike and added a robe. The shoe shop was next on the list.

Charlotte grabbed a pair of dark blue shoes with ten-centimeter heels. Ike shook her head. "I'll kill myself."

The shop had a pair in the same color, but with only five-centimeter heels and they were off. As they passed the jewelry shop, Marilyn skidded to a halt. "Wait! I'll be right back!" She ran in the shop and came out in less than five minutes with a small package. They headed for Ike's cabin.

\* \* \* \*

It was 1820 when they reached Ike's cabin. The girls helped her dress. When she was all set, Marilyn took the small package from the jewelers and handed it to Ike. "Try this."

The package held a necklace with a large green stone on a gold chain. When Ike put the necklace on, the egg-sized stone rested between her breasts. "What is this?"

"Emerald."

Claire led Ike to the full-length mirror. "My God! You look amazing!"

Ike couldn't believe herself in the mirror. She turned a little in both directions and looked at her profile. At first, thirty years of being a Marine made her worry about looking so feminine. Ike slowly realized she liked the way she felt.

Charlotte smiled. "We know you look phenomenal, but how do you feel?"

Ike hesitated. "I...I don't think a Marine is supposed to say this, but I feel pretty."

Marilyn laughed. "You look pretty, too."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." Claire hugged Ike.

"We need to do your makeup." Marilyn sat down in front of Ike. "You have such a pretty face, and you don't need to do much other than a little highlighting of your eyes and lips." Marilyn quickly applied a small amount of makeup to her eyes and put on some very red, moist lip-gloss. "There."

"I think you're ready." Charlotte paused for a moment. "You know, you sure don't look like an Ike anymore."

"You're right, Sis." Claire smiled. "You look much more like an Ikira now."

Ike realized Marilyn had paid for all this. "This is great, but I need to pay you for everything."

Marilyn laughed. "No. This one's on Jim."

The Emperor just bought clothes for his director of security. Ike started to argue. "Daddy would insist if he was here." Charlotte giggled. "He hates to admit that he likes to buy clothes."

Ike fought with a few tears. "Thank you. This is great."

Marilyn hugged her. "You're welcome. Now, we have to get out of here before Dev shows up!"

They all kissed her cheeks and wished her good luck before they left.

\* \* \* \*

Less than ten minutes after the girls left, Ike's doorbell rang. She opened the door and Dev stood there looking at something down the corridor.

He turned to her, a smile on his face. "Hi..." As his voice trailed off, his mouth hung open.

She felt the heat of her blush. "Hi."

He looked her down and up again. Twice. He opened and closed his mouth. Three times. "Ikira?"

"Yeah. I hope you like this."

He blinked. She lost count of how many times. The smile slowly came back to his face. "I do. Very much."

She picked up the transparent shawl that went with the dress and slipped it over her shoulders. "Shall we go?"

He held his arm out for her. "Yeah, we should." She slipped her arm through his, and they were off to the nightclub.

"I made a mistake earlier."

"What was that?"

"Dev is a mistake. I think I like Devon better."

"All right. I hope you don't mind me taking to calling you Ikira." He stared at her. "You most certainly aren't an Ike tonight."

The warmth of her flushed face returned. "No, I don't mind." The tingly sensation returned, causing her to quiver as they walked the corridors to the club.

"I'm glad for that."

They went into the club and the waitress showed them to their table. When Devon held her chair, Ike was puzzled for a moment. She finally sat down. They ordered their drinks and while they browsed the menu, Devon watched her. "You look terrific."

"Thank you." She found her smile came very easily for him. "I'm really happy you like this outfit."

The waitress brought their drinks and took their orders.

"I hope you don't take this wrong, but you look like a different girl." Devon sipped at his drink.

"Thank you, but I'm hardly a girl anymore."

"Again, I hope you don't take this badly, but I had to take a look at your file. You really are forty-six." He looked up into her eyes. "You're a beautiful woman."

It was her turn to look down now. "You're embarrassing me." His compliments drove not only her embarrassment, but also her desire. Ike felt the tingles turn to a spreading warmth across her breasts. "I have a confession. I needed some help, but I got this outfit this afternoon just for tonight."

He smiled brightly. "Really? I'm honored."

She looked up at him. "Don't ask me why, but I wanted to look nice for you tonight." She hesitated a moment. "I guess that's pretty silly, isn't it?"

"No, not to me, at least."

The waitress brought their dinners, and Ike fought off thirty years of being a Marine and tried to eat like a lady instead of a jarhead. Devon kept looking at her, his blue eyes intense. She felt nervous when she laughed. "Do I have something on my face?"

"What?"

"You keep staring at me." She watched her plate carefully.

"I'm sorry." His smile came back quickly, his blue eyes mesmerizing. "I guess most men tend to stare at pretty girls."

Her embarrassment kept her from even answering him.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"That's all right." She met his eyes again. "Really it is." As she stared into his eyes, the image of him in a workout suit flashed back into her consciousness. She felt the urge to drag him onto the nearest table.

He'd worn dark slacks and a nice shirt. "I'm a little outclassed in the apparel department tonight."

"No, you look great to me." Ike wanted to choke on something after that stupid answer.

He laughed.

Much faster than she should have, Ike finished her dinner. She felt sorry for that, because now her hand kept sneaking up to her hair. "I want to thank you for asking me to dinner."

"I should thank you for coming."

She smiled and found it felt very natural. "You're welcome." Thirty years as an MP built habits and instincts. They were hard to overcome. She felt eyes on her and, as casually as she could, she looked around the room. Several men stared at her.

Devon followed her gaze. "Having men look at you makes you uncomfortable."

"Yeah, a little. I guess I'm not used to it."

"If you're always going to look this good, you should get used to it."

Her face felt hot again. As she tried to carry on a conversation, Ike also tried to figure out her feelings. People often told her she looked to be maybe thirty years old, but she felt like a sixteen-year-old girl on her first date. Something about this man had her giddy and excited.

Ike wondered what he would be like in bed. She wanted to talk to him. The problem was, she felt too shy to even talk and make sense. She sounded like a babbling idiot, but he didn't seem to mind.

The waitress picked up the dishes, and the distraction interrupted Ike's thoughts. Then Zach and Claire Reeves walked up to their table. Devon smiled up at them. "Good evening, Admirals."

Zach looked at her and blinked. "Ike?"

"Hello, Admiral. Claire."

Claire gave her a wink. Zach look puzzled. "We saw you over here and wanted to say hello, but I wasn't really sure this was Ike with you, Devon."

"Yeah, it's Ikira. She looks wonderful tonight."

"Yes, she certainly does." Zach had a lopsided grin. "I just wonder where she has her blaster."

Claire elbowed him in the ribs. "Ignore him. He's like my Mom and talks to hear his head rattle."

Zach laughed. "She's right. I do sometimes talk to hear my head rattle. That's what I get for hanging around with Marilyn for seven hundred years." He turned serious. "You do look very nice tonight." He paused. "Ikira."

"Thank you." Ike glanced up at Devon. He stared and smiled at her again. Her hand wandered around on the table, no doubt trying to find a route to her hair.

"We should be going. Ikira, Devon, good to see you both outside sickbay." Claire leaned and kissed Ike's cheek. "You've got him hooked, now just reel him in!" Claire whispered so softly, Ike almost didn't hear her.

"Goodnight, folks." Zach shook Devon's hand and turned to Ike. She offered her hand for him to shake. He leaned over and kissed the back of her hand. "Goodnight, Ikira."

She and Devon sat alone at their table. He smiled at her. "Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to, but I'm not very good at it." A wave of trepidation swept over her. She didn't know if she could control herself from doing something foolish once she was in his arms.

"I'm sure you'll do fine."

### Melodee Aaron

She laughed. "Maybe. The last time I seriously danced was when I graduated from recruit to Midshipman. I was sixteen."

"It's like riding a bike." He helped her with her chair and held her arm as they went to the dance floor. The music for the last twenty minutes had all been faster numbers, but as soon as they reached the floor, the music changed to a slow song. "Looks like a minor change in plans." Devon put his arms around her shoulders as Ike rested her head on his left shoulder. She slipped her right arm around his waist and put her left hand on his chest. As they moved to the slow beat, the only thing she could think of was how good it felt in his arms.

The tingles she felt all evening intensified as he held her. Moving from mere tingling, like when her communications headset shorted out and give her a little shock, lke felt major quakes hit her body. The vibrations she felt slammed her as hard as projectile impacts on her armor.

A minute or so into the song, Devon sniffed softly. "Ikira, I just noticed it, but that's a wonderful perfume you're wearing. Very light and fresh." She felt him laugh a little. "I guess I had to be this close to smell it."

Ike was glad he couldn't see her blush this time. She wasn't wearing perfume. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. You're an excellent dancer."

She giggled like a teenager. "All I'm doing is stumbling around to the beat."

"That's all dancing is. Just a controlled stumble."

She moved her head, snuggling closer to him. Ike felt him tentatively move his face against her hair. "This is a great evening, and I'm having a wonderful time."

"You're a fun girl to be around."

"You can't get the idea I'm not a girl anymore, can you?"

"I guess I can't. I'll try, but I can't make any promises."

"That's all right. It doesn't bother me, but it is a little funny to be my age and be called a girl."

She felt him shrug his shoulders slightly. "I don't know. The Emperor's youngest wife is over seven hundred and he calls them all girls." He paused for a moment. "I believe you'll still be as pretty in three hundred years as you are now."

Ike had no idea what to say and probably would have sounded like an idiot if she did. She stayed with something safe. "Can we stay for another dance?"

"Of course. We can dance as long as you like."

Ike wondered if they could dance forever.

\* \* \* \*

They stayed at the club until well after midnight, sometimes dancing and sometimes sitting at the table talking. Mostly, they spent a lot of time staring at each other.

As Devon walked her home, she held his arm with both hands, leaning her head on his shoulder. When they reached her door, she looked firmly at the deck. "Devon, would you like to come in?"

The door swished open obediently to Ike's command, and Devon looked into the room. He took her shoulders and turned her to face him. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

She looked up into his eyes. "Why not?"

He seemed to search for words, and then smiled. "You're a special woman. I don't want my instincts and reactions to get the better of me." He suddenly became very serious. "I should stay out here."

Ike blinked rapidly at him. "It's all right."

"I'd like nothing more right this minute than to come inside with you. I know I'd still be here in the morning." Ike wasn't sure if he searched for words or strength, but he seemed to find what he looked for. "I don't want to have sex with you."

"What?"

His hands squeezed her shoulders a little. "I don't want to have sex with you yet. I want to keep learning about you, get to know you, and then, some time, I want to make love with you." Devon caressed her cheek gently with a thumb. "I'm not really turning you down."

She smiled and put her fingers on his lips. "I've never had a man turn down sex with me. And I've never known anyone who wanted to make love with me."

"Now you have."

"Yeah. I've had several firsts tonight."

"That's a good thing." His hands still rested on her shoulders. Ike didn't know if he held her to stop her from running away or if he tried to keep her at a safe distance. "I should go before I change my mind."

She almost said more, but managed to stop herself. "I understand." She wanted to say more. She wanted to drag him by his hair through the door and throw him on the floor. She wanted to chew his clothes off.

Their eyes locked as they leaned together. Ike moved closer to him and her arms slipped around his sides to his back. When their lips touched, Ike melted in his arms, and her knees tried to unhinge. If he hadn't held her, she'd have fallen to the floor.

After many minutes, their lips parted. They both panted breathlessly. "Goodnight, Ikira."

Her eyes slowly opened. "Goodnight." She brushed her lips across his again, and backed into the room, holding his hands as long as she could before the door closed between them.

### Chapter 8 Getting to Know You

Ike stood at the door, just staring at it, for several minutes after it closed, leaving Devon in the corridor. She hoped he'd change his mind and ring the bell, but it never happened.

As she got ready for bed, she dropped her hairbrush three times and ran into the bulkhead once. When she finally turned off the light and lay down, she stared at the overhead for a long time.

\* \* \* \*

Devon thought he was walking to his cabin, but it soon became obvious he actually just wandered around, thinking.

He had been in a couple of serious relationships in the past, one so serious he came very close to getting married. He'd also been in a number of not-so-serious relationships. Just with a particular woman for company and sex, nothing more.

Devon had his fair share of friends, too, both men and women, people he'd go out with and have a few drinks. He and a few of his women friends had, in times of need or simple lust, had sex and remained friends.

But he never felt like he did now.

Devon had stood outside her door for many minutes after it closed. He considered a number of plans of action before finally leaving. He thought about just ringing the bell. He considered kicking the door down. Anything to get her back in his arms again. He wanted Ikira, but it was something more.

He considered going to sickbay. He felt a knot in his stomach the size of a landing craft. His head hurt.

He smiled when he realized the doctor probably couldn't cure what was wrong with him.

\* \* \* \*

Ike woke and felt tired. The last time she looked at the clock, it was just after 0500. Now 0700, she needed to get moving. Despite being tired, she felt wonderful.

She decided to swing by sickbay to check Eeto, so after she showered and dressed, she darted in and out of the mess hall to grab a cup of coffee and a powdered doughnut. As she walked into sickbay, Claire saw her and, without a word, grabbed her arm and pulled Ike to her office, closing the door behind them. "Two things. First, how did it go? Second, what in the hell are you doing?"

Ike grunted around a mouthful of the stale doughnut. "What?"

"Look at you! You looked killer last night! Now, you're back in your fatigues, your hair is a mess, no makeup, and you're stuffing your face!" Claire sighed heavily. "And if you weren't aware, powdered sugar is not makeup!"

Ike, wide eyes blinking rapidly, swallowed. "This is all I have to wear."

Claire stared. "Oh, hell!"

"And I'm hungry."

"A doughnut?"

"I don't know how to put on makeup."

Claire just blinked.

"I brushed my hair."

Like the rest of the royal family, Claire had a neural implant that allowed her to communicate with the ship's computers and other people with implants directly. Claire's face took on the look of distraction that meant she used the implant. "All right. Mom and Charlotte are on their way." She pointed at Ike's chest. "Do not leave this room. That's an order! And get rid of that damn doughnut!" Ike stuffed the rest of the pastry in her mouth. "Jesus!" Claire stormed out of her office.

\* \* \* \*

In a matter of minutes, Charlotte and Marilyn arrived with a sleepy Paige, still in her robe, in tow. They brought several bags filled with clothes. They joined Ike and Claire in Claire's office.

"Oh shit oh dear." Marilyn's eyes rolled. "Ikira, you can't let him see you like this today!"

Ike thought she had most of the powdered sugar off her face. "This is all I have to wear."

"Not now." Charlotte dumped a bag on the table. "These are Janelle's, but you're close to her size. Paige can do a fast alteration if needed."

Paige yawned. "Hi, Ike."

Claire pushed her. "Mom, call her Ikira."

"Oh, yeah. Hi, Ikira."

Charlotte and Claire rummaged through the clothes while Marilyn applied some makeup. "How did it go last night?"

Ike smiled. "Amazing! While I'm here, Doc, I don't feel too good today."

Claire looked for a skirt. "What's wrong?"

"My head and stomach hurt."

Marilyn grinned. "Ain't it cool?"

Charlotte laughed. "Yeah!"

"You'll be fine. Strip." Claire found a navy blue skirt.

"What? I can't wear that! I'm on duty!"

"I'm an Admiral, and I say you can wear this. Strip."

Ike took off her uniform. Charlotte's eyes grew wide, and she gasped. "We forgot panties!"

Paige yawned again. "She can't have mine."

"I'm wearing them!" Ike knew this bunch, especially Marilyn. She didn't like where this might go.

Marilyn's eyes rolled again. "Ikira, Marine GI granny drawers are not panties." She glanced around the room at the other three women. "Well, you'll just have to do without."

Ike blinked rapidly. "What?"

"The skirt isn't short." Charlotte smiled. "Drop your drawers."

"Now, wait just a damn minute here!"

"Ikira, remember that whole Admiral and Sergeant thing?" Claire grinned.

Ike looked around the room for solace, but it was in short supply. She sighed and pulled off her Marine GI granny drawers.

The skirt fit fine, but the sleeves on the blouse were too long. Paige woke up enough to take them in a little and soon the outfit was good to go.

"This is cold with nothing on under it." Ike thought for a moment. "What do I do when I sit down?"

"Keep your knees together." Marilyn fussed with the hem of the skirt.

Charlotte laughed. "Or not." She handed Ike a pair of low shoes.

Claire considered a moment. "You look great! Professional and pretty at the same time."

Ike still felt a little dazed. She glanced at her watch. "Oh, shit! I'm late!" She started to run from the office.

"Ikira, you really shouldn't run when you're not wearing panties. Your skirt flies up a little in back." Marilyn stifled a grin.

Ike sighed and walked as fast as she could to her office.

\* \* \* \*

Ike almost ran through the door. "Sorry I'm late."

Kelli manned the Duty Desk. "Morning." She paused a moment. "Ike?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Lieutenant Henson is in your office."

Ike stared at Kelli for a minute. "Don't say a goddamned word!" She went to her office door, took a deep breath, and went inside.

Devon stood as she came through the door. "Good morning, Ikira." He looked at her legs for a few moments. "You look nice today."

Despite herself, she smiled. "Thank you. Good morning."

"I had a great time last night."

"I did, too." Ike found she couldn't stop smiling at him.

"You don't need to dress up everyday to impress me. I'm already impressed."

As she sat down, Ike thanked the office furniture god for the modesty panel in the front of her desk. "I'm glad you're impressed." She let the serious mood slip away for now. "I have to confess the dress from last night and this outfit really weren't my ideas."

"They're not?"

"No. A few friends are acting as my fashion advisors."

"Give them my compliments." A sad expression came to Devon's face. "I guess we should do what the Fleet is paying us for."

"Yeah, we should." She glanced at her in box and picked up the reports from medical and the lab. "It looks like the Doc was right. Kal'Orma had toxic levels of that drug in him. Claire ruled that as the cause of death. Says here he couldn't have injected the drug himself in his neck due to the angle. She's ruled this a homicide."

Devon shook himself a little. "Did the lab find any evidence?"

Ike scanned the reports from the crime lab. "Sort of. They found one smudged partial print on the syringe. They don't know who it belongs to, but they're certain it doesn't belong to Kal'Orma."

"That figures." Devon stared into space for a moment. "Anything else?"

She admired his profile. "Not really. At least nothing that shouldn't be there." She turned a few pages. "No trace evidence. The weapon was a standard hunting laser available on Palea to almost anyone and had been modified to change frequencies and boost the power."

"Was it a professional job, or something done in somebody's back room?"

"Looks like an amateur job, but they knew what they were doing, even if their technique was a bit sloppy." Ike glanced at the page. "No prints or anything inside."

"None? Not even from Kal'Orma?"

"Nope. Completely clean."

"That's odd. I would have expected to have found something, probably from Kal'Orma."

"Me, too. A professional hack would know to clean up the inside and how to do it, but an amateur?"

"More questions, Ikira."

"Yeah, looks that way." Ike paused for a moment. "Mind if I get off topic for just a moment?"

"Of course not."

"I really like it when you call me Ikira."

"I like calling you that. Like I said, it feels good to say. And I like that you decided to stop calling me Dev. I had an aunt that called me Dev, and she drove me crazy."

"I think we all had aunts like that."

"Yeah. So, what do we do now?"

"I'd like to go out with you again tonight."

"All right, you've got a date, but I was talking about the case."

Ike stared and thought she just made a real idiot out of herself. "OK, I'll see you at 1800, then. Sorry about that."

"Don't be. I was going to ask you out anyway. Now the pressure is off me."

She threw a paper clip at him. "Anyway. Maybe you can run this partial print in the Intelligence database."

"Yeah, I can do that. I want to check a few other things there, too." He smiled a little. "I may have an idea trying to take shape in my head someplace, and I need to try shaking it loose."

"That sounds like you'll be working on it all day." The thought of him being out of her sight bothered her.

"Yeah, for a while, anyway. Can I meet you for lunch?"

"I'd like that. What do you have in mind?"

"When was the last time you had a picnic?"

Ike blinked. "I can't even remember."

"Good. I'll pick you up here at 1130. Plan to be gone until at least 1300." He stood before she could speak and came to her side of the desk. "I'll see you then." He took her hand and leaned to kiss her cheek. "Bye."

\* \* \* \*

She should have gone with Devon to the Intelligence Office because she wasn't getting a thing done in her office. Kelli came in with a folder. "Here are the final autopsy reports on the Palean."

Ike looked up from her doodles. "Thanks. Anything new in them?"

"Nope, just confirmation of the preliminary." They had known each other for five years. "Ike, are you OK?" "Yeah, why?"

"Well, you seem distracted."

"Just this case. I'm fresh out of ideas."

"Uh-huh. You look good today."

Ike looked up at the Corporal. "Thanks." Ike studied Kelli for a moment. "Go ahead. Get it off your chest."

Kelli laughed a little. "Are you and the Lieutenant, um..."

"No, we are not!"

"OK. Would you like to?"

"Damn it, Kelli!"

"Hey! I'm just asking! In five years, I wasn't sure until today if you even had legs."

Ike put her pencil down carefully on the desk and clasped her hands in front of her. "I'm not in love."

"I never said you were."

"Oh."

"Are you?"

Ike sighed. "Maybe."

"Ike, if you are, I'm really happy for you." Kelli studied her for a moment. "And if you are, is it getting in the way of the investigation?"

Ike thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so." She looked up at Kelli. "Do you think it is?"

"Not that I can see."

"Tell me if it does, please?"

"I will."

\* \* \* \*

Ike's intercom buzzed at 1115. She almost didn't answer out of fear it was Devon canceling lunch. Sean's image swam into view when she answered. "Hi, Ike. What's up?"

"Oh, hi, Sean."

"You don't seem too happy to hear from me."

"I'm just really busy, that's all."

"OK. How about lunch at my place?"

Ike sighed. "I can't. Too much to do today, but thanks."

"Your loss."

She tried a smile and had to force it. "Probably."

"All right. I need to run, so I'll talk to you later." He made a kissing motion and clicked off.

\* \* \* \*

Devon picked her up at exactly 1130. He had a large picnic basket, one of the oldfashioned kind made from wicker with a red- and white-checkered tablecloth over the top. They walked, holding hands, to the Observation Deck. "Did you find anything?"

"Other than you?"

Ike laughed and, without thinking, bumped her hip against his. "No! I mean on the case."

He chuckled. "Oh! Not yet. The computers needed to link to Earth, Palea, and Wengly to finish the search. There should be some results about 1400 or so."

"That sounds good. We won't have to rush."

"Yeah." They went into the woods and found a place in a small clearing. "How's this?" The clearing was small, maybe twenty meters across, and the sweet smell of freshly cut grass was still crisp in the air. The artificial sun floated near the zenith and felt warm on Ike's skin. Birds sang and chattering in the trees, and Ike thought she heard the barking of squirrels in the near distance.

She looked around and saw no picnic table. "This looks good to me."

Devon set down the basket and spread the tablecloth on the ground. "Can I help you sit?"

Ike worried about sitting on the ground with no underwear. "No, I can get it." She wiggled around a little and made it without giving him a peepshow.

He sat down across from her, his knees almost touching hers. "Let's see what we have here." He rummaged through the basket. Devon pulled out some sandwiches and a small salad. He quickly prepared a plate for her. "Here you are, Ikira."

"This is kind of fun." She smiled broadly as the birds sang in the trees around them.

"Yeah, it is." After he fixed his plate, he reached into the basket and took out two glasses and a bottle of wine. "I wasn't sure, but I thought red for ham sandwiches." He wore a lopsided grin.

"That's great!"

"Thanks. I just wonder what the penalty is for getting an MP drunk and taking advantage of her."

Ike felt the smile fade from her face. "You wouldn't have to get me drunk, and you wouldn't be taking advantage of me." She took the glass of wine he offered.

Devon smiled and lifted his glass. "To you, Ikira. The prettiest cop I've ever known and ever will know."

"Thank you." They clinked their glasses and sipped.

They tried talking about the case as they ate, but neither of them could stay focused. Devon put everything back in the basket, leaving the wine and glasses. "This was fun."

"Yeah, it was. A very good idea." She watched his face.

He smiled. "There's something else I think would be a good idea."

"What's that?" As she stared into his pale blue eyes for a moment, the crisp and clean smell of distant flowers filled her nose. She heard the birds singing some unknown tune in the trees and felt the warmth of the artificial sun on her skin to match the spreading warmth in her pelvis.

"I think it would be a very good idea if I could kiss you again." Without waiting for an answer, he leaned forward, taking her face in his hands, and kissed her deeply.

She put her hands on his cheeks and responded to his kiss, their tongues exploring each other's mouths. Their lips slid apart, and Ike felt his breath hot against her face. She opened her eyes slowly. She could hear the pounding of her pulse in her ears. "Can we do that again?"

He answered by pressing his face to hers again.

The kiss was long and, when it ended, it took Ike several moments to open her eyes. Their hands had, without effort, moved to clasp together between their chests.

Devon smiled softly. "I'm glad you're holding my hands."

"I like to hold your hand."

"I'm not sure where they'd be going right now if you didn't."

In an instant, she decided. "Devon, make love to me, please?"

He paused for a moment, almost frozen in time and space. "I want to make love to you, but I want this to be your choice."

"I understand. I truly do. I want to make love with you." She searched his eyes for a moment.

She leapt onto him, knocking him backwards to the ground and landing on top of him. With their lips pressed together, their hands explored each other. As Ike lay on top of him, Devon's hands moved to her ass and squeezed. Working her skirt up, he slipped his hands onto her bare skin. "You seem to have forgotten your panties."

She laughed and buried her face in his shoulder. "Not exactly!" She told him the story of the hurried fashion consultation this morning in sickbay, and they laughed together. She touched her nose to his. "I'm sorry that ruined the moment. I can go home and put some on if you'd like."

"That's OK. If I'd known this earlier, I'd have been even more distracted than I've been all morning."

She kissed him again, and Devon rolled on top of her. She felt his cock pressing against her thigh through his pants. He looked down into her eyes from mere centimeters away. His face was solemn as he stared at her. "I want you."

Together, they worked his pants down, and his cock slipped into her pussy. As they moved as one, Ike couldn't take her eyes from his. His smooth, slow movements gave her a wonderful feeling, but there was something more, something Ike couldn't identify. Ike ran her hands over his back, feeling strong muscles under the uniform shirt, her nose smelling the mix of the fresh air of the Observation Deck and Devon's own unique and delicious smell. His thrusting rubbed his legs against her thighs, a combination of the roughness of his pants, the firmness of his hips, and the tender touch of passion.

#### Melodee Aaron

A smile spread over her face. Ike pulled his face to hers, kissing him deeply. Their tongues moved together, and she felt his hands move over her shoulders and head. As her hands ran over his back, Ike felt the heat of the sun making his uniform warm to the touch. The smell of a honeysuckle some place in the distance wafted over the clearing, mixing with the scent of his perspiration.

Their lips parting, Ike stretched to kiss his ear, running her tongue around the canal. A bead of sweat rolled down his hair to her tongue. The saltiness combined with his body's chemistry in a delightful way that made her mouth tingle and water.

She moved her legs to wrap them around his hips, pulling him to her tightly. The deep thrusting of his cock rubbed her ass against the soft grass. The plethora of smells threatened to overwhelm her. With the grass, Devon's delicious scent, the flowers in the distance, and the clean smell of the earth, Ike felt she neared olfactory overload.

She struggled to unbutton his shirt without ripping the buttons from the material. She ran her hands over his bare chest. Though he was no bodybuilder, Devon's chest was hard and firm. She felt his chest rise and fall quickly with his panting as she caressed the tan skin.

He pushed his hands to the ground and lifted his chest from hers. Ike opened her blouse and released her bra. She reached up to lick his chest and the taste of his skin sent a shockwave through her. He gently lowered himself to her again, his chest pressing against her jutting nipples.

As he thrust into her, his tongue strayed over her neck and shoulders. He moved from one side to the other, pausing to kiss her lips. He made flickering licks over her face, and licked the bridge of her nose.

She reached to grasp his head. His arms moved to grab her wrists. He pressed them to the soft grass over her head, holding them as his cock moved rhythmically inside pussy. He smiled down into her face. She couldn't tell what excited her most. The motion of his hips against hers, the forcefulness of his holding her arms, and the way he licked her head and neck all made her quiver.

His legs moved as he scrambled for a grip in the grass with his feet as he pushed. She felt him gain better footing, and his thrusting scooted her ass on the grass. Devon lifted his chest from hers a little and released her wrists. His hands moved to the sides of her head, and he held her tightly as he pressed his lips to hers.

