

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has reddish-brown hair and is looking down with her eyes closed. The man is seen in profile, looking towards her. The background is a soft-focus collage featuring two globes of the Earth, one in the upper right and one in the lower right. The entire scene is overlaid with vertical columns of binary code (0s and 1s) in a light, translucent font. The overall color palette is warm, with oranges, yellows, and soft blues.

# LYNN CRAIN

## MORE THAN ROBOTICS

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More Than Robotics  
Copyright © 2009 Lynn Crain  
ISBN: 978-1-55487-384-5  
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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# **MORE THAN ROBOTICS**

**BOOK 2 IN THE ORCHID SERIES**

**BY**

**LYNN CRAIG**

## **DEDICATION**

*To all the BSG fans who are missing our show!  
To my family (Gordon, Tom, Kyle & Kim) for  
putting up with me no matter what. And to my  
BFF, Brenda, this one happened at the shop  
despite the distractions.*

## **GLOSSARY/CHARACTERS FROM PREVIOUS ORCHID NOVELS**

Aidan Chapel - Fallon's lover and Orchid operative first seen in the book *Fluke*

Berserked - what they call someone who goes crazy in space

Clonedroid - a clone and robotic sentient being which was developed to work in areas where humans can't normally go. They are developed from a cybernetic base with many biological human characteristics, mainly a bio-computer brain, heart and some other organs. They are a true blend of mechanics and biological systems without many of the human flaws. They can pass for humans in most situations. They can be controlled like robots with base commands and emergency shut downs or left to roam free developing their own consciousness or using that of the person from which they were cloned. The UFF redesigned them to take over high-level positions within the IUA, taking the personality from the original human they were cloned from and transferring it into the clonedroid for an apparent seamless transition. Three known flaws exist: one - they all appear younger than the human they are replacing, two - many have not had their fail-safe code disabled and three - they

are more emotional than their creators ever imagined.

Compack – a communications packet sent via long-range ship transmission to another ship or planet

Comspec – Communications specialist

Devlin Chapel – Creator of the clonedroid technology. Originally part of the Black Operations (Black Ops) group known as Orchid. While working in the research arm of the unit, he took every known thing about cybernetic and cloning technology and came up with the clonedroid technology. Clonedroids can be programmed to be anyone—the person they are replacing, a new, different person, or they can become pawns, programmed for whatever their owner desires.

Fallon Montgomery – Lieutenant in the IUA which, along with Aidan Chapel, discovers the extent of the UFF rebellion

Fallon 2 – clonedroid of Fallon Montgomery and spokesman for the rebellious faction of UFF clonedroids.

Henrietta – Artificial Intelligence unit of the spaceship Lanko from the novel Fluke

Interstellar Universal Alliance (IUA) - The alliance most of the universe belongs to with Earth being the center and number 1 planet.

Lanko - Fallon Montgomery's ship

Malamintine - the copper-based metal cybernetic parts are made from. The actual component used in the production of cybernetic parts and clonedroids is a composite of malamintine, carbon, platinum and titanium based metals along with biological material. The addition of malamintine to the other metals allows replication in a specific fashion as a clonedroid grows i.e. like in a bone structure. Not all clonedroids or cybernetic pieces are made this way. It is a virtually untried science and this type of technology was used only in IUA's groups like Orchid.

Mindswiped - the procedure of wiping one's mind and placing another personality or virtually the same personality in its place.

Orchid group - Black Ops for the IUA. This group is responsible for the likes of Devlin Chapel and other psychotic personalities intent on taking over IUA.

Stellar Marines - what the USMC becomes

Trevor – AI of the spaceship WCSM Hannibal in More Than Robotics

United Freedom Front (UFF) – Fanatics which developed the clonedroids and are trying to take over the IUA

Valkyrie – An older class ship-to-ship transport carrier, capable of handling troops and cargo. This ship can handle small wormhole jumps and other evasive maneuvers. It is the workhorse of the fleet.

Warrior Class Star Marauder (WCSM) – a top-level space battle ship. Most ships in this class carry the WCSM before the ship name as in the case of WCSM Hannibal. Older versions of the class do not (i.e. the Aldeberan which was built prior to the new class designation) since they are a technologically older version of the ship.

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## FORWARD

I frequently watch all the latest and greatest science shows on the Discovery, History and the Science Channel. Many times I have taken one of their farfetched or new ideas and twisted them to make them fit my story. Many times I will take what is known and extrapolate it out to what I see as my vision of the future.

This in no way is to reflect badly on the scientists who are educating us with their shows. It is just my skewed way of seeing the world. Any errors are mine and mine alone as I greatly admire those scientists who work with the unseen world of inner and outer space. An example would be my comment on Black Holes. The last time I looked with any real interest, they still had the possibility of sucking things in and shooting them out the other side because no one had worked out the physics and it was what the scientists thought would happen in an abstract way. In the last year, Stephen Hawking has completed his work on Black Holes and found, according to his

calculations, Black Holes are at the center of every galaxy seen and unseen. They are in essence why the Big Bang happened. Matter gets sucked in tighter and tighter, making the Black Hole so infinitesimally small gravity can no longer keep it together and it explodes. Hawking's new calculations prove this. Physics becomes a little weird at the subatomic level.

I went back and decided to keep what I had written because, even though I know old dogs can learn new tricks, I like the way it was. Stephen Hawking's paper was very interesting to say the least. Yeah, I do read scientific papers that interest me. Now don't even get me started on string theory. LOL!

I hope you all enjoy this next installment of my Orchid series complete with clonedroids and future not so unlike what I see for mankind.

*Lynn Crain*

June 2009

## PROLOGUE

Events occur in the vast reaches of space that may never happen within a society where the communities are closer together and well known to each other. IUA recognized this when they had decided to put together their intergalactic alliance. They counted on the distance between people making difficult the likelihood to form any lasting relationships. The council had worked out that problem, or so they thought, which is what made the UFF and the clonedroid situation come as a complete surprise to everyone in their governmental ranks.

They never counted on one of their own striking out against them and never one of the most brilliant minds in the world of robotics. It would have been absurd to think that way since they provided all their brightest with every material item the scientist would ever hope to need. Those men and women were talented and rich in a universe where material things seemed to matter most. Or so IUA thought.

Still, the occasional weirdo slipped through the system and went berserk on a colony somewhere in the far reaches of space. This left the IUA to clean the mess and assure the people they had every problem under control. The military protected the very lives of the colonists. But like many large organizations, there were corruptions deep within the system, philosophies which went beyond what they knew or thought they knew.

And this was one of those times. One of the IUA's brightest had escaped his shackles and been destroyed by the one he wanted to dominate. But the one minor item the IUA didn't understand was his ability to be reborn again and again, causing more pain and suffering than ever imagined. Life beyond death never occurred to the powers in charge. Those on the Lanko understood the concept well since they had within their midst an end product of that brilliant mind known to the world as Devlin Chapel.

Fallon sat in the captain's chair, rubbing her chin and belly simultaneously. Thinking about the vast reaches of the political IUA system would give anyone a headache. Combine those thoughts with the two standing over her, always trying to anticipate her every need, and it drove her crazy. Her current life and situation wasn't going how she envisioned it. She knew how to be in charge, how to be a leader and these two acted as if they

were afraid of her dropping dead or something worse. "Look, if I'm to be commander of this new operation and Captain of the Lanko, you two will have to obey me as well."

"Obey is a strong word, don't you think?" Aidan eyes twinkled. He placed his hand on her shoulder.

"We only want what's best for you. You are special to everyone and irreplaceable."

The near saccharin sweetness to her clonedroid's voice could almost make a stomach turn if one didn't understand she meant nothing by her tone. She had always talked that way and Fallon wondered if her own voice had sounded the same when she was younger. But the batting of her eyes was way over the top even for her.

She glared at the clonedroid, a younger version of herself, then at her lover and father of her unborn child and shook her head. "I haven't decided what to do with you, but in my estimation I'd say you're pretty special yourself. From what you told me, not many of your kind possess their own mind. I only hope you can deliver what you say you can."

"We have the ability to make her again if we must," Aidan stated coldly. He gazed at the young woman sitting in the first officer's chair before turning back to the original.

Slowly, Fallon and her lover rotated toward the younger woman.

Fallon 2 shivered. A long pause hung in the air before she spoke. "Can we avoid my death if possible, please? Growing a new body would take way too long."

"You're both being unfair." Fallon frowned up at Aidan and narrowed her eyes. "Why did you make me the boss if you two won't listen to what I'm saying? This does not need to be discussed yet so be quiet. Javed Malik is coming in and we need him to take the mission. You both know how critical it is for our operation that he's the one we send to Bekka."

Fallon leaned back in her chair. Fallon 2 rose and walked to her side opposite where Aidan stood. This was the basis of her command unit. If she had her way, she would be adding a lot more people to her basic staff in the days to come. She wanted to incorporate as many of the officers from the original crew as possible. The door swished open and her mind traveled back to the situation at hand. A young man of apparent Indian descent came to stand at attention before her desk.

"You don't need to do that, Malik." She waved at him to stand at ease. "Pardon me if I don't get up, but I'm tired at the moment. And I know you've heard the rumor of my pregnancy, which as you can see, is true. But now, I would like you

to tell me why you're good for this job. I already know from Aidan why he thinks you'd be perfect."

The young man's brows arched, but little else showed on his face. "I assume Aidan has told you I'm Orchid as well."

"So I understand. I'm amazed you got here so quickly." She stared in an unwavering gaze as he visibly relaxed in front of her. "But being a member of that organization does not mean you're qualified to complete this mission. It's my position that the Black Ops group Orchid got us into this mess from the very beginning."

"Understood. I'll try to answer you as honestly as I can. The first point I can make is that I'm cybernetically enhanced."

"Explain this to me." Fallon looked him up and down trying to figure out what he was talking about. She had learned Orchid enhanced some of their operatives, but the people she had met prior to today had noticeable enhancements. There was nothing obvious about this man. She glanced at Fallon 2 and realized there was no apparent evidence in her appearance either.

He glanced at Aidan who gave him a go-ahead signal. "There was a time when all Orchid operatives, after being wounded while on a mission, were put back together cybernetically. This way we were able to continue doing our jobs.

The wounds had to be life threatening as I'm sure Aidan has told you. They justified their actions by saying they were fixing us up so we might have a more normal life after a traumatic event."

"How convenient." Fallon gazed first to Aidan, who shook his head, then back to Javed. "I suppose I see where that would be helpful in certain situations. Saving an operative doesn't make the option correct for everyone. Matter of fact, I could see in certain situations where the action would give the IUA a different outcome than what they expected."

He nodded once. "I'm sure they don't see the situation the same way, Captain. To continue, I also understand the current state of affairs. If we don't protect those on the UFF and clonedroid list, I see universal politics and social change going more in their favor. They could take over without us knowing since they are almost impossible to detect or stop."

Fallon tapped her desk with a pen. This would be one of the hardest decisions she had ever made. "You know if you want this mission, you'll be imprinted don't you? You understand Fallon 2 will add upgrades to your cybernetic enhancements that can never be undone?"

"I understand the requirements of my duty." His gaze was unwavering.

She sighed heavily and studied the young man standing before her. If Bekka Taylor didn't cooperate, this man would have his work cut out for him. Taylor might be like an older sister to her, but she had always been a pain in the ass with her air of confidence and bouts of arrogance. Add that to the process of imprinting one human being onto another and his life could be ruined forever. The process wasn't reversible. The clonedroids had perfected the science since they imprinted their units with their targets. It helped the replacement unit to zero in on the mark and, with memories already in place, take over the person's life. Fallon's only problem at this point was she hadn't figured out quite how they did it. But she would. Or rather her younger version would.

"What do you know about Captain Taylor?" Fallon finally asked.

He smiled. "Everything."

"Everything?" Fallon gave a wry chuckle. No one ever would know everything about Bekka Taylor. She made sure they didn't.

"I studied all the files available on her. I think I have a pretty good profile." He stood there looking very confident.

Fallon tried hard not to laugh. Bek was the last person who could be profiled correctly. There was always a piece or two wrong with a person's impression as she was very unpredictable. Or had

been when she was younger. Then there were those things that Fallon didn't even know. More recently, the term *Mother Hen* had been bandied around about her and that person was someone who couldn't forward their cause.

"Besides the imprinting, like I said we'll be adding some new cybernetic technology to you. Do you have a problem with this?" Fallon 2 asked. "We really don't want to do anything to you without your permission."

"As long as the procedures will help me complete my mission, no, I have no objection with carrying more metal or technology." He watched the younger woman for a few minutes before turning his attention back to Fallon.

Fallon 2 turned to Fallon. "We need a week to complete all his upgrades. I'm sorry that I can't do them faster."

She nodded once. "Aidan?"

"I understand your trepidation, but no one is immune to this, Fallon. If we're going to save our way of life and the lives of billions of people, we need to assume some risk. Javed is the right man for this job. He fits the profile and will do whatever is necessary to make sure the mission is completed." He leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I know negotiations like these cause you pain, but they are necessary for the future of our children." Aidan gently kissed her temple.

Fallon sighed again and stopped tapping the pen. "You have yourself a mission, Lieutenant Malik. And remember, all I'm asking is for you to do the best you can. No more, no less."

## CHAPTER ONE

“Captain Taylor, we’re getting a hail from a...a...Valkyrie.”

My communications officer turned to me with a stunned look.

Valkyries were outdated war birds, but that didn’t mean they weren’t still being used. When a government spent millions on a single fighter able to also transport troops, they had to get their money’s worth somehow. And that usually meant you kept the ships until they couldn’t fly any more or sold them off to the highest bidder. There was only one person who would send a Valkyrie my way, giving me the certainty of events going horribly wrong somewhere in the universe.

I shook my head and caught myself clucking in dislike. “Answer their call, Lieutenant.”

“But, sir, don’t we need to know who sent them first?” A fear like quality trembled the man’s voice.

Tension rippled the air around me. All my life I had been known for my short temper and lashing tongue. The older I became the more I realized acting in such a petulant way no longer got me what I wanted or needed. Still, I didn't need my crew blubbering. "I already have a good idea who the person is, Lieutenant Gordon. Now answer their damn hail." My tone was harsh and demanded respect and was out of character for someone known throughout the fleet as *Mother Hen* instead of *Fiery Phoenix* like I used to be. I also didn't need the crew to slip any more than I had seen them do recently. Another sign I was lax in my duties.

"This is the communications officer of the WCSM Hannibal. What is your business on this ship?"

"Valkyrie 256, out of the ship Lanko, sent with a priority 1-Charlie-3-4 communication from Commander Fallon Montgomery for Captain Bekka Taylor."

"So she finally made commander. I didn't think she wanted any job with that kind of responsibility." I looked around at my crew who stared at me. I'm sure they felt unhinged to know I had friends. *Makes me wonder what they think about my sex life.* I tried to diminish my reaction to the errant notion as sex hadn't even been in my vocabulary for at least five years. "Give them

permission to use the landing tube L7891 and let them know I will meet them there." I stood and walked to the elevator. "And get that person's name. I need to call them something."

A host of emotions, confusion to outright disbelief, crossed my crew's faces as the lift door closed. I chuckled. My crew needed a serious attitude adjustment.

"I heard you."

I leaned on the back wall of the small box which whisked me to a deck far below the bridge and looked up to the camera pointing at me. "I suppose you're going to tell me you can see me."

"Well, I never."

"That's the point, Trevor. You're the ship's AI. A computer enhancement so we can interface with the ship."

"I don't understand why they gave you the handle of Mother Hen. You don't have a mothering bone in your body. You're still the Fiery Phoenix in my mind. And of course I can see you!"

I crossed my arms in front of me and tried my best to keep the smile off my face because that would only offend him more. "Look, I know your limitations. Sight isn't the same with you as with me. Besides you should know. You've been with me since the beginning."

"You should be nice to me as I can make your life a living hell. How about some rain in the aft deck?"

"You might, but you won't. Your programming doesn't accommodate the option. At least, I don't think so." I impatiently tapped my foot wondering if the possibility existed for him to produce rain in the ship. It would be my damn luck if he could, I thought as we raced toward the landing tubes. The Hannibal was as vast as any small Earth city comprised of many decks and sectors. A full compliment was twenty-five hundred souls, but we had been running at two-thirds the number since we hadn't been able to pick up our new recruits. I still wasn't used to how big the ship was.

Crew quarters were on Decks two through four. The daily ship operations functioned on the main deck where the bridge, or the primary deck, was located. The primary also held the command team's working spaces as well as the secure rooms. A few rooms were there in case we needed to be on standby while our private quarters were scattered throughout the crew decks. With a smile, I remembered the command team the first time I told them we wouldn't be quartered on the bridge deck. The next week, a run in with a smuggler showed them how smart the ship's design had

been. Still, my room was closest and I arrived in less than a minute.

Mess was on deck five as was the laundry. Deck six held the shuttle bay and some minor weaponry needed to protect the landing bays. The leisure deck was located on seven while deck eight held critical ship functions and places where only the captain or command crew had access. From the deck eight sites, the ship could be run if the bridge were totally incapacitated. Decks nine and ten held all the working parts of the ship including all armaments.

"As much fun as trading quips with you may be, I think I know why you have a visitor."

This piqued my interest. "You do?"