She felt her climax moving closer as his cock rubbed against her clit, and his breathing became a rapid pant. He thrust hard into her she felt his body tensing as her orgasm rushed over her. Devon's body twitched and jerked in her arms and her hips convulsed as his cum erupted deep inside her.

Writhing together, a series of grunts came from his mouth as his head strained backward. Ike felt herself bucking against his thrusts as she screamed nonsensically.

He collapsed onto her, only barely catching himself enough not to knock the wind from her. As they shook against each other, his hands moved to hug her as well as he could while lying on top of her.

After a time, he rolled to recline beside her, and his arms slipped protectively around her shoulders. He smiled. "My God."

"You can say that again." She smiled at him. His arms felt strangely wonderful around her, and the safe, warm feeling she had puzzled her a little. After so many years of being totally independent, she wondered if the feeling made her weak. She decided it didn't matter. She liked it, at least right now, and she wanted the feeling to go on.

They lay in each other's arms in the soft grass, letting the sun caress them, just talking and kissing. Finally, they dressed and made their way, hand in hand, to Devon's office.

### Chapter 9 Paleans

Ike felt giddy, but not much more than Devon seemed. Once in his office, with the door closed, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. "God! You're amazing!"

Devon moved his head to look into her eyes, his forehead touching hers. "So are you." His hands strayed up and down her back, massaging first her shoulders and then her ass. He sighed. "But we have work to do."

"I still don't have any panties under this dress."

"That rules out sitting on my lap, then."

"We could talk about the first thing that pops up." Ike felt filled with passion and desire.

"We could already talk about that." He kissed her, gently at first. Ike felt passions rage, and the kiss intensified. When their lips parted, Devon stared into her eyes. "You take my breath away."

"Let me give it back." Ike pressed herself to his lips again and ran her tongue deeply into his mouth. After a very long time, she leaned back in his arms, her eyes half closed and her mouth slightly open. "Wow."

"You can say that again."

She hugged him tightly to her and felt he was erect again, his dick pressing to her waist. "Devon, would you stay with me tonight?"

"I'd like that." He leaned back and looked deeply into her eyes. "I'd like that very much."

They kissed again, gently this time as their passion receded. "You're right, though. We need to get to work so we'll be able to spend the night together."

"Does that mean I have to like it, or that I can't be distracted by you?"

She smiled. "No."

\* \* \* \*

A stack of printouts two centimeters thick sat in Devon's in box. Ike pulled a chair up alongside him as he paged through them. "Here's an odd one, right from Boone's database. There aren't five Paleans working at the coffee shop. There are six, counting the dead one."

Ike felt the trembles in her body caused by sitting so close to him. She liked the feeling and didn't want to move. "Really? I never knew that."

Devon thought for a moment. "Is that odd, or do Paleans have some affinity for working at coffee shops?"

"Not that I know of, but we can ask Zach Reeves."

"OK, so that one goes on the follow-up stack." He set the printout aside and moved to the next one. "This said there was no match to the partial print on the syringe. There's a twenty-nine percent probability it's human, though."

Ike laughed. "That narrows our suspect list down to just over twenty-three thousand."

"Yeah." He looked pensive as he scanned the next printout. "You said you and Sean have been, to use your words, sort of lovers?"

She didn't even want to hear Sean's name, let alone think about him right now. "Yeah, we were. As in past tense."

He smiled. "Writers! Always worried about tense!" He kissed her cheek. "Anyway, how long have you known him?"

"About two and a half years, give or a take a little. We started spending time together about two years ago. Why?"

Devon handed her the printout. "Because he didn't exist more than three years ago."

"Eh?" She looked at the printout and his file ended thirty-five months ago when he showed up on New Liverpool. "My report had him all the way back to his birth."

"Where did that report come from?"

"Boone's brains."

"Let me see that." Devon looked at the routing codes on the printout. "This came from Fleet and Palean Intelligence databases. We have a few different sources than you."

Ike frowned. "But Boone's databases are derived from those at Intelligence."

He shrugged. "At least one of them is wrong."

Ike chewed on her lip again. "How can that be?"

"You shouldn't bite your lip that way." He grinned. "I'd rather do it for you."

She smiled. The idea caused her to shiver. "Let's not start that again just now."

"I don't know how one would change the data."

"We could ask Empress Tanya. She's the brain expert."

"Another for the follow-up pile." He looked at the next printout. "I'm not sure if this is a surprise or not. Anamostat is only made in one place in the galaxy."

"Palea?"

"Yep."

Ike frowned. "Other than sitting this close to you, why is my hair trying to stand on end?"

"I wish I knew. Mine is too, and I don't know what I'm doing like you do."

"Boone has had exactly two homicides since she was launched more than eight hundred years ago, and this is one of them. What makes you think I know what I'm doing?"

"You know how to make a guy feel good, don't you?"

She smiled at him. "Yeah, I really do."

"Ahem. Save that thought."

She kissed the end of his nose. "I will." She looked at the printouts. "Let's go talk to the Empress and see what she has to say."

\* \* \* \*

A certified super genius, Empress Tanya had some of the problems with interactions with people that plague many intelligent people. She was shy and sensitive. She also stuttered.

"So, you see our problem." Ike glanced at Devon for a moment. "Either Boone's computers are wrong or Fleet and Palean Intelligence are both wrong."

Tanya read the thirty-page report in just over fifteen seconds. "Yeah, th-th-that's a pproblem. I'm n-n-not sure I have an answer for you, th-th-though."

Devon rolled a coin in his hand. "What Ikira is trying to ask is if there's a way Boone's computers, or at least the data in them, could have been tampered with."

Tanya glanced up at Ike. "Anything is p-possible, so th-there's always a w-w-way it could have happened. Let m-me look at s-s-something." She went to her data terminal and pulled up a mass of data, and it flashed by on the screen so quickly it was blur to Ike. "Th-That's interesting."

Ike looked at Devon for a moment. "What's interesting, Tanya?"

"The log s-s-shows I edited the p-personnel d-database 109 days ago. I d-didn't d-do that."

Devon frowned. "You're saying you remember if you did or didn't edit the data?"

"Yeah, th-that's exactly w-what I'm saying. I d-d-didn't edit the d-database. The last ttime I really d-did anything to th-this information w-w-was July 23, 3681. Just less than n-n-nine years ago." She played the keyboard. "Yeah, at 1425."

Ike considered. "Can you tell what was changed?"

"S-Sure." She typed again, and the printer started. "In a nutshell, s-s-someone added data t-to the record of S-Sean Lyons. This printout has the old record and th-the new one both so you c-c-can compare, but it looks like s-s-someone gave him a more d-detailed past." She glanced at the screen. "Actually, th-they gave him a p-past. It used t-t-to end about th-three years ago."

Devon slipped the coin back in his pocket. "Aren't you worried someone got into the system and changed data, especially using your name?"

Tanya laughed. "Of course I am, Lieutenant, but I'm n-n-not going to g-get all twitchy about it. I s-s-saw how they g-got in and c-closed the hole." She pressed a few more keys and the printer started again. "Here's th-the details on th-that for you."

Devon took the printouts as Ike shook Tanya's hand. "Thanks. We may want to talk to you again, if that would be all right."

"Of c-course." She paused for a second. "Anything you need, Ikira. And Marilyn w-wwanted you to call her w-when you have a chance." Tanya smiled.

\* \* \* \*

Devon frowned. "What was that about Empress Marilyn?"

"Remember when I said some friends helped me with my wardrobe?"

"Yeah."

"The friends are Empress Marilyn and Princesses Claire and Charlotte."

He turned to look at her as they walked. She pulled him toward her before he ran into the wall. "You've got the royal family helping you with fashion tips?"

"Yeah, I do. In fact, this is one of Empress Janelle's outfits."

He blinked. "And you're borrowing their clothes?"

"Yeah. No big deal."

"Yeah, right." He shook his head as they got on the elevator. "I think we need to talk to Mr. Lyons." He watched her closely.

She stared at the door for a moment. "Yeah, we do." Ike looked up at him for a moment. "He and I weren't in love and never were. We were, well, convenient."

"I've been with women for the same reasons." He slipped his arms around her waist and hugged her to his chest.

She liked the way she felt in his arms. "Want to see him now?"

He glanced at his watch. It was 1645. "No, let's do that tomorrow. Where are you taking me for dinner?"

"I'm not sure. Can I ask a sensitive question?"

"Always. I have no secrets from you."

"Um, are you homophobic?"

"No, at least I don't think I am. Why?"

"I like to go to the Dog and Pony Show sometimes. It cuts down on the number of guys hitting on me, and I've made a lot of friends there. Of course, they might not hit on me, but there's no guarantee they won't hit on you." She smiled at him.

"I'm already taken."

### Melodee Aaron

They still kissed as the door opened, and six Marines tried not to stare at their Master Sergeant making out in the elevator.

\* \* \* \*

They left her office on their way to the club. He glanced at her for a moment. "Did you want to stop by your place on the way?"

"No, why?"

"I thought you might want to put on some panties." Devon grinned at her.

"No, I don't think so." Ike squeezed his arm in hers. "I like the attention you've been giving me all afternoon."

"You should get used to that. I'd pay attention to you no matter what you were or weren't wearing."

The club was nearly empty when they arrived. They grabbed a table and ordered drinks and some finger food. After they ate, they were just talking when Cory and Carlo came to the table.

"Babe!" Carlo hugged her. "Who's the hunk?"

Ike laughed. "Cory and Carlo Simmons, this is Devon Henson."

Ike had prepared Devon for Cory and Carlo. Cory's eyes half closed. "Devon, eh? I like that name."

"Guys, put it in neutral. He's mine."

"Really?" Carlo hugged her again. "Do you mean yours as in a rental for tonight, or LTR?"

Devon, who hadn't had a chance to say hello, looked puzzled. "LTR?"

"Yes, dear man, LTR. Long-Term Relationship." Cory winked at Ike.

The four talked for a time, Cory and Carlo both dancing with her a few times, as did Devon. Ike was thankful neither of the men mentioned their last time together. At one point, Devon excused himself and headed to the men's room.

Cory turned to Ike. "My God! He's a doll!"

"I like to think so."

"What happened to King Dong?" Carlo smiled at Cory.

"Other than the two times he's called me, I haven't even thought about Sean."

"You little heartbreaker." Cory sighed. "I guess our nights of fun are over." He brightened. "Unless Devon would like to join us!"

"I don't think so. He's not homophobic, but I think his door swings one way. Even if it didn't, I'm not too inclined to share him." Ike paused for a moment. "Guys, I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention the other night to Devon."

"Not a problem." Cory patted her hand. "That's between us."

"Right." Carlo smiled. "I'm so happy for you. I really am! You need someone of your own, and he seems nice." Carlo thought for a moment. "But with an ass that looks like that, who cares if he's nice?"

"You slut." Cory laughed. "So, how is he?"

"We've made love once, on the Observation Deck, and it was amazing."

Carlo laughed. "Made love? You didn't just have a suck and fuck?"

Ike felt the tingles flowing through her again. "No, we made love."

"She's got it bad, Carlo."

"It looks that way to me, Cory."

She glanced at her friends. "Yeah, I'll admit it, too. I've got it bad. Guys, I think I could fall in love with him."

They both hugged her. "We really are happy for you, Ike. We love you, but we can't give you want you need and deserve." Cory sounded a little sad.

Carlo laughed a little, dabbing at his eyes. "All we could offer was the long high hard one and a little cuddling after."

Devon came back to the table. "You two aren't trying to steal Ikira from me, are you?"

Carlo laughed again. "No, we're not, but you should know that we care a lot about Ike, and we won't be happy if she gets hurt."

"Carlo!" Ike knew Cory and Carlo could be brazen. Something was coming.

"No, he's right, Ike." Cory turned to Devon. "You've never had your ass kicked until it's been kicked by two drag queens."

"I guess that's true, but you don't need to worry. I'd rather hurt myself than Ikira."

\* \* \* \*

"I hoped we could stay at my place tonight, Devon."

"That's fine. I should drop by my cabin to grab a few things, though."

She snuggled close to his side. "All right. I've got a special outfit to wear for you tonight."

"After running around all day with no underwear, driving me crazy, you've got a special outfit?"

"Yeah, I do."

"OK. I can deal with that." He had his arm around her shoulders. "Those two are some pretty interesting men."

She laughed a little. "Yeah, and they're really good friends, too."

They walked in silence to Devon's cabin, just touching, as Ike gently bumped her hip against his. He gathered a few things and they went to Ike's place. She'd left a few of her weapons on the dining room table. Devon stared at them. "What's all this?"

"Oh, sorry." She pointed at the several weapons as she named them. "Heavy blaster, pen blaster, explosive projectile, and pen laser."

He picked up the pen blaster. "I didn't know they came this small." It was about a centimeter in diameter and eight long.

"Yeah, they do." She pulled a twin to the pen blaster from her bra.

"Um, have you had that all day?"

"Yeah, why?"

"What if it had gone off while we were, uh, on the Observation Deck?"

"I'd have died happy."

He laughed, his eyes wide as he looked at the weapon. "Yeah. Me, too."

Ike kissed him. "Have a seat and I'll be back." She went to the bedroom.

"Mind if I hang my uniform up in the closet?"

"No, go right ahead. Be careful not to knock over that AGLR1917 in the closet. It's loaded. And mind the heavy laser, too."

"OK. What's an AGLR1917?"

"Automatic Grenade Launching Rifle. The big one."

"Remind me never to piss you off."

"Why?"

"Because you have your own personal armory in this closet."

Devon sat down on the sofa as Ike came back to the sitting room. She wore a robe that very closely matched the color of her eyes. It touched the floor. She went to the environment controls and turned the lights down to thirty percent. She put on some soft music and did a little turn in front of him. "How's this?"

"You're beautiful."

She again marveled at the heat his compliments brought to her face. "Thanks. Did you want to change?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't even own a robe."

They sat, just watching each other for a time. Ike smiled. "Don't you wonder what I'm wearing under this robe?"

"After what you were wearing under your skirt all day, I'm almost afraid to ask."

She kissed him. "Come with me." She took his hand and led him to the bedroom. As Ike removed his shirt, it occurred to her that they'd not even seen each other nude. On the Observation Deck today, she'd simply pulled up her skirt and his pants were around his ankles. Other than having their shirts open, they hadn't seen each other yet.

She ran her fingers across his chest and he shivered. "Are you cold?"

"No, not at all."

"Good." She knelt and slipped his shoes and socks off. She then reached up to undo his belt and pants and let them slip to the floor, leaving him naked. She stood and kissed him. "You look like I've dreamed you would."

"I hope that's a good thing."

"Very good. Would you like me to show you what I'm wearing under this robe now?" Before he could answer, she turned her back and let the robe fall to the floor. Despite the sleepwear she had from the mall, she'd worn nothing at all under the robe.

As she turned to him, Devon gasped. "Ikira, you're amazing." His gaze moved over her body. He also had a growing erection.

"Let me help." She eased him to the bed and helped him lie back on the pillows. His eyes never once left her body. Ike knelt on the bed next to him. "I hope you like what you see."

He opened and closed his mouth several times. "I do like what I see. Very much."

She smiled at him. "I wish there was a word I could apply to you. Handsome doesn't do the trick." She felt a shiver shoot through her. "Delicious." She licked his chest.

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her face to his. His tongue slid into her mouth as his arms slipped to her back.

As they kissed, she moved her hand down his stomach and touched his cock for the first time. She smiled as she felt the hardness her simply being nude and kissing him created. As they kissed, Ike again could smell his aroma, masculine with a spicy overtone. It made her desire rise higher than it already was.

Pulling her lips from his, Ike licked his lips and up the bridge of his nose, tasting the salty perspiration on his skin. Ike pressed her lips to his again as she felt the hardness of his dick press firmly against her. Ike also felt her own spreading wetness.

He rolled her to her back and quickly moved on top of her. His tongue flicked around her neck and up to her ears as he kissed her. As he rubbed his hips against her, she felt his hard cock sliding across her thighs, moistened by his pre-cum. Devon's hands moved up and down her sides, brushing along her ribs.

He slid down slightly, and his lips sucked at her nipples. His dick rested between her legs, and he thrust slightly, pumping it between her knees. As he sucked and kissed her breasts, his hands massaged them firmly, his fingers rolling her nipples.

She shivered as the muscles of his chest rubbed her stomach when he moved his head to give his mouth access to first one breast then the other. Her hands moved through his hair, gripping the sandy brown waves in her fingers. Ike felt the sweat of their bodies mixing to make their skin slippery as she wiggled beneath him.

She smelled the delicious scent of his sweat as he kneaded and licked her breasts. Slightly acrid, with a musky undertone that seemed to speak directly to her passions, the smell made her want to taste his body.

As he sucked her nipple deep into his mouth, his hands moved up to caress her face. His fingers brushed lightly over her forehead and cheeks, moving down to stroke her lips. The image

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of a blind man studying a statue came to her mind, and Ike wondered what his fingertips told him.

As his hands moved over her lips, she licked his fingers and tasted the flavor of his perspiration there. The taste made her twitch as it played over her tongue.

His hands slipped back to her breasts as he kissed down across her stomach. He slowly licked her thighs, and she quivered. His tongue pressed against her labia for a moment before slipping between the lips to dart into her pussy. She jerked with the intense pleasure, and he licked upwards, his tongue flicking around her clit over and over again.

Ike moaned as he sucked her clit between his lips and swirled his tongue around the tip. She wiggled when he gently nibbled at her clit, his tongue continuing to flit across the head.

His hands moved down, caressing her stomach and sides, until they reached her pussy. He gripped her clit between his thumbs, rubbing and rolling, as he slowly eased two fingers into her cunt. Licking the very tip of her clit where it protruded between his thumbs, his fingers explored every corner inside her pussy, stroking over her G-spot and across her cervix.

Her body shook and writhed as she screamed nonsense when her orgasm rolled over her. As she jerked on the bed, his thumbs, tongue, and fingers kept up their flickering motions, causing wave after wave of pleasure to sweep over her.

After many minutes, he slowed the movements of his hands and slipped his fingers from her pussy. He made one final slow lick of her cunt before sliding up to lie beside her. He put his arms around her, and she shivered in his arms.

Devon kissed her cheek softly. "I need to do that more often."

She managed a small laugh through her panting breath. "I'd die from the pleasure." She felt motion on the bed as she lay with her eyes closed and tried to control her breathing. She opened her eyes and saw him slowly pumping his dick with his hand. Reaching down, she placed her fist around his cock. "Let me do that."

She pressed her lips to his and moved to straddle his hips. His hard cock slipped easily into her pussy, and he moaned softly.

She wanted to make this last for him, but her desires pushed her forward faster than she wished. In minutes, Ike neared climax and bounced her hips to his, never pulling her lips away. Her orgasm thundered across her, and she removed her lips from Devon's from fear she'd bite him as her body convulsed.

Ike collapsed forward onto his chest with his stiff dick still buried in her pussy to the base. Her voice quivered when she spoke. "Damn it."

Devon kissed her ear. "Yeah." He rolled her and was suddenly on top, thrusting slowly into her pussy as his cock made smacking noises in her wetness with each slow stroke.

As on the Observation Deck, she felt herself fixated on his eyes. Ike tried to hold herself from climaxing again and she soon felt Devon tense and his thrusts become faster and harder. As he made a final powerful thrust into her, they climaxed together, their screams and moans blending in passion.

Devon removed his now semi-rigid cock from her and lay beside her. "Now it's my turn to say damn it."

"Yeah." Ike turned to face him and touched his face with her fingertips. They lay together, staring at each other until Ike felt his dick stiffening against her again. "I'd like to do something for you that you may like. However, you may not like it. Tell me if you don't like it or if I hurt you."

He looked puzzled. "I will."

She positioned his hips on a pillow and knelt between his spread legs. Retrieving a lubricant from the nightstand, she applied it to her fingers and made slow, gentle circles around his anus, applying the lubricant and relaxing him. "I want to massage your prostate gland, and I'll put my fingers in your ass to do that. If it hurts, tell me."

He nodded at her as she smiled and continued to press ever harder on his opening. She gently slipped her index finger in him just a little and he twitched. "Is this hurting you?"

"No. It was just a bit of a shock."

"All right, but tell me if it hurts." She smiled. "Or if it feels good." She resumed working her finger slowly and gently in his ass and she could feel him relaxing. She could see his cock, stiff as steel and pointed at the overhead.

After several minutes of working her finger in him, she slowly inserted her middle finger, as well. She moved her hand back and forth, penetrating deeper into his ass. When she had both her fingers to the second knuckles in his ass, she curled her fingers upward toward the base of his cock and felt his soft, spongy prostate.

As Ike watched his face, Devon's eyes slowly closed as she gently rubbed his gland, massaging the two lobes and tracing the cleft between them. "Are you all right?"

"That feels amazing."

"Good." She continued to rub inside him, applying more pressure and watching his reaction. "Most men can cum from having this done. Would you like that?"

"Yeah." The rise and fall of his chest was quick and shallow. She slowly but firmly moved her fingers back and forth on his prostate, increasing her speed. He moaned softly. Ike listened and watched to make sure they were moans of pleasure and not pain. "God, that feels so good!"

"Can you open your eyes?" He slowly opened his eyes and his gaze locked to hers. "I'm glad you like this."

"It's fantastic."

"Tell me if I hurt you." She rubbed harder and faster. His ass clenched her fingers and he shook all over.

Devon's voice sounded shaky, trembling as much as his body. "Yes, Ikira, yes! Faster!" Ike smiled at him and moved her fingers faster and pressed harder. "Yes! God!"

When he climaxed, the cum shot from the end of his cock and splattered against his chest and stomach. Ike slowed her movements and eased the pressure as he shook like an earthquake. As she slowly removed her fingers from his ass, he trembled and moaned, no longer able to hold

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his eyes open. Ike leaned over him. She slowly licked his seed from his body. When she kissed the head of his dick, he jerked like he'd been shocked.

She lay beside him and cuddled him to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I am." He gasped for air. "That was amazing."

She kissed him gently. "I'm glad you liked it." She found she had tears in her voice and

eyes.

He turned his head to her. "Why are you crying?"

She shrugged a little. "I'm happy I was able to please you that much, that's all."

He struggled to turn to her and slipped his arms around her. "Please, don't cry."

"They're happy tears."

"As long as they're not sad tears. I never want you to cry sad tears over me."

# Chapter 10 Suspects

Devon woke before dawn. Ikira still rested in his arms, her head on his chest, with a gentle smile on her face. They had waked one another in the night several times and made love. He watched her sleeping.

The session on the Observation Deck yesterday raised far more questions about his feelings than it answered. At times, Ikira was all business, as his initial impression had been. At others, she seemed to live life for the moment, eager to explore and learn.

He pressed his face against her head and smelled the delectable fragrance of her hair as she slept. He felt the shivering sensations that she triggered in him.

He remembered something from his days in school. Some psychological theory whose name he could no longer remember talked about people confusing lust and passion with love. The result was what people called love at first sight. He fought the urge to say that he loved Ikira. Knowing her less than two days, how could he love her?

Ikira was tough, more than able to take care of herself, and yet, when they were together, she seemed happy to let him feel like her protector. Some bit of leftover evolution made a man want to protect the woman he cared about. Devon felt that urge in him.

Devon suspected, and after last night, he knew Ikira had much more sexual experience than he. That was all right, though, because her past and his weren't important. The only thing that mattered was their future together.

If they had more of a future than just sharing passion.

\* \* \* \*

Ike decided she wanted to talk to Sean in her office and not at the coffee shop.

She called him, and he came to her office at 0900. As he sat down across the interview table from Ike and Devon, she studied him for a moment. "Thanks for coming, Sean. This is Lieutenant Devon Henson of Intelligence."

He barely glanced at Devon. "I didn't think I had much choice in coming or not. What's this about, Ike?"

Ike moved her notepad on the desk. "We want to ask you a few questions about Kal'Orma."

"I've already told you everything I know."

Devon opened the case file and looked at the notes. "We just want to clarify a few things, Mr. Lyons. First, it seems a little odd that of eleven Paleans on Boone, five of them work for you."

Ike glanced at Devon, wondering if he forgot the other one they'd found.

Sean blinked several times. "You've got bad information, Lieutenant. I have six Paleans working for me. As for why, I don't know. They're good workers, and they get along well with my customers."

"Right, six." Devon jotted a note in the file. "When did you hire the sixth?"

"Day before yesterday. I needed to replace Kal'Orma."

Devon frowned. "Why did you replace him so quickly?"

"I need a full crew at the shop." He shrugged. "Since not even your people could find him, I just assumed he abandoned his job and hired a replacement."

Ike took the crime scene holographs from the envelope and set them on the table. "That turns out to be a good idea. You see, Kal'Orma is dead."

Sean looked at the pictures for a moment. "Do I need a lawyer?"

"If you feel like you need one, you're certainly free to have one here."

"You're not under arrest or suspicion of anything. As Ikira said, you certainly have the right to an attorney, if you feel you need one." Devon glanced at Ike. "Would you care to answer our questions, or would you prefer to wait until an attorney can be brought in for you?"

Sean stared at Devon, then turned to look at her. His eyes were wide. "Ikira?"

"We can't compel you to answer any questions other than the one Devon just asked." Ike spread her hands. "Do you want a lawyer?"

"No. Why would I? I haven't done anything."

"No one said you have." Devon smiled. "We're just looking for answers, that's all, and we hope you can help us."

Sean looked slowly between the two. "I'll try to help in any way I can."

"We appreciate that." Ike pointed at the pictures again. "As you can see, Kal'Orma is dead."

"What happened to him?"

"He was murdered. Someone hit him on the head, knocking him out, dumped him in cargo bay nine, and injected him with an overdose of a drug that caused him to have a heart attack."

As Ike spoke, Sean glanced at the pictures again. "What was in that little suitcase?"

Devon leaned forward onto his elbows. "The weapon used to shoot Ambassador Tinn."

"You two think Kal'Orma tried to kill the Ambassador?" Sean laughed.

"No we don't. Devon and I think the person who tried to kill the Ambassador killed Kal'Orma to throw us off the scent." Ike watched his face and saw a look of trepidation sweep over him.

Devon waited a moment, as if hoping Sean would say something, but he only stared at the pictures. "Where were you between 0300 and 0330 on the ninth of this month?"

"I thought I wasn't being accused of anything."

Devon smiled. "You're not. I'm just asking."

Sean stared at Devon for a moment. "I was at home, in bed."

"Were you alone?"

He hesitated long enough to make Ike think he wouldn't answer. "No, I wasn't."

Devon glanced at Ike. "What about between 0800 and 0900 the same day?"

"I was at work." Sean sighed. "Ike, could you turn off the recorder for a minute?"

She pressed the *off* switch. "Sure."

"I was with Aida Patterson." Before she could speak again, Sean went on. "I know you two are seeing each other, and that's all right, Ike." He looked at his hands for a moment. "I know I can't give you what you really need and want." He smiled a passable smile. "I'm actually happy for you. Both."

"Thanks."

"Thank you, but we have a few more questions." Devon turned the recorder on again. "Ikira said she ran into you between 0500 and 0530 on the ninth, and you were doing some cleanup work at your coffee shop. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, we had a spigot on a pot break the night before and dump several liters of coffee on the floor. I was meeting Aida for drinks, so I left it and came in early to clean up."

Devon nodded. "For the record, could you tell us who Aida is and how she fits into this?"

"Yeah. Aida Patterson. She works at the shoe store next door to the coffee shop. We met for drinks at the Café and then we went to my place. We got there about 2330 and I left her sleeping about 0430."

Devon looked at something on his portable data terminal. He looked up at Sean. "The records show Ms. Patterson is married. Is there a reason we shouldn't talk to her?"

"No, but I would ask, for her sake, that you be discreet. Her husband doesn't know."

"We'll keep that in mind, Sean," Ike said, glad that he had found someone else.

"Thanks."

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"There's another thing Ikira and I are really concerned about." Devon picked up the two differing background files on Sean. "It seems you have two different histories. One ends about three years ago and has nothing before that time. The other goes all the way to your birth on New Liverpool thirty-eight years ago. We're curious as to not only which one is correct, but also why there are two different reports." Devon set the reports on the table in front of Sean.

"I'm a little confused." Sean hesitated, looking at his hands, but never at the reports. "Ike, I'm sorry I never told you about this before, but I've been running from someone. My name isn't Sean Lyons. It's Larry Wyatt."

Ike froze for a moment, blinking rapidly. "Why are you running?"