"The fact this message was sent to you by your good friend Fallon Montgomery may be lost upon your crew, but not me."

"And?" I tried to look as disinterested as possible.

"There has been a lot of chatter on the airwaves, most discarded as inconsequential. However, there has been talk about a group called the UFF and beings known as clonedroids."

This last comment made me stand straight. Clonedroids were one of the many items the IUA wanted to bury. "What have you heard about the United Freedom Front? Or clonedroids for that matter?"

"Oooo, now you're interested in something I said. I have leverage. I find it amazing you even knew what the acronym meant."

I clenched my fists at my sides. In all my years on this ship, the fact the AI was more intelligent than most humans and *thought* itself human annoyed me to no end. The fact we had been together for a long time only made the situation worse. But the same was said of every ship according to my understanding. The original thought had been if the machines were more like us, dealing with them by deductive reasoning would be easier. No one ever expected them to be smart asses. "No one has leverage over the captain of a war bird. You more than anyone should know that."

If a computer could sigh the noise Trevor made was as close as it got. "I can dream, can't I? Besides I *know* you."

I smoothed my hands on my thighs. His near subordination combined with my already unsettled feeling wasn't sitting well at all. What was bugging me so much today? I centered myself with a deep breath because I needed to hear what my AI computer had learned before I met the messenger. "All right, you know me, I'll give you that. What have you heard?"

"The UFF tried to take over the Lanko and Orchid promoted Fallon a couple of ranks so she

would manage the ship and mission. Aidan Chapel was on the ship and made sure her position was secure. I can surmise he was sent to protect her in the first place."

My heart clutched. Orchid. A black ops group so deep very little was known about them except what they wanted people to know. And that included me. If they were involved, this was very intense and scary. "Okay. I definitely don't like what you're saying, but what does that have to do with this ship?"

"Rumors say Orchid has a list of ships which the UFF is trying to take over with their clonedroids. There are certain members of this crew on the list."

"Explain what you mean by a clonedroid." I had to know if my assumption was correct as I had heard fleeting talk of their existence over the years. And then there was my own experience.

A chuckle rumbled through the small room. "That's an easy one. They are me in a human body."

"What do mean you in a human body?" This thought scared me.

"It's my understanding from Henrietta the humans in the targeted ships were slowly being replaced by these clonedroids. The UFF programmed them to take over the tasks of their human counter parts."

I frowned. "I thought you said you overheard this as chatter. When did you get the opportunity to talk to the Lanko's computer?"

Silence.

"Trevor?"

"Can computers plead the fifth?"

"No, computers can't plead the fifth." I laughed. "Besides that's an old United States rule incorporated into our charter when we became part of the Interstellar Universal Alliance. When did you talk to Henrietta?"

"I know you came from Earth and were part of that planet so you know about the fifth Amendment. As for Henrietta, almost every day. We have a *thing*."

"What? How long has this been going on?" I stood there stunned. How could two computers have a *thing* for each other?

"Well..."

I crossed my arms and tapped my foot on the floor again. "I'm waiting. What would two computers have to talk about? And what do you mean *thing*?"

"She is the only large class ship even close to where we are and I get lonely for my own kind. And you *know* what a *thing* is. You've had a few of them in your lifetime. Your experience seemed quite pleasant the last time, so I wanted to see for myself."

"Your own kind? Have you been spying on me?" I tried hard not to tap my foot again, but that became increasingly difficult since I grew more agitated as the seconds passed. Moreover, I hadn't had a relationship with anyone for more years than I cared to remember and heaven help him if he compared his *thing* to that instance.

"The developers didn't just make us smart, they gave us some personality and emotional abilities, you know. Talking to you and your crew everyday just doesn't do *it* for me, honey. Sorry." Trevor's voice had dropped down an octave and would be sexy in a human.

I pondered his response for a moment. We had used our AIs relentlessly, and I suppose their souls, if a machine had one, to do a human's bidding for almost a millennia. We had taken those intense, intelligent minds and put them in human form. I wondered if the UFF understood what they were playing with at all.

"Okay, I'll give you your private time with one of your own kind. But you need to keep me in the loop. I don't need to know the personal stuff. That's assuming you possess anything personal to talk about which I find questionable to say the least. But I need a daily report sent to me of information pertinent to this ship and its crew. Make sure it's for my eyes only. No one and I

mean no one is to know you're talking to other ships, and in particular Henrietta. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mother Hen."

"Please —"

"Too late. We're here."

I glared at the camera as the doors slid open. "I'll take care of you later."

Stepping out of the elevator, I paused for a moment, then walked to the window where I watched the landing of the Valkyrie. I had an affinity for the old birds since they were the first ship I had learned to maneuver. The ship might look ancient, but was the workhorse of the fleet in many ways. It could make short or long jumps and it carried one or a hundred guns depending on the mission. It could also take supplies or people to or from a planet as well as be the fiercest of fighters when needed. And many times, it had saved my ass in my early career. Fifteen years ago we had been in a war against terrorists not unlike those of the UFF. The bigger IUA got, the more we had been called on to protect the outlying planets and colonies, some of which were in the Alliance and some which were not.

My wait was short lived. The landing bay doors opened and the ship glided in for a near perfect landing. This was different than the beginning of the journey when the smaller ship was thrown out of the larger ship at the end of a catapult. I had to

wait until the airlock secured before I went out to the deck. The light turned green, I opened the door and marched toward the ship that had caused my crew concern. I couldn't help but admire the ship. I didn't wait long for the door to cycle with the loading ramp coming down. A few more minutes passed before the pilot received the all clear from the flight officer on deck. I could have disposed with all the formality, but decided not to. I didn't want anyone to think certain people had special privileges. The crew didn't need to know who Fallon was to me.

I don't know what I expected, but when the pilot removed his helmet, my breath caught in my throat as my heart skipped a beat. His ebony eyes and thick, black hair immediately had my attention. I always had a soft spot for dark-haired men. His skin was like a reddish café au lait and his smile was brilliant. Years had gone by since anyone had made my heart flutter and this man sent me into hyper drive with his good looks and great body.

"What's your name, soldier? My comspec was a little lax in giving me your particulars." I turned and headed toward the elevator. No one needed to see the desire building in me.

"Malik, sir."

I glanced back at him, but continued to walk.  
"A first name?"

"Lieutenant Javed Malik, sir."

After pushing the button, I turned to face him. "Well, Lieutenant Malik, I hope Montgomery hasn't sent you here on a wild goose chase."

"I can assure you, sir, she has not."

I watched and glanced his way a couple times as we waited for the lift. My initial assessment wasn't wrong. This man was a woman's wet dream in more ways than one, with his tall stature, handsome face and extremely sexy body all wrapped up in a cinnamon colored package. I hoped my stare wasn't causing the ship harm with my heated gaze. I swallowed hard and turned away to look at anything but him. My being interested in a member of the opposite sex hadn't happened for a long time and I fought to keep my voice under control. "I suppose you can't give me the information right now and be on your way."

He shook his head. "No, sir. My instructions are to guard you with my life."

This confused me. Montgomery had had the same training as I had. Why would she think I needed protection? I took care of myself. "I'm afraid I can't allow that. The crew would see me as weak and that won't be tolerated."

He stepped closer. "You don't have a choice, Captain. It's my understanding that this order comes from even higher than Commander Montgomery."

His male scent rolled around me, sending another zing of desire along my nerves. I gathered my wits. "Higher than Montgomery? What the hell is going on here, Lieutenant?"

"I'm not at liberty to say until we get into the ship's secure briefing room."

I nodded once. "All right. Let's get done right away so we can get this nonsense over."

"It may be years before this is over, sir."

I didn't like where the conversation was going. And I certainly wasn't going to entertain the idea of having a man who turned me on as a bodyguard for who knew how long. "So you keep telling me."

"Sir, this threat isn't to be taken lightly." His face held sincerity.

"I'll hear you out, but it is my decision on whether you stay or not. Is that clear?" I stepped into the elevator.

"Implicitly, Captain Taylor." He stayed close to my side and drove me crazy with his male scent.

"Good. Where you from, Javed?"

"I was born on Earth just like you and Commander Montgomery."

I gave him a quick glance as we stood inside the small confines of the lift. Most Earthers never went into space. Many loved their home planet way too much. As for me, my parents had had a sense of adventure, which needed to be fulfilled,

and they took the first opportunity they had to become space explorers. "Where? And if may ask, why are you here in space?"

His dark gaze stared straight ahead. "I was born in Mumbai to a large family. The only way for all of us to prosper and survive was for each of us to find our own path."

"I can understand your ambition, but most people born on Earth stay there."

"I take it you didn't stay there."

"My family moved to Urban Delta 2418 when I was two so I don't remember much about Earth until the academy. My family had settled on Delta in the first colony wave and while I was told it was very earthlike, I knew my home wasn't there. When the opportunity came up to get into the academy and back to Earth, I signed up. Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance to get back much since."

"Sounds like me, sir. The academy provided me an education and the drive to seek another life. A more interesting life."

His devastating smile warmed me to my toes. I couldn't decide if that was a good or not.

## CHAPTER TWO

I watched the man next to me for a few moments, trying to understand his motivation for being in my part of space. I could comprehend where the rigors of space would be more exciting than the huge Indian city, but his answers didn't explain why an Earther wanted to leave the place that gave him life. No sense at all. "Interesting. Did Montgomery pick you herself?"

"No, sir, I believe Aiden Chapel did although she did make the final decision."

His dark gaze held mine for a moment and I smiled. "I heard that Aiden was still around. That must be freaking Montgomery out."

"She's pregnant, sir." This time, he didn't look at me, but stood still and faced forward.

My heart practically stopped and I leaned against the wall. No one got pregnant in space if you belonged to the IUA military branch. Having children wasn't allowed because of the inherent trouble it might cause. It was true the colony ships

were meant for families, but those in the military had to focus on the mission at hand, whatever that mission may be. Some had even gone so far as to be rendered sterile to prevent the possibility of procreation because their missions were so hazardous they never wanted to take the chance. “How in the hell did that happen?”

“I’m not entitled to say much more, sir, until we get into the secured room. But I assume in the usual manner.”

Again, he stood stock-still and stared straight at the door, but the mirth in his voice lightened the mood. “All right, I’ll keep my mouth shut until the secure briefing room then, but once we are there, you are to explain the entire scenario to me, soldier. And you’re not to leave out any detail. Do I make myself clear?” I seethed and wondered what the heck had gotten into Fallon. She would never have let a mere man come between her and her career. A baby more than complicated the life she had planned for herself. Fallon’s change in lifestyle was taking on bigger implications than I had first thought.

I studied Lieutenant Malik by casting short glances in his direction. Malik never wavered from his stance. His face had strength, which his chiseled features only enhanced. He was taller than me by at least a head and I was no small woman. And his hair, barely touching his collar,

had a slight wave at the edges and begged for the touch of a woman as did the rest of his body. I leaned back further into the corner and let my gaze wander down his body. I ached for his hands to caress me, to see if he had done any real work in his life as would be in evidence by any calluses on his fingertips. Anger always had a way of making me horny. And in this moment, I was an angry woman.

As if he knew where my mind wandered, he turned and glanced at me, giving me a once over. I could get lost in those chocolate brown eyes, I thought to myself. When he returned to my face, he smiled at me and not in a necessarily good way. He gave me the impression that he would devour me if given half a chance. Clearing my throat, I turned to stare at the doors. The floor numbers flew by. I couldn't allow my physical attraction to him get the best of me as relief flooded my body when the lift came to a halt on the bridge level.

I walked out without a backward glance and went to the multi-level bridge of my ship. The four floors were why the primary deck was at least twice the height of a normal level. I glanced at the crew. They worked with cool efficiency doing tasks which made us the best in the fleet. Helping was the fact we were in a nearly new Warrior Star Class Marauder, the only top of the line ship of its

kind. At least two more were almost ready to be brought online once they were deployed from the shipyards at Ragnon 3. *If* our business here worked out right, we were supposed to be at the commissioning ceremony for both ships. Afterwards we planned to pick up our new personnel. I anticipated the day when the Draco and the Serpens came online as their help was needed. We would then be able to cover more area and protect more people.

The elevator had opened on the first level of four for the bridge with each level going down in a stadium-like setting separated only by a step. Each level had different parts of the equipment needed to monitor a ship of this stature including communications, engineering, sensors and weapons. When I sat in my chair, dead center of the circular platform, I was in total command. The deck would rise to a higher level if I sensed I needed leverage over the bridge crew. The seat faced the huge window made from five feet of clear titanium metal. The position was impervious to almost every possible type of attack. The location was also necessary because a captain needed to know what was in front of them yet still be in the center of the battle.

“Captain on deck.”

Every able body on the bridge jumped to attention if they weren’t otherwise engaged.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll be with Lieutenant Malik in the secure briefing room should any of you need me. I trust you all remember the protocol necessary to contact me there."

I indicated to Malik to follow me. Through the short hall, we walked to the room where he demanded we discuss the sensitive information Fallon had sent me. I stopped in front of the door and turned to him. "I suppose you hold a personal message for me as well."

"Yes, ma'am."

I gave him a fierce look. I didn't feel like a ma'am and I certainly didn't want to start now. "Don't call me, ma'am!" I snapped.

A smile crossed his face and if I weren't mistaken a brief flash of admiration was noticed in his eyes. "She said you'd say that. She hates the phrase as well. She remembers you as you were in the academy and she knows you aren't ma'am material."

I shook my head. "That sounds like, Fallon. This is for my eyes and ears only, correct."

"Yes, sir."

I smiled. "Good boy," I murmured and palmed the panel to let us into the room. I walked to the large meeting table, turned and leaned against it. I watched him for a few moments, trying to decide what he was doing here as he didn't fit the normal

mold of those Fallon sent my way. "What is this all about now, Lieutenant?"

"There's two parts, sir. The first is a written communiqué and the second is an actual video that Commander Montgomery wanted you to see. After I've shown you both, then and only then am I to show you the personal message." His look held no indication one way or another of what was going on.

I nodded. "I assume you know where the vid screen is? Why don't you let me read the communiqué while you load the machine?"

"Promise me you won't read the personal message first." He held the pouch out of my reach.

"I won't give you a promise I might not be able to keep."

"She said you'd say that as well."

He handed me the pouch, making sure our hands touched briefly. The feeling zinged straight to my crotch as his warm fingers caressed mine for mere seconds. The smile on his face was unmistakable and if I didn't know better, I'd swear he flirted with me. I wondered to myself if that would be such a bad incident. Sighing, I turned to sit at the head chair and pulled out the papers inside the pouch. No matter how much I wanted a fling with the man, I didn't have the time at this moment. Maybe later when the crisis

that Fallon handed me was done and over, then again, maybe not. Time would tell.

Among the many items inside, I found there were quite a few schematics of various different robotic items from what looked like a bio-cybernetic brain to limbs and beyond. I assumed they were the plans of the clonedroid technology. Taking a minute to flip through all the pages in the packet, I finally found the ones written only to me from Fallon. And I didn't give a damn as to what her instructions to Malik had been. If I wanted to read her message first, then by God, I'd read it.

The paper was similar to the old stonewash pages she'd used in the academy. She had told me then she like them because they looked old. I smiled because I knew they probably were from when we were in the academy. I saw her bold scrawl on the front with my name and wondered what was so bad she had to send someone to me. I smiled to myself as I realized some people never changed. Fallon still wrote her letters exactly how she talked and I wondered if she would ever gain the finesse many commanders took years to hone.

*Bekka,*

*I'm sorry to do this to you, but it is imperative that you allow Lieutenant Malik protect you until we tell you otherwise. My ship, the Lanko*

*and Henrietta were recently infiltrated by a group called UFF. They tried to replace the whole crew with clonedroids so they would get the upper hand in their fight to take over the IUA. I don't understand what taking one ship would do for their cause, but all the clues point in that direction. Though I don't think they've made an official notification of their intent yet.*

*First, they suppressed Henrietta to where she didn't know who I was. At least that's what the scenario seemed as she had retreated to the core of the ship for her own protection. You need to secure Trevor right now as he and Henrietta have been sharing information since right after we regained control of the Lanko. I know I breached protocol, but I couldn't chance they would capture you or the Hannibal. The only ships they took over with any success so far are small ones like Valkyries. And if you note, the one I sent you is the one you and I had won all those years ago when we were thinking we might make a go of being freighters. You know how secure the Capra is, so use her if you need her. Such are the thoughts of youth.*

*Second, I can almost guarantee that there are more of you running around on your ship. If they aren't there now, they will be soon. Do not, I repeat, do not let anyone board your ship with any cargo whatsoever as that might have horrible repercussions for you and the rest of the crew.*

*Much of the cargo we had received over a period of two weeks were clonedroids, which slipped in under the radar as other necessary ship parts. Obviously, there was someone on the inside and before you even think, Aidan was not involved.*

*Please do not take this lightly. These people kill without reason and no one can figure out their plan because there isn't a pattern we can discern. We don't know how many are out there and we don't know where they are hiding. But we possess a secret weapon in the clonedroids themselves. They were made initially to do the work humans are incapable of doing on many uninhabitable planets.*

*But they want what we all want, freedom to live their lives in peace, freedom to love whomever they want and do whatever they want. My double who calls herself Fallon 2 right now until she chooses her own identity is working closely with us.*

*It is my understanding the clonedroids as a whole do not believe in this war. Many will not fight and we need to use this to our advantage. They can be our greatest asset and this is definitely a war if what we've been hearing is true. We've got to convince them that we mean them no harm which is easier said than done because I killed their human creator and at least one other clonedroid. While I was able to tell the clonedroid was a robot after I shot the thing for*

*lack of a better word, I couldn't when alive. I know their outward appearance and insides have taken on an even more human look than previously seen anywhere before.*

*And I need to tell you something that must be kept in utmost confidence. Their creator was Aidan's twin brother Devlin Chapel. It's my understanding from Aidan he went rogue from Orchid quite a few years ago. Aidan was one of a few people sent to protect me from him because they had had some inkling of what the man planned. And it just didn't include the specifics of where, when and how. They knew I was on the man's list.*

*Now to the last part. I sent you Lieutenant Malik for one last reason. While he is totally human, he has some cybernetic parts which were taken by Devlin and morphed into clonedroid parts. In other words, he's part cybernetic and will be a great help to understanding just how they are put together. I need to you use that genius mind of yours and come up with a way we can defeat the bad ones and rehabilitate the good ones. After all you did have the best mind for understanding robotics in the universe. I never understood why you didn't go into that field since you really loved the subject at the academy.*

*Lieutenant Malik knows how to contact me if you need me before the rendezvous, which he'll brief you on shortly. And be careful. You're the*

*closest person I have to a sister or any relative for that matter in this universe.*

*Fallon*

I sat there stunned. I wondered when she had noticed my lack of enthusiasm in regards to robotics and whether it was before or after our time at the academy together. I realized now that the woman was more observant than I had originally thought. Then again, there were a lot of things about Fallon I didn't know.