Sean took a deep breath, still looking down. "I'm married. Her name is Barbara. I couldn't take it, so I ran. I changed my name, and I've been here ever since. I'm sorry."

Devon watched Ike for a moment before he pressed forward. "Mr. Wyatt, we understand you ran away, and the why doesn't matter much, and that explains your file ending three years ago, but why did you change it recently?"

"I didn't, Lieutenant. That's what confuses me." He picked up the older, short report. "This is all that was there, or at least all I paid for when I got the new identity." He tapped the other report. "I have no idea about this."

Devon pulled the file for Larry and Barbara Wyatt on his data terminal and handed it to Ike. Barbara Wyatt reported her husband missing thirty-four months ago on New Scotland, and he had two kids. Ike stared at him for a minute. "Do you prefer Sean or Larry?"

"Larry, please."

"All right, Larry, you're telling us you know nothing of this expanded background file?"

"That's right. This is all news to me." He paused again. "Ike, I'm really sorry. This is why I couldn't let myself give you the things you really need and deserve." He looked up, a wistful smile touching his lips. "I'm happy you two are able to share those things. You're a good woman, and you deserve better than what I had to offer."

Devon spoke into the uncomfortable silence as Ike stared at Wyatt. "That's immaterial right now." He took the reports. "You should know, however, this is a bit disturbing to us as it relates to the cases we're looking at right now."

"Yeah. If I were you, I'd be suspicious, too." Larry glanced down at his hands. After a moment, he looked at Ike and then Devon. "After all, if I've been lying to you about this for three years, what else might I be lying about?"

"Exactly my thoughts, Mr. Wyatt."

Ike and Devon exchanged a look. Ike found she couldn't do more than frown. She didn't love Wyatt, now or ever, but she cared for him. She didn't think he ever loved her. While not in love, they had been lovers. She hated being lied to. She managed to keep her voice steady. "One last thing, Larry. You work with several Paleans. Do you have any reason to think one of them may have tried to kill the Ambassador or killed Kal'Orma?"

He paused for a moment. "No, I don't."

"Before we turn off the recorder, is there anything you want to add, Mr. Wyatt?" Devon kept watching her. Ike wondered if he sensed how upset she really was.

"No, nothing I can think of."

Ike switched off the recorder. "Thanks for talking with us."

"No problems, Ike."

\* \* \* \*

They sat in the interview room after Wyatt left. "Do you believe him, Devon?"

Devon scratched his chin. "I don't know. My gut is saying he's hiding something, but I couldn't prove that if you paid me." He turned a little in his chair to face her. "What do you think?"

"I think you're right, but I couldn't prove it, either. I think he's being level about his past."

"Maybe." He watched her for a moment. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. It's a little rough to find out I've been lied to for so long." Ike thought that she might feel better if she could get mad. When she looked for the anger, all she found was hurt. The man was married and had two children! She understood that, maybe, the pressure of having a family and the responsibility could push someone to the breaking point. She never suspected that his past hid something like this. She wondered if he would have told her, if things between them might have been different.

"I know."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "But I've always felt something was strange with him. Nothing like this, though." She smiled at Devon. "But that doesn't matter now. What next?"

Devon kissed her forehead. "I think we need to talk to this Patterson woman."

"Yeah, we should."

They went to Ike's office to call Patterson.

\* \* \* \*

The interview with Aida Patterson was inconclusive. All she could tell them was that she did spend the night with Wyatt, and when she woke up at 0630, he was gone. He left her a note saying he'd gone to work early. She had the note in her purse.

Devon and Ike interviewed all the Paleans working at the coffee shop except for Lor'Lera. The others told them nothing they didn't already know. Lor'Lera would come in when she got off work at 1330.

Ike stood from the interview table and stretched, standing on her toes, reaching high over her head for the overhead and wiggling her fingers. Devon smiled. "That's really distracting."

She'd worn another of Janelle's borrowed outfits, a pantsuit made of some elastic material. It fit very snugly. "Distraction is good, while I'm the one distracting you."

He stood and slipped his arms around her waist. "You can be a tease."

"Not me." She lowered her arms around his neck. "A tease never actually does anything." She kissed him passionately. Her tongue moved deeply in his mouth, and Ike's pulse quickened at the wonderful taste of his lips.

"Can I have my tonsils back, please?"

She laughed. "Shall we get some lunch?"

"Sure. What would you like?"

"You."

"I meant what would you like to eat."

"You."

"I still contend you're a tease."

She half closed her eyes. "If this door had a lock, I'd show you I'm not teasing."

"I believe you would. Come on, let's have lunch."

"Who is teasing who now?"

\* \* \* \*

The bistro was quiet and almost empty when Ike and Devon arrived. Since neither was very hungry, they shared a salad and sat talking.

Ike slipped her shoe off and ran her foot up and down Devon's leg. Now, she had her heel resting on the chair between his legs, rubbing his cock with her toes. "So, what do you think?"

"I think if you keep your foot there, we may never get back to the office."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"I never said that."

"That's good. I was asking about the case."

He thought for a moment. "I just don't know. There's something bothering me, but I'm not a cop, so I don't know what it is or what it means."

"Yeah, I know the feeling, and I am a cop."

Ike noticed Devon tended to play with a one-credit coin in his fingers while he thought. He reached in his pocket, and as he brought the coin out, his hand knocked the blaster from its holster at his side. It clattered on the floor. "Damn it! I'm going to end up shooting myself with this thing!"

Ike giggled. "You'll get used to it."

He put the weapon back in the holster and rolled the coin in his fingers like a magician. Ike watched the coin flashing in the sunlight as it moved across his knuckles, flickering in and out of existence as he rolled it over, under, and between his fingers. "Wyatt is lying to us, but I don't know what he's lying about." His eyes focused on something in the distance that Ike couldn't see as he played absently with his coin.

"I don't think he's lying so much as not telling us something."

"Maybe."

As he played with the coin, Ike's communicator beeped as Kelli called on the emergency channel. "Ike, we have a code thirty in the mall, sector fourteen. Teams responding. ETA three minutes."

"On my way! ETA twenty seconds." Ike pulled Devon to his feet. "Let's go!"

"What's a code thirty?"

"Shots fired."

\* \* \* \*

Sector fourteen of the mall was at the end that emptied into the Observation Deck, only fifty meters from the bistro. "Stay low, Devon, and don't shoot at anything you aren't certain is a threat." She thought for a moment as they ran. "Stay behind me."

She heard people screaming from the mall, and when they went through the entrance arch, shoppers ran. Ike heard the unmistakable buzz of a laser charging. As she and Devon dove behind a large potted plant, Ike saw something lying on the ground about twenty meters away.

She stuck her head out and made a quick survey, only exposing herself for a second. It was too long. The laser beam crackled through the air and hit the floor behind her, passing through where her head had been an instant before. In her brief glance, Ike saw that the thing on the ground was a person. She tapped her communicator. "Payne here. Civilian down, mall, sector fourteen. Single shooter, heavy laser, sector fourteen near sub-sector three."

Kelli's voice came through. "Copy. Team ETA 110 seconds. Medical responding."

"Seal the mall."

"Copy."

Ike heard the doors closing and locking.

She turned to Devon. "Stay here and keep your head down." She darted for a tree about five meters away.

The laser spit fire again, hitting the tree as Ike landed behind it. Ike's eyes locked on the place the red flame had come from. A few people huddled against the walls, but most were in shops and she saw the employees had closed the security gates. "This is security! Put down your weapon and come out, hands on your head!" The answer came as a bolt of red, burning deeply into the tree trunk.

Ike drew her weapon and played with the controls, setting the blaster to narrow beam, heavy stun. She ran for a doorway. Cement and molten metal sprayed from the wall next to her. She had a good look at the shooter's location, and stun wasn't going to work. The shooter had good cover. She worked the controls again and set the blaster to kill.

As Ike ran for her next cover, she fired at the shooter's location and the wall he hid behind exploded.

The shooter ran from the hiding place, and Ike saw it was Lor'Lera. Ike stepped out to fire and Lor'Lera suddenly grabbed a woman who huddled against the wall. She pulled the woman in front of her.

"Lor'Lera! You can't escape! The doors are sealed and the teams are waiting for you!"

"I want safe passage to hanger deck and a shuttle, or I'll kill her!" Lor'Lera held the laser to the woman's head.

Ike spoke into the communicator. "Kelli, we have a hostage situation. Hold the teams at the doors."

"Right."

"Lor'Lera, no one has to get hurt here. Just turn her loose and put down your weapon."

"Get my fucking shuttle!"

Ike stood out in the open, her weapon trained on Lor'Lera, but she didn't have a clear shot. "Just relax, Lor'Lera. No one wants to hurt you."

"I'll kill her!"

Ike heard Kelli on the communicator. "Teams in place."

"Lor'Lera, this is pointless. You can't get away with this."

"Get a shuttle, or you're going to have a lot of dead people, Ike."

"I can't do that, and you know it."

"I'll kill her! Get the fucking shuttle!"

Ike saw a flicker of motion from the corner of her eye at the same time Lor'Lera caught it. It was Devon, and he was out in the open, running for cover. Ike screamed. "No!" Lor'Lera flicked the laser and fired, never moving from behind her human shield. A part of the floor exploded as Devon fell behind another potted plant.

"I'm done playing, Ike. Put down your gun and get your arms up." The laser trembled at the woman's head.

She tried to force her thoughts of Devon from her mind, but felt only partially successful. "All right, Lor'Lera. Relax. Turn the woman loose, and I'll take her place." Ike put her left arm up and bent to set the blaster on the floor with two fingers. As Ike slowly straightened, Lor'Lera pushed the woman away, swinging the rifle toward Ike.

Ike's left hand came down smoothly and quickly, snatching the pen blaster from her bra, and she fired.

Lor'Lera's head vanished in a puff of pinkish Palean blood.

Ike ran for Devon as she activated her communicator. "Shooter is dead, two civilians down, I want medical here now!"

Kelli's voice rang through the communicator. "Copy. All teams, move in!"

Ike fell to her knees beside Devon. He looked up, holding his leg. "That was pretty stupid, wasn't it?"

She ripped his pants and held pressure on the wound. "If you die, I'm going to be really pissed off." The wound looked to be from flying debris. "Damn it, Devon! What were you doing?" Now that she knew he wasn't dying, she was suddenly angry.

He gave a pained smile. "I'm sorry. I was trying to get a clear shot at her."

Ike's anger faded as fast as it had come on. "Maybe I should kill you myself." The medical teams came into the mall. "Claire! Over here!"

Claire and several techs came to Devon, while other techs went to the person on the ground. Claire looked at Devon's leg. "You'll be fine." She pulled some medications from her medkit and sprayed the wound . The bleeding stopped and Devon's face relaxed.

Claire looked at the techs by the downed civilian. "What do you have?"

"This one's DOA." They covered the body with a sheet as other techs covered Lor'Lera's body.

Ike tapped her communicator. "Kelli, status report."

"The civilians are secured, and we're looking for more shooters."

"I only saw one, but I want this place swept top to bottom."

"Copy. How's the Lieutenant?"

She smiled at Devon. "Other than not being a Marine, he'll be fine."

Kelli stifled a laugh. "That's good."

Ike felt tears in her eyes. "Keep me posted." She clicked off. "Doc, take him to sickbay and I'll be down soon."

\* \* \* \*

Corporal Jack Ingram commanded the teams. Ike walked to where he stood between the bodies of Lor'Lera and the civilian. "Who do we have over there?" Ike pointed at the covered civilian.

Jack hesitated. "That's Sean."

Ike sighed. She looked around. "Let's clear these civilians and get them out of here."

"Will do."

Ike stood watching the medical teams remove the two bodies and the security teams clear the civilians from the mall. She went and sat down on a bench, picking up her blaster and holstering it.

Ike had been in situations like this before. She had, before going into the security side of things, been a regular Marine and had been in firefights on ground actions. She'd also had a few confrontations as a cop, including hostages. She wasn't a stranger to this.

Her hands shook so badly that she had trouble getting the blaster set back to stun and the safety turned on. The image of the laser blast that looked to have hit Devon kept playing over and over in her mind, and she fought with tears. She lost. Hot trails of salty water ran down her face to the corners of her mouth.

The fact their number one suspect was now dead at the hands of the new number one suspect, also dead, should have been on her mind, but it wasn't. She wanted to go to sickbay. Jack came to the bench and sat down, removing his helmet. "The mall's secured." He looked at her for a minute. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Just a little rattled."

He punched her arm. "Hey, everything's OK. The Lieutenant and you are both all right."

"If you hit me again, I'll rip your head off and shit down your neck."

"There's the old Ike I love!"

# Chapter 11 Interlude

Ike sat on the bench for a long time. Kelli had come to the mall. "Ike, we both know there's someplace else you'd rather be right now."

"Yeah, you're right about that."

"I'll take care of things here. Why don't you go to sickbay?"

Ike sat for a moment, just thinking. "I guess I should. I'm just in the way here."

Jack came up, carrying Devon's blaster. "Do you want to take this back to our hero?"

"I guess I should." She took the blaster from Jack. "Call if you need me."

As she walked to sickbay, Ike tried to stop shaking, but didn't have much luck. She had no doubts about her relationship with Devon, but she had serious questions about him being involved in her professional business. He meant well and tried to help, but he damned near got himself killed. The worst part was Ike would now be watching him, trying to take care of him. The next time this sort of thing happened, his actions, and her reactions to them, could get them both killed.

When she thought about it, maybe she did have questions about their relationship. The chemistry between them was incredible. She knew that they were attracted to each other. She liked him. She smiled thinking that she liked him a lot. Ike knew he was attracted to her, and he liked her, too. She frowned when she wondered if she loved him. Only knowing each other a few days, how could she be in love? Love at first sight didn't really happen, not in the real universe. She definitely was in lust with him, though. No man had ever made her feel the way Devon did. When he touched her, she fairly sizzled. When he held her, Ike felt safe. When they made love, the rest of the galaxy ceased to exist.

Even her experiences with Jacques paled considerably when she compared them to her feelings now.

And Devon called her Ikira.

\* \* \* \*

When Ike walked into sickbay, Claire talked to one of the nurses while she wrote in a medical chart. She looked up at Ike. "I didn't get a chance to ask you. Are you hurt?" Claire closed the chart and handed it to the nurse. "Here you go."

"No, I'm OK. How's Devon?" Devon's blood, now dry and crusty, covered Ike's hands. When she blinked, she felt the crusty tracks of dried salt on her face.

"He's fine. In fact, I was going to release him, but I decided to make him wait here for you."

"Thanks." She thought for a moment. "I've been trying to decide how mad I am at him."

"Come over here and wash your hands." Claire walked with Ike to the sink. Ike scrubbed her hands. "I think it's normal and probably healthy for you to be mad. You care about him, and you don't want him hurt."

"Yeah, that's it exactly." Ike felt the hot tears running down her face. She wanted to be mad at him, but she felt too scared. "He scared the living fuck out of me."

"I know." She smiled a little. "Men do that sometimes."

"I guess." Ike dried her hands and arms. "So, he can go home?"

"Yeah, anytime. He'll need a wheelchair tonight and a cane for a day or two. He's released to duty for tomorrow morning, though."

Ike tossed the towel in the hamper and stared at it for a moment. "All right, Claire. I'll get him out of your hair."

Claire walked Ike to Devon's room. "Just don't beat him up today. He's used up his time in sickbay." Claire paused. "Don't be too mad, if you know what I mean."

"No, I'm not that mad." She looked at her hands, now clean again. "The more I think about it, the more I know I'm just scared."

\* \* \* \*

Devon lay on the bed in sickbay, thinking about how he'd upset Ikira terribly, and when he faced the facts, had put her in danger as well. Ikira might have been hurt because of his stupidity.

He wondered if he was in love with her. He felt an attraction to her that went far beyond the physical and much deeper than any he ever felt before. It was easy to mistake lust for love.

He could forgive himself for getting hurt and almost killed. Devon would never be able to forgive himself putting Ikira in danger.

It was just evolution, but he felt responsible for her safety. The fact she was much better at this cop thing than he had no bearing on things. The fact Devon felt responsible for her meant, in his mind, he *was* responsible for her.

\* \* \* \*

Ike tapped lightly on the door and went in. She smiled her best for him and found, even if she was scared, or even mad, it came very easily. "Hi."

He looked up from staring at his hands where they rested in his lap. "Ikira."

She came and kissed him gently. "How do you feel?"

"Mad at myself."

She sat on the side of the bed and took his hand. "Don't be. Would you like to go home?"

"Yeah, I think so." He looked back at his hands. "I'm sorry."

She smiled again. "Hush. We'll talk later. For now, I'm just happy you're all right."

She helped him to the wheelchair, and they left sickbay.

As Ike pushed his wheelchair along toward her cabin, he wore a puzzled expression. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

"It looks like you're going to your place."

"Yeah, we are."

"We should talk before you do that."

"All right." She stopped the wheelchair and set the brakes, letting the people in the corridor walk around them. She came to the front of the chair and crouched down. "OK, it's your credit."

"I know you're mad at me."

"You're wrong. I'm not mad. I thought I was mad, but I was scared."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're all right, and that's really all that matters to me." She put her hand on his knee. "I was scared. I told you once I wasn't afraid of anything, and until a little while ago, I wasn't. But when I saw her shoot at you, I was scared." She tried to smile, but warm tears flowed down her face as she spoke to him.

He glanced at his hands again, and then looked up into her eyes. "Nothing like that will ever happen again."

"I know." She wiped at her tears. "You wanted to talk about going home."

"I wasn't sure you wanted me there."

"Of course I do." She moved to her knees and took his hands in hers. "Of course I want you with me. Just because I was scared doesn't mean I don't want to be with you." She didn't care about the dozens of people passing them, staring at the security chief on her knees before a man in a wheelchair.

"I want to be with you, too. No matter where we are, I want to be with you."

She smiled again. "Then that's settled. I guess I should have asked if you need anything from your place."

He thought for a moment. "Actually, I do need to grab a couple of things."

"All right." She stood and kissed him gently. She pushed the wheelchair to his cabin.

\* \* \* \*

At her cabin, she helped him move from the wheelchair to the sofa. Devon was a little embarrassed because Ikira fretted over him. She arranged the pillows perfectly. She got him something to drink. She gave him the remote control for the tri-v. She asked three times if he was warm enough and if the light was too bright or too dark.

Ikira went to the dining table and placed their weapons along with the others there. "I'll be right back." She went to the bedroom. When she returned, she'd changed into her robe and sat down next to him. She kissed his ear. "Can I get you anything?"

"You've already got me everything in the place!"

She blushed a little. "Yeah, I guess I went a little domestic there, didn't I?"

"Yeah, maybe a little." He looked in her face, and he saw her smiling as she stared at him.

She seemed happy to just stare at him, smiling the gentle smile she'd worn since stepping into his room in sickbay. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I am. We didn't eat much at lunch, and I guess we burned a few calories since then."

"We did at that. How about pizza?"

"That sounds great." Something about the way she fussed over him felt good even though he felt a little uncomfortable with the idea. He usually didn't want a woman fussing over him, but somehow he didn't mind Ikira taking care of him. She wanted to. The more he thought about it, the more he accepted the feeling of her presence in his life. He didn't know what this all meant. Maybe he needed her.

She kissed him again and went to the service console to order their dinner. When she returned, she got Devon a plate and made sure he was comfortable to eat. "Did you know Boone is the only place in the galaxy you can get pizza?"

"Um, no."

"It's one of the royal family's favorites. Stu and Ann Dayton, when they built Boone, made sure to have pizza since both of them, and Tanya and Marilyn, all loved the stuff from before the Doom Time."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Yeah, just like the classic rock music at the Café. Stu is a bit of a sentimentalist and Ann isn't much better."

Her robe fell open a bit and the curve of her breast distracted Devon more than a little bit. "What are you wearing under that robe tonight?"

She smiled the seductive smile he found so stirring. He wanted her.

"You're injured."

"Just my leg." His eyes flicked down to her partially open robe.

Ikira's eyes followed his. "At least your libido didn't get hit in the firefight."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Do you feel like talking about the case?"

"I'd rather not."

The seductive smile was back. "I can think of a lot of things I'd rather do than talk about the case right now."

\* \* \* \*

"Wait here." She turned the lights down and put on some music. "Let me show you what I'm wearing under this robe tonight."

Ike slowly let her robe fall to the floor. The blue lacy thing she wore went from her neck to her toes and covered her arms to her wrists. A spray gun couldn't have made it fit any tighter. She slowly turned a circle in front of him. "How's this?"

"Remarkable." The lace was someplace between totally opaque and completely transparent and the pattern made the eye see things that weren't there. Maybe. His eyes moved slowly over her body, from head to toe. She saw his gaze linger at her breasts and then her crotch, but when he reached her face, he stared for several moments before the gaze moved on again. "You're so beautiful."

She sat down next to him and put his hand on her thigh. "Would you like to stay here or would your leg be better if we lie down?"

"I think I should lie down and put my leg up."

"OK." She helped him to his wheelchair. "It may not be your leg, but I plan to get something up."

"You already have."

She laughed softly as she pushed him to the bedroom. After she helped him undress and lay down, Ike crawled, cat-like, onto the bed next to him. "Hi." She licked his ear and he shook violently.

"Hi yourself."

"Do you like this outfit?"

The lace that strained across her breasts pressed against his chest and side as she lay beside him. "Yeah, I do. Very much."

"Good." She smiled at him for a moment. "You have no idea the things I want to do to you right now."

He grinned. "Remember, I'm injured."

"Yeah, I do." Ike kissed his neck, nuzzling against him. She felt his shiver and the goose bumps on his skin, rippling across his body. Ike wondered casually if it was simply passion or the growing love she felt for him that made him smell and taste so good. Between the musky smell of his skin and the saltiness of his sweat, Ike wasn't sure which drove her longings most. "Are you cold?"

"That's not why I'm shivering."

#### Melodee Aaron

"Good." She worked her way down his neck and kissed his chest, gently sucking and biting his nipples. Ike moved and lay on top of him now, her lace-covered body rubbing against his as she nibbled at his chest and sides, seductively tickling him with her lips and tongue. Her hands ran over his face and hair. She looked up into his eyes.

Ike moved across his stomach and felt the firm muscles quiver under her lips as her hands moved to his chest, rubbing his pectorals and rolling his hard nipples between her fingers. His hands rubbed her shoulders and caressed her hair as she kissed and licked his navel.

Ike felt his cock getting harder where it nestled between her breasts. She slid down and kissed his balls, finding them hot and hard. She slowly licked from his balls, up the base of his cock and the full length of his dick, feeling him tremble in response.

Ike swirled her tongue around the head of his cock and Devon twitched. She saw his eyes half close as he moaned softly. She smiled a little and slowly took his shaft fully in her mouth and throat. He made a soft gasp and his hips moved slightly against her. His hands still softly caressed her hair, but he didn't attempt to force her head down onto him or even to grab her.

Ike pumped his cock several times in her mouth, and then slowly pulled back until only the head of his dick was in her mouth. She sucked as hard as she could and he shook violently. "Ikira—"

She licked his cock from base to head, slowly, and flicked her tongue over the tip to taste the slightly salty flavor of his pre-cum. Ike again swallowed his shaft, making slow strokes over his length. Even at his deepest penetration into her throat, his hands only brushed her hair in a light caress, almost tickling her. She sucked his balls into her mouth, gently flicking her tongue on them as he jumped like a marionette. She licked down to his ass, circling his anus with her tongue and heard his breathing speed up. Ike made long, slow licks from his ass to the very tip of his throbbing dick, flicking her tongue over the pulsating blue vein.

Ike felt the spreading wetness in the lace and her vaginal muscles flexed as she worked Devon's rigid cock in her mouth. She moved back to the head of his dick and rapidly licked all around it, biting gently at the ridge of skin on his glans. Devon moaned louder. "That's nice."

His eyes slowly opened and Ike looked straight into them as she rapidly slid his cock down her throat. With his cock fully in her, she worked her neck and throat muscles. Devon shook violently. When she pulled back, so only the head of his dick was in her mouth, she sucked fiercely and flicked her tongue. He thrashed on the bed under her. As she repeated her deep throat blowjob, Devon's moans became louder. "Yes, Ikira, yes! God, yes! Please!"

Ike moved to straddle his good leg, rubbing her clit against the hot flesh of his shin and ankle. As she sucked him, Ike rocked, her wetness causing her pussy to slip pleasantly on his leg. She worked herself and his cock faster.

Ike's climax came on her like suddenly. She wasn't able to scream because she had Devon's cock in her throat. As she grunted her orgasm, her mouth closed tightly around his dick, and she felt him tense. She slid his cock from her throat and held his head in her mouth, swirling her tongue rapidly. She wanted his cum in her mouth this first time she sucked him off so she could taste his sweetness.

As Ike's orgasm hit her like a runaway train, Devon shouted her name over and over. His cum exploded in her mouth, hot and sweet and sticky. While her pussy twitched, Ike felt Devon's

cock throbbing in her mouth as she sucked and swallowed the last of his cum. He trembled and jerked spasmodically, and Ike felt his dick softening a little in her mouth.

She slipped his pulsating cock from her mouth, giving the still swollen head a last kiss, and kissed her way up his chest and stomach until she looked into his eyes, just centimeters away.

She leaned to him and they kissed deeply. When their lips slowly parted, Devon sighed then rolled on top of her, but he cried out a little and grimaced.

"Are you all right?"

He smiled wistfully. "Yeah, but I can't lie that way with this leg."

She smiled and brushed her hand on his cheek. "That's OK."

He frowned. "No, it's not. I want to lick your pussy."

"Let me help you slide down a little." She eased him down the bed half of a meter and stood up on the bed. Placing her feet on either side of Devon's head, Ike squatted over him.

He pressed his tongue against the tight membrane of lace covering her. His hands rubbed and squeezed her breasts, gently pinching her large and firmly erect nipples. "Hmm, I'll fuck you with my tongue."

Ike chuckled softly. She stood over his head and slowly removed the lace garment, spreading her legs over him. She lowered herself back to his face and he slammed his mouth to her pussy, running his tongue deep into her dripping slit.

As his tongue played in and out of her pussy, his fingers tugged at her nipples, sending shock-waves through Ike's body. Devon licked from her ass, across her soaked pussy, to her hard clit. He sucked her clit into his mouth, biting gently and rapidly flicking his tongue over the head. He worked his way back to her ass, rapidly circling her anus with his hard tongue, pressing it slightly against her asshole.

Ike felt herself building to another orgasm. She wanted to force her wet pussy to his probing tongue, but held herself above him as he drove her closer to the edge. "Fuck my pussy! Yes!" His tongue darted in and out of her, and he pressed on her clit at the end of every tongue fuck.

She moaned and leaned against the wall. He pinched her nipples between his thumbs and fingers, pulling them as his tongue penetrated into her ass. Ike convulsed and fell onto his face as she climaxed. Devon's hands slipped to her hips and he ran his tongue into her seizing pussy as he pulled her hips down hard onto his face.

Ike's climax seemed to go on forever as she shook and screamed while he tongued her pussy and lapped her flowing juices into his mouth. After an eternity in bliss, Ike collapsed and fell from his face to lie beside him, her breathing ragged and fast. As she smiled speechlessly into his eyes, she heard the blood pounding in her ears and felt the sweat running down her body. "Wow."

Devon licked his lips, getting the last of her juice. "You taste wonderful."

## Melodee Aaron

"I can say the same for you." She had the sudden, intense urge to kiss him and gave in. They kissed for a long time. Ike slid her hand down his stomach and found his cock at attention, hard as steel.

Ike mounted him, taking his cock deep inside her, and slowly rode him. "You're lucky you're already hurt, because if you weren't, I'd probably hurt you anyway."

He pulled her to his face and they kissed again. "Is there anything you do that doesn't make me feel like I've died and gone to heaven?"

"I hope not." She leaned onto his chest, raising her hips from his body. "Fuck me." He grasped her firmly and thrust his hips, shoving his cock deeply into her. His eyes found her breasts, bouncing firmly with his every thrust, and he watched them jiggle and dance to the rhythm of his fucking. "Do you like my tits?"

He looked up at her eyes. "I like all of you."

She kissed him. "Good." Ike felt Devon's thrusting increase in speed and force and she leaned back slightly so the head of his cock rubbed against her in just the right place. Almost instantly, much sooner than she expected or wanted, Ike felt the first slow waves of her climax rushing on her. "Yes, Devon! Harder! Harder!" She sat up and slammed herself against him, his cock ramming her cervix and the wall of her pussy like a battering ram.

Devon's fingers and hands dug into her hips as he thrust up, meeting her every downward bounce against him. They screamed together as his pulsing cock shot cum deep inside her. Her hair plastered to her head by sweat, Ike fell onto his chest, trying to breathe.

Devon's arms closed around her as the last of his seed squirted into her warm wetness. They lay still, holding each other for a long time until their breathing slowed. "Is my lying here hurting you?"

"No. It feels wonderful."

# Chapter 12 The Weekend

Devon woke slowly when he felt himself being watched. Ikira sat on the bed next to him, watching him with a gentle smile on her face. "Good morning."

He blinked several times "Hi." He put his arms around her and pulled her to him. He kissed her deeply. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long. Maybe twenty minutes." When she hugged him, the fresh smell of her hair filled his nose. "I thought I should wake you. It's just after 1000."

"After 1000? We should have been at the office hours ago."

"It's Saturday, there's nothing you and I need to do that my people can't take care of right now, and you need to rest your leg."

"Yeah, it hurts this morning."

Ikira had a pained expression. "My poor baby." She kissed her fingers and pressed them to his lips. "Are you hungry?"

"For you."

She laughed. "Later. We'll be here alone all day."

"I think I like those plans."

"Good. For now, let's get you up and something to eat." She helped him to stand and put his new robe on. "Claire wanted you to walk today. Can you make it to the dining room with just my help, or do you need your cane?"

Devon flexed his leg a little. "I think we can do it." With Ikira's help, he managed to hobble to the dining room and sit at the table. Ikira went to get him some coffee and order brunch for them. Instead of the lovely robe of the past two nights, she wore an old faded orange terry-cloth robe with some rips here and there, and most of the nap worn to the point of being shiny. She hadn't brushed her hair yet, and it stuck out in all directions. She wore no makeup and was

barefoot. He smiled as he thought she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. "You look pretty this morning."

She laughed softly. "Your pants are going to burst into flames for lying like that."

"I'm not lying. You're gorgeous."

She sat a cup of coffee in front of him and kissed his nose. "You make me feel special."

"You don't need me to make you feel special. You are special."

"Thank you." Ikira kissed the top of his head just as the service transporter dinged with its delivery.

"Since we're not working, what would you like to do today?"

"I thought I made that pretty clear." She smiled at him over her coffee cup. "We're going to stay here, and I'm going to make love to you all day."

"I think you'll find me pretty open to that idea."

"Good. That gives me more energy for other stuff."

\* \* \* \*

Ike and Devon spent the entire weekend in the cabin. They cuddled together on the sofa a lot, pretending to watch movies or tri-v, but usually kissing and touching. They made love as the mood took them, and the mood came over them many times. They ate mostly finger food and fed one another. They talked a great deal. Ike wondered if Devon might be the one. The man she could really fall in love with.

Ike's head rested in Devon's lap and she looked up into his eyes. "I really needed this time with you."

He ran his fingers across her forehead, brushing the hair from her skin. "Me, too. I was beginning to feel a little desperate for some time so I could focus only on you."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. This has been a great two days."

"I guess it's back to work tomorrow."

"Yeah, it is." Neither had discussed the case over the weekend, and Ike didn't expect to start now. She smiled. "Tell me more about how beautiful you think I am."

"I don't think you're beautiful. I know you are." He touched her cheek gently. "I'm crazy about you."

"How can you do that to me?"

"What?"

"Make me melt like that with just a word?" She wiggled her head against him. "My headrest is getting lumpy."

"Gee, I wonder why?"

"It's uncomfortable. Let's see if I can make it stop." She rolled over, pulling his robe open and swallowed his cock.

He twitched violently. "Please take this the way I mean it-you give great head."

She slipped his half-erect penis from her mouth. "I can't expect you to be romantic when I'm sucking your cock." She bobbed her head up and down his shaft as his dick went from only half-erect to raging hardness in seconds.

Devon's left hand slowly rubbed her back as she sucked him and he gently stroked her hair with his right. He moaned softly and his hips flexed ever so slightly upward. Ike wanted his cum in her mouth. She worked feverishly up and down his shaft until she felt his body quake and his hips convulse. He shook mightily and he filled her mouth with steaming juice.

Devon's body jerked and danced as she sucked the last of his cum from him. She rolled over to face him. "Did you like it that way? Fast and hard?"

His breath was still rapid and shallow. "I love everything you do." He stared into her eyes. "I want to kiss you."

"I can do that." She sat up and turned on the sofa facing him. Ike put her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. Several minutes passed before their lips parted. "I'll bet my headrest got lumpy again." She licked his nose.

Devon put his hand under her robe and slipped his fingers into her. "You certainly got wet." She kissed him again, her body shaking as Devon's fingers danced inside her pussy. Keeping her lips pressed to his, Ike worked herself to her knees, legs spread, giving him freedom to finger her better. Devon buried his fingers deeply inside her and pressed his palm against her clit, rubbing it to hardness.

Devon's hand moved, and Ike felt his thumb slip effortlessly into her soaked pussy. His finger pressed urgently on her anus. His finger, wet from her pussy, slid gently into her ass. She pulled her lips away.

"Oh, yeah." She pressed her lips tightly to his as his finger worked deeply in and out of her ass. Ike gasped a little when Devon pressed two fingers into her, his thumb still flexing and thrusting in her pussy. Ike felt his hand rocking quickly back and forth, his fingers running their full length in and out of her ass as his thumb moved to ride firmly across her clit. "God, yes! Yes!" Her anal climax slammed Ike, hitting her like a brick, and she shook against Devon, calling his name.

Devon removed his thumb from her clit but kept pumping his fingers in her ass. Ike felt Devon ram a third finger into her. A bolt of pleasure struck her as the second wave of her orgasm washed over her body, like a seizure. Ike forced herself down onto his hand harder and harder. Her arms were around Devon's neck as she leaned back, thrusting herself against the hard digits in her ass.

Sweat ran down her face like water. All Ike could do when the third orgasmic fit hit was to moan, her breathing ragged. "Yes, Devon, yes!" Ike fell against his chest and jerked violently as he pulled his fingers from her ass with a slight smacking sound.

He put his arms around her and held her as her trembles subsided.

She sighed. "My God, that was amazing."

He kissed her gently. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

#### Melodee Aaron

"Oh, no! Except maybe when you stopped." In her orgasmic fog, Ike studied his face. "Come to the bed with me, please." She helped steady him as he walked and she laid him back on the bed. When she crawled into bed next to him, he grasped her hips and lifted her to straddle his legs. His hands moved to rub her thighs as he stared up into her face. Ike felt his thumbs darting between her labia to trace over her clit, and she twitched.

She studied his face carefully because she saw things there she didn't fully understand. She saw the lust and passion. Desire etched on his face. His gentle smile held more, though. Maybe she was too jaded. She felt she might have fallen into seeing men as only wanting sex. Just as Wyatt served a purpose for her, she knew she did nothing more for him. With the brief interlude of Jacques, her entire life was more of the same story. Even with Jacques, it hadn't been much more than that.

As she looked down into Devon's face, trying to think through the trembles that his hands sent through her, she saw his look of concern. It suddenly came to her that he wanted her, sexually, but he would only smile and agree if she told him to stop.

His hands moved and she felt his fingers spread her pussy. The wave of passion that swept over her made her ruminations fade away. His fingers darted deeply into her, and her back arched as his thumbs rubbed her clit. She felt his cock rub against her ass as she wiggled on top of him.

He pulled his hands away and he grabbed her hips again. He lifted her slightly, and Ike felt the head of his cock press against her anus. His soft smile faded a little. "OK?"

She nodded, looking forward to what was coming. She relaxed her body and let him hold and move her.

He lowered her slowly, his cock slipping into her ass. He held his hips still, not thrusting against her, and she soon felt his cock fully in her ass. His hands returned to her thighs and he pinched her clit gently again.

The shivers that shot through her made her hips rise and fall on him, and his hard dick moved in her ass. His hips thrust gently against her, increasing the sliding motion of his cock in her.

She felt him take her clit between his thumb and finger, rolling it firmly, as his other hand reached to massage her left breast. The combination of his fingers on her clit, the hand on her boob, his cock up her ass, and the remarkable expression on his face blended into more than she could bear.

Devon's body tensed and trembled as he thrust into her. His hands moved to her hips, pulling her down onto him, and she felt his cum erupting into her ass.

Her orgasm hit her, and her head lolled back on her neck. She moaned as Devon grunted and jerked under her.

She fell forward onto his chest, his cock slipping from her ass. His rapid pant lifted her body rhythmically as she rested on top of him. She felt his arms move to circle her body, and he nuzzled in her hair for a moment, his breath fast and hot against the skin of her neck.

He almost whispered when he spoke to her. "Are you OK?"

"Perfect."

He chuckled slightly. "Yeah, you are that."

"You're spoiling me."

"Spoiled is good."

She laughed a little. Ike never thought of herself as spoiled, or even being capable of being spoiled. She liked the attention, though. "Am I hurting you lying here?"

"Not at all." He paused for a long time, and she wished she could see his face. "It feels good being this close to you."

"I like it, too."

He squeezed her a little. "I want to tell you something."

She wondered if he was about to say that he loved her. She both wanted and didn't want to hear the words. Mostly, she didn't know what to say to him. "Sure."

"You are the most special, the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

She waited a moment, but he didn't say more. When would the other shoe drop? "I feel the same way about you."

"That I'm a special woman?" She felt him chuckle.

"No, silly." She laughed. "You know what I mean!"

"Yeah, I do."

Maybe he wasn't going to use the L-word. She felt relief and disappointment. She knew she could love him. He might be the one. She just didn't know yet.

Ike frowned to herself. Maybe she just wouldn't, or couldn't, admit it to herself yet.

# Chapter 13 Loose Ends

When Ike and Devon walked into the Security Office Monday morning, Jack worked the Duty Desk. "Hi, folks. The reports on what we found in Wyatt and Lor'Lera's cabins are on your desk. Some interesting stuff, too."

"Thanks, Jack. How was the weekend?"

He smiled at her. "Not as good as yours, I'll wager."

She laughed. "Thanks." She and Devon went into her office and closed the door. "I sounded like an idiot!"

"Not to me."

"You're biased."

He pulled a chair up next to her as Ike took the reports from her in box. Over the weekend, teams searched the apartments of Larry Wyatt and Lor'Lera and found a few interesting things.

Hidden in a box tucked in a closet, Lor'Lera had the tools needed to make the modifications on the type of laser found with Kal'Orma's body, along with directions on how actually to do the job. Along with this was a manual for a pen laser. They also found documents that had the names of known PLF operatives, as well as several other names, human and Palean that were not known associates of the PLF. The scariest thing found was a full, detailed itinerary of Eeto's trip to Palea.

The key find in Wyatt's cabin had been a handwritten journal. He'd overheard three Paleans talking about assassinating Eeto. The journal detailed how Lor'Lera threatened to kill his estranged wife and his children if he said anything to anyone about what he'd heard. Jack had alerted the civilian authorities to protect Barbara Wyatt and her children, just in case.

Devon frowned. "He said three Paleans."

"Yeah, he did. And we only have the two dead ones." Jack had put the remaining nine Paleans under surveillance with special attention to the four working at the coffee shop. The journal also revealed Wyatt's struggle with his decision to leave his family and his relationship with Ike. His tormented words in the journal showed this clearly. There was page after page of ramblings about how he thought about going back to them. He ruminated about telling Ike and asking for her help. In her quick read, Ike counted thirteen separate times when Wyatt wrote of actually being in the confessional, ready to tell the Priest before losing his nerve.

The file had a note saying there had also been an envelope found in Wyatt's cabin. The envelope, addressed to Ike, was marked personal and confidential. It was in the evidence lab to maintain custody. Ike swallowed. "I'm not sure I want to read what's in there."

"We both know it may be important."

She sighed. "You're right. Let's go see what it says."

\* \* \* \*

After Ike signed for it, the evidence clerk carefully slit the envelope and handed Ike the letter it contained.

She opened the letter and read, Devon looking over her shoulder.

*My Dear Ike*: *Since you're reading this letter*, *I'm either dead or in custody*. *Either* way, the fantasy is over. You probably know by now I overheard Kal'Orma, Lor'Lera, and Jen'Talsin talking about killing your Ambassador, and they threatened the lives of my children, Yvonne and Ed, as well as Barbara, if I said anything. I have no hatred toward my family. My own weakness wouldn't let me stay to be the husband and father they needed. That shouldn't surprise me, because I couldn't be the kind of man you need. Even for someone as dense as I am, it takes only moments to see Lieutenant Henson can be the man you want and need. I'm happy for you both. You're a special woman. For now, I'm going to write this letter and hide it. I know your people will find it easy enough, but maybe Lor'Lera won't. She's already killed one of her own and tried to kill your Ambassador. She won't hesitate a moment to kill me if she gets to me before I can get to you. If I'm dead, I want you to know that, despite everything, I did love you in some way. While I don't have what it takes to love you the way you need to be to be loved, Henson might. Stay with him. Maybe I really am as crazy as I seem to be, but only you and Henson can stop this madness. As much as I can anyone, I love you, Ike. Larry. Friday, May 12, 3690 @ 1045

Ike tapped her communicator. "Jack, pick up Jen'Talsin on a charge of conspiracy. Use extreme caution."

"Copy." Jack closed the link.

She stared at the letter for a long time.

Devon looked at the letter over Ike's shoulder. "That letter doesn't sound like he was all that stable when he wrote it."

"No, it doesn't." She handed the letter to the evidence clerk. "Make me a copy, please."

"Will that hold up in court?"

She took the copy from the clerk. "I doubt it, but we can't have her running around loose right now. We need to talk to her." They went back to Ike's office.

Devon took her hand. "I'm sorry."

She'd been reading the letter again. "It's all right. Really. I didn't hate him, even though he lied to me for the entire time I knew him. I'm sorry he's dead, especially if things really went down the way this letter leads us to believe." Ike smiled at Devon.

"You just seem a little shocked."

"I guess I am." She set the letter aside. "I think I'm most shocked by the idea of having a trio of killers on Boone for so long."

"I can understand that's hard to accept."

She grinned. "Are you psychoanalyzing me?"

He laughed. "Looks that way, doesn't it?"

"You should be more concerned by my deviant sexual behaviors."

"Maybe I should."

Jack knocked and came into her office without waiting. "We can't find Jen'Talsin."

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Her intuition told her this was all about to become a very big deal. "Shit! Jack, get everyone you can find out there looking. Consider her armed and dangerous. Get full teams on the royal family, and I want two teams in sickbay on the Ambassador."

"Will do." Jack left her office.

Ike hit the intercom. "Bridge, Admiral Q."

"Admiral, Ike Payne. We have a situation. Please take Boone to intruder alert, and have the Science Officer find the Palean Jen'Talsin immediately."

"Understood, Sergeant." The intruder alarm wailed as she gave Q a summary of what happened.

\* \* \* \*

They ran to her cabin. She went to the closet and pulled her body armor from the rack. She started putting it on. Devon stared at her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going after her." She paused for a moment. "I want you to stay here."

"No, I'm coming with you."

She stopped fastening the armor and put her arms around his neck. "You're already hurt and not at a hundred percent yet. You'll be at risk and I'll be at risk because I'll be looking after you. Please?"

"I'll go back to the office and stay there." He frowned. "Maybe I can help there."

She kissed him. "I can accept that." Ike finished dressing and reached into the closet, pulling out the AGLR1917. She loaded the massive weapon and dropped another box of slugs and a handful of grenades in her pockets.

"In that outfit, you scare me."

"Good." Before Ike put her helmet on, she slipped her arms around him. "Watch yourself. Stay in the office and watch your back. I have a bad feeling about this."

"More feminine intuition?" He smiled at her. "I will. Remember, you have someone to come home to now."

"I know. Hold dinner for me." She kissed him and slipped her helmet on. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

As Ike jogged to Jen'Talsin's cabin, the Science Officer called from the Bridge. He said he couldn't find Jen'Talsin's life signs on Boone. He also reminded her that a cloaking device for the readings would be easy to build. Ike recalled the manipulations to the database on Boone and thought Jen'Talsin probably wouldn't need a cloak to cover her whereabouts if she could get the computers to just forget she even existed.

Twelve Marines in full combat gear stood in the corridor outside Jen'Talsin's quarters. Jack was in command. "She's not here, Ike. Negative at the coffee shop as well. Do you think she's dead someplace?"

"No, I don't. I don't have a clue where she might be, but she's not dead." Ike's communications headset buzzed. She used the mouth controls and flicked the switch with her tongue. "Payne."

"Admiral Q here. Sergeant, Boone's drives just shut down and we are dead in space."

"She's in the computers, Admiral. Can you shift everything to manual?"

"Negative. The computers are not responding. If a terrorist can control the computers, they can destroy Boone by shutting down the anti-matter containment fields."

Ike thought. "We'll work on it, Admiral." She clicked off. "Jack, we need Empress Tanya in the brain core. Get a team and escort her there now. I'll meet her."

"Right." Jack pointed at four of the Marines and they moved out.

Ike went by sickbay to ensure everything was secure there. She then went on to the brain core. The trouble team was there and Empress Tanya with her team joined them soon. Ike explained what was happening to her and the Empress looked pensive. "I m-may or m-m-may not be able to stop w-w-what's happening completely, but I th-think I can make B-Boone safe. I'll try."

"That's all we can ask." Ike turned to the teams. "No one in here without my approval."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Ike went into the core with Tanya and watched as she did things to the brains. Boone carried fourteen sophisticated positronic brains that controlled nearly every aspect of the ship, from the automatic floor cleaners to the anti-matter containment systems. The person who controlled the brains controlled the ship.

Ike watched as Tanya tested circuits and software. "It's a s-simple software override, b-bbut it's going to take s-some time to c-clean it out." She typed several commands and installed a few jumpers. "The d-d-drives are s-safe n-now."

"OK, Tanya." Ike advised Admiral Q.

Tanya frowned. "This w-w-will take me at l-least two or th-three hours to completely ccorrect. Some odd things m-may happen in th-that time."

"Like what?"

Tanya shrugged. "Other th-than the ship b-blowing up, p-p-pick s-something."

"That's just great. Keep either Jack or myself posted, please. I've got to go."

"I w-w-will."

Ike just didn't know where she needed to go.

\* \* \* \*

As Ike moved through the ship, more or less without a destination in mind, she let her thoughts ramble. The biggest question she had, and the one she couldn't even begin to answer, was if one person could do all this. Then again, until last week, there had been three of them. That may have been enough hands.

Her communicator chirped and Corporal Allen, commanding the teams in sickbay, was there. "Code thirty main sickbay, code thirty main sickbay!"

Ike ran. As Allen spoke, Ike heard heavy weapons fire in the background. She ran around a corner at transporter room five, and eight fifteen-millimeter slugs hitting her body armor slammed her against the bulkhead. As she fell to the floor, Ike saw no shooters. She rolled back around the corner.

The armor stopped the projectiles, but the impact still hit her like a sledgehammer in the chest. She tongued the communicator. "Code thirty transporter room five, code thirty transporter room five!" The acrid smell of cordite hung thick in the air.

Ike pulled her mirror from her vest and used it to peek around the corner. A burst of fire came from the far end of the corridor, and the mirror exploded. Ike yanked her hand back and looked at the fragments of glass stuck in her glove. "Shit." Using a fifteen-millimeter automatic rifle to shoot a mirror was about the same as using a thermonuclear device to settle a political debate. In the moment before the mirror was dust, Ike saw the muzzle flash of a heavy weapon.

Ike tongued the communicator again. "Personnel near transporter room five, sound off!" There was no answer. Ike repeated the command, and again there was no answer.

"Ike, we've got at least two shooters outside main sickbay, and they have the corridor pinned down." She heard heavy fire behind Jack's voice.

"Copy. I've got one at transporter room five. Get everyone to sickbay. I'll take care of this monkey."

"Copy."

She closed the communicator and checked her helmet, pulling the visor down and activating the infrared viewer. The world around her took on the eerie glow of false color based

on heat. The bulkheads, overhead, and deck glowed an eerie blue-green. Where wiring and plumbing ran behind the plating, faint lines in reds and yellows traced the heat they carried. Ike hunkered down and stepped into the open end of the corridor, her back pressed firmly to the bulkhead.

The slugs from the rifle slammed into her, pinning her to the wall, but the infrared image traced the path of the projectiles to their source in bright white trails tinged with light blue at the edges. Ike flicked the safety on the grenade launcher and sent two close-quarters nuclear warheads to the end of the barrel. The explosion rang like the inside of a bell and buffeted Ike, knocking her from her feet. The projectile weapon fire stopped.

Ike stood and ran. As she went by the gaping hole in the bulkhead, she saw there was nothing left inside. She ran toward the main sickbay.

\* \* \* \*

Ike was close enough to sickbay to hear the firefight when her communicator chirped. "Code thirty mall sector twenty-seven, code thirty mall sector twenty-seven!"

"Shit!" She continued to sickbay. She stopped at the far end of the corridor with six Marines. Sickbay lay to their right, about halfway to the next cross-corridor. Ike tongued the communicator. "Jack, I'm here."

"OK. We can't get to sickbay. There are shooters in the overhead, and there's one in the bulkhead directly across from the door into sickbay."

"Do they shoot only when something shows itself?"

"Yeah."

She thought for a moment, and then turned to the Marine next to her. "Give me your mirror." He handed it to her, and Ike stuck it around the corner. The mirror disintegrated in a burst of fire. Ike reached in her pocket and took out a piece of paper, wadding it into a ball. She tossed it out into the corridor and the rifles in the overhead fired on it. "Jack, these are automatic target weapons and they're firing at movement."

"It looks that way. Smoke screens, now!"

Four Privates reacted to Jack's order. "Fire in the hole!" Four smoke grenades bounced down the corridor, spewing dense gray smoke as they rolled and drew fire from the heavy rifles. As the tracking systems targeted individual particles of smoke, the three guns covering the corridor all fired at high automatic rates.

Jack yelled to be heard over the din of the weapons. "They'll either run out of ammo or melt the barrels any time now!"

The smoke began to thin. Ike heard the unmistakable sound of a heavy projectile weapon exploding, its slumped barrel jammed with slugs coming at fifty rounds a second. Soon came the rapid clicking of two other empty weapons.

She waved her armored hand around the corner and nothing shot it off. Ike smiled. "Blast the emplacements." Three Marines darted out and tossed grenades into the slots where the automatic weapons fired from. The bulkheads blew out. As Jack advised the other teams about the automatic weapons, Ike went to the door of sickbay and used her communicator. "Sergeant Payne here. Sickbay corridor cleared." The door swished open, and ten Marines waited for anything. "Everyone OK in here?"

"Yes, Sergeant, but the doctor said she's got injury reports from all over."

Ike nodded. "Claire! We're clear!"

Claire came from the back. "The Ambassador is fine, just scared. I've got a medical mess out there. My teams need to get in the field."

Ike nodded. "Jack, how many firefights do we have right now?"

Jack checked with the Duty Desk. "Eleven."

"Shit. Claire, you and your people need to stay put and let the Marine medics do what they can until we get things under control."

"I don't like that idea."

"I don't either, but that's the way things are."

Claire thought for a moment. "I'm going to the back, and maybe I can talk the medics through saving a few people."

Ike and Jack watched her go. "Ike, Lieutenant Henson is asking to talk to you."

"OK." She thought for a moment. "Keep two teams in here and move the rest of these people out to start clearing these booby traps."

"I'm on it."

Ike stepped into the corridor to call Devon.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm all right, Devon."

He almost screamed. "Ikira! There are people getting shot all over the ship!"

"I know, but I'm OK and you're OK right now."

"Let me come help you."

"No. Absolutely not, Devon. You stay put and let me and my people do our job. We're trained to do this, and we've got it on the run now." She knew she lied.

He sighed. "If you die, I'm going to be really pissed off."

"I know, but that's not going to happen."

\* \* \* \*

Ike stood listening to the chatter on the communicator. Booby traps kept popping up in new locations. People died and were getting shot all over the ship. While all of the evidence was circumstantial, she knew Jen'Talsin was behind it all.

She clicked the communicator and called Kelli.

"Duty Desk, Witt."

"Kelli, this is Ike." She took a deep breath. "I want Jen'Talsin found and stopped. The use of deadly force is authorized."

Kelli paused. "I need security code confirmation of that, Ike."

Ike thought for a moment. She had no choice. "Understood. Use of deadly force against the Palean Jen'Talsin is authorized. Security code alpha-two-niner-bravo."

She heard Kelli typing at her data terminal. "Code accepted."

# Chapter 14 Criticality

Jack came to the corridor and got her attention. "We've got a firefight on the Battle Bridge. We're responding to help."

Ike nodded. "OK. We need to sweep this systematically. I'm going to have Kelli coordinate from the office."

"Have her call me and we'll get everything together."

"Right." Jack took off with his team. Ike's communicator buzzed. "Payne."

"This is Kelli. The Emperor wants you call him ASAP."

"Copy." This was all Ike needed. She went to the intercom and called the Emperor. "Payne here, Sir."

"Ike...I mean Ikira, what the hell is going on with my ship?"

She explained the booby traps and the search for Jen'Talsin. "We have a mess out here right now, Sir."

"I can see that." He paused for a moment. "Do we have control of the ship?"

"Yes, Sir. Tanya is in the core getting things fine tuned."

His eyes narrowed sharply. "Is she safe?"

"Yes, Sir. I've got twenty people with her alone."

"All right. I'll try not to bother you."

"Thank you, Sir. We're a little busy right now."

Ike went to Claire's office. "Claire, don't do anything stupid."

Claire looked up from some patient telemetry from the mall. "I won't, but we need to get medical teams out there. We've got more than fifty people down now."

"As soon as it's safe. All we'll do right now is get your people killed."

"All right. Keep me posted."

"Will do."

\* \* \* \*

Ike's chest and side hurt. She thought she probably had a few broken ribs, if not her sternum. She absently counted the dimples in her body armor and found forty-three impact sites. She laughed a little when she thought the understatement that fifteen-millimeter high velocity slugs hit hard.

Kelli called as Ike walked to the Battle Bridge to see how that went. "I'm getting a handle on the firefights to coordinate the assaults."

"Good. How many hot zones do we have right now?"

"We have twenty-one reported and a few I think will be hot soon."

"Any pattern so far? We need a safe place to herd the civilians to."

"Sorry, but not yet."

"Keep at that. We've got to get the people out of the hot zones." Ike thought for a moment. "What about the brains? Anything from the Empress?"

"She reported about ten minutes ago that she's looking at another eighty to ninety minutes."

"OK. Ask her if she can tell if these weapons are under local control or if the brains are running them. If the latter, tell her to neutralize them as her top priority."

"I'm on it." She paused for a moment, lowering her voice. "Devon's coming unglued down here."

"I know. I talked to him for a few minutes, but that's all the time I have." Ike paused. "Don't let him do anything stupid."

"I won't."

\* \* \* \*

Devon paced the Security Office. Every time he passed Kelli's desk, which was about every thirty seconds, he asked if she heard from Ikira. He moved for the door a dozen times in the last forty-five minutes. Kelli finally threatened to put him irons if he didn't keep away from it, so he stayed back.

His mind and imagination ran away with him when he listened to the communications channels, but he couldn't stop. There were firefights with the automatic booby traps all over the ship. He had no idea how many people were injured or dead, but he thought the number was high. He tried not to listen to the chatter on the channels, but he couldn't help himself. It was like passing a bad accident, and he couldn't stop himself from looking.

Kelli talked on the intercom with Empress Tanya. Devon heard a strange swishing sound and just had time to wonder what it was before the shooting started. He fell to the floor and rolled under a table. He saw the muzzle flash from one of the booby traps almost directly over Kelli's desk.

Kelli screamed in the communications system. "Code thirty Security Office!"

Devon saw a Marine Private run from the back, his weapon ready and his helmet off. The gun in the ceiling burped, and the Private's head exploded in a cloud of red tinged with white flakes of skull.

Kelli grabbed the AGLR1917 from the desk, rolled, and pumped a grenade into the hole in the overhead. The explosion knocked her backwards, slamming her into the bulkhead, but it neutralized the booby trap.

As more Marines and medics poured into the office, Devon went out the door.

\* \* \* \*

When Ike reached the Battle Bridge, a medic treated Jack for a small wound on his shoulder. "It's secured, and the Bridge crew is on their way back."

"You all right?"

"Oh, hell yes. Just a little nip, that's all."

"You're as bad as I am."