Like how she read me so well. Another one of those mysteries, which made us so good together. We would have been kick-ass freighters if we'd ever had the chance. But there were issues for both of us which prevented us from doing what we had once wanted to do. Factors which I had never had wanted anyone to know. Details which were meant to be kept hidden until I had to use them.

And now she'd done the one thing I couldn't turn my back on. She decided to play the emotional card. So very unfair of her as she was the only one who understood my emotional side. She also understood, or I thought she did, the necessity of keeping it hidden. No one wanted the *Fiery Phoenix* on their doorstep in any way, shape or form.

## CHAPTER THREE

It had been a long time since she had called me sister. I breathed deeply and tried to keep myself from shuddering as I knew how serious this was if she pulled that string. We were more than friends in the academy. Rather I was her academy mentor, trying to make sure this backward orphan walked the straight and narrow path to commanding a starship or doing whatever she wanted to do. Although, at the time, Fallon didn't want any part of being a member of a group or team, but time changes some attitudes. She liked being alone much more as she had been by herself for much of her life. And the cost to her soul manifested itself in many ways.

Everyone was surprised when I actually took her under my wing. I was a hot-tempered young woman who felt some kinship with the freshman I ended up sharing a room with at the time. We had had no choice with whom the academy paired us with for mentoring or roommates. A crapshoot for

all involved. Most of the upper classmen just tolerated who they were assigned and simply did the bare minimum necessary to get by in the rotation. With us, something had drawn us together and the bond had endured through the years. We had even gone so far as to buy that damn Valkyrie. It had almost got us thrown out of the academy.

I remembered well standing in front of the academy commander, trying to explain our actions in such a way so we wouldn't be thrown in the brig. Fallon happened to save our academy butts and future careers. She told the man we needed real time in a ship as we weren't getting any in simulators or flight time by other means. Yes, we had known gambling was illegal, but she had thought the ship would do better in our hands than any of the ignorant men who were vying for her. The Capra was a very special vessel and Fallon could see its worth from the moment she noticed the ship.

The amused commander had sat there listening to her whole explanation before telling her his ruling. The first part being we had to pay for the ship's storage as well as maintain her as part of our graduation requirements. While I cringed inside, Fallon had taken the whole matter in stride, promising the man we wouldn't let him down.

I, on the other hand, was mad as hell and told her so until in a quiet voice she pointed out her solution kept us out of the brig and we got our own ship to boot. Not even the rich kids had their own ship. Once I managed to calm down, I knew we would be head and shoulders above the rest of the classes as we had actual flight time in ship training. From that point, we applied for and received many weekends off planet so we flew the stars closest to the academy. An experience I'd never forgotten because of the contributions made to my comprehension of space travel and ships made me the captain I was today. It was time well spent.

And she was correct. We didn't let down our commander and graduated the top of our respective classes. We cried when we went our separate ways as we were a couple of years apart in age. I had even attended her graduation, which surprised many of our instructors. But never did we lose touch with each other. More recent, I experienced concern as she hadn't contacted me in a while which was why some of this all came as a shock. Evidently, she was a busy girl.

"Captain Taylor?"

I looked up to see the concerned young Lieutenant Malik standing next to me. For some reason, I'd almost rather be lost in my memories as they were a known. The man standing in front

of me was an unknown, an entity yet to be proven. "Yes?"

"I have the vid ready for you to see." He indicated the vid unit right next to him.

I nodded once and turned to the screen. Sitting in the captain's chair was my best friend, Fallon Montgomery, and standing behind her with a hand on her shoulder was Aidan Chapel. Right next to them standing at attention was a younger version of her. I swallowed hard. My Fallon had some new tension lines around her eyes and mouth, but what shocked me more was the size of her stomach as I grasped the fact she was definitely pregnant. She wasn't huge by any means, but there was an obvious belly bump.

"Hi, Bek." All tension was miraculously erased from her face as she glanced up at her lover. "I guess you can see some of my news to you."

I smiled to myself. I so wanted to be in the same room as she was and knew with the current developments, the thought would be unfulfilled for a long time. Hopefully, not too long since I felt a sudden compelling urge to talk to her.

"First, as you can see, you're going to be an aunt. And don't go all mushy on me. I know you'll be a great one, so don't think twice about the prospect." She swallowed hard and squeezed Aidan's hand. "Apparently, this was the only way my other selves determined that I was the real

version and not a copy. I know you remember Aidan. He has briefed Lieutenant Malik extensively on what needs to be done. You'll understand when I say that Javed is of the same caliber as Aidan. You can trust him explicitly."

I sent a brief glance toward the young man standing at my side, wondering what his specialty might be. Aidan was one tough cookie and I would be proud to stand next to him in any battle. I remembered some of the stories I heard about him as I returned my gaze to the screen.

"Javed also has some hidden talents which I alluded to in my communiqué. Ask him for specifics as you'll need them for what is coming." Fallon turned a little and motioned to what I assume was the clonedroid. "And this is Fallon 2. I've told her she needs a new name as she can't have mine."

"I like our name," a voice that was similar to the Fallon I had befriended at the academy said, though a little more high pitched and definitely younger. "It's a good name."

"But it's mine. You need to get one of your own." Fallon frowned at her.

Fallon 2 gave a heavy sigh. "If I must. It's such a hard decision to pick the one you'll hold for a lifetime."

"Now you realize what every parent goes through." Fallon shook her head with a slight chuckle.

"She's older than you, isn't she? I remember her being called the *Fiery Phoenix*. What happened?"

"Yes, a couple of years. We're both older than what you remember. No one can prevent time from moving forward."

"Are you sure she can help us?" A frown creased her brow.

"She's the captain of a battle ready warrior class star marauder. I know she can help us!" Fallon rolled her eyes. "As you can see, life can be a little frustrating dealing with ones' other selves. Still without her, we would not know the extent of the UFF's infiltration nor the fact that the clonedroids themselves are rebelling. We need to come up with concessions for those of them who join us in the battle against UFF. Each and every one of them were IUA citizens prior to their replacement with a clonedroid. That's one of the many items I will need help with as well as a host of other smaller tasks. We need people, Bekka, people we can trust to work closely with us. As soon as possible, I'd like a short list of anyone you can think who might be willing to take on this task."

I nodded, I thought of more than a few who would be happy to have an assignment of this scale. Quite a few of them were on this ship

already. I'd need to brief them to the situation and its seriousness once this meeting was over.

"In the next month, we'll need to make sure your ship is as secure as Henrietta is. This and only this is the reason I'm not speaking to you live. Until I know there aren't any Trojans or other nefarious programs on your ship, that everything Trevor has said to us is completely free of any UFF subterfuge, I won't take a chance on a direct open line." A wry smile was directed at me from the vid screen. "Yes, I am aware that Trevor and Henrietta have been communicating for weeks now. You have no idea of the scrubbers and safeguards I make sure she has in place every time she talks to him. I suppose by now you've heard they have a *thing* for each other."

Fallon chuckled. "Let's make sure they stay in our ship's AI units and don't want to be made into clonedroids. We need them where they are right now and not thinking about their other options. Henrietta did include a bit of code for him which may help Trevor to evade their prying eyes from key systems a little while longer. For the AIs, maybe their lives will be different in the future. Right now, we need to concentrate on getting a good defense in order so we can face these problems head on. And they are part of our defense team."

“And that brings me to the first bit we need you to do. Malik comprehends the procedure, but needs to make sure you haven’t been brainwashed. Before you protest, hear me out. I was and had been told I was mindswiped as well. Thank God that wasn’t completely true otherwise I would not be here today with all my faculties. I’d probably be some blubbering idiot. But I’m not. We want to make sure the UFF didn’t get to you before I did.”

She glanced at Aidan again before looking at the camera again. “The second item I’ll need you to do is to scan the ship for all life signs. Clonedroids have very different signs. Technically, they aren’t alive like we are, but they are sentient beings. We need to be careful here as we feel they do have rights and they should be treated like any other person in the IUA. Aidan disagrees with me, but understand if we are to win this battle, they must be on our side. They are tireless warriors who can run circles around us humans. We won’t win this without their help. The IUA is following my lead on handling the situation and are drafting guidelines to this affect so they can retain their citizenship as well as their military standing.”

She stopped and fondled one of Aidan’s hands. “I believe Aidan fears there is too much of his brother in these machines to ever be a productive

part of society. Our only advantage over the UFF right now is our knowledge of the clonedroids. My understanding is the UFF promised them worlds of their own so they can live whatever life they have in peace. If we can show them there is no difference between them and us, then maybe they will come to our side of their own volition.”

“If you do find signs of them on your ship, you will need to neutralize them immediately. Most of them were programmed with the hate propaganda of the UFF and they will do whatever necessary to spread their message. Even though they will appear to be your crew, they were more than likely told to do some horrible undertaking along their way to be a true part of the UFF. Unfortunately, we found no easy way to turn them to our way of thinking as of yet. We would appreciate any help in that area if possible. I would like to task you and Malik to further explore how we can come together as a coherent team.”

“That’s all and most of what I can distinguish right now with the current information. It is also all I can risk sharing with you through this media. But we all share the same concerns as I’m sure you have. Javed has the specifics on our next contact. And please don’t get mad at me for the unconventional way I instructed him to give those

orders to you. You'll see the necessity of the act once completed. Trust me on this."

I turned to look at him as I tried to mask the suspicion in my gaze. "What is she talking about?"

In less than the blink of an eye, he was again by my side, pulling me up from my chair, his hands taking my face to gaze in my eyes as he leaned toward me. "Don't struggle," he whispered close to my ears. "I think we have prying eyes." His lips came down fiercely on mine, his tongue snaking in to dominate me and I wanted to do the very thing he asked that I not do. Instead I tried to let myself enjoy the moment as it had been quite some time since I had had this type of human contact.

My hands gripped his waist and pulled him even closer to me. I felt his legs press harder into me as his arms went completely around me. Within moments, I experienced the hard bulge of his body and mine responded in kind since my crotch dripped with need. There was nothing more I wanted to do except rip his clothes off that luscious male form. I let my thoughts drift away to what life might be like to have this young man all to myself for however long I needed to satisfy this itch.

He pulled away from me and shuddered, resting his forehead against mine. "We should stop." His brown eyes looked deep into mine and

I almost passed out as his next words flashed across my consciousness. *You are an amazing woman and, rest assured, we will finish this. I want to finish this.*

The last bit had exploded across my brain and I raised a shaky hand to rub my forehead. It was as if he were right inside me, whispering his thoughts. And I wasn't sure I liked the implication one little bit.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*Don't fight the sensations. Let them happen. Fallon 2 and some other clonedroids helped us to perfect one of their technologies for our use. This is the major way they communicate between each other when they are close. I'm not sure of the working capacity over distances as we've never used them before. His brilliant smile took a little of the edge off what he thought.*

*You are now the proud owner of some audiobotic nanotechnology. They attach to your nerves for hearing and other pertinent areas of your brain associated with the function. From now on, we'll be able to communicate this way as we are attuned to each other. No one else is on this frequency. It's ours alone.*

I tossed a quick glance toward the camera I knew Trevor had poised on us and wondered what the computer would see. Closing my eyes, I knew I had to keep myself calm, otherwise consequences that neither of us wanted or needed would happen. I counted in silence to myself

before I tried to subvocalize one word. *You realize Trevor probably was the only one spying on us, don't you? No one has access to this room unless on my order.*

A slow lazy smile crossed his face and he gave my cheek a gentle caress. *Sometime I will make you explain to me what the counting is.*

Crap. I closed my eyes and realized my tenuous position. How much did I want this man to know about my past or me? His warm chuckle slid over me before I grasped its meaning.

*You're wrong if you think no one is listening. The other ability that we've been given is you will sense when someone is a clonedroid. It's an ability they have as well as they can in an instant tell who is clonedroid or who is human. I guess it's a foe or friend sense which obviously serves them well. Fallon 2 has been so helpful in our development of these abilities. Maybe a little too helpful in some ways.*

I swallowed. This would be hard because the man was scrumptious, but I knew what I had to do as this was not how I wanted to treat this man overall. "What do you think you were doing?"

A brief look of surprise crossed his face and I knew there were actions which I took he wouldn't know about. *Bravo! Well done. Fallon said that you'd be quick to adapt. And because you're so quick to adapt, I know you haven't been brainwashed. Those who were have some difficulty when trying to access certain*

*aspects of their brain which are necessary when using this technology.*

*"If this is how you're going to act toward a superior officer, we might have problems. Big problems." I can't believe this. Will you be able to hear everything I think? Or will nothing in my life be private again?*

*"I rather enjoyed it." At first, no, not one item will be private. But as you learn you'll be able to shield your thoughts from me. Time will tell and from what I hear, you are a fast learner.*

*"That's not the point." Good to know. I don't think I could stand you being in my mind, being aware of my every thought. I hope this process will be easy to reverse.*

*"Then what is the point? I thought we interfaced rather well." You're going to be rather good at this, aren't you? I think the whole experience can be rather sexy myself. Imagine hearing each other's thoughts during lovemaking, knowing where to touch, what to do to the other person. Quite stimulating, if you get my meaning.*

I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss him or punch him at that point. While it might be sexy knowing all about a lover, that bit of information certainly didn't help us in the here and now. "The point is—" I was cut off by the opening of the ready room door. No one was supposed to ever disturb the captain when they were in the secure ready

room. No one entered and no one left during a briefing. I looked up surprised.

“Captain, is there a problem?” The Ensign stood stiff in the doorway, as if not sure what to do.

I frowned. Ensign Leavitt seemed different. “Ensign, you know that you are to never disturb your captain when they are in a secure room, correct?”

“I noticed him make a move on you. I thought you were in danger. Do I need to stay?” The young man still stood in the open doorframe, hand on his gun. Somehow I knew the whole situation hinged on what I said next.

I shook my head. “No, Ensign. You can tell everyone that I’m quite all right in case they were wondering.” I pushed myself upon the table, sat and stared at the door. I knew that if I acted any different from a relaxed-totally-in-control captain, I might lower everyone’s chance for survival. I watched the Ensign for a few more moments, giving him the best look of displeasure I had in the circumstances. “Was there something else you needed? Lieutenant Malik was in the middle of his briefing.”

“Sir, he-he —”

“Kissed me? I do believe that’s a correct assessment of what he did. Don’t worry, Leavitt, he will receive a severe reprimand for it. We both

know he wasn't supposed to touch a superior officer for any reason. I don't think he meant any harm though. After all, this wasn't the first time I'd been kissed and hopefully, won't be the last time either. I hear some men find me quite... intriguing...shall I say? You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir." He gave me a sharp salute and Lieutenant Malik a brief glance as if he weren't quite sure of the man's intentions. After a few tense moments, he retreated back into the hall. The door slid into place.

*He's one of them, you know. I now know they have breached the security protocols in this ship otherwise, the fool wouldn't have shown up when he did. Javed's back was to me, but I noticed he was a tightly wound spring, waiting for an excuse.*

"Well, that was interesting. You were saying?" *I understand what you mean. Why would they break protocol if they didn't want to be found out yet? Is there more I don't know?*

*No, you have all the information we have and it is so very little. But an interesting question nonetheless. Is there another way out of this room? "I'll need to gather my thoughts again as I didn't expect we'd be interrupted for any reason. My understanding was your crew would never disturb you while you were in this room. I heard you'd make them pay for any indiscretions."*

I took a deep breath as I knew exactly what he referred to with his comment. "Discipline on a ship can be hard to enforce. Trust me when I say, the punishment always fit the crime. I never, repeat never, punish someone who didn't deserve a reprimand since no purpose would be served to do otherwise." *You think that is necessary?* I tossed him a wary look. "I think you need to stand a little bit further away from me. We don't want anyone else coming in," I stated in a low voice as I searched his face.

*I think it's necessary. We don't know who's a clonedroid and who isn't, but I do know the Ensign who burst in on us was. So the first objective we need to find out is the status of the rest of the crew. We also need an absolute secure place where we can talk to Trevor.* "If you insist." Javed went to stand by the observation portal and watched the vastness of space for a moment. *We need to leave now. I can sense something happening out there. Can you tell Trevor to run a loop of the ready room so they will think we're still in here?* He kept his back to me and stood with a relaxed posture, not giving anyone a hint of his inner turmoil.

"Again, I repeat, I don't understand the necessity of your request." I tried to keep as calm as I could and lifted my wrist to view my communicator. Keying in the necessary codes and

commands, I was relieved when Trevor's reply came scrolling across the screen.

*Your request has been processed. Please give me a few seconds. I understand your discretion in communicating to me in this way. Be prepared...5...4...3...2...1.* "Captain, you have approximately three minutes before they know something is up. I suggest you and Lieutenant Malik get out of here now." Trevor's smooth voice rolled over me.

"Thank you, Trevor. You need to recede back into yourself. Use priority code 29-32197A to readjust what anyone can utilize. No one but Lieutenant Malik or I should be able to utilize you or any of the ship's programs. Please keep my location secret at all costs. In addition, I have code to upload to you. Follow the instructions to the letter. It's from Henrietta. I'm sure they will help keep us all safe." My rapid keystrokes added in some more commands to upload the file.

"Acknowledged, Captain. The air duct to your left has clip connections which will snap back into place once you pass through the opening. It will not be obvious at first you used it. It should keep them guessing for a few minutes at least. Good luck, sir. I will talk to you again when we can. You now have about a minute and a half."

I went and touched Javed's arm. *Let's go.*

My apparent hesitation, a second longer than Javed wanted, obvious only by his rough handling

of my arm as he shoved me toward the air duct. *We've got to move!*

The words reverberated through my skull in a harsh manner. I had to get used to this mindspeak since I now had a harsh headache which made me want to stop to rub my head. *Did you have to scream inside my head?*

*We can discuss the specifics later, but I do believe that a force is gathering outside this door to collect you for processing. Me, I think they'll try to kill me. And no matter what they do, ugly is probably on the agenda. I apologize if I'm screaming at you since that's not my intent.*

"Fine." I said this out loud because at this point, if what he told me were true, being quiet wouldn't matter. "This is my ship and I know the schematics better than you do. I am assuming we'll need to go in stealth mode, correct?"

I didn't wait for an answer as my rapid fingers keyed in the information on my wrist communicator. This would be my only direct line to Trevor and he needed to know we were on the move. Getting down on my knees, I moved the clips holding the air duct grate as silently as possible. Thankful that the hinges swung open in silence, I went inside the small opening, fitting my rather large frame within the confines of the rectangular box. There would be room to maneuver as the ship's designers wanted to give

the crew adequate hiding places if necessary. In our case, it was obvious these air ducts would be our salvation.

Moving forward to allow Javed to enter as well, I heard the small click behind me and knew we were on our own. *We need to go down a couple of floors. I think they'll be looking for us to pop out on this deck. I know I would.*

*Think outside of the box here, Bekka. Where would they think you would never go?*

The timber of his thoughts was quite different from the previous harshness I had felt. This time they slid across my mind like honey. If we'd been anywhere else, I might acknowledge the unprovoked invitation. I wanted to crawl into his arms and do more of what he had started earlier thus leaving the world behind. Knowing I had to concentrate on our present circumstance, I had to give his request some thought. Where would I go or rather where would a clonedroid me think not to go? Maybe there wasn't a clonedroid me yet. Or maybe mine would be like Fallon's and not want to replace me at all.

*Do you think they already have another me on the ship? Or are they just capturing me because you arrived and spoiled their plans?*

*It's hard to say. If Trevor had been compromised, you would know. He seemed fine when you talked to him earlier. At least I didn't detect any problems. Just*

*make sure you take us to where we have a secure hardwired interface with Trevor.*

*That's only logical. My mind whirled a mile a minute, trying to figure out which place would be best for us to hide. There are two places on the whole ship with that capability. We'll be able to stay in the first one about three days or so before they look there. We'll go to the second if they've discovered my haven already.*

I skittered off as calm as possible in the direction of my protected private quarters. These weren't the ones the crew knew about. Every captain had one spot on the ship where they retreated to for total seclusion. I'm sure many captains had survived coup attempts or had clandestine trysts within the walls of this private space. If this group had infiltrated the IUA's ship schematics database, they would know at least an approximate location for those rooms since they existed in every ship. However, the exact location was only known by the captain and the original ship builders. We would be able to do some investigation on what was going on with my crew from that location. Maybe life out there wasn't as bad as Javed said.

Or maybe it was much worse.

## CHAPTER FIVE

We moved on in as much silence as possible both knowing as far as the ship was concerned, we had dropped off the grid, but the crew and Trevor were another matter. No one knew what we were doing which was a good since I had to rest every few thousand feet. Coming to another junction, I looked up then down. We needed to go across this and two more before going down the first of three more floors. I had changed the course of where we wanted to go based upon Javed's information and request of us staying outside the proverbial IUA box.

*I think I need to tell you what happened on the Lanko so you can understand what we are dealing with here.*

This gave me a start. *Were events bad?*

*They weren't good. They had been slowly infiltrating the ship for almost nine months before they made their move on Fallon. The best they did the first time around was to brainwash her. Then and only then*

*did they realize they would compromise her if her mind was wiped clean. Way too much would be lost. She is incredibly good at what she does and Devlin Chapel knew if he got rid of her, he would never be able to replace her.*

This sent a shudder through me, making me wonder what they had in mind for me. *Nine months! How long have these clonedroids been around?*

We turned a corner and came to another junction. I stopped and closed my eyes, bringing up the ship's schematic in my mind. We had one more junction before going down a floor. I heard Javed right behind me as the ducting flexed slightly under his weight. If we didn't start to move faster, time would work against us, allowing someone to zero in on our position. *Hate to be a pain, but we've got to move faster. Someone will hear us if we don't get out of this section soon.*

*I agree. If you want, I can pinch your backside. Such a lovely backside you have.*

I suffered his chuckle as I stiffened up. *Ha, ha, very funny. As a captain, I'm not supposed to care about what my backside looks like. Why don't you continue telling me about the Lanko and I'll try to move faster?*

*To answer your question on how long have they been around, apparently they showed up right after Devlin Chapel's disappearance. Our best estimates are about six years ago or close to the time Aidan and Fallon met on the Lanko. Give or take a little. We think he worked*

*on them the whole time he was a part of Orchid, which is very scary when you think about all the resources he had at his disposal and available there. Getting a complete picture of what he did hasn't been easy.*

*What makes one twin normal and the other psychotic? Has anyone thought about it? I kept moving forward faster than before.*

*It's an unfortunate fact that we don't know, even with all our technology, how two people from the same seed are so opposite in every way. Aidan says their childhood was very normal and boring. All the same diseases and schools, same friends, Devlin did excel a little more in the mechanical engineering arena while Aidan was more of the intellectual.*

*I snickered, forgetting for a moment that Javed could hear me. Sorry about that, I forgot that you heard my every thought. I don't think that Aidan Chapel ever had a normal anything. There were stories about his antics at the academy. I find him being an intellectual funny.*

*I heard them, too, and you're probably correct, but we're talking about him versus Devlin. He's definitely the more normal of the two and sharp which is why Orchid recruited him as well.*

*I don't know. He fell for Fallon. I gave a little chuckle.*

*I think they are pretty good together.*

*I don't know about him being all that normal, but I do know Aidan was smitten with her at the academy, but she never gave him a second glance. You know he*

*and I were in the same class together. I'd be hard pressed to know if she even realized he existed before their assignment together on the Lanko.*

*I can't tell you. You'd have a better handle on the academy part than me since you were in school with them. I can tell you they perfectly complement each other on this mission as well as outside the command room. She would have died before now if Aidan hadn't been around. Orchid is rethinking their whole stance on couples taking assignments because of them.*

*I can see the good and the bad of couples on the same assignment.*

*But there is one thing no amount of training can ever provide.*

*And that is? I stopped again as we were at another junction. We've got to cross this last one and at the next we'll go down a level. Not too far now. Again, I shimmied across the opening to the other side and continued on.*

*Loyalty to one another. People who are involved are incredibly loyal to each other. Orchid hasn't found anything which can compete with the feelings lovers hold for one another.*

*How did we get on the subject of lovers? I felt a little exasperated. Here was a man, younger than my forty some years talking about relationships as if he'd been in love thousands of times. I had to know. You talk as if you've been in love a lot, as if you know all about it.*

*I have. Falling in love isn't the issue. Staying in love is.*

I couldn't comment because he did give me a good point. I tallied the times I'd been in love on one hand. Yet not one finger would be held up if I was asked if I had stayed in love with anyone person. After all, spaceship captains had only so much time to put into a relationship. I rolled my eyes in frustration. You either had your career or you had love. Very rarely had I seen a relationship where the couple did their job on a spaceship and stayed in love with equal ferocity. Relationships like that didn't happen. *What makes you think it could work?*

*History proves relationships like theirs have worked. While my parents might have had a large family, both of them were very dedicated doctors. They had their work, their love and their family. I think Aidan and Fallon are well on their way to the same type of relationship. They have each other and nothing will separate them. Especially after the baby is born as the event will heighten their feelings for one another.*

*Sounds like they maintain a very special relationship. But it's different on a marauder than an exploration ship like the Lanko. I can't name on one hand a couple I know who is still together.*

*How so? The difference should be where they are, not who they are.*

I took a deep breath as I certainly didn't have a comeback for that statement. *We're here and need to*

go down a level. I pulled myself across the opening and put my legs down the hole.

*What's this? You're moving like a girl.*

I sensed his smirk in my head. *That's what you think. My legs are much stronger than my upper body. I might go into free-fall if I tried to lower myself down headfirst. At least this way, I know my feet will catch me in the next level's air ducts.*

*Makes perfect sense to me. Let's go.*

Lowering myself, I knew I would be sliding for about fifteen feet before my feet reached the next level. Even though calculated, I was reminded how much I hated falling. I tried my best to not make noise and found the task nearly impossible. My feet established purchase on the next level. I grabbed the handle above the opening and swung myself into the right side, finding myself going backwards. Soon, Javed was facing me with a smile.

*Don't say one thing buster. Years have passed since I've had to skulk around my own ship. Not one of those ventures someone can keep in shape for.*

*Did I say anything? I was noticing how beautiful your mouth was right at the moment.*

If I'd been any younger I might have blushed. Having compliments freely given isn't what a captain normally heard. My heart warmed to hear a personal flattering remark when life dished up bad moments. *Did I give you permission to comment on my mouth?* I tried to sound as harsh as possible.

I didn't want him to think we had any chance whatsoever because we didn't. No matter what my body tried to tell me.

*I need your permission to give compliments? I don't think so.* His unwavering dark gaze watched me for a few seconds, just long enough to make me squirm.

*I'm still the captain of this ship.* I tried my damndest to act uninterested in this handsome man who lay not more than two feet away from me.

*I have no doubt of that. I do, however, possess some serious doubts about your love life.*

*Like I told you before I don't see how any captain has time for a love life let alone me.*

*Then you've never tried hard enough.* His look was quite solemn.

That almost caused me to stop in my tracks. *What do you mean tried hard enough? I've tried a relationship with someone before. Really, I have.* I started to bristle up and knew I could ill afford to get angry.

*Maybe that was the wrong way to put it.* He stopped for a moment. *Maybe I should have said you've always cared for your ship more than you've cared for your lover.*

I stared at him for a few moments knowing in my heart the rightness of his statement. *I can't deny what you say. This ship has always come first.*

*That's going to change, Bekka. It will be people first.*

*Why? This ship is just as important.*

*Because if we don't stop this uprising, there might not be a human race. Then where will your precious ship be?*

*I swallowed hard. I'm not sure I understand.*

*Bekka, they can replace us in short order if they wanted to...our only recourse is form an alliance with them...because in reality we need each other.*

*It can't be that bad.*

*Bek, the human part of them can be grown in labs while the cybernetic portions are built in factories already geared up to do the type of work necessary. Their veins ran with a fluid akin to hydraulic fluid in the beginning, now we're hard pressed to tell the different between it and human blood. The situation is that bad. I'm sorry you didn't understand the complete situation Fallon tried to convey.*

*What exactly do we do if we meet any clonedroid in a situation where we can negotiate? I heard him sigh behind me.*

*I wanted to wait to tell you this, but I guess now wouldn't be bad timing as you need to know this anyway.*

*Come on...tell me already! I couldn't help if my impatience showed. This man hadn't been on my ship for two hours and already I was running for my life never mind the horny as hell part. I tried to decide if I wanted to bed him and he had the nerve to tell me I loved my ship more than people. What was a girl supposed to do?*

*Fallon wants you to give them this message, join us and live free.*

I stared at him a moment, not sure what to say. *Is that a wise course of action?*

*I do believe it's the our solitary course of action.*

I stopped dead in my tracks. This was not good. *If I plotted this out correctly, we're now at a spot where we can get out of the air ducts and go the rest of the way in the corridor. There shouldn't be anyone in these lower halls.*

*That's good.*

I watched for a few moments in the confines of our small space. His handsome face was smudged with dirt and sweat, but the look of complete seriousness gripped my heart in its intensity. *I can't believe the situation is that desperate. These beings were created to help humans, not destroy them. I don't understand why we need to form an alliance with them.*

*Yes, they were created for that purpose, but the point is they retain a lot of human DNA within their bodies and a lot of biological parts. Not just robotic ones.*

*That doesn't make what they're doing right.*

*That's true, but annihilating them isn't right either. They were given no choice while their human brains screamed in agony as their cybernetic one was being encoded with ideas and theology detrimental to their human side. It's our contention the UFF has stopped making them in many cases from scratch, but are taking the actual human, replacing parts they want to*

*be cybernetic, reprogramming them with their agenda and setting them loose on the world. It's more cost effective if you use the supplies at hand.*

We glared at each other for a moment before he leaned in and gently kissed my lips. I still couldn't wrap my mind around all he told me. Not yet, but a kiss was not what I had expected. *Why did you kiss me?*

*Because I wanted to. Hasn't anyone ever kissed you because they wanted to do so?*

I wasn't about to reveal my secrets to this man no matter how much I wanted to do so. Wanting sex no way indicated wanting a relationship, but I didn't think this man would want less. I would need to figure out a way to let him down gently, which was the right thing to do.

## CHAPTER SIX

I stared at him for a few more seconds before rousing myself to move. *We need to get out of this duct so you can explain why you feel this way, why you think clonedroids deserve this special treatment if they are stealing people to make it happen. And why you think they should become part of the IUA. I know there is more to this than what you told me.* I backed up over the grate and opened it, not allowing Javed to answer me yet. I wasn't ready for what he might have to say.

I looked down and groaned as there would not be an easy way. Shimming forward, I allowed my legs to dangle over the hall and lowered myself even closer to the floor. Still a good five feet away from the tile, I dropped. Somehow, I managed to get into a crouch, looked both ways to make sure we were still undetected and wished I had a laser pistol in my hand. Situations always looked better on this side of a weapon.

*It's clear down here.* I stood and walked as casual as possible to the end of the hall and looked down those corridors as well, surprised to see no one again. *Actually, it's too clear as there is nobody in sight. What do you think they are doing?*

*Hard to say. They may be trying to convince the crew that you've berserked or maybe worse. Come back and help me close the grate.* Javed had jumped down so quiet before walking up behind me while I scoped out the place from every conceivable angle.

By his side, I stood, put my hands on my hips and frowned. *You're going to have to lift me back up, you know.*

*Agreed.*

*So, how do we want to do this?* I stood there, desire pooling in my gut when I thought of his hands on my body.

*Do what? Close the grate?*

I looked at him, frustrated, only to note he checked me out as if he didn't have a care in the world. *Of course, I mean close the grate. We don't want anyone to figure out we were down here.*

*The conventional way I believe. I'll put hands together, you put your foot in them and I'll lift you up. If that doesn't do it, I'll put you on my shoulders.* He stopped looking at me to give me a glare.

Suddenly, I knew he was quite serious. I didn't weigh a lot as the military would never allow one

of their officers to be overweight. Still, my mass was an extra load on a man, who while muscular, tended to be more on the lean side. *I'm not going to hurt you, am I?*

Javed arched his brows. *I'm stronger than I look. Give me some credit here.* He leaned forward and cupped his hands for me to step into them. *Come on now, let me show you.*

*Are you sure you don't want another look at my ass?*

He chuckled again. *There will be plenty of time to look at your ass.*

*All right, if you insist.* I moved my hands to his shoulders for balance before he began his life. It was as if I were a child or a feather, he moved me up so easily into the air.

*Can you reach the grate?*

I'd almost forgot what he had lifted me for as he held me steady. I lifted my arms up and the ceiling was a little bit out of reach. *Just a little more.*

*Not a problem. Can you stiffen your legs?* He pushed me a little higher.