"I guess I am. I missed the call, but did they get the office secured?"

"Yeah, but we lost a Private, and Kelli got banged around a bit. She'll be OK, but she's out of it." Ike watched as the Bridge crew went to their stations. "I need you to go down there and take over the desk."

"And miss all this fun?"

Ike laughed. "Yeah. Get your ass down there."

\* \* \* \*

Before the booby trap in the office went off, Kelli had set the teams on securing the mall, so Ike decided to go there, making a stop at the brain core on the way. There had been no booby traps near the core and that made her nervous. So far, where a trap was found and been neutralized, another hadn't appeared. However, a good many appeared in new places.

Ike went to the room in the core where Tanya worked now. "Any news?"

"Some, b-but not good. The t-t-traps you have out th-there aren't under the c-control of the c-core b-b-brains, s-so I expect they're local. It w-w-will take maybe another f-fifty minutes to get the system b-back to normal." She looked up from her work. "That w-w-won't help you w-with the traps, th-though."

"Yeah, you're right about that." Ike flexed her shoulder to stretch her ribs.

"Are you all r-right?"

"Yeah. My armor is binding."

Tanya watched her for a moment. "You know, I'm th-three thousand years old and I c-can t-t-tell that you're lying to m-me."

"Maybe, but that doesn't matter much." Ike looked around. "When you're done, I want you to stay here. That's safer than trying to take you back home."

Tanya looked at Ike like she was a specimen in a cup. "All r-right." She leaned her head to one side. "T-Take c-c-care of yourself."

"I will." Ike continued to the mall.

\* \* \* \*

Ike reached the mall and the teams slowly swept the entire area with robot probes to trigger the motion sensor of the booby traps. They were just shy of halfway through the mall and had found fourteen traps. "What have you got for casualties up here?"

The Corporal adjusted her helmet. "About twenty-five people so far, two DOA. We can see another seventeen people down farther up the mall. There are at least a hundred people in the shops up there, too."

"OK. Don't take any risks or shortcuts. We can't help those folks by playing hero."

"No, we can't." The air exploded in automatic fire as the robot tripped another booby trap. "How's the rest of the ship looking, Sergeant?"

"About the same."

"That's fucking wonderful."

"My thoughts exactly." Ike remained at the mall. They really didn't need her there, but she had no place else to go, and the casualty reports nagged her. These people, the injured and the dead, depended on her to protect them. Ike couldn't think of anything she might have done to prevent this, but she felt responsible just the same. Her self-esteem suffered and she now questioned her actions.

Ike's bright spot was knowing that Devon would support her, no matter what.

\* \* \* \*

Devon took the long way to Ikira's cabin. The roving bands of Marines didn't see him. She had, over the weekend, set the door to open for him, and he went in. When they left the cabin for her office this morning, Devon had picked up his blaster to strap it on. Ikira had laughed and made him leave it behind.

He went straight for the closet in the hall. He grabbed the flack jacket and slipped it on. Even with the straps let out, he couldn't get it zipped all the way up. Devon picked up the big laser in the corner, and it felt good in his hands. The indicator on the laser marked 'Charge' was in the green zone. He carried it to the dining room table.

Devon put the communications headset on and flicked the switch. Things sounded quieter than they had an hour ago, but the Marines were still finding booby traps. There was no sign of Jen'Talsin. He strapped on his blaster and set it to heavy stun. After he holstered it, he picked up the laser and headed for the door. He slowed to a stop and went back to the table, and picked up the explosive projectile pen weapon and tucked it into his right shoe.

\* \* \* \*

#### Melodee Aaron

"We're not sure of the sensors yet, Sergeant, and we're still getting a lot of spurious returns." Admiral Q tried to keep some kind of control of his ship.

Ike frowned. "But you think you have something on the Observation Deck?"

"Yes. We cannot tell the species or an exact location, but we have a return."

Ike bit her lip. "Is it moving?"

"No, stationary, within the limits of detection." He gave a set of coordinates in the woods of the adult play area.

"All right, Admiral, we'll check it out." Ike clicked off and connected to Jack. "How are we looking?"

"Better in terms of casualties, only because we know how to handle the traps now, but we've still got them all over the place." He paused for a moment. "Wasn't Devon supposed to be down here?"

Ike swallowed hard. "Yeah, Kelli was babysitting."

"He's not here, and he's not in sickbay."

"Shit." She thought for a moment, wondering where Devon could have gone. She had no idea, and the possibilities seemed endless. "OK. I'm going to the Observation Deck to check the return the Bridge has. Have folks keep their eyes open for Devon."

"Will do. Do you need a hand checking the OD?"

"Negative. It's just a sensor glitch, but I'll have a look." She hoped it was a sensor glitch.

She didn't know exactly where Devon might be, but she knew precisely what he was doing. He was coming to help her. She cursed under her breath at the same time she felt a twinge of happiness. He came to protect her, to take care of her. She should balk at the thought of anyone trying to take care of her.

The only part that surprised her was the pride she felt over his actions.

\* \* \* \*

Devon heard the exchanges between Ikira and the others about the Observation Deck, and he moved that way before she started. He planned to shadow her and give her backup if she needed help. Devon thought her going to check an unknown sensor return on her own was at least as stupid as his leaving the Security Office, so everything balanced out. He moved to the aft entrance of the Observation Deck and went in, the door closing behind him.

He heard the heavy air-tight door click as it closed.

\* \* \* \*

Ike swept into the Observation Deck and took cover behind a large tree. She tongued the communicator. "Payne entering OD sector nine." She heard a click and looked at the door. It had locked behind her. "Duty Officer, Payne. Door eleven to OD has locked. Please confirm." There was no answer. "Jack, do you copy?" Again, only silence.

Ike played with the communicator controls and heard nothing but static. The chitchat of the teams cut off completely when Ike entered. She slammed the communicator in her helmet

against the bulkhead by whipping her head sharply to the right. The random pummeling had no effect. Ike shrugged. Systems were only marginal all over the ship, and Tanya would have them up soon. She moved off toward the adult-only area, only casually staying covered.

\* \* \* \*

Devon heard Ikira trying to contact Jack. He turned the controls on his communicator and heard nothing except soft static in his headset. Devon doubted both his communicator and Ikira's would have failed at the same time. The Empress still worked to persuade the ship's brains to work right, and the outside communications failure was another symptom of the sick brain.

Devon continued to move toward the adult area of the woods, darting from cover to cover as Ikira had told him.

\* \* \* \*

There was a large play field adjacent to the woods in the Observation Deck. It was an open field, some three hundred meters long and almost two hundred wide that the children used for soccer, football, and other such games. Ike crouched at the edge of the field behind a clump of trees, watching something on the field. It looked like a child's body. The binoculars in her helmet visor offered no detail, and when she tried the infrared, the flash almost blinded her. Something, probably a malfunctioning sensor, radiated heat and the visor simply amplified the noise. Her life sensor showed nothing, but she was at extreme range for a reliable reading.

Ike was about a hundred meters from the human-like heap in the field. She could circle to the other side, but that would leave her about ninety meters away. A twenty-minute trip that would gain her ten meters.

This might be what the Bridge saw on their sensors, but the location was more than five hundred meters from the coordinates Q gave her. The signal Q had was alive. Ike had watched for more than five minutes, waiting for the figure to move, but nothing happened.

The worst part was that the hairs on Ike's neck all stood at attention.

This far from the bulkheads, there was no place to hide a booby trap other than the trees. Ike didn't think it likely an automatic trap could cover the field.

She argued with herself for a few moments. She'd be in the middle of an open field, out of communications, and alone, but, if that was a person, it was a child. She was almost persuaded to go check when motion caught her eye at the end of the field to her left.

Someone moved into the field, and they weren't wearing body armor. Ike clicked the visor to binocular mode and saw it was Devon, running in a zigzag pattern, right out in the open.

She tongued the communicator. "Devon! Get back!"

He didn't even slow down. "There's a child out there!"

"Get the fuck back!"

He covered maybe fifteen meters of the hundred and sixty he had to go to reach the still form on the ground when, to Ike's right, the burp of a rapid fire rifle began. The dirt around Devon exploded in flying clumps.

Ike turned in the direction of fire and poured covering fire into the trees, the heavy rifle bucking in her hands like a wild horse. She pumped half of a dozen grenades to follow the slugs.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Devon running for cover at the edge of the field as the shooter focused fire on her position.

As Devon dove behind a boulder at the edge of the field, Ike drifted back into the trees and moved in his direction. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"What in the fuck are you doing?"

"I'm trying to help you."

She took a deep breath. "Just how is getting your fucking head blown off going to help me?" The fact that he came to help her made her feel good. The fact that he could die doing it pissed her off.

He didn't answer.

The Observation Deck was quiet again. As Ike moved for Devon's position, she knew the shooter would be moving, as well. This wasn't an automatic booby trap. There was a real shooter out there. The shots hadn't started until after Devon covered a good distance, and they didn't turn on her until she started firing.

Ike came to Devon's spot behind the rock. Holding her rifle in her right hand, pointed in the last known direction of the shooter, Ike put her left arm around his neck. "You're cute, but you're a dumb fuck."

He looked at the dimples in her armor. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm fine. I zigged when I should have zagged." She watched the woods at the far end of the field. "Is your communicator working?"

"Not for anything outside. You're all I can hear."

"Great." She thought for a moment. "We need to get you out of here."

"I'm staying with you. You need help in here."

"Yeah, I do. You're not it. If you had a few hundred hours of training, body armor, and a heavy weapon, maybe. With what you have and no training, no thanks."

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

"Sometimes, I want to shoot you myself."

"That may be, but I'm still not leaving."

"All right, let's find a door and get out of here so we can get backup." Her plan was to get to a door, toss him out, and then close and lock the door behind him. Let Devon call for help while she kept the shooter on the Observation Deck. As Ike turned to glance at the field, fire came from the opposite side.

Ike threw Devon behind the rock. As she spun to return fire, a burst of slugs hit her legs, sweeping across them and knocking her feet from under her. As she fell, Ike's eyes followed the fire, and she poured fire in return. She rolled behind the rock and continued firing.

Devon shoved the laser around the other side of the boulder and fired in the general direction of the shooter. "Devon! Hold your fire!"

He pulled the laser back behind the rock and panted. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah. That's why God made body armor." The firing stopped. "We need to get moving." She pointed off behind them. "There's a door about a kilometer that direction. Go, and I'll be right behind you."

"If you're not, I'm coming back for you."

"I know. Now, move!"

They reached the door with no more firing. When Devon tried, the door wouldn't open. "Let me try." Ike shouldered her rifle and entered the override codes, but the door didn't budge. She leaned close to the bulkhead and tried her communicator, but there was no response.

Devon hefted the laser in his hands. "Will this cut through?"

The large dome of the Observation Deck, more than ninety square kilometers, was impossible to get totally air-tight and it leaked a little, no matter what. "No. These are air-tight blast doors, and a hand-held weapon would take a month to burn through." Ike needed to rethink her plan. "If we can get to the bistro, there's an intercom on a hardwire there." She pointed. "That way, about a kilometer and a half." They moved off, Devon in the lead and Ike walking backward, swiveling her head and rifle.

\* \* \* \*

When they reached the bistro, it was deserted, like the rest of the OD. Hidden along the walkway leading to the entrance of the bistro, they were about twenty meters from the gated entry. "We need to go in that way." Ikira nodded toward the gate. "I don't know how the cabling for the intercom is run and if I blow through a wall, we might cut the lines."

"All right. What's the plan?" Devon watched the woods.

"I'll lay a grenade up to the gate. When it blows, you go while I cover you. When you're inside, get to the intercom and call for backup. I'll be behind you as soon as I make sure no one's shooting at us."

"OK." He smiled at her. "Even shot up, hot, sweaty, tired, and filthy, you're still pretty."

She smiled and flipped her visor up. "You're a mess." She kissed him lightly and flipped her visor down again. "Ready?"

"Oohrah!"

She giggled and fired a grenade. "Go!"

Devon moved before the sound of the explosion faded. He ran for where the gate had been, a cloud of dust hiding the hole he knew was there now. While he was still five meters from the building, a burst of heavy fire came from somewhere to his right. Devon saw the cement of the walkway exploding in flying chips. He heard Ikira's returning fire behind him.

She screamed in the communicator. "Go! Go!"

Devon dove through the air for the building. The thud of a launching grenade came from behind him. He hit the floor of the bistro as an explosion to his right rocked the forest. He rolled to the wall and got his bearings.

### Melodee Aaron

A firefight raged outside as Devon tried to focus on getting to the intercom. He crawled to the counter and around the end. The intercom was on the wall at the far end, next to a window that faced the forest where the shooter was.

Ikira was on the communicator. "Got it?"

"I can see it, but I'll have to expose myself to the shooter to get to it and make the call."

There was a pause. "Standby. I'm coming in."

Ikira ran through the missing gate, but no one fired on her.

Devon didn't see that she had been shot, but every fire exchange left more dents in her armor. "Did you get him?"

"Her. No, she moved away."

"Jen'Talsin?"

"Yeah, I saw her for a second." She wiped sweat from her chin. "She's armed to the teeth, too."

"You're a fun date." He pointed. "There, next to the window."

"I told you I know how to show a guy a good time." Ikira looked at the window. "She's waiting for us to show ourselves there. That's why she moved off."

"Yeah. If you can keep her busy, maybe I can just switch on the intercom. Someone will decide there's a problem here when they hear the shots."

Ikira considered. "Maybe." She looked around. "The problem is, I don't know where she is out there, and she knows exactly where we are in here."

"You're right about that. She won't shoot the intercom hoping we'll try to use it."

The silence was deafening. "We have to do something. The longer we sit here, the better she can pinpoint us."

"You're the expert at this, but what will we do and where will we go?" He watched her. When he thought about the possibility that she might have been in here alone, he shivered. He understood fully that they could both be dead soon, but at least they would be together.

"I don't know."

"Like it or not, this is the killing field. We make a stand here. One way or the other, it ends here."

Ikira looked at him, flipping her visor up. "You're right. This is it." She glanced down for a moment. "What have you got on you?"

"My blaster and the laser."

She turned her rifle over and reloaded it. When she had both the projectile and grenade magazines full, she handed Devon the remaining four grenades. "Here. Make sure you really want to use them before you pull the pin, and be ready to throw them."

He looked at the small radiation hazard symbol on the grenades. "OK."

She dug in her pocket and gave him a pair of flash-bang grenades. "You can be close to these, but they're really loud and bright, so protect your ears and eyes."

"Sounds like fun."

"Yeah, loads." Ikira thought for a moment. "OK. Your first goal is to call for help, however you can. Once you've done that, go through the back wall. I'm going out the front door and lighting up the woods to get you some time to call for help. Once you're out, we'll meet up."

"Won't she be listening to the communicators?"

"I'm certain she will."

"OK."

She smiled through the sweat-streaked dirt on her face. "Thanks for coming to help me."

He smiled at her. "You're welcome."

She kissed him, briefly but passionately. "Let's do this."

## Chapter 15 The Killing Field

Ikira crawled to the gate of the bistro. She checked her weapons one more time and dropped her visor. "Now!" As she sprinted from the bistro, he saw the walkway exploding around her as he watched through the hole where the gate once stood. She dove for cover about ten meters away from the building and fired into the woods. "Now, Devon!"

Devon crawled until he was under the intercom, the firefight raging outside. He reached up with one hand to hit the switch, and the window shattered as bullets whizzed over his head. He forced his way up through the flying glass that cut his hands like razor blades and tapped the code for security.

"Security. Ingram."

"Jack! Devon! Ikira and I are in a firefight with Jen'Talsin! Bistro on the OD!"

"Say again."

Before Devon could speak, the intercom exploded in a hail of slugs, raining debris down on his head. Devon clicked the communicator. "I got Jack!"

"Get the fuck out of there! She's really pissed off!"

Devon crawled around the counter. Jen'Talsin alternated her fire between the bistro and Ikira's location outside, and the building disintegrated around him. Devon ran for the back wall, bringing the laser up as he ran. The blinding red beam cut through the wall like hot butter, and Devon rolled, crawling for the woods. "I'm out!"

"Move for the lake, near side."

"Copy."

As Devon made his way as quietly as he could through the woods, he heard the firefight suddenly stop. "Ikira?"

"Here. She's moving around your way. Stay alert."

### "Copy."

A hush fell over the OD. Devon could see the small lake and tried to figure out how he would find Ikira. The only sound came from the waterfall about thirty meters to his right. He heard a slight popping from the leaves on the ground and spun quickly, the laser trained in the direction of the noise. "It's me." Ikira stepped from the tree cover and crouched next him. "What did Jack say?"

"Not much. I yelled what was happening and where we were. Then, she shot the intercom."

"That's OK. Jack will be on his way." Ikira thought for a moment. "It'll take ten minutes to get the heavy lasers in to cut the doors and another fifteen to get through." She looked pensive. "Unless he decides to blow the doors. That would be faster."

"Where is she?"

"Damned if I know."

The dome of the OD showed the bright blue sky of Old Earth, studded with a few fluffy white clouds. It suddenly changed to clear. They both swung their weapons around, looking for a target. Devon laughed nervously. "I guess we're a little jumpy."

"Yeah." She pointed at the dome. "Look."

A shuttle pod hovered just outside the dome.

Their communicators crackled and Jack's voice came through. "Ike, Devon, do you copy?"

Ikira tongued the switch. "Hi, Jack. How are you doing?" She grinned at Devon.

"Can you say your status?"

"All fucked up. Jen'Talsin has locked all the doors, and she's not a happy camper. She's heavily armed and has us on the run."

"OK. All the doors are covered. We're going to blow a few of them and storm the place. We have no sensor data in there, but the shuttle will give us communications." He said something to someone with him that Devon couldn't understand. "In ten minutes, you're going to have a lot of company, so set the table for two hundred."

"Copy. We'll be happy to see everyone. We're on the starboard side of the lake, about thirty meters forward of the waterfall."

"Copy. Devon, say something."

"OK, Jack. We're waiting for the cavalry."

"Copy. We'll be there. I have you both transmitter locked."

Ikira smiled. "Copy. We'll see you soon."

"Roger. Out."

She closed the link. "Come on, we need to move. She knows where we're at now." Ikira led him around the lake until they were almost opposite from the waterfall.

\* \* \* \*

They leaned against a small boulder. Devon watched the forest. "So, now we wait?" "If she'll let us."

"I'm sorry I didn't stay put when you told me to."

Ike brushed his cheek with her gloved hand. "That's OK."

"No, it's not. Not really."

"Well, maybe we do need to talk later." She paused a moment. "I really meant it when I said thanks for coming to help me."

"I know." He smiled. "I can think of a few more things other than talking I want to do later."

"Yeah, that, too." Ike heard a soft thud, and something landed a meter in front of them. "Grenade!" She shoved Devon, and they rolled in opposite directions, away from the grenade.

When it went off, it stunned Ike through her armor. She kept crawling away from the blast. She made it to a clump of trees and looked back, but she didn't see Devon or Jen'Talsin. Ike spoke to the communicator. "Devon?" There was no answer. She darted to a large boulder and leaned her back to it. She switched the communicator to the outside channel. "Jack, can you locate Devon? Jen'Talsin is close."

"Negative on Devon. I have no signal. We'll be inside in three minutes."

"Copy."

Ike took a breath and peeked around the rock. The stone exploded in front of her, spraying her visor with stone chips and metal fragments. She ducked back quickly. At least she knew where Jen'Talsin was.

Ike looked around and saw a clump of trees to her right. As she ran for the trees, Jen'Talsin didn't fire on her. She looked and saw Devon crawling for a cluster of rocks twenty meters away. When he reached cover, he saw her and made motions that his communicator wasn't working. Ike nodded at him and pointed in the direction Jen'Talsin was located.

Ike checked her rifle. She had only one grenade and two hundred rounds remaining. She sighed and switched the rifle to semi-automatic mode. She saw motion in the corner of her eye. Devon ran for her location.

Ike looked at him in disbelief. She heard Jen'Talsin begin firing. Ike stepped from behind her cover and lobbed her last grenade in the direction of the fire. She returned fire, trying to find a target before squeezing off her last few precious rounds.

Devon ran a zigzag pattern, and Ike turned to yell for him to get down. She heard a burp from Jen'Talsin's rifle. Ike saw the slugs hit Devon's left shoulder. His arm flew from his body, the hand still clutching the laser. Devon spun from the impact. Ike saw, in slow motion, two more rounds hit Devon in the chest. The impacts slammed him backward as blood, bone, and tissue exploded from his torn chest and splashed across her visor.

Ike turned away from his shredded body and screamed senselessly. She felt her face twist into a snarl. "You fucking bitch!"

She flicked the rifle back to fully automatic and fired into the bushes where the shots came from. Ike charged the hiding spot, yelling senselessly and pouring on fire. Her rifle ran out of ammunition and clicked uselessly. As Ike dropped the weapon and drew her knife, a slug slammed her left shoulder. She staggered under the impact and looked up. Jen'Talsin stood on top of a rock outcrop and fired. The impacts of the slugs on her body armor caused Ike to stagger backward, but she managed to keep her feet. Jen'Talsin fired in random bursts so she couldn't lean into the shots.

Jen'Talsin stopped firing and Ike fell forward to her knees. A frown came to Jen'Talsin's face. "You pathetic little woman. All you have for your interference in the business of others is a dead lover. But don't fret. You'll soon join him."

"You won't get away with this, Jen'Talsin. This place will be crawling with security people in minutes."

She laughed at Ike's threat. "There will be two less people when they get here."

"Maybe, but I'll die knowing you're going to burn in hell."

"One day, humans will learn to keep out of other's business. By the way, Payne, Paleans don't believe in hell."

"Fuck you."

Jen'Talsin laughed again. "The last refuge of the incompetent. Humans lack a sense of proportion. Cursing me will save your life no more than it did your sex toy back there."

"He's not a sex toy. He's a man. A man I love."

"You should be using the past tense, Payne." Explosions rang in the distance as the Marines blew the doors. "I see our time together is short."

"Yeah, it is."

Jen'Talsin smiled and shifted the rifle in her arms. "As much as I'm enjoying this discourse, your time is up."

Jen'Talsin was smiling softly as a burst of small-caliber, high velocity fire whizzed centimeters from Ike's head. Jen'Talsin screamed as an invisible dragon chewed her right shoulder. The rifle flew from her hands, and her right arm flailed on a thin strip of skin still holding it to her body.

Ike reacted instantly, throwing her knife. It buried itself to the hilt in Jen'Talsin's chest, directly into her heart.

Before Jen'Talsin's body fell from the rocks, Ike spun and saw Devon. He lay on his back, with her explosive projectile weapon in his right hand. Smoke drifted from the barrel.

He smiled at her, dropped the weapon, and collapsed.

\* \* \* \*

Ike screamed in the communicator. "Jack! Sector sixteen! Shooter neutralized, and I need medical here now! Devon's down!"

"Copy. Thirty seconds."

Ike knelt beside Devon. "Devon! Wake up, Devon!"

His eyes fluttered a little, then opened. "Are you all right, Ikira?" Blood came from his mouth and nose and he gurgled with each labored gulp of air.

"I'm fine." Ike put pressure dressings from her medkit on the stub of his left shoulder. She ripped the flack jacket and his shirt open. Gaping holes, big enough for her fist to fit inside, marked the wounds in his chest. She stuffed dressings into the holes and leaned on them to stop the bleeding.

He coughed. "It doesn't hurt. I thought it would hurt."

The tears running down her face stung the open cuts there. "I know."

His hand clutched at hers. Ike grasped it. "Ikira?"

"Yes?"

"Is she dead?"

"Yeah, she is. The medics will be here soon. Rest."

He tried to laugh and Ike saw the blood on his chest bubble and foam. "Ikira, I love you. Remember that."

She stared at him for a moment. "Remind me later."

"I'm so tired, Ikira." His voice faltered. "So tired."

Ike felt the feelings she had for him rush over her like a wave. She knew for the last few days that she might be falling in love, but she repressed the feelings. Either too busy or too frightened to admit them to herself. This was, she thought, a hell of a time to decide she loved him. "Don't you leave me, goddamn it! Don't you fucking leave me!"

His eyes fluttered again. "I love you, Ikira. I love you."

Seventy-five Marines swarmed into the clearing, weapons searching. Several covered Jen'Talsin's corpse. Three medics ran to Devon and started working on him.

Jack came up behind Ike and took her shoulders. "Come over here and let them work." She stood and backed away from Devon. "The doctor is right behind us."

Ike cried, her tears like trails of scalding water on her cheeks. She couldn't look away from where the medics worked on Devon. They started CPR. When Claire ran up, the medic Corporal looked up and shook his head.

Claire glanced at Ike. Her eyes met Ike's for a moment. She expected Claire to tell her that Devon couldn't be saved. Claire sighed, dropped to her knees next to him, and opened her medkit.

Claire opened Devon's chest and placed sutures while a medic rhythmically squeezed Devon's heart in his bare hands. Another medic pumped oxygen into his lungs. Claire ordered medications and blood to be given, but Ike paid little attention to all this. Devon's face was ashen and lifeless. His eyes were open slightly. They were glassy, with no awareness.

"We need to transport him." Claire tapped her communicator. "Q, is the transporter working?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Lock onto my signal and transport the five of us to the main sickbay, now."

"Copy."

Devon, Claire, and the three medics twinkled out of existence.

Jack had his arm around Ike's shoulders. "Come on, I'll go with you to sickbay."

"No, you stay here. I'll be OK."

"Bullshit. Sergeant. Come on." He put his arm around her shoulder and walked her to sickbay.

\* \* \* \*

Ike made Jack leave her alone in sickbay. The nurse said Claire had Devon in surgery. Ike sat in the waiting room, still in her armor, and waited. She never stopped crying. Usually, her tears came slowly, but sometimes, she lost control and broke down into racking sobs.

Her mind wandered about, thinking about the last week since she met Devon. Somewhere, sometime, the nearly instant attraction she felt for him turned into love. She tried to think of the happy times. Their first date at the Café and how he wouldn't come into her cabin was one of the memories. Another was the remarkable picnic when they made love under the artificial sun. The place where he'd been shot lay less than half a kilometer from there. No matter how hard she tried, the images of the projectiles ripping his body would flood her mind, and the tears racked her body again.

Ike had sat crying for more than two hours. Her tears flowed from some reservoir deep inside where they'd been stored for forty-six years. When the sickbay door swished open, Ike saw Marilyn and Charlotte come through.

Neither spoke until they sat on either side of her. Marilyn put her hand on Ike's. "How are you doing?"

"Not good. What are you doing here?"

Marilyn grasped her hand. "Claire called us on our implants and said you might want some company."

Ike looked back and forth a few times. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Charlotte glanced at her mother. "No. At least not that we know. Claire stepped away from the operating table for a moment and called us. She said you were alone here."

"We've been there. We just want to help you, if we can." Marilyn looked at Ike's left hand. "Is your hand all right?"

"Yeah." Ike still felt suspicious of the timing of their arrival. "I guess I could use some help. Or a drink."

Charlotte smiled a little. "Maybe both."

"Yeah."

"If you weren't so dirty and didn't smell so bad, I'd offer to hug you."

Ike laughed, but it sounded like a bark. "Yeah, I'm pretty nasty right now."

"You are that." Charlotte looked around. "I'll be back." She went to the back area of sickbay.

"Char and I really have been here. Jim and Mar both have been sick and hurt, and we thought we would to lose them. This isn't easy, and you need someone here to at least sit with you." Marilyn held Ike's hand in both of hers.

"Thanks. I do appreciate it."

Charlotte returned with a scrub suit over her arm. "This won't win you any fashion awards, but it's clean and there's a shower back here. Come on." Marilyn and Charlotte herded her into the shower.

Ike removed her armor and clothes and looked in the mirror. Black bruises covered her torso. Even through armor, fifteen-millimeter slugs left damage. Too many times today, Ike had been a target and shot. Scratches and deeper cuts, along with more bruises, covered her face, arms, and legs. At least two of the fingers on her left hand were broken. Her training allowed her to shut out the pain of her wounds. She wished it would let her ignore the pain in her heart and soul.

The warm water of the shower felt good. It at least covered her tears for a few minutes. It seemed like a lifetime ago now, but just this morning, she and Devon had shared a shower, soaping and rubbing each other all over. She could almost feel Devon's arms around her as they kissed. She licked at the water as it ran down her face and could taste his lips on hers. When she closed her eyes, Ike saw his face, his eyes soft and tender as he stared into her eyes.