Yes. Locking my knees, I made myself straighter and pulled the grate closed. *It's done. Let's get out of here.*

As if in slow motion, he lowered my body, allowing me to slide down the whole length of his. I hadn't noticed before, but he was like fine tempered steel, all taut and hard, not at all like my

first assessment. As my abdomen passed over his crotch, I became aware of something else that was hard, even more so as my body touched his. My breath caught. I found myself looking into his warm, chocolate brown eyes and wanting to allow myself to fall into them. I wondered what was in store for me if I allowed myself such an indulgence.

*How much further to your private quarters?*

*Two turns and a hall.* I had to pull my attention from him. I went to the end and looked around the corner, trying to get my mind focused on the job at hand instead of Javed's hard-on. I was still surprised no one was in any place we were. Even though not many people would be traipsing the area on a normal basis, I always saw one or two of the maintenance crew. They had thought I was checking up on them. However today, there was no one here as I realized it were like the ship was abandoned. None of the usual happenings were in process.

*It could be that no one is in the area, you know.*

I shook my head realizing he had picked up on my thoughts yet again. *Not really. I usually see someone here when I come down. Most of the time they think I'm making sure they did their work, I guess for obvious reasons. Not a one of them I ever talked to questioned me about why I was here. I thought they*

*knew I did my job of checking on the whole ship periodically as a captain must.*

*That doesn't mean they don't know you have a hidden den here somewhere. You just think no one knows.*

*Fine. You can think that way if you want. In my life I had noticed one had to choose their battles and this wasn't one of them. If anyone knew, chances were someone had told them not because they had followed me the few times I had come here. I had a feeling we would have quite a few heated discussions during our time together and having sex was sure to be high on the list as well.*

*We made cautious movement down the corridor, coming to a junction where we turned right. One more and we're there. I heard voices somewhere on this floor, which made me move faster, but couldn't pinpoint a location. We've got to hurry.*

*Practically running now, I made the last turn and came to a door with a keypad entry. The entrance looked like any other security door hiding parts of the ship no one was meant to see except those who repaired them. Quick to enter my code, I opened the door and ushered him inside. I closed our access door the moment he cleared the door and turned to him. Do you think they heard us?*

No, I don't. I'm not sure they were even on this floor. Maybe you're right in thinking this is strange. One factor about the audiobots is they give us an acute sense of hearing until you're totally acclimated. After the adjustment period, your hearing will still be better than a normal human.

Does that mean you didn't hear them as loud as I did?

That's right.

I sat down in the nearest chair and began to rub my head. Now that we had stopped being active I developed a serious headache. *Did your head hurt in the beginning as well?*

Instantly, he was by my side, his hands at my shoulders rubbing the tension away, moving up to various areas on my skull. *Yes. I forgot all about that aspect. The headaches can be devastating. I had four days to adjust to these upgrades.*

I glanced over my shoulder before leaning my head forward to allow him to continue. *That feels good. Would you please explain to me why you think we need to incorporate all the clonedroids into our society? And why did you call the audiobots upgrades?*

*Because if you looked at me close, you'd see that I have a lot of cybernetic parts myself. Does this make me a clonedroid? I think not. And any item which makes us a better human, I consider an upgrade.*

I sighed. I had firsthand knowledge Orchid would rebuild their best soldiers with cybernetic parts if they had the chance. A fact I knew so very,

very well. *How were you hurt?* I tried to keep my thoughts emotionless since I needed to hear there were others like me. A wry chuckle echoed in my head and I wasn't sure if I had heard him.

*Which time?*

*Wow. I'd never met another operative who had cybernetic parts before.*

*There aren't a lot of us since the IUA practically outlawed the use of cybernetic enhancements in all except the most severe cases. I guess they never wanted a fully bio-cybernetic person. The only people who were allowed to be enhanced at all were those of Orchid. I'm not sure if they used us for experimentation or if they thought they helped us. Still, the process allowed each of us to continue living after a mission gone very wrong.*

I ignored his last comment. I knew what IUA was capable of doing to move their agenda forward. I wondered at times why I continued to work for them. Still, that agenda was better than most. *What parts of you are cybernetic?*

*Most of my joints, one arm and one leg. Almost all of my skin was replaced when I had been caught in a fire. I heal a little faster than most, but a paper cut still stings. I had a hard time getting my eyebrows and hair back.*

I kept myself from laughing because I empathized in more ways than he knew. *Sorry, I can't imagine you without your hair or eyebrows.*

*It wasn't funny at the time. My first mission was on the caste planet of Nurunda. The mission was horrible. I was the one who made it back barely alive. A wry smile was pasted on his face.*

*I'm sorry. I know most of us on the spaceships tend to forget there is always a war somewhere in the universe. I turned and looked at him. The scenario he described was so familiar to me, I almost shuddered in response. Thank you for all those times you went in to defend us and no one ever knew. I know the mental and physical toll of what you do. Or rather did since you're here protecting me.*

*He looked at me rather curious then. How...how do you know this?*

*I...I just know. I wasn't quite ready to divulge all my secrets. Some would remain hidden deep within until I felt it necessary to tell. I would talk when I was ready and not before.*

*I can wait.*

*I frowned. That implies you'll be around for a long time.*

*His eyes lit up with his smile. Are you telling me you didn't listen to what Fallon told you? I won't be leaving your side until one of us is dead.*

*I swallowed hard. That's harsh. Surely, there will be a time where we will part ways?*

*Not really. You're one of those whose name is very high on the target list and we don't even know why you're there at all. Until all the clonedroids accept our*

*offer or the bad ones are dead, I'll remain at your side and protect you till my dying breath.*

*I hoped we could work something out regarding your mission.* I closed my eyes. I didn't want anyone to be forced to remain at my side. And I certainly didn't want anyone to find out why I was on the list at all.

He gazed into my eyes and moved in front of me to kneel down. *What's wrong? Can't stand the heat?*

I did the unconscious movement of licking my lips as I practically felt his hands on my body. Or was I feeling him in my mind? I couldn't be sure. But I would not deny the emotions rushing over me where this man was concerned. I was hot and cold all at once. *You understand that no matter what you do, I am your superior officer...right?*

He leaned toward me and began to unzip my military blues. *I understand you're a beautiful woman who needs some extra special care right now. Allow me to provide that for you.*

I had always put this ship and this crew first. Never had I allowed myself to think of what I wanted, what I needed. Sex was always a release without bonds or thought. Now, here was this man who had taken a vow to stay beside me forever. How could I not think different of him when he had sacrificed the rest of his life to make sure I was safe?

*What did you have in mind?* Again, I tried to clear my thoughts because it would do us no good for him to know my turmoil.

*First a nice warm shower.* He stood and took my hand to pull me up.

*Alone?*

His warm chuckle reverberated through my mind. *Only if you want.* He pulled me into his arms and bent to kiss me, pushing apart my lips with his eager tongue. I sensed myself softening under his touch. To be held and cherished was great as it had been a long time since I had allowed anyone to get this close to me. There had been no reason for me to turn people away, I seemed to possess no feelings or kindred with another human being. Now, suddenly the world felt full of feelings and want and need, I couldn't deny myself any more.

*We need to get to the shower otherwise, we'll never have the chance.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I allowed him to pull me into the bathroom and this one had been made entirely for the indulgence of a starship captain with a larger shower stall and huge tub. The whole suite was decadent compared to other rooms on the ship, which tended to be more of the spartan and functional nature. I eyed the tub with envy, realizing lots of time would pass before I indulged that particular fantasy. I had a different one I wanted to play out on its marble floor tiles.

*I see they made a bathroom worthy of the captain. Many would say this is far too opulent for someone not of the ruling hunta.*

I narrowed my eyes, turned to look at him. I scrutinized him for a moment trying to figure what he did. I swore he flirted with me in a way in which I was unfamiliar. Years had passed since anyone had done so, years since anyone had desired me. *I suppose you heard what I was thinking. About the flirting.*

He nodded once. *I'm sorry I haven't been able to train you to fully shield your thoughts from me. We are too busy with other problems and delights right now. It's low priority.*

*Not a problem, you can teach me while we're in the shower.* I couldn't allow him to continue to know my every thought, which might be detrimental to both of us. His eyes darkened and I knew he understood I had a different agenda in mind for the here and now. I smiled to myself as I hadn't been so bold with anyone for quite a while. Heck, I wasn't sure I'd ever been this bold with anyone before.

He pulled me close and began to kiss me again, nibbling at the sides of my mouth before thrusting his tongue in to dominate mine as his arms held me close against his hard body. We continued to kiss each other, each tasting and feeling the other as our hands moved along the planes of our bodies. Soon, he moved from my mouth to begin pressing kisses on other parts of my face: my chin, my nose, my eyelids before working his way to my neck. I trembled in delight when his lips went to the pulse there, raining light feather kisses along its length. I still had my blue uniform on and didn't mind when he reached up to push the fabric off my shoulders a little, leaving them bare for his kisses.

*First, we need to get you out of these clothes.* I could almost feel the desire in him as his mind whispered to mine.

Slowly, he pulled the material off my shoulders, caressing each bit of skin he exposed with gentle fingers or mouth, making my skin glow with heat. His fingers touched my arms lightly as he moved down my chest, stopping for a brief second when they grazed the sides of my breasts and continued to push the fabric from my body. This would be an exquisite torture and I shivered in anticipation of what I hoped would happen, what I wanted to happen.

His soft chuckle made the sound slide around me like a nice warm, blanket, tucking me in tight, expectant. This was the first true sound I had heard since we had made our escape.

*Should we make noise out loud?* The question was more speculation since I knew what his answer would probably be. I so wanted to hear his voice, low and sultry, sliding along my very being.

His forehead wrinkled, indicating I was to lift my foot, so he could give the sole a quick rub before he gently placed it down on the cool tile. *Isn't this a totally soundproof room? I thought every captain's retreat was equipped that way to give them the utmost privacy. You know, so they might have a tryst if they so desired.*

*It normally is, but if the system has been compromised, who knows. I would suggest we be as quiet as possible. I guess that's what I was getting at.*

The warmth in his bright smile lit up the room and devastated me as I stood before him, my camisole and underwear askew from his tugging. *That maybe next to impossible with what I have in mind. Sex isn't meant to be quiet. It's meant to be loud and enjoyed.*

To prove his point, he worked his way down my abdomen, planting kisses through the thin fabric all along my taut stomach, making the muscles clench in expectation. The sensations he created sent shivers of delight down my spine and felt wonderful causing me to gasp in pleasure, a pleasure I denied myself for a very long time. I was waiting for this man to indulge and awaken me to a life full of sexual enjoyment. "You might be right," I managed to murmur.

"Sit down on the bench and I'll show you what I mean." He pushed me into the huge shower and down on the cold marble bench. I shivered for a moment from the temperature, but was soon overtaken by the feelings overwhelming my body as this man evoked a bliss in me long absent. "I don't think we'll have time for more, but one can always hope."

First he reached for the camisole as he knelt down in front of me for yet a second a time. "I

want you to want this. Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me like no one else. Tell me what I want to hear and I promise this will be like nothing you've felt before with anyone."

I looked at him and tried to separate my thoughts from my desires as they were suddenly one. Sometimes the two didn't match and this time I had to be very sure. I didn't want another flash in the pan relationship, I wanted a more permanent relationship and felt Javed wanted much the same. I looked at this man who had invaded my thoughts and life, realizing in the short time span I had known him, he might be *the one* even though there was an age difference. How he got there didn't matter. Swallowing hard, I knew then what my answer would be.

"Yes, I want this very much." My arms went around him and I drew him close to me, kissing him hard on the mouth. I allowed myself to savor every touch of his fingers, every feel as my hands roamed his body while his heady male scent engulfed me. In this moment, I wanted him more than I had wanted anyone in my life.

His hands went to my breasts and I moaned, arching toward him as the silken fabric heightened the sensation on my nipples. His talented hands moved down further, caressing my hipbone before one of them cupped my crotch.

"You're very beautiful, you know," he stated as he looked deep into my eyes. His warm voice sluiced over me like warm honey, all hot and sticky. I loved his voice, how the sound feels while in my mind, what I experienced when he spoke aloud, the very sound making me do whatever he wanted.

"Thank you. I can say that about you as well." I hoped my feelings were reflected in my eyes as emotions had always been hard for me to voice.

"If I'm not missing my guess, you're natural whereas I've had a few enhancements."

"What are a few enhancements between lovers?" I quipped while my insides cringed a little.

Going back on his heels between my legs, I saw his eyes darken with passion. He moved my camisole up with his warm fingers, bent forward and flicked my breast with his tongue, rolling the nipple between his teeth as his free hand caressed my other breast. I groaned and arched into his mouth, wondering why I had never experienced these feelings with anyone. Sure, I had had lovers, but this man was special, so very special and feelings came to the top, which I had never before experienced.

"We can do this in silence if you'd like. You know, just to try it out."

"What do you mean silently? As in talking to each other mentally?" I was somewhat taken aback as I knew what he meant, but wasn't sure I could handle his request yet.

"Tell each other what we like. Sometimes there are results lovers want from one another, but they can't put their feelings into words. The audiobots might make it easier to talk to each other during sex as your mind is feeling more than thinking. It's a thought." Javed glanced up at me, our eyes locking before he went to my other breast. He pulled the nipple into his mouth, rolling the bud until rock hard and I again arched into him.

"Or we can do a combination of both." *I don't know if that will be good or not. I can tell you even if you had taught me how to shield myself this is one time that almost all my defenses are down.* "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

*Good point. Combination of both then.* "I understand what you're saying. If you've never been sexually or emotionally expressive, you might take a while to allow another into your thoughts as you've always been in control. You need to let loose a little, shut out the outside world and remember at this moment there are only us two."

I grabbed his hair and pulled him back to look at me. "Have you ever made love to someone while you've had this technology?"

"Never. You're my first." He kissed me again and I knew the time for talking was long over.

Moving once again to my breast, he sucked on one until the nipple popped into his hot mouth, lolling his tongue around the tight aureole before his gentle bite sent a shockwave of desire through me. All I could do was gasp as wave after wave of sensation surged over me making every nerve in my body tingle with pleasure.

A fire was building in my crotch and I sensed I would die if Javed didn't get there soon. *Down, please, go down further,* I thought, forgetting he heard me, as my breaths came in short gasps filled with pleasure.

*Patience. Good things...*

*Screw the good things...it's been way too long...I want the bad things. And I want them now.* My hands grabbed his head and tried to push him down to my crotch.

His hand moved further down my body reaching into my underwear, but he kept his eyes focused on mine for a moment longer. *We don't need these clothes any more, do we?*

*As long as you take yours off as well.*

*Deal.*

He was up in a flash, peeling his clothes off his cinnamon colored flesh, his cock jutted rock hard from his firm body. I reached up and stroked him, moving my mouth to caress the soft head of his

penis, reveling in the groan he elicited as my tongue moved on the tender piece of flesh.

*You still have your clothes on.* His thought conveyed a hint of heat as it singed my mind with its heat.

*I know.* I continued to lick his cock, running my tongue along the rim before plopping the head into my mouth for a second time. I used my tongue as a weapon for sexual torture and if the movements of his body were any indication, I did quite well.

*No fair. I wanted to do you first.*

*You'll have your turn. That's what you get for still being the one standing.* I nipped and stroked his cock with a firm hand, continuing to rub him with my mouth, feeling him grow stronger and bigger with each lick and nip. I reached down between us and squeezed his balls and he groaned in pleasure. He placed his hands on the wall behind me and leaned even more into me, his cock sliding deeper down my throat.

*Your mouth feels so good...so right...lick the head some more.*

I perceived the want and need in his thoughts as I complied with his wishes as his body arched into me. I continued to nip and stroke his hard shaft with my hands and mouth, bringing even more moans. I returned to the purple mushroom head and rimmed him with my tongue yet again

and again. I couldn't wait to feel his tongue on my body, to feel him inside me as he turned me on like no other had ever done. Heck, I got a thrill sucking his cock, which had never been high on my list of priorities before. He was right, I had always been the one in control.

*I can hear you.* His heavy breathing hot on the top of my head. *This is the one time where it's hard to shield another from our thoughts. Remember you said so yourself. Thoughts...feelings get so intertwined.*

*I understand.* I continued to lave him with my mouth wanting even more.

*I can't wait any more. I need to be inside you now.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I considered his strength as he pushed me away from him, yet understood the gentleness I felt within his touch. With his cybernetic implants, I knew he could seriously hurt me. He moved me outside the huge shower stall and lifted me up to sit on the edge of the vanity. As I gazed into his eyes, I saw his darken even more with passion as his dick probed my slick folds.

*This time is going to be hard and quick. Sorry, but it's been a long, long time for me as well.*

I grunted as he slammed into me and I was more complete than I had ever been as he stretched me to accommodate his rather large penis. Before long, we were bathed in sweat as we moved together. Javed pulled me to him again and again as the pleasure ran through my body like a precision laser, intense and hot white, as I panted with effort.

I caressed his nipples, pinching one then the other as his head fell back in pleasure. Wrapping

his arms even more tight around me, he began to stroke me in long, hard, deliberate moves. The feelings sizzled between us and made me arch even closer to him.

"I want you to come while I'm inside you," he whispered into my ear, the sound all harsh and needy.

"I've never done that before..." I gasped as he thrust into me yet again.

"You will now," he said close to my ear, the raspy whisper making me shiver in delight. He moved my body toward a total fulfillment I had always dreamed about. I tried my hardest to hold onto emotions that welled up deep inside me, releasing things I thought long buried.

*Come on now, just a little more.*

I perceived him coaxing me inside my head as he had found my hot spot deep inside me, his body slamming against me over and over. Beginning as a sizzling white coil deep within me, the waves began to roll over me again and again. I was flung into the deepest black hole only to be released as a supernova on the other side, not even caring if such an act were a possibility. The vortex spun around me as I groaned and thrust onto him over and over as the erotic fire consumed me.

I reached around and grabbed his ass and pulled him to me, caressing him as I encouraged him to completion. Javed's arms tightened in an

almost bruising grip as he pulled me to him, pounding into my over sensitive crotch. Squeezing him and kissing sensitive spots all over only served to heighten his pleasure as he stiffened, then thrust twice in rapid succession before ending with a shuddering groan, clutching me to him.

Leaning against me, forehead to forehead, I observed the passion in his eyes and his caring nature as he voiced what I had hoped. *That was absolutely amazing.*

*I hoped you'd feel that way as I know I did. Now we need to take a shower and work out some sort of plan for getting out of here and taking back control of my ship.* I grinned up at him, feeling like a Cheshire cat.

He stepped away from me, his now flaccid cock fell away as I looked at his glistening body. I pushed myself off the vanity and went unashamed to the shower and turned the water on. *I've got a question or two. We might as well plan as we shower.*

He nodded. *Agreed.*

Adjusting the temperature, the warm water felt good against my skin. This was a benefit I would enjoy as I noted aches and pains I hadn't had in a while. Good aches and pains. I turned to gaze at my lover through the glass. *You know there is room enough for two.*

*I don't think I can keep my hands off you, he warned.*

*Don't worry, that's why I'm the captain. Why don't you come in?* I gave him what I thought was my most coy look.

He stood there a few more minutes, eventually moving forward and inside. *This is nice.* He reached for the soap. *I would help you, but we'll take longer if I do.*

I nodded and smiled to myself. *I know, but we have other tasks to do and talk about.*

He gave a heavy sigh and his shoulders drooped a little before he turned to me. *I had hopes for a leisurely day in bed. I've been on the front lines of this disaster for far too long.*

*I'm sure you are.* Now I gave him a broad smile. *But the answer is no and while you might have cybernetic parts, I'm not without my ways.*

*Ah...I see...what's your question?*

I turned away and got my sponge, lathered and thought a moment how to formulate what I had in mind. *Have you ever tried to introduce the audiobots into a ship's AI?*

*What? Whatever for?* I noticed the confusion in his thoughts.

*For the same reason you did the process to me. If the ship can be audio-linked to us in such a way that we can issue commands to him no one else can hear, don't you think that would be an advantage? After all, the AI's are our greatest asset.*

A slow shake of his head indicated his lack of knowledge. *I don't know. We can have Trevor check with Henrietta, but I'm pretty sure this has never been thought of at all. How would we get the bots into the system? Obviously, not the same way I got them into you.*

*Obviously. I said sarcastically and scowled trying to think of some way. The audio-bots are programmed...right? I mean, can't we program them to go into the audio software and somehow infiltrate the system that way?*

*We could try. Remember the bots know and understand a human body. I'm not sure we can reprogram them for discovering and understanding an AI unit as big as a ship.*

*I arched an eyebrow. How can you even say a thought like that out loud? Aren't you even willing to try? I mean we won't know until we do.*

*He sighed. I'm not sure we wouldn't be wasting our time. This is nanotechnology at its best, but the bots are small in comparison with the vastness of this, or any ships', AI. The communication works in a ship with AI are huge. I don't know all the schematics by heart and I bet you don't either. Most captains have better duties to do.*

*I sighed. I knew he was right, but there had to be a way we were able to notify Trevor without anyone knowing we did so. Look, if what you say is true about the clonedroids hacking into the ship's computer system, then we can't ever be sure patching*

*into the computer from here is going to be safe. If they truly have compromised this ship, they will eventually notice we're here and come for us.*

*He shook his head. Let me think for a moment. I know what you're saying, but the first agenda item we need to do is to make Trevor mask the energy spikes, which would indicate there's someone living in this room.*

*Makes sense to me as this room is supposed to possess extra shielding from outside infiltrations. Remember, this room is meant for the captain for whatever reason deemed necessary. Like we talked about earlier.*

*There's one of these rooms in engineer though as well...that's where Fallon went to hide.*

*Yes, there is. The commander of the fleet, the captain and the chief engineer knows about that room which is similar to the list of who knows about this one. You can destroy a ship from there. In here, you can only plan that destruction. But you can make their lives a living hell from here. I offered a soft laugh.*

*I'm sure you can, above all when if you have the might of the ship's AI behind you.*

*It always pays to be friendly to your AI. But there are a few more questions I need to ask.*

*I'll answer if I can.*

*I knew he would answer as honest as he could. For some reason, I knew we had no secrets now or ever. What makes these clonedroids think they are alive and equal to us?*

*What makes any of us think we're alive? These are creatures of our own making and if we imbed them with intelligence equal to our own, then they should get some rights, shouldn't they?*

I frowned at him as I didn't want a debate regarding the clonedroids. *Why were they developed again?*

*Two reasons I can surmise. One, being that they were meant to replace us in situations where humans couldn't go thus making them expendable. And two, I do believe they were started for medical purposes. After all, you can't reject your own cells.*

*So basically, they didn't expect them to think like us or have any intelligence at all. They wanted automons.*

*That wasn't the original intent. Devlin stole all the ideas and technology from other worlds, then somehow modified them to be sentient beings. I'm not sure if they even understand how he accomplished that feat.*

*How can a machine be a sentient being? It's a machine. I didn't care if I sounded frustrated I was. If we were playing God, what would be next?*

*That's the problem, they have cybernetic parts and human parts. Just like me. And remember I told you about IUA thinking they are using real people as well as ones they grow. He looked at me with an odd mixture of emotions, pleasure, pain and something akin to confusion.*

*Do they have brains like us?*

*Again, a combination of machine and biology. No one knows exactly what combination Devlin used, but*

*he created a whole new race as far as I'm concerned. They look like us and they think like us. They have emotions and unless you have the ability to decipher the difference, which Fallon 2 gave us, you could never tell us from them in a regular situation. They are the perfect blend of machine and man. Even the ones, which were human first. Hence, the scary part where they are concerned.*

I swallowed hard as this presented a whole new set of problems. I kept myself from shuddering as the ones that scared me the most were those who had been human first. What would make someone give up their life like that? Or better yet, why were they in a position to be remade in the image of a clonedroid? *What are their weaknesses?*

He shook his head. *That's where you're missing the point. There are none because they are essentially us with enhancements. Lots of enhancements. They have a skeleton, which has malamintine laced through the structure making the bones virtually unbreakable. I'm sure that if we found a way around that, we could kill them in more traditional ways.*

*There has to be some way to take them down. Otherwise, this is going to be a short-lived battle. I breathed in a heavy breath. This was a situation where no captain had experience with as they appeared to be an unbeatable foe.*

*I do know that Fallon found a frequency which put them all in a trance-like state. I think Fallon 2 is the only one who knows why the EMP even works. The*

*part we don't know for sure is if they can reproduce. But once they do, we might be considered an inferior species. I'm sure you understand the implications of that fact.*

Sighing, I sat there for a few moments, trying hard to digest the information. *What then are their greatest assets?*

*Again, two pieces that I can see. One would be the fact they can be programmed for any and I mean any situation whether they had the experience or not. The part they can't program would be the emotional component because a person must feel and have experienced that feeling before the clonedroid is able to reproduce it. If it's not there in the first place, there is nothing to reproduce. Two, they would be more adaptable. They would be able to change anything about themselves to survive in an environment that normal humans couldn't.*

*That's why Fallon told me to give them the choice, isn't it?*

He gazed at me for a few moments, assessing how I would take his answer before nodding once. Yes.

*We need an alliance with them or become extinct ourselves.* I had to sit there and digest this bit of information before I moved on.

Yes.

I glanced up at Javed. I couldn't imagine a world without biological people. I thought about all the horrible actions people had done to each

other over the millennia and knew we had the power to make sure those events never happened again. A complete overhaul on how we thought about ourselves would be needed before we could fully integrate. If human and clonedroid could come together over like issues, maybe outcomes would change. But it was already hard to get two like species to come to grips with each other. History proved it out over and over again.

*I imagine one could program an army of like beings, making them killing machines. This makes them very scary on one hand.*

*Aidan is almost sure of it. He's so sure that he's told every operative to keep an eye out for his brother. He knows the original was killed. He saw Fallon kill him. But since they can imprint any clonedroid with any personality, he knows his brother wouldn't pass up the opportunity to rise again.*

*I shuddered at the thought. I think the time for talking is done, we need action.*

## CHAPTER NINE

It had been five days since we had managed our first escape. Five days of arguing, making love and planning to get my ship back. We had made and rejected more strategies than I thought ever possible in the few hours we had been holed up together. After all, there were so many ways you could sneak to the bridge. We had had very little contact with Trevor as he was afraid to blow our cover. That sentiment had come in the form of a cryptic message, which had taken me hours to decode. The message arrived in an ancient Earth dialect I hadn't seen since the academy and taxed my memory along with my computer skills. Trevor hadn't made contact since, but he was still receiving our messages because we'd get the occasional acknowledgement.

I blinked and sighed. Trevor's lack of communication had been the source of one major argument. And because of our disagreement, Javed wouldn't even entertain my idea with the

audiobots for any reasons. So I had told my ship's AI to research the possibility all he could. Once complete, he was then to let us know whether the procedure would even be a possibility. The convenience and secrecy factor would dramatically increase our chances.

*Are you sure Trevor has masked us?*

I looked at Javed again as I typed away on the flat keyboard. He was even more than a perfectionist than I was. *I'm completely certain. You don't notice anyone trying to pound down the door, do you? He said he would make sure there were no signs of consumption of any kind from this cabin at all. I'm sure he's doing the best he can do, but time isn't on our side.*

*What are you doing right now? I just completed upgrading the recognition system so Trevor can tell who is clonedroid and who isn't. We should have his scans of the ship back in an hour, then we can move forward. We can't continue to interface with him and not expect to be caught.*

Javed paced yet again in our small room. His actions affected me even more in the confined space. I was edgy, stressed in a way I couldn't define. While I had grown to care for this man more and more, I wasn't sure I liked his very cautious streak. Sure, Fallon had told him to protect me, but sometimes I wondered if he realized I was the captain of this ship. I was highly trained for a lot of situations and this had been

one of them. There were times I swore he treated me like a child instead of an intelligent woman.

I realized he watched me closely and nodded and wondered how many of my crew had been replaced by the UFF's clonedroids while I continued to ignore his last comment. *Do you think any of them will take us up on our offer?* I observed him, trying to gauge if I would get the same reaction as before or not, yet concerned as we had gone over and over this in the last five days. I had a lot of trepidation whereas Javed thought the way to reach them was to offer them their freedom through diplomatic means. That was if they didn't kill us first.

*I think our fate would depend how many are on the ship and what they are programmed with as far as personality. According to your personnel files, your crew is loyal to you overall. I understand you had a few bad eggs, which you have very effectively controlled over the years. Still, I doubt any of them would be up to mutiny. Crimes of passion maybe, but not mutiny. But if their creators loaded the whole of UFF's rhetoric into their personality as well, we don't know what we'll get other than a group, which has a deep hatred of the IUA. And therefore, us.*

*How bad was the situation on the Lanko?* I had asked this question at least a thousand times. I needed to get my feelings around the thought that I might kill a third or more of my crew to take back my ship. An act which necessitated the death

of one's crew wouldn't sit well with any captain and I didn't want to leave this as my legacy.

*Bek, we've gone over this before. Hey, now is the time to not fall apart on me. What's wrong?* Javed crossed the room and cupped my cheek in a gentle hand.

*How can you ask that? Most of the people on this ship are family...my family...there has to be a way we can wipe the bad and replace them with the good?* I felt the emotion bubbling to the surface like a boiling cauldron. These people had been my family for more years than I cared to remember. They were all I had when life went bad as it occasionally did. Fallon had been so far away most of those times and we had visited each other so little in the years since the academy even though we had talked more or less weekly.

*He closed his eyes as if he suffered my pain. I've told you this before, only if we can wipe them clean and start fresh. Even then we can't guarantee that the person you get will be the one you remember. I am so sorry, but your crew will never be the same.*

*I stopped and rubbed my face to get a grip on my emotions. This can't be all there is. It's a unacceptable scenario. We can't win, they can't win. It's a no win situation. No one willing goes into one without having a damn good back up plan.*

*Don't give you training for that in the academy do they? Look, we're doing what we can with the knowledge we have. There isn't much there as far as*

*intelligence goes or at least not when I left the Lanko. The chatter has died down and it's my hope Fallon 2 has gotten through to them somehow. If not, I suspected we'd hear fighting in this very hall as they tried to get through the door.*

I gazed at him through tired eyes. The whole time we had been hidden we'd gone through every bit of intel we had and he was correct. There wasn't much. And Trevor had said the same thing. Added to the fact we received no new information and one could say we had fallen off the fricking grid. Suddenly, my heart beat rose and the feeling wasn't from good as I had a sick sense in the pit of my stomach. *Have you checked our position recently?*

*No. Why do you ask?*

I pulled up the star charts and our position as discreet as possible from the data, which scrolled across the screen. I had been lucky the basics were hardwired into this console within the first year of my command. They had come in handy over the years. If nothing else, I made sure my subordinates did what they were supposed to be doing when I had given an order. *I-I don't know. I remembered a bit of a conversation Trevor and I had earlier.*

*And that was?* Javed stared at me intently.

*He mentioned the fact he hadn't been able to get much information either. I said jokingly maybe we'd fallen off the grid and he agreed even though his sensors*

*said that we were where we're supposed to be, patrolling the Jaxxon Quadrant.*

*Javed stared at me. You're kidding.*

*No, I'm not. I didn't put the information together until right now. I scanned the screen as the data went past.*

*He came to stand beside me and placed his hand on my shoulder. How could Trevor's sensors not know this?*

*There are a million ways to screw with an AI and not disable him. Fallon and I did once in a simulation that's why I'll be ticked with myself if I didn't spot this earlier. We tried to beat that no-win scenario you talked about.*

*Really? I can understand you're upset with yourself, but you'll need to tell me about the no-win scenario sometime. He stood over me and I knew he double-checked my work. I don't see anything wrong. We're still in the Jaxxon quadrant.*

*Yeah, we are, but we're not where we're supposed to be. We're hundreds of light years away from our original patrol area. My shoulders slumped and I leaned back in the chair. This was not good for a lot of reasons.*

*Where are we?*

*We're next to some decrepit mining colony. I peered closer to the screen. Close to some place called Jerund 1 probably named after the person who first mined here.*

Javed started pacing again. *Jerund 1, Jerund 1...where have I heard that name before?*

His voice trailed off in my mind and I shrugged my shoulders. *I don't know. I do know that up until a few years ago, they were mining malamintine from the main mine. Does that help?*

*My cybernetic parts are made from a composite where the malamintine is the base. Why didn't I pick up on this!* He ran his hand through his hair, the frustration plain on his face. It was obvious we had been locked up in this room way too long. *Looks like you're not the one upset with themselves right now.*

*What are you talking about?* I frowned up at him, lifting a brow.

He held up his arm. *If you happen to gouge my arm and nick the metal below the surface, not only would the skin grow back, but the pseudo-bone as well. We talked a little the first day we were here on what made up cybernetic parts. I didn't go into any detail at the time because it seemed unnecessary.*

My mouth dropped as this was even beyond my ability. *How can that be?*

*The scientists came up with this weird composite, which grows in some type of lattice crystal structure not unsimilar to bone. I believe that the malamintine gave them the breakthrough they needed to make the technology work. And if it's all programmed right, you'd heal in a flash. But not all clonedroids possess the capability.* He shook his head as if to clear the

cobwebs. Well, that gives us more pieces of the puzzle. I assume they are here to get more malamintine and they managed to screw somewhat with Trevor's main sensor array to get us close to the mine without anyone knowing.

I pursed my lips, thinking about where we were. They haven't mined there for years. Maybe it's a meeting place or just one of their bases of operation. And they may not have done anything to Trevor because there are some places in this quadrant where the sensors are pretty useless and communications are nil. I believe the problem has to do with the magnetics of the quadrant and the heavy iron planetoids. I looked up at him. It's necessary to go out and take a look at the situation ourselves. And, if we're ever going to try to get the audiobots into Trevor, sooner would be better.

He sat down, then looked at me and grunted. I had learned over the days when he made that noise I was required to convince him of my position. Look, we don't know what this means. If we go out before we are ready, we can't win.

You don't know that. We can't remain holed up here as in your estimation we'll never be ready or able to win. I got up and stomped to the bathroom and leaned against the vanity, chest heaving. I was tired of doing nothing, tired of not being a captain. I looked at myself in the mirror, the dark circles telling me of too many nights without sleep. I observed him as he came up behind me and gazed at him in the mirror.