Ike's muscles began to get stiff and she knew she should work out to prevent that from happening, but all she wanted to do was to curl up in the corner and cry some more. What she wanted even more was to touch Devon.

Ike dried herself carefully and dressed in the scrub suit. She went back to the waiting room where Charlotte and Marilyn sat. "Thanks, Charlotte. I feel better now."

Marilyn stood. "You look a lot better, too." She held her arms out to Ike. "Come here."

Ike was crying again, uncontrollably. "Marilyn, I don't know what to do!" The tears flowing down her face soaked the neck of the scrub suit. She could taste the hot salt as the tears flowed over her lips. The images of the final confrontation with Jen'Talsin again rushed into her mind's eye.

"I know, but you're doing all you can."

Ike cried for a long time. "I need to sit down before I fall down."

Charlotte sat down next to her. "Can we get you something to eat?"

"I guess I should eat something, but I don't really feel like it."

Charlotte got the lost-in-thought look the royalty had when they used their implants to communicate. "We'll have something for you in a few minutes."

"Thanks." Ike looked at her hands. Cut and bruised, the index and middle fingers of her left hand were swollen and dark around the knuckles. "The not knowing is the worst part, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is. Let me see if I can find out anything." Marilyn faded into thought for a moment. "Claire is going to have a nurse come out in a minute to fill us in on what's happening."

"Thanks." Ike cried slowly. She stared at the far bulkhead as the warm fluid ran down her face. She winced as a thought told her that she should stop crying now because she might need more tears when he died. She slammed the thought away, forcing deep into the corners of her mind.

The nurse came out, her mask pulled down around her neck. "Sergeant Payne, the doctor wanted me to give you some information about Lieutenant Henson."

"How is he?" She squeezed Marilyn's hand.

"The doctor is still working, and he has some very serious injuries." She seemed to hesitate for a moment. "His heart stopped several times, but he's responded to treatment. He's lost a tremendous amount of blood and we're giving him replacements for that as fast as we can. There doesn't seem to be any neurological damage, but we're worried about that with the blood loss."

Ike's voice felt weak and she heard the trembling. "Will he live?"

"We don't know yet. He's actually doing better than any of us thought he would, but things are very much touch and go right now."

Ike looked down into her lap, tears leaving dark splashes on the green scrub suit. Charlotte slipped an arm around Ike and looked up at the nurse. "Could you come out a little later and let us know how things are going?"

"Yes, I can." The nurse touched Ike's shoulder. "We're doing all we can." The nurse went back to the OR.

Ike sat rubbing her hands together. Even though she just showered, her mind could still see Devon's blood on her hands. She didn't know if she could ever get the feeling to go away. The last three simple words he said to her rang in her ears. The Emperor walked into sickbay carrying a tray. Ike looked up, puzzled. "Sir?"

He smiled at her. "You didn't know one of my many jobs was as delivery boy?" Charlotte gave him her seat next to Ike. "Ike...I mean Ikira, what can I do to help?"

"Unless someone's promoted you from Emperor to God, not much, Sir."

He rested his hand on her knee. "I guess that's true. By the way, stop calling me sir. That drives me crazy." He glanced at Marilyn. "You and Devon did a great thing for Boone and everyone aboard today. We're all in your debt. You should be proud of yourselves."

"I guess. I'm too scared to be anything else right now."

"I know." He looked at his wife and daughter again. "You don't need a delivery boy hanging around right now, so I'm going to go, but if you need anything, just tell one of these two." He gave Ike a lopsided smile. "It seems that when I want something done, it happens around here."

Ike wiped at her eyes. "Thank you, Sir. I mean, Jim."

He hugged her and kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Ike." He left sickbay.

\* \* \* \*

Three more hours passed before the nurse came out to talk to them again. "There really hasn't been much change, but the surgery is progressing. The doctor hopes to start reattaching his arm in another hour or so."

Ike huddled in on herself. "Has his heart stopped anymore?" She didn't feel like talking. She just wanted the news.

"Yes, it has. A few more times, but the blood loss has mostly been stopped, so we hope that will help."

Charlotte hesitated before looking up at the nurse. "Has the danger of a stroke passed, then?"

"We hope so, but he's still far from stable."

Marilyn leaned to Ike. "Did you have any other questions?"

She looked up from her lap. "No."

Marilyn smiled at the nurse. "Thank you. Please, keep us posted."

"I will." The nurse left the women alone again.

Charlotte smiled a little. "It sounds like things are getting a little better, if not yet all that good."

Ike's hands wandered around on her lap. "I guess." She wiped at her eyes. "I'm so scared."

Marilyn hugged her. "We know, and that's OK." Marilyn again looked at Ike's hand. "Why don't we get a nurse to look at your hand?"

"I'm fine." Ike glanced at the fingers. She had been hurt worse. In her mind, this was combat, and you fought through the pain and injuries. Devon fought for his life somewhere in sickbay, and she planned to stay right here and fight with him.

Charlotte sighed. "You don't look fine."

Marilyn stared at Ike for a moment. "I could order you, as Empress, to let someone look at that."

"And I could tell you to get stuffed." Ike hated herself for saying that. "I'm sorry. As soon as we know something, I promise I'll have them tended to."

Marilyn's face looked like she had gotten a bad lemon. She nodded. "All right. I don't like it, but you've got enough stress right now."

"Thanks." Ike caught herself counting the squares of tile on the floor, trying to distract her thoughts and keep the images out of her conscious mind. "Am I supposed to be this scared?"

Marilyn nodded. "Yeah. We're not talking about a stranger or a friend in there. This is the man you care about, and you're supposed to be scared."

Ike got a small smile. "I'm glad it's normal, because I'm scared shitless."

Charlotte laughed. "Yeah, it's normal."

Ike nibbled at the sandwiches the Emperor had dropped off. She took a small bite. "He's a neat man, your husband."

Marilyn chuckled. "I kind of like him."

"Yeah, Daddy's the best." Charlotte smiled.

Ike stared at the tiles again and forced herself to stop counting. "It must be great having a guy like that."

"You tell me. You've got one." Marilyn glanced at Charlotte.

"But for how long?" Her tears tried to well up again, but she forced them down.

Charlotte thought for a moment. "All of us only have each other for as long as God will give us. You have to make the most of that time."

Ike sniffed. "I guess that's right. I just want longer than five days."

"We know." Charlotte looked at her mom.

\* \* \* \*

Two more hours had gone by when the nurse came out again. "The doctor is reattaching his arm now, and he's doing a little better."

Charlotte studied her. Ike hadn't spoke in more than fifteen minutes, just staring at the floor. "Is his heart doing better now?" Charlotte held Ike's hand.

"Yes, it is. It hasn't stopped since I was out last, but he's not out of danger."

"That's good news, I guess." Ike's tears ran dry, but she felt herself becoming quiet and sullen.

The nurse smiled a little. "Yes, it really is."

"How much longer do you think it will be?" Marilyn still sat with her arm around Ike.

"It should take another two hours or so to reattach his arm. The doctor has a few things to address after that, so probably three or four hours."

Marilyn and Charlotte looked at Ike. When she didn't speak, Marilyn hugged Ike's shoulders. "Thank you for keeping us up-to-date."

The nurse nodded and started to leave. Ike looked up suddenly. "Please, if you can, just whisper in his ear that Ikira loves him."

"I will."

## Chapter 16 Jigsaw

It was another three and half hours before the nurse came out again. She said Devon was unchanged, and Claire was in the final stages of the surgery. She would be out to see them in two hours or so. Ike became almost completely silent, only responding to questions and then only in short answers, one word when she could.

Marilyn and Charlotte tried to make her talk, but Ike felt absorbed by her thoughts. The images wouldn't leave her alone. The only thing in her experience that she could equate them to were the films from battle exercises. Combat scenes, filmed from multiple angles, in three dimensions, and played back in super-slow motion. Ike could see every detail of the shots that hit Devon. She shivered as she saw the slugs hit his shoulder, ripping his arm from his body. Her heart pounded as she watched the rounds slam into his chest, ripping holes as big as her fist.

Ike fell silent as she thought about Devon fighting for his life. She considered what she would do if he died and couldn't come to any acceptable conclusions. Ike knew she could live without him. She'd done it for forty-six years. The problem was that she didn't want to. She read someplace that people contemplating suicide often felt frightened by the thought.

She felt no fear.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours and fifteen minutes after the nurse's last visit, Claire came from the operating room. Her hair was a mess and stuck to her head by sweat. She had dark stains from perspiration on her scrub suit, and she collapsed in a chair.

Ike reacted for the first time in hours. "Claire?"

"He's a lot better than he was. We're not out of the woods yet, but we can at least see the Emerald City from here."

"When can I see him?"

Claire held her hand up. "Damn. That was about the worst surgery I've ever had to do." She took a deep breath. "A couple of more hours. The nurses are getting him settled in the intensive care unit." She looked at Ike and smiled a little. "You think you're tough? You don't have a thing on him." Claire stretched. "His heart stopped twenty-six times in there. We replaced his entire blood volume twenty-two times over. I put nearly three kilometers of sutures in him and probably five kilograms of metal and plastic. I had to replace his left lung, and most of his shoulder and rib cage on the right side." She stretched again. "He must love you, because something sure kept him alive, and it wasn't me."

Ike gripped Marilyn's hand tightly. "Will he live?"

"I wish I could say for sure, but I can't. I don't know yet. We'll have to wait. He needs more surgery, but he can't take that now. We'll have to go day-by-day."

Charlotte hesitated, and then glanced at her mother. "Claire, Ikira's not doing very well."

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Marilyn slipped her arm around Ike's shoulder again. "You're either getting depressed or going into shock."

Ike looked at the three. "I'm fine."

Claire sighed. "Let me see your chest." The black bruises showed around the neck of the scrub suit.

"I'm OK."

Claire sighed again. "I'm much too tired to play games. Sergeant."

Ike blinked a time or two, trying to hide her left hand. "I've just got some bruises."

Claire stood and took Ike's hand. "Come on." Between Claire pulling and Charlotte pushing, they got her in an examination room. When Ike undressed, Claire blinked. "Oh, my." She moved a scanner around Ike for a while.

Marilyn looked at the bruises on Ike's chest and caught her breath. "This should've been looked at hours ago."

"Yeah, it should have." Claire set the scanner down. "You've got four broken ribs, your sternum is cracked, you've got two broken fingers, a torn ligament and a broken collar bone on the right side. Damn it, you're in bad shape yourself!"

"I know, but I want to see Devon as soon as I can."

"You'd think that after seven hundred years, I'd get used to hard-headed Marines." Claire made some notes on a clipboard. "The nurse is going to come in and put about a kilometer of tape and such on you. And I'm calling Doctor Hughes to come see you."

"Who's he?"

"She. A psychiatrist."

"I don't need a headshrinker."

### Melodee Aaron

"I don't remember asking you, Sergeant. Besides all the physical things, Mom's right." Claire ran her hand through her hair, a habit she learned from her father. "You're getting depressed, and you're near psychogenic shock."

"I'm fine, Claire."

"That's Admiral." Claire slammed the clipboard on the counter. "Sergeant, I didn't ask your medical opinion. Sit the fuck down and the people you need to see will be here." She stormed out of the room.

"You might want to do as she says." Marilyn tried to hide a smile.

Charlotte's eyes went wide. "Yeah. That's only the second time in six hundred years I've heard her say fuck."

Ike sat down and waited.

\* \* \* \*

The nurse had just finished taping and splinting Ike when Doctor Hughes came into the exam room. Charlotte and Marilyn left, returning to the waiting room. "Hello, Sergeant. I'm Tara Hughes. Doctor Reeves thought you and I should talk for a while."

"Call me Ike."

"All right, Ike. You've been through a rough day."

"I guess you could say that, yeah. We had who knows how many firefights around the ship, eighteen people killed, more than a hundred hurt, a lunatic on the loose trying to kill me, and Devon had his arm blown off and two slugs pumped into his chest. Sounds like a bad day to me."

Tara Hughes had a calm, gentle expression that said she understood everything her patient told her. "That was all hard for you."

"Gee. You really think so?"

She seemed to ignore the sarcasm. "Yes, I do. Tell me, how long have you been a Marine?"

"Thirty years, since I was sixteen."

"That's a long time."

Ike wanted to cry again. "Yeah, it is."

"It's OK to be upset by something like this."

"Doc, I've been in firefights before. My job is to get shot at and to kill people. The Fleet personnel don't always understand that." Ike took a deep breath, but the tears spilled over, anyway. "There's nothing I could have done to save the people who died or to protect those who were injured. We had a terrorist who didn't care. Besides, shit happens."

"I think you're coping with the people who were hurt and killed just fine. I also think you're doing all right with your own life being in danger and that you had to kill the terrorist."

"So why are we here, Doc?"

"Because of the man back in ICU."

Ike stared for a moment. Of course Claire and the headshrinker talked. "Yeah. I love him, and I'm worried about him."

"Yes, you love Devon."

Ike's tears had been slow and faltering, but now she fell back into racking sobs again. "I'm so scared he's going to die!" The horrendous images rushed to her consciousness again. His last words to her, him telling her that he loved her, hammered in her ears.

Tara handed her a tissue. "I think that's reasonable, Ike. I spoke to Claire, and I understand his injuries are severe."

"Doc, I'll never get that image out of my head."

Tara's expression faltered for a second. "You were there when he was hurt."

"Yeah, about three meters from him." Ike paused for a moment. "I saw his arm shot completely off his body and the bullets rip into his chest. I saw him fall after his blood sprayed over me. And there was nothing I could do to help him!"

"It seems to me you did help him. He's still alive."

"I lost it, Doc! I couldn't help him. I put myself in a position that the killer was going to kill me because I lost control." Ike drifted off as she saw the scene in her head. Her voice went soft and quiet. "I wanted to die. I wanted her to shoot me. Then, somehow, Devon fired from behind me and hit the terrorist. That was the last thing he did before he collapsed."

"So he killed the terrorist."

"Yeah. She was dying. I just finished her." Ike looked up through her tears. "I couldn't help him, but he managed to help me."

Tara paused for a moment. "I wonder if you feel weak because he helped you."

"Maybe I do. My emotions got away from me, and I put myself in danger. He saved me not only from the killer, but from myself as well."

"You're a strong person, and don't like to think of someone taking care of you."

Ike sighed. "No, I don't. My job is to protect people as best I can, and not for someone to protect me."

"Maybe Devon feels the same things about you."

"I know he does. He wants to take care of me, but I don't need that."

"It seems maybe you do."

Ike thought for a moment. "I guess I did today. Yesterday, now."

"Is Devon's desire to take care of you a bad thing?"

Ike thought again. She liked the way she felt when he held her. As much as she hated to admit it, she felt safe in his arms, and she liked feeling she could relax and let someone look after her for at least a while. "No, not really. I like that he makes me feel safe."

"As a woman, I like the way my husband makes me feel when he holds me."

Ike smiled a little. "Yeah. Doc, right now, I'm just so worried about Devon. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"I understand. It's hard to even think about losing someone you care about that much."

"It is that." Ike thought for a moment. "I think everything that happened is coming home to roost in my head at the same time."

"I think you're right." Tara looked at her watch. "I imagine you'll be able to see him soon. We can't expect to help you work through these things in this short time. I'd like to give you some medication. An antidepressant, an anxiolytic, and something to help you sleep for a few days."

"You're probably right. I can do that."

"And I think you and I need to talk a few more times, too."

"I'd like that."

"All right, but I do need to ask you something, and I'm trusting you to tell me the truth."

"Sure."

"Ike, are you having any thoughts of hurting yourself?"

"No." She knew that could change at any moment. She took a deep breath. "If something happens to Devon, I really don't know how I'll handle that."

"I understand. Can you promise me that if you feel like hurting yourself, you'll call me before you do anything?"

"Yeah. I can promise that to you."

Tara smiled again. "All right. I'll have the nurses get your medication for you." She took a card from her notebook. "Here's my direct intercom number. Call me if you need anything. I'd like to see you at 1500 tomorrow."

Ike smiled a little. "Is that 1500 tomorrow, or 1500 this afternoon?" It was almost 0500.

Tara laughed. "You're right. This afternoon."

"I'll be there." Ike hesitated. "Thanks. You made me look at a few things."

"That's why I'm here."

They walked to the waiting room together and said goodnight.

Ike sat down between Marilyn and Charlotte. "Thanks. I needed that."

Marilyn took her hand. "That's OK."

The nurse came out. "Sergeant, you can come back now."

Ike took a deep breath. "I guess this is it."

"We'll be right here." Charlotte hugged her, and Ike followed the nurse to the ICU.

\* \* \* \*

The nurses had placed Devon in a bed with a mass of wires and tubes running from him to the wall and under the bed. His swollen face looked like a balloon. He was on a ventilator and

four IV lines ran into him, two carrying blood. Ike felt an odd combination of shock and relief when she saw him.

The nurse checked a few readings. "He's stable right now. We're keeping him on the ventilator until his new lung has a chance to heal a little. Doctor Reeves will be in to talk to you in a few minutes."

Ike nodded. She pulled a chair over to sit by his head. She took his right hand in hers, avoiding the IV. "Devon, it's Ikira. I'm right here." She leaned and carefully kissed his hand. The warmth in his skin when her lips touched his hand made her shiver at the thought that he still lived. She wanted to hug him to her body, to savor the warmth and feel his heart beating. "Don't worry about me. Thanks to you, I'm all right. Yeah, I'm little beat up here and there, but nothing major. You're the one we both need to focus on right now." She wiped at her tears.

Ike sat talking to him for a while. She told him about Charlotte and Marilyn being here. She also told him about Tara and that she would talk to her again later today. She told him how much the support helped her and how worried she was about him.

Claire put her hand on Ike's shoulder. "Hi."

Ike turned. "Claire, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I know how that is. Did you and Tara have a good talk?"

"Yeah, really good. She helped a lot already, and I'm going to see her this afternoon."

"That's good." Claire pulled up a chair. "Let me tell you what we've got here with this man of yours."

"All right."

"He's stable right now and doing about as I expected. We'll have him on the ventilator and sedated for at least eight hours to keep the stress off his new lung so it can settle in a little. His arm has good blood flow, and we've seen some reflex movement already. My biggest concern right now is his blood volume, but that's coming up with the transfusions. That also tells me he's not having any major bleeding inside."

"You said he'd need more surgery, right?"

"Yeah, he will. I need to do some more work on his arm. He had some damage to his heart that I had to patch, and that needs more work, too. We can put those off for a couple of days until he's stronger." Claire stared at her for a few moments. "We'll need to do some more tests, but I think he's had at least a small stroke."

Ike felt her heart skip a beat. "How bad?"

"I'm not sure yet what the impact will be, if any. We'll need to see."

Ike held his hand. "Tell me the truth. Do you think he'll make it?"

"I don't want to discourage you or give you false hope. I can't say for certain, but he's a lot better than he was fourteen hours ago. There are an unbelievable number of things that could still go wrong, but my gut feeling is that he's not going anywhere." She smiled. "Like I said, he doesn't want to leave you, and he's fighting hard not to."

Ike smiled, the first true smile she had felt since yesterday morning. "That's my Devon."

"Yeah." Claire hesitated. "I hope we don't have to fight again, but you need to take about another twenty minutes, and then go home. Both of you need to rest. I'm going hang around here so I can watch him. You can call the nurses anytime you like to see how he's doing. I'd like for you to get some sleep, though."

Ike frowned a little. "I don't really want to, but you're right. I'm really tired. Tara gave me something to help me sleep, so I think it's a good idea to use that and get some rest."

"Good. If anything comes up, I'll call you, but otherwise, you try to sleep."

"I will." Ike took Claire's hand in hers. "Thank you, for everything."

"You're welcome."

Ike sat with Devon for another fifteen minutes. "I'm going home to try to rest a little. You need to rest, too, so I can take you home soon." She stood and leaned over the bed rail to kiss his lips. "Sweet dreams. I'll see you a little later." She kissed him again and went back to the waiting room.

\* \* \* \*

Marilyn and Charlotte walked Ike home. At the door to her cabin, Ike paused. "I can't thank you two enough for helping me with this."

Marilyn smiled. "No thanks are needed. We're happy we could be there for you and that we were able to help."

Ike smiled. "Goodnight."

Marilyn kissed Ike's cheek. "Goodnight. Call if you need me."

"Me too." Charlotte kissed her other cheek. "Get some rest."

The two left Ike standing at the door as they made their way home.

Ike opened the door and stood just inside for a moment. She recalled the day less than a week ago when she stood there, thinking how bad it was to come home to an empty cabin. She smiled slowly when she realized the cabin wasn't empty anymore. Devon's spirit was here now. She could hear him laughing, and telling her how pretty he thinks she is.

Ike sighed at the empty room. "I love you, Devon."

She took her medicine, lay down, and was out in minutes.

\* \* \* \*

Ike woke stiff and sore. It took her half an hour to get out of bed and nearly as long to shower. She stopped by sickbay for several minutes on her way to see Tara. Claire had taken Devon off the ventilator and he breathed on his own, but he was still in a drug-induced sleep. Ike sat with him while she could, holding his hand and talking to him, before she left for her appointment.

Her meeting with Tara was a good one. It became clear to Ike that her feelings for Devon were putting her in a conflict between wanting to be totally independent and wanting to rely on Devon to look after her. She doubted things could be resolved until Devon could talk with her. When she left Tara's office, Ike went by the Security Office on her way back to sickbay. Kelli worked the Duty Desk, a small bandage on her forehead. "What are you doing here?"

"I run the place, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but we thought you'd be taking some time to be with Devon. How is he?"

"He's better, but he still has a long way to go. How's the head?"

"That's good to hear." Kelli rubbed absently at her head. "At least I know what day it is now." She glanced at the desk for a moment. "I'm sorry he got away from me."

Ike put her hand on Kelli's. "I know, but it was no one's fault. Things happen. I'm glad you're all right, though." Ike thought for a moment. "Is there anything you and Jack can't handle?"

"Probably not."

"OK. I'm going to take some time off." Ike grinned. "On top of being distracted with Devon, I'm so sore I can barely walk. I'm getting way too old for this crap."

Kelli laughed. "I can believe that. I'm ten years younger, and I'm too old for this crap." Her face turned serious. "Take all the time you need. What Jack and I can't handle, we'll call you about."

"Thanks. I think I'll go to sickbay and see Devon."

\* \* \* \*

When Ike arrived at sickbay, the nurse caught her before she reached Devon's room. "Claire wanted to talk to you before you get settled in with Devon."

Claire almost ran over Ike in the hall before Ike made it to Claire's office. "Ah! Ikira! Good. I was going to call you if you didn't show up soon."

Ike's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?" She felt her heart beating faster as the possible problems that might hit Devon ran through her mind.

"Not a thing, but he's waking up a little and I thought you might want to visit with him."

Ike's concerns faded quickly to feelings of happiness. "Damn right I do!"

"That's good. Just remember he's got a lot of drugs on board and he's still very groggy, so he'll probably fade in and out." Claire smiled. "It's not that he's bored with you."

She frowned. "Don't say 'bored' when he's not in any condition to do any boring."

Claire laughed. "Right. Now, get out of my hair and go see Devon."

\* \* \* \*

Ike went into Devon's room quietly and sat down next to his bed, taking his hand in hers. "Hi. I hope you're feeling all right today. I'm pretty stiff and sore." Ike wasn't totally certain she actually felt it, but Devon gently squeezed her hand. "Can you hear me?" He squeezed her hand again, a little stronger this time. Ike had to fight not to whoop with joy. "Just relax and rest. I'm here." Devon's eyes moved, like the REM of sleep, for nearly a minute. He slowly opened them a tiny amount and stared at the overhead. "Devon, are you hurting?"

### Melodee Aaron

His eyes and head turned slowly to her. A weak smile touched his lips. Devon's voice was dry and husky. "Ikira. I was dreaming about you."

"That's nice to hear. Are you having any pain?"

"Other than from not being able to hold you, no." He swallowed a little. "My mouth is so dry."

The nurse looked up from the monitor station. "You can give him a few ice chips if he'd like that."

Ike picked up the cup of ice on the side table and gave him a small amount in a spoon. "How's that?"

"Good. Are you all right?"

"Other than some bruises and scrapes, yeah." She glanced her left hand and felt the tight tape across her chest. "Well, I guess there are a few broken ribs and a couple of fingers, but nothing major."

He smiled weakly again. "Good." Devon seemed to fade off for a few moments, his eyes fluttering shut. His eyes opened again and he continued, like he had never stopped. "You're right."

"How's that?"

"You really know how to show a guy a good time."

"I told you so." Ike felt a huge knot of tension that rested between her shoulders melting. Something told her he would be all right. A few tears slipped from her eyes to run down her cheeks, leaving a salty taste as they rolled around her lips.

"Don't cry."

"These are happy tears." She could feel the smile as it distorted the tracks of the tears on her face.

He sighed heavily. "I hope you didn't have too many sad tears."

The nurse came to the bed. "Let's get this out of your way." She let the bed rail down. "I'm going to the monitors in the hall if you need me." She smiled and left them alone in the room.

Ike leaned and kissed his lips. "I had a few." She wiped at her eyes. "I've missed you."

"I know the feeling." He faded a little, and then came back. "How long have I been here?"

"It's Tuesday evening. You've been in sickbay about thirty-six hours."

Devon looked puzzled. "Tuesday? It seems like it should be longer than that."

"Yeah, it's been a long time, but you're worth the wait."

"Ikira?"

"Yes?"

"Can I have another kiss?"

"Any time and all you want." She kissed him again. She moved her lips and tongue against him very gently, afraid of hurting him. The touch of his lips, dry and chapped, against hers had the same effect they always did. Ike felt her passions and desires rising. She thought that would be a bad thing now. A feeling new to her came across her then, and she tried to understand it. She wanted him, but she also wanted to care for him and protect him. For life. Her mind made the instant connection. This was love. "How was that?"

"Wonderful."

"Are you tired?"

"Yeah, but I like that you're here."

"Go ahead and sleep. I'll be here while Claire lets me stay."

"I'm so tired, Ikira."

"I know. Sleep."

"Yeah..." Devon's eyes slid shut and he drifted off.

Ike sat watching him sleep as she held his hand. The new feeling flowing through her made her want to wake him. She wanted to tell him that she loved him and never wanted to be away from his side again. He needed to know that these things were clear to her now. She leaned and kissed the back of his hand and felt him squeeze her hand gently. She smiled when she realized that she didn't need to tell him these things now. Somehow, Devon knew that she loved him.

Ike sat with him for six hours, but he didn't wake up again that evening.

\* \* \* \*

Boone had some minor drive damage from the malicious programs Jen'Talsin had put into the ship's brains. The repairs would take about a week and, until then, Admiral Q decided to stay where they were. There was no rush to get Eeto to Palea. The original story of Boone having drive problems delaying her arrival was still good and now, it wasn't really a lie.

Claire released Eeto from sickbay back to her quarters. Her injuries had healed well enough. She was back to her normal guards and seemed happy to be up and around again. Ike stopped by to see her, and Eeto thanked Ike for protecting her and gave her well wishes for Devon's recovery.

Over the past three days, Devon had been awake more and having less pain. His arm was doing very well and the rest of his recovery followed along. Even though she had lived with it all of her life, the way the medications accelerated the healing process always amazed Ike. Claire decided, after a large battery of tests, that she didn't need to do more surgery on Devon's heart, even though she'd need to monitor him closely for any possible problems. Claire did the second surgery on his arm to reconnect the remainder of the nerves.

Tests confirmed Devon had suffered a small stroke. Claire discussed it with Ike, explaining the possible impact. "It's in a part of his brain that controls memory, mostly the movement of things from short-term to long-term memory."

Ike nodded. "How will this affect him?"

### Melodee Aaron

"I'm not sure yet." Claire played with the papers on her desk. "It may be so minor that no one, even him, will notice. It could be major. We'll have to wait and see how he adapts to the changes."

She watched Claire for a moment. "What aren't you saying?"

"Sometimes, damage of this kind to the brain can start a domino effect, where the problems get worse and more pronounced with time. Again, we need to wait and see."

Ike sighed. "All right. After what we've been through already, Devon and I can cope with it together."

Ike went to two more sessions with Tara and came to understand she wanted to be independent and take care of herself, but she wanted Devon in her life as well. When she really thought about it, there was no conflict. Ike could still take care of herself. She was still the same person she was last month. At the same time, she now had someone who could, when she wanted or needed it, take care of her, and this was a two-way street. Devon could take care of himself, but he had Ike now to take care of him when he needed a hand. He'd need one when Claire released him from sickbay.