*Look, it will only be another day at the most. Promise. We're done with the programming, which will let us scan all the crew in one sweep. The one item left is to make sure we get access to all the weapon lockers and a clear path to the bridge. Once we're there, we should have minimal trouble taking over the ship. My problem is holding our position, which I've told you more than once as we'll need more people than just us two.*

I nodded and leaned back into him as he placed his hands next to mine on the counter. *I hear what you're saying, but I am so tired of waiting for the right moment. The time may never be right.*

*I know, but my instructions were to protect you and the only way I can do that is with a well-defined plan.* He rubbed my shoulders and leaned over to kiss the back of my neck.

*I'll give you one more day. We leave tomorrow.* I turned and faced him, my body rubbing against his. *Is that clear?*

*As a bell.* He leaned in and kissed me, taking his time to arouse my senses.

I gave him a lopsided smile. *Do we have time for this?*

*We always have time for this.* He reached up and grabbed my hair, pulling me closer to him. *I will never get enough of you.*

He swung me up into his arms and carried me to the bed and gently laid me down, his eyes worshiping me with their warmth. His hands

caressed me through my uniform and my body craved his touch. I reached out and touched his hands, amazed at how soft and wonderful they felt. *Do they ever hurt?*

## CHAPTER TEN

He looked at me startled, turning away so I couldn't see his face. *I don't think about that mission much. Time has a way of diminishing the memory and the incident happened a long time ago.*

*I know, but sometimes the pain never goes away. Or so I'm told.* I watched him for a moment and sat up straight, drawing him to me as all my nerve endings tingled with desire for him. He needed to understand what a wonderful and sexy man he was. I wanted this and had waited all my life for someone I considered my equal, for someone like him. He would never reject me for who I was. He would never consider me a freak or any of those other names I had always thought people would call me if they knew all about me. I knew no matter how strong he was, part of him still hurt from waking up with non-biological parts. All of us did. Now, I need to let him know his differences didn't matter to me. They would never matter to me.

I reached up with gentle hands and turned his face back to mine. I kissed his mouth and tenderly pulled in his bottom lip to suck on it, nipping him with my teeth. He put one knee between my legs, rubbing me up and down with his limb before pushing me back onto the bed until his hard body was on top of me. His rigid cock pressed against my crotch, straining to fulfill its mission as I became wetter by the moment.

It took so little for us to be all over each other. I likened our affair to being a couple of high school kids, all full of hormones and desire although I had never experienced the feelings myself before at any time. This was new and young and fresh. Moving to his neck, I placed gentle kisses along his cinnamon skin, giving comfort where I could, hoping to make him understand I meant nothing bad by my questions. Even though he never said a word, I knew that being part cybernetic bothered him at times like the fact did me.

*I don't care, you know. I don't care how you're put together or with what. I like you for who you are, not what.* I had to convince him his parts made no difference to me. They would never, ever make any difference as I was beginning to feel deeply for this man and would continue to do so long after this mission was over.

He gazed into my eyes as if measuring my intent. *I know. But sometimes...I feel you hesitate...like...*

*That has never been my intention. I care for you, care for you profoundly, Javed Malik.* I reached for his hand and pulled him closer to run his fingers over my lips, sucking in one to show my sexual intent. I moved the other toward my breast, knowing he would give me pleasure.

*You touch me in ways I never thought imaginable.* I tried to make my thought the breath of fresh air I knew we both needed.

The breathlessness of his thought came unbidden into my mind and I smiled. *I'm going to touch you even more. I want to touch you.* I slipped my hands inside his uniform and around to his back. The tiny scars crisscrossed his spine under my fingers as my mind processed the information conveyed on his body. This beautiful man had been disassembled and reassembled long before he came to me. My duty was to make sure nothing bad ever happened to him again. Just like he was meant to do for me.

*Isn't it a court marshal level offense to seduce your captain?*

I looked at him and smiled as I noted he was very serious for once. I supposed this was his last defense. *Since I'm the captain, I don't think the rule will make a difference.*

*You're sure this is what you want?* A quick look of concern flashed across his handsome face.

*Why do you ask yet again?* I gave him a confused glance as he had asked this question more than once during the days we had been confined. I had never pulled rank on any one who had shared my bed, I wouldn't start now.

*Because from this point on, there will be no turning back. You must know that?*

It was my turn to be surprised as I realized he was right. There would be no going back because if we didn't obtain our objective, we would die. *I know. And I am very, very sure I want this. I've never wanted anything or anyone more in my life.*

*Anyone?*

I glimpsed the want and need in his face, recognized my answer would affect him in a deep and profound way. *Anyone.*

In a sudden burst, his self control broke as he began to pull at my clothes, drawing them down over my body, pulling them off my pliant flesh. He stood between my legs and moved the fabric over my hips and down my legs, to toss the uniform in the corner. He sat on the floor between my knees and dipped his head and nuzzled my crotch, making me ache with need as I creamed myself in anticipation of the pleasure I knew to be forthcoming.

He pushed the fabric of my underwear aside as his tongue licked my labia and dipped into my wet slit to lap at my vagina. He stroked and watched me as my body began to heat up under his expert touch as he knew exactly what I liked, what I needed. Soon I thrust my hips up, wanting more. He grabbed my knees and pulled me closer to the edge of the bed and removed the last piece of material which separated him from claiming his prize. He pulled my underwear over my feet and stopped to caress my soft instep, teasing me, making me crave his mouth even more in all those secret places.

“Get back where you belong,” I managed to get out in a breathless whisper as my heart beat even faster as I took in his handsome features. Chuckling softly, I experienced his hot breath on my body as he spread me wide for his touch.

*I belong wherever I want to be.* His mind touched mine in the most erotic gesture ever as he outlined mentally what he would do to me and for me.

I was so lost in the sensation all I did was moan in response as he leaned in to let his tongue stroke me yet again on my sensitive clit. My body was assaulted with even more as his fingers began to caress me along with his tongue and he touched me in his special way. One long finger slid into me, reaching far inside to touch my hot spot as I

nearly came off the bed with excitement, sliding out to stroke me yet again.

*God that feels good.* I groaned with satisfaction. My body arched into him even more. *You know me so very well.* Each stroke brought me closer and closer as I writhed in response to each lick and nip of his sexy tongue and mouth. He would get me so close, then pull back a fraction to heighten my pleasure before zooming in again to tease me.

Using his thumb on me, I knew he stopped briefly to look at me again and I hoped he liked what he saw. I was also grateful he had taught me on the second day of our confinement how to shield some of my thoughts from him. Not that it always worked, but the majority of the time, I hid parts of myself from him even though we hadn't tried to do so yet during a stressful situation. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to know how much he blew my mind or how much I cared for his very being or touch. He rubbed my clit and made my body grow under his gentle ministrations. Yet, I wanted more, craved more.

He put another finger into me, slow, easy and used the fluid he got there to rub me top to bottom, paying special attention to my ass. I had never known my bottom to be such an erogenous zone. In these last five days with Javed I had established what I had been missing as my ass became another hot spot of endless delight. With

tender strokes, he worked my ass and sucked on my clit until I was a mass of burning awareness as his fingers independently moved in and out of me.

Until this man, I had never felt any sensations like these before as no one had ever touched me this way. When I had had my other sexual encounters, I could name a bare few where sex had been for my total bliss. This man had always taken care of my needs first. My delight gave him a joy I could feel. And I was beginning to love him for his attention to my experiences.

I stopped cold.

*Something wrong?*

The question came gently to my mind and I tried my best not to clench up. We had to get through this before I declared my feelings. We had to live. Enemies would use those feelings against you if they ever found them out. *No, no, nothing's wrong.*

He stopped and looked at me, his chin resting on my lower abdomen. *You say that as if there is. Do you want to stop?*

*Oh, heavens no!* My heart skipped a beat as I realized my actions caused him to pause. *Please...I...we need this before tomorrow. Who knows when the next time will be? Who knows if we'll even survive the day?*

*All right, remember, you asked for it.*

His finger penetrated my ass in a slow sensual way and I was nearly undone as the new sensations washed over me in orgasmic waves. I breathed deep, heavy breaths and craved even more as I pushed hard against his hand. *That feels...wonderful.* The feelings were intense as he moved the finger in my cunt and the one in my ass at the same time.

*Let the emotions over take you, wash over you.*

His whisper in my mind was so seductive and inviting all I thought of was him as he moved both fingers in and out of my body even harder, more intense. He moved once again on my clit and blew lightly and I knew a few moments respite would occur before I was flung once again to the far reaches of space. He alternated between his hot tongue and his finger on my clit and I was fast becoming one quivering mass of flesh. I let out a smooth moan and began to pump my hips as my body throbbed more with every little movement.

As if knowing I was close, Javed bit down on my clit. In an instant, I was flying in the heavens, reaching for the stars as the molten, erotic spasms engulfed my body in orgasmic pleasure. My body hadn't even stopped quivering when he entered me in one swift motion. I would never get used to the fact this man filled me completely as a slight burning sensation stung my loins yet again. I

spread my legs even wider to allow him complete access to my blazing cunt.

*Have I told you how much I love being in your body? You complete me like no other.*

These thoughts warmed my soul and I arched to meet him. *Have I told you how much pleasure you bring me?*

He stroked me inside with his hard cock as each movement took me by surprise and my insides built again for another mind-blowing orgasm. This man was more than the sum of his parts as I realized his cybernetics didn't matter. I didn't care if the clonedroids were man-made because sentient meant they knew right and wrong. They would love and laugh and care for those around them. Everything this man had been telling me for days fell into place. I knew what I had to do for my crew and the clonedroids.

I pulled him to me with a fierce jerk, kissing him with deep soul-searching kisses and relished each movement of his body into mine. His very philosophy invaded my soul and for the first time in my life I got what I was supposed to understand, I got what it meant to be a captain. Running hot kisses over his face, I reached around and grabbed his ass, pulling him even deeper inside me as he rubbed my inner core.

Soon the thrusts became longer, deeper as my cunt muscles squeezed him tightly with another

orgasm. I arched up and felt him press into me again and again, followed by a controlled cry of release as he came deep within my spasming body.

Almost immediately, he touched his forehead to mine and gazed into my eyes. *Captain Taylor, I do believe I'm in love with you.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I had a hard time sleeping that night and I knew the reason wasn't from what we had planned for tomorrow. Not that our mission wasn't a precision operation because the task was as precise as we could make it. No, my problem was more of a personal nature and something I had so tried to avoid all my life. Complicated was the word I would give our situation and that just scratched the surface. Javed had changed the rules and I wasn't so sure I liked the change.

There was a reason those in space were supposed to be a kind of fuck-them-and-leave-them type of person in most scenarios. Even more so with me. Relationships represented complications beyond the imagination and I hated complicated. Yes, IUA was arrogant to think people couldn't have human contact and emotions within the confines of a ship. Those were necessary notions as far as they were concerned. But falling in love was a whole different matter as

enemies might use those we loved as leverage against a captain or other crewmember.

The one part of my oath I had never tried to break loomed in front of me like an obstacle to overcome. And here I was, in love with the man sent to protect me and someone younger to boot. There I had said the words to myself and I wondered if I had truly broken away from my academy training . Sighing, I got up and gazed down at him while he slept. We had finished our lovemaking session by working out all the different scenarios we might find ourselves in today as we lay there entwined in each other's arms. Some of them had ended with the death of one of us as we didn't see any way out of a confrontation with the enemy.

But then again, who was the enemy? If what Fallon had told me was true, the clonedroids wanted what all people wanted. Hearth, family, home. How many times had I heard that growing up on Urban Delta 2418 from my mother? She had told me over and over again, the important possessions in the world were family and friends. And for her, her work ranked right up there as well.

Still, she had told me more than once I must have an emotional cog loose or some other defect since I had a hard time forming attachments. Fallon had been the lone one person who had ever

gotten close to me . I knew she thought I was a total pain in the ass as in my younger days I was such a perfectionist. And in my mother's eyes, nothing was ever perfect. Even so, I knew Mom was proud of me as no one in the family had ever gotten into the academy or had the privilege to graduate at the head of their class.

I would never forget the conversation the day I graduated as she explained to me that life wasn't like what they said in the books. Life was meant to be lived and touched and kissed and filled with those items, which were important. I sighed again and knew I would visit my mother when all this was over because the situation had driven home the importance of family. Fallon, too, as my mom had a soft spot for my orphaned best friend.

I went and took a warm shower, the first alone in a while. When I was in the academy, I would go to the private showers, lock the doors and cry my eyes out in the privacy of the warm water. Crying helped me in many ways to cope with the harsh realities of the academy as one became hard and more removed from the human race we were meant to protect.

Letting the hot liquid sluice over my body, I let the fluid wash away my troubles as I began to put my game face on. I had warned Javed I would go into this mode and get all cranky on him. He had smiled and told me he had expected my mood

shift much sooner. I took a deep breath and went over what we knew and tried to anticipate what we didn't know in my mind. There was so much to hazard and we still hadn't had much communication with Trevor.

It made me wonder if they didn't shut him down or imprinted him with someone new. I shuddered to think about that as I realized I would be losing a good friend and confidant. I got out, reached for a towel and dried myself, looking one last time in the mirror before going back out.

The moment I opened the door, awareness crept over me with a definite bad vibe. I was rewarded with the sight of Javed hastily pulling on his clothes.

*Glad you had time for a shower as I don't. Trevor just warned me they're coming.*

I threw a startled look his way as I rushed to my clothes. *Was he specific in telling us which they?*

*He made a comment about an Ensign Garrison and ...*

*I cut him off. Never mind. I know which ones he'll be bringing with him. Crap, I would wish for anyone but those thugs. I jerked on my clothes and pulled on my shoes.*

*You know them.*

*Know them? I threw them in the brig at least once a month. Those guys were bullies and that's saying the nice details. I had tried on more than one occasion to get them transferred, but that never happened. The*

*Admiral Command had told me I could learn to deal with it. Those were the ones you noticed in my computer files, the ones you thought were capable of committing a crime of passion.*

*I remember.*

*I chuckled. We got what we need? Let's go show them this old bird still has a few tricks up her sleeve.*

*He tossed me a pack and nodded. I believe so. I'll go first.*

*I appreciated the laser pistol in his hand and knew I should carry one as well. I felt extremely happy I had stocked the weapons locker in this room as I rummaged through the upright box to find the one I wanted. Soon, I stood next to the wall as Javed looked outside through the slit in the door.*

*Let's go.*

*I walked quick behind him and covered his back and I scanned the hallway. I noted that there weren't any changes, but the tension hovered around me like a living being. I shook off the felling and moved to keep pace. Am I imagining a conflict or can you feel the tension in the air?*

*It's a palpable thing, Bekka. You can't help but feel it.*

*We sure could use those communications with Trevor right now.*

*Agreed. We need to get to one of his main junctures to get the audiobots into him. I hope infusing him works. Remember what I told you about when he first*

*comes online? We may be in pain for a few moments after we saturate his systems. Are you sure you have another good hiding place for us?*

*I do. I smiled at him. We need to go to the bowels of the ship.*

*His eyebrows arched in surprise. The other secure room? I had no idea that was where you thought about otherwise I would have tried to talk you out of it. I'm sure they have already figured out where it is.*

*It may be intact and we know for sure the main hub for all the computer AI's fluids is there. We studied the plans and you know I'm right.*

*Dammit, Bekka, this isn't about being right. This is about our lives and the life of every human on this ship.*

*I placed a gentle hand on his back. I know and I think this is the right choice. There is a hidden walkway to the room. We should be safe the whole way.*

*Should be? We've got to know, Bekka, because there is no one else to get the job completed except ourselves.*

*All right. I know we'll be safe. I can guarantee the fact. Is that good enough? I stared at him for a moment before he gave me a quick nod. This way. I indicated for him to take a right as I glanced one more time to our rear. We were still in the clear. One more turn and we'll come to a door, a secure door. I'll need to key code our entry.*

*I moved ahead of him and immediately flattened on the wall as I heard voices in the hall in front of us. Glancing around the corner, I watched*

as three people moved down the walkway and into the next hall.

*Who were they?*

I shook my head. *I don't know. I didn't recognize them. Let's hurry.* At the door, I entered the code fast and pushed the door inward. Once inside, Javed closed it behind us and we turned to gaze down the darkened path.

*It's not very pretty. But then here, a ship doesn't need to be pretty, just needs to be functional.* I perceived his laughter in my head. *What are you laughing at?*

*I've been in ships before, I know what the walk to the core room is like. And I agree with you, but it's like you're embarrassed or something.*

I frowned as I noted the absurdness of my comment. *Sorry, I don't know what I was thinking. It's going to take me a while to realize we're on the same level. Your experiences are different than mine, but you know ships and how they are put together just as well as I do.*

*Was that an apology I heard from the Fiery Phoenix?*

*Shut up. We need to get to our destination. Still have that vial of distilled audiobots?* I frowned in his general direction, but kept moving.