They were now, Ike thought, a team. Neither of them was superior or subservient to the other. They were equals. The new team of Ike and Devon was, because of the teamwork, much stronger than either of the individuals. The team was much stronger than the simple sum of the parts.

# Chapter 17 Returns

Devon sat up in a wheelchair at the side of his bed as he wiped a small bead of sweat from his forehead. The physical therapist had just left after working with his left arm. Ikira peeked in the door, and he smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." She came and kissed him before sitting on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

He took her hand. "Better now." He felt confused. "I know my brain may not be working right yet, but shouldn't you be at work?"

She smiled at him. "It's Saturday. I'm still taking some time off to be here with you as much as I can."

Devon laughed. Each time they had this discussion, he'd remember having it before. "Oh yeah." Claire and Ikira filled him in yesterday about the stroke he suffered. He felt like he couldn't remember dates and times.

Ikira kissed him again. "You look tired."

"Yeah, the therapist from hell just left."

"You know she's just helping you get better."

"I know, but she's a slave driver. Always wants just one more repetition."

She grinned. "You could have a Marine Sergeant supervising the workout for you."

"As long as I get to pick the Sergeant."

"Does that mean I get to pick the workout?"

He squeezed her hand. "I'm feeling a lot better, but not that much better."

"I know." She laughed a little.

Claire stepped in the room. "Ikira, I didn't know you were here yet."

"Surprise!"

Devon laughed at them.

"I just talked to the therapist, and she's pleased with how you're doing." Claire came and felt around on his arm. "Does this hurt?"

"No. I can feel it, but just pressure."

"That's good." Claire pulled a chair over and sat down. "I'm glad you're both here before I leave for the day." She looked from one to the other. "How would you feel about going home?"

Ikira blinked. "Really? He can come home?"

"Yeah, he can, so long as you're both comfortable with that."

"I still need a lot of help." He wondered just how much. He could only barely move from the bed to the wheelchair by himself.

"So what?" Ikira smiled. "Or did you forget I can pick you up and carry you?"

"Well, no, but that would be a lot of work for you."

"Devon, you're no trouble for me." She put her hand on his cheek. "That's what I'm here for."

"The therapist would drop by twice a day and I'll have a nurse come by every day just to check you over. If Ikira needs some help, that would be available, too." Claire smiled. "In case you missed it, I'm trying to get rid of you. You're going to recover faster and better at home instead of here."

"Tired of me already?" Devon looked at Ikira. "If you think you can handle it, I guess I'd be all right with the idea. I just don't want to pile too much on you."

"You're not. I want you home. Besides, I have a surprise for you."

"Um, what kind of surprise?"

She giggled. "Not that kind."

Claire laughed. "Just a couple of rules. Take it easy. Don't get too tired, and don't stress that arm. I won't tell you what you can and can't do, just take it easy and use moderation and common sense."

Ikira smiled seductively at him. "What about sex?"

Devon suddenly got interested in the bedside table. Claire smiled. "Common sense and moderation are the keywords, and he shouldn't get too tired or stressed."

"I can do that."

\* \* \* \*

Ikira and Devon reached her cabin door. She kissed him. "OK, here's the surprise." She opened the door and pushed his wheelchair into the sitting room.

The room was half again as big as Devon remembered. There was also more furniture than before. The dining room looked bigger, too. The small table for two was gone and a table

for six sat in its place. Devon just caught a glimpse of a small kitchen off the dining room. "Wow! The big time!"

Ikira helped him move from the wheelchair to the sofa, and then she arranged the framework that held his arm in place. "What do you think?"

"It's really big." He looked around a little more. "Why the change?"

"Maybe I've put the cart ahead of the horse a little, but I knew you'd need to stay here for me to help you for a while. I know we haven't talked about this, but I hope you'll stay here, even when you don't need the help."

"I'd really like that." He paused for a moment as he thought. Over the past few days, he thought about her a lot. He knew he might be reacting to his brush with death, but he wanted to be with Ikira. Not just now, but forever. "Can we talk for a minute?"

She sat down beside him. "Sure."

He watched her eyes. He wasn't sure what he looked for there. She couldn't possibly know how he felt about her. "I'm afraid I'll scare you."

She laughed. "Not unless you get shot again."

He could feel his heart beating fast in his chest. Sweat ran down his chest and he felt his armpits getting moist. "Ikira, I've fallen in love with you."

Her face went oddly blank. "Really?"

He tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. "Yeah, really." He thought for a second, and then looked deeply into her eyes. He saw a tenderness there now that went farther than anything he had seen there before. "I want to think that you love me, too, but I also know this is happening pretty fast."

She nodded. "Maybe it is. We've only known each other for twelve days."

"Yeah, that's true." He felt his heart slowing as it tried to sink into his feet. He knew he just pushed her away from him. She wasn't ready for this, and he had jumped the gun. "I'm sorry I said anything."

She reached up and put her hand on his cheek. "No, don't be sorry. That's not what I meant." She took a deep breath. "Sometime between Monday morning and Tuesday afternoon, I realized that I didn't want to live without you. I want you, Devon." She smiled. "Yeah, it's all happening quickly, but I don't think that feelings and emotions can tell time. It took me a few tries to admit openly to myself that I've fallen in love with you, too."

His heart bounced back up from someplace around the level of his knees. He felt the smile come to his face. He took her hand in his and kissed it. "I love you."

She leaned and kissed him gently. "I love you, too."

\* \* \* \*

Ikira spent the afternoon waiting on Devon. He kept count. In a one-hour period, she asked if he needed anything seven times, if he was in pain five times, and rearranged his pillows on the sofa twice. She also brought him three glasses of water, a cup of milk, and a strawberry jelly sandwich.

"Ikira, you're fussing."

"What?" She put another blanket on his legs.

"You're fussing over me."

She looked at the coffee table where the remnants of the food and drink were. "Oh." She smiled sheepishly. "I guess I am."

He took her hand. "You don't need to do that."

She knelt beside the sofa. "I know I don't need to. I want to." She thought for a moment. "I came way too close to losing you, and it wasn't just the trauma of seeing it, either. I just want to be close to you and..." She hesitated. He saw her blinking rapidly and the moisture in the corners of her eyes. "I've cried more the last week than I have in my whole life put together. I know you don't really need me to do it, but I want to take care of you."

Sometime over the last few days, he figured it all out. "I do need you to take care of me. Not just now, but always."

She smiled as the tears slid down her face. "I know the feeling." She put her head on his chest and looked up into his eyes. "I'm a big girl, and I can take care of myself, but it's good to know you're here to take care of me, too."

He ran his hand across her hair. "All I know is I love you and I need you."

Ikira grinned. "I'm not fussing, but you've been up a long time. Are you tired? I can help you to bed."

"I think I'm all right here."

"Let me try that another way." The seductive smile that grabbed Devon's total attention came to her face. He suddenly wanted her. He wasn't sure he could actually do anything about his desire, but he wanted to try. "I think you should go to bed."

"Bed is good."

\* \* \* \*

Ike helped him to the wheelchair and pushed him to the bedroom. The bedroom was much larger than it had been. The bed was gone and a platform two meters wide and three long was in its place. Ike helped him to stand and slipped the modified robe from him. She eased him to the bed and arranged the frame for his arm. "Don't run off. I'll be right back."

Ike hummed softly while she brushed her hair and changed in the bathroom. The bruises faded, going from almost black to simply purple now. She wondered how Devon would react when he saw them. She pulled her robe on and went back.

Ike turned the lights off. Devon hesitated for a moment. "Could you leave the lights on low? I got used to that in sickbay."

"Yeah, I'll leave them on a little. There's something I need to tell you about, though."

"What's that?"

"I'm more than a little bruised from the impacts on my armor. It's just bruises, and I don't want you to get all worked up about it."

His eyes narrowed. "Just how bad is this bruising?"

"It was pretty bad. It's getting better, and it doesn't hurt now." She saw him tense a little. "You have to remember I took a lot of abuse on my armor that day." Ike didn't tell him about finding 193 projectile dents in her armor.

"Let me see, please."

"All right. Just don't get all crazy." She turned her back to him as she slipped her robe off. There were only a couple of minor bruises there. She turned to face him.

"Oh, my God, Ikira!"

She took his hand. "It's all right. I'm OK. They're just bruises, that's all."

"What's the tape for?"

"Oh. That. I had a couple of ribs broken, too." She left out the sternum and collar bone.

"You should have told me about this." He'd worked his hand from hers, and gently touched the darker areas.

"I did."

"When?"

"Um, when you were still goofy after surgery."

Devon laughed. "Ikira."

"Well, I did tell you!"

"I guess you did. Doesn't that hurt?"

"It did, but it's just sort of achy now."

"This is really bad." His eyes explored the bruises.

"I love you." She studied his face for a moment. "It's taken me a little time to get my feelings for you in order, but I know now all I want from life is you, your love for me, and a chance to make you happy any way I can. That's really all I need."

"I'm glad you feel that way." He paused, staring at her. "I want you to be sure about this."

"I am sure. I think that I've been alone for so long that I started to feel like I'd never find anyone I could really love." She smiled at him. "I was wrong."

He nodded slowly. "I know what you mean."

Ike moved and sat next to him as he lay on his back. She leaned over him, resting on her right hand beside his waist. "Are you tired?"

"Yeah."

Ike lay down next to him, resting her head on his shoulder and her right arm on his chest. Her right leg came up across his thighs. "Is that OK?"

Devon yawned. "Yeah, it is. Very nice."

"Go to sleep and rest."

Ikira drew little pictures on his chest with her nails, and he faded off to sleep

## Chapter 18 Changes

Devon woke to soft lips on his face. He opened his eyes and Ikira leaned over him, looking into his eyes. "Good morning."

"Hi." He stretched. "I would ask what time it is, but I'm not even sure of the day."

She kissed his nose. "It's Sunday, about 0830. How do you feel today?"

"This sleeping in one position is a killer." The framework that held his arm prevented Devon from lying on his sides.

"I know. Marilyn called a little while ago. She asked if you'd like some company." Ikira grinned. "The whole royal family wants to come see you."

"Yeah, they travel in a pack, you know." He stretched again. "Actually, since I can't get out, maybe some company would be nice."

"All right. I'll call her back later. For now, we need to get you out of this bed." When Devon was in his robe and seated in the wheelchair, Ikira pushed him to the dining room. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I am."

"I've noticed that in the list of things you say I am, domestic isn't there, and for good reason, I guess. I'm not making any promises, but I'm going to try cooking something for you."

Devon was glad she couldn't see his face. "Are you, um, sure about that?"

"No, but I'm going to do it anyway. I may not be a chef, but I can follow directions."

"All right."

Ikira laughed. "I won't poison you!"

"Oh, I know that."

"And I won't burn the ship up, either."

Breakfast was actually very good. Ikira made eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee. She only set off the smoke alarm once.

She cleared the table. "I guess that unless you cook, we're going to eat out a lot."

"Actually, I've been known to do a little work in the kitchen."

"Really? You'll have to cook dinner for me sometime."

"I can do that."

"Naked."

"Um, there are hot things in there."

"I promise to kiss anything that gets burned." Her robe fell open as Ikira leaned toward him, and he saw the curve of her breast. "Or anything else you'd just like to have kissed."

"OK, you're not a tease. Temptress fits better."

She smiled brightly. "Hey! I like that! Temptress Ikira. Sounds almost as good as Mistress Ikira."

"Ahem. All right, then."

"Maybe I'd better call Marilyn before this degenerates any further."

"Yeah. I'm injured."

Ikira kissed him as she stood. "Yeah, damn it to hell." She went to the intercom. She came back and kissed his head. "They'll be here in about thirty minutes. Do you want to try getting dressed?"

He though for a moment, glaring at his arm in the contraption over his head. "I guess pants would be in order."

"Yeah, that's the least you can do for the Emperor and Empresses."

"OK. Just be careful with the zipper."

\* \* \* \*

The entire royal family showed up. Even Jimmy and his husband Edward were there. Ike was civil to Jimmy, even though she just didn't like the man. Edward, on the other hand, was friendly and fun to be around. He hugged her and warmly shook Devon's hand.

Zach and Claire were there, and Zach had to threaten her to stop Claire from acting like a doctor and checking Devon's arm. Claire laughed as she stopped fussing over Devon's arm. "If it was up to him, everyone would just fall over dead while he made me be social."

Ike had never had a problem with her self esteem. The simple fact of the matter was that of all the women of the royal family, Claire was the least beautiful. Next to Claire, Ike felt like she looked like the ugly stepsister at the ball. Yet when Ike glanced at him, Devon didn't watch the Empresses or Princesses. He watched her.

When everyone had greeted them, the Emperor looked around the room. "We won't be staying very long. We don't want you to get tired, Devon." He gave a lopsided grin that was

famous and well-known all throughout the galaxy. "I actually needed a couple of officers here that are at least Captains."

Ike smiled to herself, thinking that with himself, three Admirals, and four Captains, he had that covered. There was enough brass in Ike's sitting room to make a landing craft from the insignias.

The Emperor came and sat on the coffee table in front of them. "First, we all owe you both a debt of thanks. Second, this event has brought to my attention the fact that we, the Fleet in general, have viewed security as a bit of a non-issue when, in reality, it's clearly not. The idea of having a Sergeant in charge of something as vital as security just doesn't make sense." He reached in his pocket and took out a small box and handed it to Ike. He grinned again and nodded toward his wives and daughters. "They all want me to call you Ikira, but to me, you've always been Ike and I guess you'll always be Ike." He tipped his head to box. "All I need is a yes or no, Ike."

She looked at the box for a moment and slowly opened it. Inside was the single star insignia of a Marine Brigadier General. She blinked and looked up at the Emperor.

"I want you to really run security the way it should be run." His face turned serious. "You're probably going to argue with me, but I have this feeling in my stomach this wouldn't have happened if you'd have had the control you should have had, and I take full responsibility for that."

Ike looked several times between his face and the star. "Sir, I don't know what to say."

He laughed. "If you think I hated it when you were a Sergeant and called me Sir, wait until you see how hostile I get when a General calls me Sir." The lopsided grin was back. "All you need to say is yes."

"I don't know how this would all work."

"Simple. You're a General. The only people you answer to are Admiral Q and I. And, by the way, when it comes to security, you can even overrule us." He seemed to think for a moment. "When I finally got your great-grandpa to take a commission, I had to fight with him for nearly a year. Don't make me do the same with you. Just say yes."

"I guess I'm your man."

"Good. That was easy." The Emperor turned to Devon. "As for you, it's a little tough for a Lieutenant to be the Fleet liaison to the General in charge of Security. You're a Commander now." He handed Devon a box with the silver oak leaves.

Devon laughed. "Why didn't I get the smooth talk you had for Ikira?"

"Because I'm not afraid of you." He smiled. "All right, let me get a dozen or so of these people out of here so you can relax." He looked around the room. "OK, folks, let's move 'em out!"

\* \* \* \*

Devon smiled at Ikira. "Congratulations, General."

"Hey! Now I can order you around!"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You have no idea."

"Now you're scaring me."

"Yeah. Be afraid, be very afraid." She ruined the effect when she giggled.

Devon hugged her. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. Hey, making Commander isn't small change, either."

"I guess."

Ikira took his cheeks in her hands and turned his face to her. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a bad feeling about things."

"About what?"

He stared into space for a moment. "There are tons of loose ends in this whole thing with the Paleans."

Ikira sighed. "Yeah, I guess there are a few things we need to answer, but it's over."

"I'm not as sure." He turned to her. "How was the Ambassador shot? We still have a locked room mystery on our hands."

"The lab has that figured out. They're not sure if it was a sheet of ice or plastic, but something reflective was jettisoned with some junk in engineering, a routine thing, only ninety seconds before she was shot."

"You're asking me to believe that someone sent a mirror out into space, waited for it to get in position, then shot her image?"

"Yeah. It's happened before, too. At least mostly. A long time ago, on the moon in Sol system, a man was murdered by someone bouncing a laser off a mirror made from ice." Ikira smiled. "The mirror melting from the laser is what caused the beam to spread and lose its focus."

Devon laughed. "That's very different. The moon's surface doesn't move!" He shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. The shooter, the mirror, and the target are all moving. It seems to me it would take more computer power than Boone has to make that shot."

"The mirror had some sort of guidance system to hold it in place, but that's all simple. So, what do you think happened?"

"I don't know, and that worries me."

"There's nothing to worry about."

He bit his lip. "Maybe. These people tried to kill both of us, along with a bunch of other people. They're dangerous."

"Stop biting your lip. Yeah, no shit they're dangerous. I've got the bruises to prove it."

"I know you're the real cop here, but I'm a kind of cop. Yeah, I'm a cop that sits in a nice, safe office breaking puzzles and codes. This is a puzzle, so it may be more up my alley than yours." Despite her admonition, he bit his lip again. "We're all missing something important here, some piece of the puzzle."

"I think you're seeing things."

"Maybe I am. I hope so, too. If I'm not, we're still in deep shit." He didn't think he was seeing things.

\* \* \* \*

Ikira went to his cabin earlier and brought back a few things for him, including his jewelry box with his insignias and decorations. It also held a small box with a gift he wanted to give her.

They sat on the sofa with the tri-v playing some movie that they didn't watch. They spent the time kissing and touching each other. Ikira's hands barely brushed his body as they caressed. He pulled his lips from hers. "You can touch me."

"I don't want to hurt you." She smiled a little. "It's hard to keep my hands off you."

"You won't hurt me." He pulled her to him with his good arm. Her hands touched him with more force, but not much. Her mouth behaved very differently. Her lips moved on his, slipping in the sweet blend of their saliva. Her tongue probed his mouth urgently, and Ikira sucked and nibbled at his tongue when he plunged it into her mouth. His hand moved over her back and hugged her as well as he could with one arm.

Their lips parted, and he looked into her eyes. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

She leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose. "OK."

He thought for a moment, trying to decide how best to say this to her. "I love you."

She smiled. "I love you, too. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"In a way, yeah." The wheelchair sat next to where he sat on the sofa. He reached into the pocket on the side of the chair and took out the small box he grabbed from the jewelry box earlier. He turned it in his hand as he thought about his grandmother. "Ikira, will you marry me?"

Her eyes went wide and her mouth opened soundlessly. She blinked at him several times. "What?"

He opened the box and took out the simple diamond ring. "This belonged to my grandmother, and I'd like you to have it."

She stared at the ring in his hand. "What?"

Devon thought she would say yes. He prayed she would. He was realistic enough to know that she might say no. "Will you marry me?"

She stared at the ring, and then slowly looked up at his face. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Her chest moved up and down rapidly with her breathing. He smiled to himself because she practiced power breathing, in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her cheeks puffed with each exhale. Ikira held her hands very still in her lap, but he could see the slight trembling in her shoulders. She opened her mouth several times to speak, but no sound came out. She finally managed to find her voice, but it came out soft and shaky. "I...Are..." She closed her eyes for a moment, and then looked into his eyes. "This is it, isn't it?"

He felt certain she'd say yes now. Devon allowed himself a small smile. "I think so, yeah."

She took a deep breath as she looked at the ring he held again. She looked up, and he saw the tears slipping down her face, running around the smile on her lips. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He wanted to hold her hand as he put the ring on her finger, but he had only one arm to work with. She held her hand out and he slipped the ring onto her finger. "Thank you." He smiled at her, then pulled her to him and held her close.

\* \* \* \*

Ike helped him lie down and rigged his arm in the support frame. When Ike took off her robe, Devon looked at her chest for a moment. "The bruises look better."

"Yeah, they don't hurt as much."

"I think if we're careful, I can make love to you."

"Are you sure? We don't have to."

"I know we don't have to. I want to make love to you."

Ike placed her hand on his half-erect cock. "If you have any pain or anything, say so and we'll stop. Promise me."

"I promise."

He responded quickly to her touch and his erection raged in her fingers. Ike carefully mounted him, taking him fully inside. "You feel so good." She leaned forward and kissed him deeply. "And you taste delicious."

As Ike sat up, moving her hips against him rhythmically, Devon put his hand on her hip. "I want to touch you so badly, but I'm afraid I'll hurt your bruises."

She smiled down at him and took his hand, placing it on her breast. "Just be gentle."

"Sometimes I get a little carried away."

"Yeah, but I like that." Ike kissed him again. "Are you all right?"

"In heaven."

"Me, too." She continued to slide her pelvis against his, feeling his shaft deep in her, impaling her. As his cock slipped smoothly in and out of her, the shaft rubbed against her clit, pushing her rapidly towards her waiting orgasm. "I've missed this."

"Me too. I've missed just touching you and being close more."

Ike kissed him and their tongues darted and explored each other's mouths. When she sat up, she felt his dick ramming the back of her pussy. He ran his hand gently over her chest, just touching her and caressing her hard nipples.

"My God, you're beautiful," he said.

Ike felt herself near climax. She tried to hold herself back, but found she could neither slow the speed or intensity of her writhing hips. Ike forced herself down onto him, trying to get his dick farther into her wetness. She threw her head back and screamed. "Yes! Devon! Yes!" She jerked and flailed against his body, screaming incoherently. She managed to catch herself from falling onto him with her full weight. She lay slowly onto his chest, shaking uncontrollably

in the afterglow of her orgasm. Ike managed a weak smile. "God, that was intense." Ike saw his eyes were a little wide. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. You were glowing, like an angel."

"I love you."

"I love you, baby."

She moved her hips and his hard shaft rubbed her clit again. A small gasp escaped her lips. "Don't go away." She slipped his rigid cock from her, placing her feet on either side of his hips and crouching to slip his hardness back into her dripping slit. Flexing her knees, Ike slid his full length in and out, just holding the head of his raging cock in her labia then slowly sliding him deep inside, his balls hitting her ass.

He moaned softly, but Devon's eyes never left hers. "You feel amazing."

His hand moved to rub her clit, and she felt her body quiver as he rubbed her firmly. As his hips moved to meet her, their motion caused the framework holding his arm to clank and rattle.

She felt him tensing as she moved, and his fingers pushed her to a second climax. His fingers rolled her clit, and her climax hit her as he thrust up against her. She felt his cock throbbing inside her as his cum filled her.

He moaned loudly. She didn't think Devon tried to talk, but a series of grunts and moans came out of his mouth as Ike moved up and down his stiffness. His body danced like he was on a puppeteer's string, and his eyes closed as he thrust against her.

She slid down, his cock buried deep inside her. "Are you OK?"

He managed a slight smile. "Yeah." He took a few rapid, shallow breathes. "Thank you."

"Never thank me for making love to you."

He smiled again, but didn't seem able to find the breath to speak. Ike carefully rolled from atop him and cuddled close to his side. Devon put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "You could hurt a guy that way."

"Never you."

"I wish I could hold you right, with both arms."

She snuggled against him. "This is just fine for me."

"I'm not thanking you for making love to me, but thank you."

"For what?"

"For marrying me."

She smiled and tried to get closer to him. "You're welcome. You're stuck with me now."

"I like that."

## Chapter 19 Evidence

Ike invited Kelli and Jack to stop by Monday. They both saluted the new General. "If you don't stop that, I'll kick both your asses."

Jack laughed. "Damn, I never thought I'd see you with brass on your shoulders."

"I'm still in shock myself."

Kelli sat next to Devon on the sofa. "You know, I was scared to death Ike was going to kill me when you took off."

"Sorry." Devon looked at the healing cut on her forehead. "I guess that's two I owe you for."

"Now that she's a General, I guess working out something in trade is out of the question."

Ike put her hands on her hips. "You're just dying for an ass kicking, aren't you?"

"Get 'em, Ike!" Jack laughed.

"I will. You two put it in neutral." Ike pointed her finger at Kelli and Devon. "What's happening out in the real world?"

"We're just getting a few odds and ends taken care of. We found that four AGLR1917 units, a bunch of ammo, more than a hundred automatic fire weapons, and the other goodies Jen'Talsin had were missing from the armory. We've got everything there and in the storage compartments being manually inventoried." Jack laughed. "We've got a lot of storeroom clerks mad at us."

"The good news is that we've accounted for all the weapons." Kelli smiled. "But there are some other oddities."

Devon frowned. "Like what?"

Jack sniffed the air. "What's that wonderful smell?"

Ike only smiled in response as she went to the kitchen.

Kelli frowned as she watched Ike move to the small kitchen. She shrugged and turned to answer Devon. "Just crazy things missing, probably someone forgetting to debit an item from inventory." She grinned again. "Like, fifty kilos of milk chocolate are missing."

"Don't look at me!" Ike checked the cake she had in the oven, and then went back to the sitting room.

Jack smiled slyly. "Yeah, you don't need chocolate anymore."

Kelli snorted, and Ike didn't respond.

Devon looked around. "Is this something I should know?"

"Maybe. Ike's been known to eat a little chocolate now and then when she's in a dry spell." Kelli stifled a laugh.

"Dry spell?"

Jack's face was serious. "When she's not getting any."

"Any chocolate?"

Ike sighed. "All right! I might eat a little chocolate if I'm not getting sex. Happy now?"

"Oh. Fifty kilos?"

"Shut up, Devon."

Jack laughed. "I'll save you. Other stuff is missing, too. We haven't actually counted everything in a long time. Clothes, furniture, lamps, office supplies, you name it, and it's missing."

Ike smiled. "I bet that's driving Q crazy."

"It really is." Kelli sniffed. "Um, what smells so good and are you causing it?"

Ike put her hands on Devon's shoulders. "Yeah, I am. Anyone want some coffee and cake?"

Jack blinked. "Cake?"

Devon sat very still.

"Ike, are you baking?" Kelli glanced at Jack and Devon.

"Yeah, I am. Want some? It's an apple and spice cake."

Jack blinked and looked at Devon. "Did she just use the words apple, spice, and cake in the same sentence?"

"Yeah, she did."

Kelli frowned. "What have you done to her?"

"Nothing to have caused this."

Kelli shook her head. "Damn. I need some chocolate."

"Let me help you, Ike." Jack stood and went to the kitchen with Ike.

They returned with coffee and cake all around. She looked where Kelli sat next to Devon. "Do you plan to move your skinny little ass from next to my man, or do I have to move it for you?"

"I'm already gone, Boss." She went to a chair and sat down.

Ike set Devon's coffee on the table. "Here you go." She handed him cake and put a napkin on his lap.

Jack laughed. "Sweet Jesus, Ike!"

"What?"

"You've turned into a fucking housewife!"

Ike put her hands on her hips. "You want to bet on that? Best two falls out of three?"

"No, thanks." Jack smiled as he tasted his cake. "This is really good."

"Thanks. Are you all set there, Kelli?"

"Fine, and this is good." She paused. "This wasn't a mix, was it?"

Ike sat next to Devon and smiled. "Nope. That's the real deal."

Devon swallowed a bite of cake. "Thank you. This is great."

"You're welcome."

Kelli giggled.

Ike sighed. "Shut the fuck up, Kelli."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Ike laughed. She looked from Kelli to Jack. "So, what are you two going to do now?"

"Eh?" Jack mumbled around a mouthful of cake.

"You're both Sergeants now."

Kelli almost choked. "What?"

"I didn't stutter."

"I guess that just makes sense." Jack looked pensive.

"Yeah, it does, Jack. You two are in charge of the Duty Desk and rosters now."

Kelli's smile looked a little strained. "So you're just going to kick back and relax?"

"Well, yeah! I'm an officer, and they pay me to think now. Not actually to do anything!"

"It's going to take both of us to do her job." Jack finished the last bite of his cake. "That cake was great. Maybe you need two husbands?"

She laughed, leaning her head on Devon's shoulder. "No, thanks. One will be plenty."

\* \* \* \*

When the physical therapist came by to do Devon's exercises, she told them he didn't need to wear the support framework anymore other than at night. Devon had very good range of motion in the arm and very little pain.

After the therapist left, Devon flexed his left arm a little. "Could we get out of here for a while today?"

Ike was in the kitchen again and she raised her voice so he could hear her. "Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"How about lunch someplace?"

"Well, the bistro is out of the question. They're still picking up pieces of that place."

"Yeah, I guess so. How about the Café?"

Ike came to the sofa, sitting on the arm next to him. "That's fine. Are you up to that?"

"Yeah, I am. In fact, I'd like to walk. I'll push my chair if I need it, but I think I can walk."

"All right. You've got a date, Commander."

\* \* \* \*

Devon had to walk slowly, but he made to The Imperial Café under his own power. They took a seat away from the dance floor and ordered lunch.

"You can have a drink."

"I'd better not. Some of the medicine Tara has me on doesn't mix well with booze."

"All right." He took her hand in his left. "Now that feels good."

"Yeah, it does."

Devon held her hand and looked into her eyes for a moment. "How are things going in your sessions with Tara?"

"Good. I really do feel better about everything." Ike kissed his hand. "I know a big part of it is that you're doing better, too."

"I'm glad you're feeling good. Has she said when you might be able to stop taking the medicine?"

"We've talked a little about that." Ike sipped at her soft drink. "I can probably stop the tranquilizers and sleeping pills anytime now, but the antidepressants may be a while."

"You don't seem depressed. Do you feel sad?"

"Not anymore, no." She paused for a moment. "Devon, I was pretty bad off this time a week ago." She stopped again, looking around the room. Ike wasn't sure she even wanted to tell Devon about this, but she knew she didn't want to have any secrets from him. "I can't lie to you. I'd decided if you didn't make it, neither would I."

She watched his face carefully. Three small lines appeared on the bridge of his nose and his lips fell into a concerned frown. His brow wrinkled. "I'm sorry." Ike could see the looked of pained concern in his eyes. He opened his mouth again and hesitated before he spoke. "Do you still feel that way?"

She shrugged. "I think that depends on what you're really asking me." Ike thought this line of conversation might hurt him, but she knew he needed to know. She wasn't good at these kinds of things, talking about her feelings. She hoped that the love she felt for him would guide her. "If you're asking if I want to kill myself, the answer is no. Absolutely not. I have too much to live for right now. If you're asking me if I can live without you, the answer to that is also no. I don't want to live without you."

Ike saw the concern in his eyes fade a little. He squeezed her hand. "If you start feeling like that again, please talk to someone." He sighed and glanced down at his lap for a moment before looking into her eyes again. "It doesn't have to be me, but talk to someone."

"I will." She smiled a little. "Now I've made that promise to you and Tara."

As the remaining concern seemed to fade away, Ike knew that her simple promise put him at ease. It came to her that not only did Devon trust her with his life, but he also trusted her with her life. He smiled. "That means there are two of us keeping an eye on you, then."

The waitress, a simulated human named Rebecca, brought their lunches. "By the way, Ike, scuttlebutt has it you're the new General in command of Boone's security detail."

"That's what they tell me, Rebecca."

Rebecca laughed a little. "I guess you two get all kinds of congratulations, then. You're a General, Devon's a Commander, and you're getting married."

"Thanks, Rebecca." Devon smiled at Ike. "We're excited, mostly about the third thing on the list."

"I'll bet. When will we have a little General or two running around the place?"

Ike laughed. "Don't rush me! I'm still adapting to getting married!"

Rebecca laughed. "You'd be a great mom." She left the table giggling.

Ike shook her head. "The sense of humor she has amazes me. Q's isn't that good, and he's a lot older."

"Yeah, but Q doesn't spend all his time in a bar fighting off passes." He paused for a moment, watching Ike's face. "She's right, though."

"What's that?"

"You'd be a great mother."

Ike blinked at him several times. "What?" She really didn't feel ready for kids yet. She wanted to have Devon's children, just not now.

"I think you'd be a fantastic mom." He took both her hands in his. "I'm not hinting or anything. I'm just saying I think you'd make an excellent parent."

"Devon..."

"I'm not saying we should have kids. Now or even ever. All I'm saying is that, if we do have kids, you'd be great at it."

"All right. Actually, I'd like to have kids, but not now."

"That's fine, and I happen to agree with you on both counts."

"Good."

Devon watched the two couples on the dance floor. "I can't wait until I can dance with you again."

"Me, too. I'm not sure if I like to dance with you or if it's just being all close and cuddly." She noticed Devon had a faraway look. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking about something Jack said earlier."

"What was that?"

"He said there were all kinds of furniture and fixtures missing."

"I didn't understand him to mean a lot of any one thing. I had the feeling he was talking just one or two of a lot of different things."

"Yeah." He was lost in thought, his eyes focused in the distance. "Can we go look at the pictures from the Ambassador's room?"

"Sure, but why?"

He smiled wanly. "I don't know."

\* \* \* \*

Engineering hadn't installed Ike's new office yet, so they sat in her old office as Devon thumbed slowly through the hundreds of crime scene holographs. He sighed. "The place looks too neat."

"Maybe it's just me, but blood sprayed all over the bulkhead isn't all that neat."

He set a picture on the desk. "No, look here." He pointed at the bedside table where a lamp and a glass half-filled with water rested. "Why aren't these things knocked over?"

"I don't know."

He pulled up the blood spatter analysis. The lab made an animated recreation of when the shot was fired based on the blood, the wounds to Eeto, and the tiny deformity found in the glass of the window. It showed Eeto standing in front of the window, bending her knees and looking out. The animation showed her turned slightly to her right, toward the bedside table. The animated laser beam came through the window, striking her in the chest and knocking her back onto the bed where she lay flat on her back. Devon frowned. "Let me try something..." He played the keyboard and changed some parameters. When the laser shot came that time, it spun Eeto slightly to her left, her lower right arm coming up and knocking the lamp over. The lamp hit the glass of water.

"What did you do?"

"I told the computer to assume she would actually move when she was hit and not just fall backwards." He bit his lip. "The lab forgot that. The animation they did had her very stiff and rigid."

"She does have an exoskeleton. She's not as flexible as a human."

"Yeah, I know, but I only gave her ten percent flexibility. The lab had her at zero." He worked the keyboard again.

"I didn't know you were this good with a computer."

"In my side of the cop show, I have to be. Now, let's see what happens."

Eeto started off turned just a bit more to her right. The shot came this time, but not from the window. It came from the bedside table area. Eeto was pushed straight backwards and fell on the bed, rolling to her back. His lip got a workout. He typed more and restarted the animation. Eeto's body faced the window more, but her head looked at the table. The shot came and she fell onto the bed, twisting slightly to her left, and ended on her back. Devon smiled and typed more commands. "Now, the computer will fill in the blanks."

He started the animation. Eeto faced the table, and her body was at forty-five degrees to the bulkhead. The laser blast came. She spun slightly and fell onto the bed. The display flashed, *Blood Spatter Match*.

The laser shot had come from the lamp. Her arm never came close to hitting it as she fell.

Ike stared at the screen for a long time. She clicked the intercom. "Engineering, is there a way to tell if a window has been changed from what you installed?"

"Yes, General. Every window has a laser inscribed serial number." He gave her the details on how to find and view the serial number. He also gave her the number for the glass installed seven years ago in Eeto's cabin.

When they checked the numbers, the glass from Eeto's cabin was supposed to be in the window of Jen'Talsin's cabin.

\* \* \* \*

On their way to Eeto's cabin, Jack called to tell them the window in Jen'Talsin's cabin belonged in Eeto's room. Ike told Jack to send a team to meet them.

"Devon, you need to stay in the corridor."

"I don't think so."

"Will you at least stay behind me?"

"I don't see any armor on you today."

"No, you're right. You're also just barely able to walk."

Devon took her arm and stopped her. "We're a team now. I'll be damned if my partner, either professionally or personally, is going in there without me."

"Yeah, we are a team. All right, partner, let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Ike called Zach Reeves and he met them at Eeto's cabin. She told him what they suspected based on the evidence. "Ike, how sure are you about this?"

"Better than ninety percent. She's in with the PLF."

"I hope you're wrong, but it doesn't matter too much."

Ike held Devon's hand. "No, it doesn't."

"All right, let's go in."

Ike shook her head. "No. You're staying here. If she reacts—shall we say, poorly—you don't need to be in there."

"I guess arguing with you won't help?"

Ike smiled. "Not a bit." She turned to Devon and touched his arm. "Let's do this."

Devon smiled. "Oohrah?"

"Yeah, right." Ike rang the doorbell. When Eeto opened the door, she looked puzzled at the small crowd in the corridor. "Eeto, may Devon and I come in?"

"Please do." She stood aside as Ike and Devon entered and the door swished closed behind them. They all sat down. "What is this about, Ike?"

"I think you know what it's about." Ike studied Eeto for a moment, but she could read nothing in the hard exoskeleton.

Eeto clicked for a moment. "Maybe you should tell me."

Devon took a deep breath. "Ambassador, would you mind if I had a look at the lamp in your bedroom?"

Eeto looked away from Ike. She glanced at the oak leaves on Devon's shoulders. "I'm happy to see you are recovering, Commander."

"Thank you. May I see the lamp?"

"What do you expect to find there?"

"In a word, a laser. The laser you used to shoot yourself with two weeks ago."

"We don't need to look at the lamp, do we?" Ike frowned. "Before you say anything more, I need to tell you you're under arrest for terrorism. You don't need to answer any questions, and anything you say can be used against you in court."

Eeto seemed to cave in on herself a little. "No, Commander, you don't need to look at the lamp. The weapon you seek is there and I am unarmed." She looked to Ike. "I would like to see an attorney."

"Very well." Ike tapped her communicator and the team came to escort Eeto to the brig.

## Chapter 20 End Game

They presented the taped interview with Eeto to the Emperor and Zach in the Emperor's office.

Eeto told the entire story, but Ike thought her lawyer didn't seem too pleased by her confession. Eeto didn't seem to be as much in with the PLF as she was against relations between Wengly and Palea.

The Emperor watched the interview. He listened carefully as Eeto talked about her suspicions that Jen'Talsin had lost her mind. "She found out too late she had fallen in with crazies."

Ike nodded. "I think that's it exactly." She watched him and could see the stern compassion in the Emperor's eyes.

Eeto told how the assassination attempt had been staged in order to get Boone to abort the mission and return to Wengly. The terrorists gave her little training on using the laser hidden in the lamp beyond where to stand and how to work the time-delay firing mechanism.

The Emperor stopped the interview. "Why didn't they just kill her for real?"

Zach stroked his chin for a moment. "If I were a terrorist, crazy or otherwise, I think I would hope that she might be of use later." He shrugged. "An Ambassador would be a handy spy."

"You're probably right." He started the recording again.

Eeto told them that when Ike and Devon interviewed Wyatt, Lor'Lera panicked. She thought Wyatt told them what he overheard. When the gunfight on the mall left both Lor'Lera and Wyatt dead, Jen'Talsin lost her loose grip on reality. She decided to trigger the booby traps that the PLF team installed over the last year. She wanted to kill as many people as possible.

"Damn." The Emperor stopped the recording again. "How did we miss that these people were aboard for that long?"

Ike shrugged. "We've been too lax. That's the only reason." She thought for a moment. "We've assumed that Boone is totally safe from attack. We were wrong."

He smiled at her. "Well, not anymore. Why did she do this, though?"

Devon nodded toward the recorder. "That's the last part."

The Emperor started the interview tape. The video showed only Eeto's face, but Ike's voice asked why she ever cooperated with the PLF. Eeto's hard face was impossible for a human to read, but she rubbed her four hands together and made the strange clicking sound. She sighed and looked up from her lap. "The events on Boone have been only a foretaste of things to come should the Wengly and Paleans be brought together."

When the interview finished, the Emperor turned off the recorder and sighed. "Well, then."

Ike glanced at Devon and Zach. "I think she's telling the truth. She didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"That may be, but we've got three dead Paleans and twenty-two dead humans, plus a bunch injured, including your fiancé. And all this could have been stopped if she'd come to you at the very beginning."

Devon sighed. "We're not saying she didn't do anything wrong. It's a question of intent."

Jim leaned back and put his feet on his desk. "Let me ask you a question, Ike. You take that formidable weapon you had on the Observation Deck and load it. You then leave it, accidentally, on the table in the kindergarten classroom with the safety off. Little Johnny picks it up, squeezes the trigger, and blows away half of his class. Did you mean that to happen? I hope not, but what's your moral and ethical situation?"

"Shitty."

"You bet it is. You'd fry for that. You didn't intend for those kids to die, but they did, and it was directly because of your actions."

Ike paused. "I see your point."

"I was afraid you'd say that. I hoped you could talk me out of this." Jim looked to his sonin-law. "Zach, what's the impact on the Wengly?"

He shrugged. "None, really. They said if we send her back, they'd execute her. They've already convicted her in absentia and sentenced her to death. They might or might not let her off the shuttle bringing her down."

Devon frowned. "What about life in prison?"

"That probably won't work." Zach glanced at the Emperor. "The Wengly would want her extradited."

"I could refuse to extradite her. This is, after all, firmly in the jurisdiction of the Empire." The Emperor rocked in his chair for a minute. "Ike, Devon, if you were making this choice, what would you do?"

Devon stared into space for a moment. "I've never liked the death penalty. It's a little too final for me."

Ike looked at the three men. "I'm a little more conservative, I guess, because in the right cases, I think death is the proper punishment. Here, I think life without parole is a better choice."

"Is this your true feelings, or is it because you like her?"

"There's no secret I like Eeto. I still do, despite the fact she nearly got Devon killed through her inaction. But I think we need to consider intent."

The Emperor nodded. "Zach?"

"I'm with Ike on this one, Skipper."

"Well, I guess being Emperor comes with the perk of not having to explain myself to anyone." His lopsided smile made an appearance. "Other than my wives. Anyway, I'm glad I'm not the only one to feel this way. She gets life without parole, and extradition is denied on the basis this was a crime committed against the Empire and not any one system."

\* \* \* \*

As Ike pushed Devon's wheelchair home, he kept nodding off to sleep. "Go ahead and sleep. You've had a long day."

"We're almost home." He paused for a moment. "Home. That sounds great, especially knowing it's our home."

"Yes, it does."

He reached over his shoulder, putting his hand on Ike's where it rested on the wheelchair handle. "I can't believe how much I love you."

"I love you. More than anything." Playfulness crept into Ike's voice. "I hope you can stay awake for a little while when we get home."

"I can do that."

\* \* \* \*

Ike used the excuse of washing his back to join Devon in the shower. She slipped her arms around his waist, reaching up and running her hands across his shoulders. "See? I told you I'd wash your back."

The warm water ran down their bodies as Devon hugged her to him tightly. "I wish I had the words to say how much I love you, Ikira. You're the writer, though."

She laughed and felt the bouncing of her body against his. "I'm a wannabe writer. You don't need to say anything."

He moved and rested his forehead against hers. "I've dreamed all my life I'd meet someone like you. I guess every man dreams of women like you. Beautiful. Strong, yet with a vulnerability. Amazingly smart. Loving and caring." He kissed the end of her nose.

"Thank you. You're a special man, too." She sighed. "Tara thought I might be having a problem depending on you to take care of me, but that's not the case at all. I like it when you take care of me and protect me. I was having a problem accepting that I like it." She put her head on his shoulder. "I'm lucky to have found you. And to think, we were here on Boone together for more than eight years and never even met." Ike sighed. "All that wasted time."

"Not wasted. Saved." He hesitated for a moment. "I know now what real love is. I know how it feels to love someone so much that her and her happiness and safety means more than anything else." He smiled into her eyes, but Ike thought it looked a bit sad. "And I know how it feels to love someone so much I'd give her up if that would make her happy."

Ike kissed him gently. "Your leaving would never make me happy. It would only destroy me. I do know what you're saying because I feel the same for you." Her smile brightened. "These last two weeks have been the happiest in my life, even though we've have a couple of rough spots."

"Yeah, we've had that, I guess." Devon absently flexed his left arm, running his fingers over the new skin, accelerated by medications, growing on his chest to cover the holes from Jen'Talsin's bullets. "I guess that's what love is really all about. Being with each other, for both the good and bad times. Just loving and supporting one another." He kissed her. "Ikira, I love you."

"I love you, Devon."

Between kisses, they dried each other and staggered to the bed, still locked in a passionate embrace.

Ike knew Devon's arm wasn't yet able to support even part of his weight, so she lay beside him. Ike felt him pull his lips away.

"Lie on your side."

She rolled, putting her back to him, and he snuggled to her, pressing his erection between the cheeks of her ass.

Devon slipped his cock into her pussy from behind and pumped into her with long strokes. He pulled completely out of her, tickling her pussy with the head of his dick. As his head rubbed gently between her labia, she felt him tremble. Devon slowly penetrated her again, until his head was at the deepest point of her, his hips gyrating and impaling her gently on his shaft.

Devon's weakened left arm moved around her and he gently rubbed her breasts, kneading her nipples between his finger and thumb. Ike barely noticed the fading bruises on her chest, lost in the tenderness of his touch and the passions rising in her. His hardness slipped from her wet pussy and he thrust forward, the head of his cock sliding through her slit and across her clit.

Ike jerked as her clit met his head, and Devon reacted the same way. Their motions caused them both to gasp. "You're driving me wild."

His slight laughter bounced the head of his dick against her clit, starting the process over again. Devon slipped his cock from her clit and buried himself deeply in her core, rapidly moving his cock in and out a few centimeters while his hand massaged her clit. Ike trembled with pleasure.

She felt his cock slip from her pussy, and the head pressed gently against her anus. Devon pressed his stiffness against her as Ike relaxed, anticipating the pleasure of feeling his dick in her ass. With a slight push, Devon's cock-head slipped by her muscles into her waiting ass.

She felt him shake and he slowly and gently rocked his hips, moving his head just inside the vestibule of her backdoor. "Give me more, please."

Devon moved against her, his cock rhythmically sliding back and forth, deeper with each stroke, until his full length was in her ass.

Devon moved his cock, running his full length to and fro, penetrating her completely. Ike felt him, after less than a dozen strokes, tensing.

He quickly pumped his cock and on the third fast, hard stroke, he pressed tightly to her ass, filling her with his cum and shaking like an earthquake had hit him. "God! Yes!" he groaned.

Ike slammed her ass back against him and she felt her anal orgasm hit her, her ass gripping Devon's cock. Ike screamed incoherently as she writhed in his arms, her hips jerking away from the spasms of his dick, and then slamming hard backward, taking his spurting member all the way into her ass.

Ike laid in his arms, his half-erect cock still in her ass, and tried to catch her breath. She had never thought much about anal sex and her enjoyment of it. Devon had been gentle as he entered her. She knew, from him climaxing so fast, he probably wanted to get into her faster, but he treated her tenderly and lovingly.

Ike snuggled to him, her movement sending a tremble through Devon. "Wow."

"Yeah. Wow."

They lay together for a long time, Devon's cock still in Ike's ass. "That was wonderful." Ike moved away, sighing as his dick slipped from her. She rolled and rested on her elbows, face only centimeters from his. Ike leaned forward and kissed him deeply. "I want you again."

"You'll get no argument from me."

## Chapter 21 Wedding Day

Devon woke Wednesday morning. Ikira rested on her elbow next to him, watching him sleep.

"Morning." He stretched.

She smiled at him. "In three hours and forty-one minutes, you're going to be my husband."

"That sounds great."

"It surely does." Ikira kissed him. "Are you hungry?"

He slipped his arm around her waist. "For you, yes." He rolled on top of her. He kissed her, his cock pressing against her pussy. His heart raced and his breath rushed quickly through his throat. He smiled at her. "Mind if I slip into something more comfortable?"

"As long as it's me, not at all."

He guided his cock into her. As he moved against her, Ikira's hands brushed over his back as they kissed. He was nervous about the coming wedding, but he knew everything would be all right.

When he looked into Ikira's face, she smiled at him like she always did, but it hit him hard for some reason he didn't understand. Somehow, he felt closer to her, like they merged into one. He kissed her again.

Her eyes flutter, and he felt her pussy grip his cock. He always tried to make their sessions last for her, but somehow, Ikira pushed him over the edge very quickly. As her back arched and she moaned, his cock throbbed and he came in her pussy. Thrusting for every extra millimeter, he jerked against her.

He pulled his lips from hers and stared into her remarkable eyes. She smiled up at him. He must have done something right to have her come into his life. He wondered how he could ever show or tell her how he felt.

All he knew to do was to tell her that he loved her and to make love to her. He knew there must be more.

\* \* \* \*

The royal family gave up calling her Ikira, leaving the special name only for Devon, the way Ike actually wanted things. Charlotte and Marilyn helped Ike dress, and she needed it. Ike had never in her life worn a long gown, let alone a wedding gown.

At first, they gently tried to prod Devon into leaving the dressing room so Ike could get ready. When he hesitated, Charlotte became increasingly annoyed with him. Despite Marilyn's calm explanation that Devon couldn't see Ike in her gown before the wedding, he still dragged his feet. Charlotte grabbed his arm, shoving him out the door. "Men! Just get the fuck out of here!"

Ike swallowed hard. "I can't do this!"

"That's OK. Everyone is nervous at times like this." Marilyn fussed with the pleats of the

train.

"No, I really can't do this!"

Charlotte's brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"I'm going to puke on Devon or the Padre! Maybe both!"

Marilyn had an absent look for a moment. "It's all right. Claire's coming."

Claire almost ran into the dressing room. "What's wrong?"

"Sis, Ike's got a few butterflies."

"Butterflies? I've got fucking buzzards in my gut!"

"I can fix that!" Claire dug in her medical bag for a moment and pulled out a syringe. "Here." She injected Ike. "That'll take care of the buzzards."

Ike swallowed again. "Thanks." She paused for a moment. "Am I supposed to be this scared?"

The three women shrugged. "I damned near wet my dress." Charlotte stifled a giggle.

Claire smiled. "Me, too."

Marilyn giggled as she worked with the train. "Claire, your dress was wet because you were a virgin when you got married."

Charlotte's wide eyes showed her amazement. "A virgin? Do they still make those?"

"Shut up, Sis."

"Right."

"You're not helping me, Claire!" Ike thought her stomach felt better.

Marilyn stood. "All set." She helped Ike down from the platform where she'd been standing. "Just relax. He's not going to back out now."

"Are you sure? That's what's worrying me. He'll think about this, and head for higher ground."

"No, he won't. Devon loves you. And I can promise you he's thinking the same things about you right now." Marilyn hugged Ike. "You look so beautiful."

A light tapping came at the door. When Claire opened it, the Emperor peeked in. He blinked at her several times. "Ike, you look fantastic."

"Thank you." Ike felt the warmth of her blush on her face. "How's Devon?"

The Emperor laughed. "We were finally able to get him to stop panic-running and get dressed." He gave his lopsided grin. "I guess he's about like you."

"That's bad. I think my stomach feels better."

"I told you it would help." Claire smiled. "I guess we're all ready."

Kelli hopped from the other room trying to get her shoe on. "It's obvious a Marine didn't come up with this wedding idea!"

Charlotte steadied Kelli. "Yeah. There aren't any guns involved."

The bell rang, signaling things were ready. Claire and Charlotte kissed Ike and went to the audience to sit with their husbands. Kelli looked at Ike. "This is it." She kissed Ike's cheek. "Oh, hell!" She ran from the room.

Marilyn laughed. "Relax and enjoy. This is your day and you'll never forget it." She slipped her arm around her husband's waist. "I know I'll never forget my wedding day." She dabbed at her eyes. "We'll see you soon." She hugged Ike tightly, kissing her cheeks, and left Ike and the Emperor alone.

"Turn here." He fussed with her veil for a moment. "You know, I've been involved with a lot of weddings in my life, and I've done this so many times I've lost count. This is the first time I've had the honor of giving away a Marine General."

"Thank you for doing this for us."

"Don't mention it, Ike. It's my pleasure." The second bell rang. "It sounds like they're playing our song."

She took a deep breath. "Yeah, it does."

The Emperor kissed her cheek, lowered her veil, and held his arm out to her. "Come on, you ape. Do you want to live forever?"

Ike laughed at the Marine saying, probably four thousand years old by now. She took his arm and smiled. "Oohrah!"

They left the dressing room and started down the aisle to the Wedding March.

\* \* \* \*

Devon stood in front of the Padre, waiting for all of it to be over so his stomach would stop trying to turn inside out. Claire gave him an injection and it helped. He now only wanted to puke as opposed to actually puking. He wasn't sure he had a case of being scared. He believed he was simply more excited than he'd ever been in his life.

Devon was realistic enough to know, at least a little, he feared Ikira would change her mind. This was a bigger step for her than it was for him. He made a conscious effort to stop jittering and shuffling his feet.

The Padre, officially known as Commander Luis Gonzales, smiled gently. "Relax, Devon."

That was easy for him to say. He wasn't marrying the most wonderful girl in the galaxy.

The Wedding March started and Devon looked to the far end of the aisle. There was Ikira, the Emperor escorting her on his arm, and she was beautiful. Devon's nerves seemed to vanish as he became lost in her, walking slowly towards him. He could see the smile behind her veil, Ikira's beauty completely overwhelming the long white gown.

When she reached the foot of the dais, the Emperor placed Ikira's hand in his. She took the two steps up and stood on his left. Devon saw her smile and the faint shimmering of tears on her cheeks.

The Padre began the Wedding Mass.

\* \* \* \*

Unlike many Marines, Ike had never been religious. As she listened to the Padre celebrating the Wedding Mass, she wondered if she'd made a mistake in that belief. Somehow, Ike knew God Himself had brought Devon and her together. There was no other explanation. The love she shared with Devon was so special, so intense, that it could only have come from God.

When the Padre finished the mass, he announced that Ike and Devon had written their own vows and wished to exchange them before those assembled. He nodded to Ike.

The knot in her stomach faded away as she stared into his eyes. She took Devon's hand in hers. "Devon, you're my light, my life, and my love. I thank God each day for sending you into my life and for the love and peace that you bring to me. We've known each other only a short time and we're still on a wondrous voyage of discovery, learning more and more about one another as each day passes. My love, I'll spend the rest of my life discovering all there is to know about you. I'm happy and proud to be your wife and to take you as my husband."

Devon had tears on his face. "Ikira, I love you, and you're my very heart and soul. I'll never know why God blessed me the day he brought us together, but I'm thankful for that moment. You are the center of my universe, my drive, and my reason for living. I don't know how I lived without you for so long, but I know I can't live without you any longer. With each passing day, as I learn more about the love of my life, I feel my love for you grow to infinity and beyond. I'm honored to be your husband and the happiest man alive to take you as my wife."

Padre Gonzales smiled and made the sign of the cross. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Devon lifted her veil. They kissed, much less passionately than Ike would have liked.

\* \* \* \*

At the reception and on their way home, Ike found Devon couldn't stop touching her, no more than she could stop touching him. They became lost in each other's eyes for minutes at a time, oblivious to the celebration around them.

When they reached their cabin, Devon sighed a little. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned, and maybe I can't do it with this arm, but I have to try." He smiled. "It's been six weeks now." He lifted her in his arms and stepped across the threshold. He held her for a time. "That didn't hurt as bad as I thought it was going to."

"Put me down before you do hurt yourself."

He eased Ike to her feet. "I love you, Ikira."

"I love you, Devon." They kissed deeply. "Now, you're really stuck with me."

He chuckled. "I can think of far worse things."

She kissed him again. "I'm so happy. More than I ever thought I could be and more than I deserve."

Devon hugged her to him. "You deserve all the happiness there is. I hope I can give you just a little."

"You make me happy. A very great deal."

Devon held Ike at the end of his arms, looking into her eyes. "That makes me happy. All I want from this galaxy and from this life is for you to be happy and safe."

"I'm both." She took his hand. "Come on. Let's get changed." They helped each other undress and stood, nude, hugging in the bedroom. "You're so warm."

"I'll keep you warm when it's cold."

"I'd like that." Ike looked up into his eyes. "I want this never to end."

"Me, too." He smiled. "Who knows? The Emperor and his family are immortal. Maybe we'll be, as well."

"Forever with you would just scratch the surface of how long I want to be in your arms."

Devon sighed, pulling Ike close to him. "Yeah. We're a team. Personally, professionally, and more. What are we going to do for our next trick, though?"

Ike leaned back in his arms, and she gave him her best seductive smile. "We'll think of something."

#### FOR THE LOVE OF PAYNE

An Ike Payne Adventure, Book 1

# THE END

## **AUTHOR'S BIO**

Born in the Ozark Mountains, Melodee Aaron comes from a long line of storytellers. Storytelling is a tradition in the Ozarks and one of Melodee's earliest memories is sitting on the front porch of her great-grandma's house listening to her tell stories.

Being an avid reader of anything, including both romantic and erotic, Melodee was popular with the guys at Southeast Missouri State University. For some reason, guys like a girl who reads Penthouse Forum. Add to that a passion for actually trying the things she read about. Anyway, after sixteen semesters and no degree, Melodee moved on to the real world.

Melodee decided to try telling stories on paper and has had success with a number of short stories, including flash works of fewer than 1,000 words.

Mel writes erotic and adult fiction, with a science fiction spin as well as incorporating a bit of crime, military, and political drama.

Check out Melodee's books at www.sirenpub.com/melodeeaaron

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