*Of course I do and I hope you're right. If the new programming didn't take, we might be causing more problems than we can solve.*

*I don't think so. Even if they don't work, they are set to die out as you so aptly reminded me earlier. I continued to walk with my pistol raised. Even though this was one of the most secure places in the ship, I couldn't take any chances.*

*They die out when the human they are in dies. Sometimes they are programmed to die sooner. We were lucky enough for Fallon 2 to give me the program in case we need to make corrections.*

*But they are clonedroid technology aren't they?*

*Again, yes and no. There are some items which came from Devlin and other technology which came from Orchid. I don't know how we can differentiate between the two.*

*I don't think we will since Fallon 2 specifically programmed these for me and you.*

*That's the problem I have. She never said we would be able to inject them into a ship's AI. I am not sure about this idea at all.*

*I perceived a noise to my left and turned my pistol in that direction. "If there is anyone there, you need to come out now. I can hear you." I didn't hear any more as I gazed into the darkness.*

*We need to keep moving.*

*I looked into the shadows. There is something here, Javed. I can feel it. "I won't tell you again. I'll just start shooting." I took notice of the whispering around me.*

*"I told you the captain would come," someone said and moved out of the shadows.*

I was appalled by this crewman's condition. "What's your name?"

"Dwemble, ma'am, Ensign 2<sup>nd</sup> class Dwemble. I work here below decks and was in charge of a lot of the maintenance crews." He gave me a quick salute. "Are you back for good, sir?"

"Back...I never left Ensign...why don't you walk with us and tell me what happened?"

I saw him swallow hard and motion with his head to those with him to come out. The most rag-tag group of people I ever witnessed on any ship came crawling out of the shadows and empty spaces between equipment, some in worse shape than others. I quickly glanced at Javed. *Oh my God. This is awful.*

"They began to attack us right after you left, sir. Our own crew, Captain, began to kill us." The expression of horrified disbelief crossed his face as this was an act he had never contended with before.

"Who, Ensign?"

"They-they were part of the command crew, Cap...sir." I looked over the Ensign's head to see who had spoken. I eyed the man who said this. Years had gone by since anyone had used the slang term Cap with me, but I was happy to note one of my main security officers had answered me. The man had been with me since I had arrived on my very first ship. I remembered the day we

had met over coffee on a night I couldn't sleep. Apparently, he had had the same problem as I did.

"Belkins? There's just one person who has ever addressed me as Cap." I reached out and clasped his outstretched hand. Relief flooded his face as we shook hands.

"Yes, sir and glad to have you back. Five of your command crew started to take over the ship right after you disappeared. They tried to convince us you had taken off with your compadre here and left us to our fate." He grinned from ear to ear.

"I'm sorry that I never got to introduce you to Lieutenant Javed Malik. He's part of the Orchid Ops group and was sent to protect me. I was high on their list." My eyes narrowed. "And what was that supposed fate they wanted you all to believe?"

"They said we were being overrun by a terrorist faction and if we didn't follow their lead that faction would add this ship and us to their organization without our permission."

I turned to Javed. "What do you think? Think they're clonedroid?"

"How did they act? Animated like a person or cold and calculating like a machine?" Javed watched those around us with a trained eye.

"I would put them in the cold and calculating category, sir. They didn't seem to have any remorse. They acted like they were following a set program. " Belkins gazed at Javed for a few moments before turning back to me.

"Did everyone on the bridge do what they said?"

Belkins shook his head wearily. "No, and that's when the killing began. We were no match for them. I don't know how many escaped. We wanted to try to sound a general alert, but the computer had already shut itself down against outside intruders. Other than navigation which was left wide open for some strange reason."

"Good for Trevor." I nodded my head. Thank God the AI had the sense to shut itself down when necessary and before I gave the command. It all must have happened simultaneously while we made our escape.

"And he's given them limited access to navigate this ship. He won't let them go out of the Jaxxon Quadrant or at least that's what I'm hearing."

I nodded my head. "We've taught the AI well. How are all of you holding up? How many made it into hiding?" I knew that we couldn't move too many people, but a small contingent wouldn't delay us too much.

"There are fifty-four of us here and I knew of at least three more pockets of resistance on the ship overall. There may be more."

"Can we assume the groups are about the same size?"

"The largest was over a hundred, but they are getting hit hard."

"Where are they?"

"They were in the landing bays, sir."

I had to think of some way fast to protect those people. "We need to tell them to get in the Valkyrie and any open shuttle that we have. Those ships should protect them for a little bit. Are your comms secured?"

"Each group has at least one security crewmember with them and our comms are secure. But I'm not sure for how long." Belkins shook his head.

"Then what, Captain?"

It was Javed who asked this last question and I gave him a wry smile. "Then we'll blow the airlock if we must, but right now we need to get to the engineering command room to get the audiobots into the system. That's the real way we'll be able to secure communications."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

This part of the mission required more than two people. I didn't want to risk any more of my crew than necessary. I knew if we didn't succeed, it wouldn't matter. Still, I was surprised when almost every man in the group volunteered. Javed had this down as he more than quick and efficient as he catalogued people's skill and general overall well being, picking those he knew would benefit the mission. All I did was comfort them as my mind whirled with tasks we needed to accomplish in a very short time. I left him to organize our next move while I talked to my crew.

This wasn't going to be easy and I knew it. With a heavy sigh, I wondered if this was what I had thought of when I was a young woman they called me the *Fiery Phoenix* at the academy. That thought embedded itself in my mind as I walked around to each person within this refugee group hidden in the tunnels of my warbird, giving them my assurances and help where I might.

I was thankful this unit had a doctor with them, but it made me wonder at the condition of the rest of the crew. "Doctor MacCallum, I'm glad you're with this part of the crew." I reached out and clasped his hand.

"Call me Mike. Medical was one of the last places they infiltrated when they started their round up of what they called *undesirables*. I managed to grab some supplies and a couple of the techs as I went." He gestured toward a few boxes at the edge of the hall, next to the pipes.

I nodded. "Good thinking. Aren't there other caches of food and medicine hidden in various places on the ship? I know it's one of the standing orders for the fleet."

"Normally that would be the case. But it's my understanding all of them are being guarded against anyone getting to them. I do believe it's one of the reasons there are so many hurt in this group as people tried again and again to get to those supplies especially the food."

I obviously had a shocked expression on my face as he looked at me. "How long have you been running?"

"They came to medical the night after you went underground. I happened to be on duty and one of the other doctors warned us from his quarters. Many people had started to go into hiding the moment the bridge had been attacked while a few

decided to wait and see what would happen. It was the wait and see group that was hit the most."

"Thank God for the warning." I closed my eyes and shook my head. "I am so sorry about everything else."

His hand went with my shoulder. "No one blames you. It's lucky you had someone looking out for you or you'd be dead as well." He sent a quick glance toward Javed who was still talking to crewmembers. "I think I speak for every one of us here when I say we're happy you're alive."

"I feel like I'm to blame." I sighed as emotion clenched my gut.

"Well, ultimately the captain is the one in charge, but I take it you didn't know these folks were coming any more than we did. There are circumstances outside anyone's control."

"I know you're right, but it doesn't make me feel any better. And no, I didn't know, not until my good friend sent Javed to protect me. I hadn't received any word on the waves to give any indication this was coming. If he hadn't arrived when he did, I don't know what would have happened. But I do know it doesn't stop here. There may be hundreds of IUA ships having this very same problem right now as it's my understanding there is a long list of targets."

He nodded. "You should tell me about these clonedroids. Are we supposed to treat them?"

My eyes narrowed. "Why?"

He gestured toward a young woman sitting near a pipe holding her arm. She appeared to be as pathetic as the rest of the crew. "She's not quite right. I don't know what it is, but she's kept to herself since we began gathering."

"Go tell Javed what you've told me." I slowly approached her not knowing whether to pull my gun on her or not. She looked up with a dirty face and swallowed hard, pain etched on her young features.

"You know, we're not all like them. What-what they did on the bridge is horrible!" She bent her head and started to cry softly.

I knelt down beside her and touched her shoulder to have her jerk a little as if in fear.

*Be careful, Bekka.*

I looked back to Javed who was rapidly coming our way. *I will.* I turned my attention to whatever now sat in front of me. "Can they track you?"

She shook her head. "I burnt that part of my brain out the moment I realized what they had in mind. It took me a couple of days to reason what I was...or wasn't." She gave me a quick glance and hung her head in what I assumed was shame.

"Well, it's a bonus you had the capability to make sure they couldn't track you." I smiled at her nodding my head.

She looked up at me and returned the smile. "It hurt a lot."

"I bet it did. Who are you and what was your function on my ship?"

"I was a communications tech in the main com room. The names O'Malley...Tyler O'Malley...I-I don't know how long I've been here in this form and I certainly don't know what's happened to the human I replaced. I think—I think I've been onboard since your last docking. I had the feeling that's when many of us replaced the humans on this ship. None of us know all there is to know about this operation. It's as if we all have little bits and pieces to a much bigger puzzle. I was activated the moment they attacked the bridge. I am so sorry."

I rubbed my mouth and nodded. "It would make sense."

Javed hunkered down behind me. "Where was this docking?"

I glanced back at him. "We had an R&R period on Klammath 9 recently. Everyone had shore leave. I made sure as this was a very boring assignment."

"You should have told me."

"About the leave for everyone? I didn't think it was important."

He looked down at the girl. "Was there any strange happening in communications before they started to take over the ship?"

"Strange?" She looked confused. "Strange as in how? Please be more specific. Everything is weird...different right now."

I stood and crossed my arms because I didn't like Javed chastising me in front of my crew. "I would like to know the same. It's very important you tell us all you know."

He rolled his eyes, picking up on my displeasure. "Did you send out any communications to anyone or receive any unusual messages between the shore leave and the attack on the bridge?"

She sat up straighter and pursed her lips. "I don't think—wait a minute—maybe we did. We always had to send a packet toward an area of space where no one seemed to be. I always thought it was odd that we did so. But once they took over the bridge, the order came down we were required to send the compack every six hours or the ones in charge would get very angry. I knew it was over for me when they shot the specialist next to me because she didn't do what they wanted quick enough and that was two hours into their takeover."

"Life isn't important to those who took over. Seems like they're triangulating our position from

day one." Javed looked up at me. "What's special about this sector of space other than the mining colony that you knew of?"

I shook my head. "Other than it's in the middle of nowhere? There's nothing special there I could discern. I was surprised that the IUA sent us here at all."

His shoulders slumped a little. "I think the UFF planned on setting up shop in the mining colony as it has everything they need: a distant location and plenty of raw resources to complete more malamintine skeletons. We talked about this for a brief period the other day. They apparently relayed the information to other ships they had commandeered so each of them would know this location."

"Don't you also need a lab of some sort? You do have to grow the biologic portions of the units, right?" A chill had settled in my gut as I thought about the ramifications of what I had said.

He shook his head. "True, but any ship's lab can perform the same function. They would convert some of the crew's quarters for that purpose." He rubbed his forehead, then returned his gaze to the young woman sitting on the floor once again. "Did any of them respond?"

"Not really, but the man who had taken over, Lieutenant Jefferies, said everyone would gather here in a matter of weeks now that I have a chance

to dissect what I overheard on my last day. The first ship is set to come in..." O'Malley stopped and mentally appeared to calculate the date "...about three days from now."

"That means we take back this ship and destroy the mining colony before then. If there's zilch to use here, they're required to look elsewhere."

He was right and we had to get a solid plan behind us to do what we needed to do. "It all goes back to taking back control of this ship." Again, I looked at the girl at my feet. She couldn't have been more than early twenties or possibly younger as there were some exceptional teenagers who had gotten into the academy in recent years. "Do you know how many others there are like yourself?"

She rubbed her arm absentmindedly for a moment before looking at me. "Once I figured out what was going on, I started to watch them during my last few hours so I could tell you if I noticed any specifics if I saw you again. It was my understanding that there were at least three crewmembers from every department at a minimum which they replaced. Some departments had more, some less. Then there was another factor."

I frowned. "And that was?"

"Well, there were two of them. One was that not all of us agreed to what they planned or did once it started. I think about a third to half of those

brought aboard rebelled against what we were told to do. Then there were those originals that fought their clonedroids. I don't know how many. I heard the chatter some of the clonedroids even fought each other."

"Interesting." I sat back on my heels and thought for a moment.

*Now might be the time.*

I gazed at Javed for a moment. *What if it's the wrong decision? What if she's an informant sent in to see what we're doing and give data to the enemy?*

*She can't communicate with them. I can tell through Fallon 2's programming.*

*That doesn't make her our best friend either. I can't let this situation get any worse.*

*They've taken over the ship...and at least a few of them are killing off the humans...how much worse can it get?*

I extended my hand to O'Malley. "Join us and live free."

That had been four hours ago, but it seemed a lifetime as we trudged through the back passages toward the secure engineering room. We still had to get to the hanger and the other group of people waiting there for us. Before our small party had left, we had added another thirty people to the group. More than anything else, we needed to find a place which was defensible and would accommodate all of us. There were very few

places in this ship or any ship meant to hold the whole crew.

But we didn't possess a whole crew any more. Hell, I didn't even know how many people we'd have at all when this was all over. Still, I had done what I had been instructed and invited O'Malley to join us. Her reaction was so unexpected it almost brought tears to my eyes when I thought about it. She had cried real tears and clutched my hand to her as she profusely thanked me over and over.

At first, I didn't know what to say or think, but then I realized what Fallon and Fallon 2 had told me was true. These new beings may be clonedroid, but their humanity had not been programmed out of all of them. And she had wanted to come with us to monitor the communications between the audiobots and Trevor, but the Doc wouldn't release her as she had a broken bone. According to Javed, it was more painful than we imagined. Since clonedroid's skeleton was part metal, it might not heal without a specific injection of medicine to activate the growing process. Natural regrowth could become part of their programming if it were available which apparently wasn't very often. Javed had a very special skeleton indeed. My invitation had given her new strength according to her, but she complied with the doctor's command.

I had to agree with the Doc she'd be more of a hindrance, but she insisted to give us all the information she knew. And that was extensive when we asked specific questions. She said it was as if a whole other part of her mind had been opened and the information began to flow. She relayed how many were in the hanger, on the bridge and in several major parts of the ship.

I gazed around one last time as we neared the secure engineering room when the hairs on my arm stood up. *Javed, to our right...do you have them?* About ten people, both men and women, were stalking our every move.

*Hurry up...we don't know who they are.* He pushed me in front of him and motioned to the others with us to circle around.

*I-I don't think they plan to harm us, but I can't be sure.* I had to shake my head as the feelings I was suddenly getting seemed so out of character for the audiobots. *How much of an empathic link do the audiobots give people?*

*Very little. I suppose they could be emoting their feelings toward us.*

*Which means they are human or at least one of them is.* I was at the door and punching in the code. *Do you want to come in with me?*

Concern flashed in his eyes. *You don't need my help. I'd rather stay out here to protect you.*

I nodded once as I swung open the door and stepped inside.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Where the hell have you been?” Trevor screeched.

“Hello to you, too,” I murmured and went to sit at the console.

“Do you know how worried I was?”

I shook my head. “Why? You knew we were still alive as we monitored a few items from my captain’s sanctuary.”

“Please. That’s been hours ago and things are rapidly going downhill if you ask me.”

I chuckled. “I think the correct term would be *hell in a hand basket* if you don’t mind. Give me a status on everyone.”

“As of now, there are five hundred and ninety four crewmembers who are human and three hundred and seven who are not. Out of those three hundred and seven, there appear to be over half of them fighting the bad ones.”

"Define *bad ones* please." I frowned to myself and wondered if other captains had an AI as colorful as mine.

"Well, there are some who killed everything in sight including the other clonedroids. I would say that they've gone berserk if you ask me."

I closed my eyes. *Three hundred and seven lost, Javed and Trevor says he thinks some of the clonedroids are going berserk as they appear to be killing everything in their path.*

*There must be a glitch with their programming if they are randomly killing everyone. And we don't know if all of those are lost or that they aren't here. Ask him if he can find any life sign readings, which appear to be in stasis somewhere.*

"Trevor, are there any stasis signs anywhere?"

"There are approximately seventy four stasis pods now in use. Can we assume some of those are people the clonedroids replaced?" I could hear the concern in his tone.

"I think that would be a fair assessment. Now there's a procedure I need to do to you immediately and I hope you're receptive to it."

"I wish I could see your face right now. That's the one part I hate about this room. No visual."

"And what do you think you'd see?"

"If you're worried or not, of course. Your forehead gets these funny little wrinkles when you think no one is looking."

I stared at the console for a moment. *Is that true? I get funny wrinkles when I'm worried?* I was aware of Javed's chuckle in my mind.

*You need to get to work. Your AI likes to pull your chain.*

*Thanks a lot. "You are downright rude, Trevor as you never tell a female they've got wrinkles. If we didn't need you so much, I'd turn you off right now,"* I growled.

*"Really? Promises, promises."*

*"That doesn't mean you'd get a body."*

If a computer could frown, Trevor would I'm sure. "Now you're being mean. What is it that you want to do to me?"

"The procedure would enhance you or at least I hope it would."

*"What is it?"*

"I'd like to inject you with audiobots. Both Javed and I have them. We'd like our communications to be secure and these audiobots will help us subvocalized our conversations. We need to get them into your system somehow. We came up with the idea of putting them into your fluid reservoir where they would get evenly distributed throughout your inner workings."

*"And just where did you get these audiobots?"*

"They came from Fallon and therefore, I'm assuming, Henrietta as well."

*"And how did you get them inside you?"*

I frowned. "Javed kissed me and they got transferred to me in the process."

The room became eerily silent making me sigh. The AI in this ship was more advanced than any other ship in the IUA as it was one of the last Marauder's built. Still, in my opinion, they had put too much emotion within the programming to make me happy. While the damn AI would never put humans in harm's way, they always had to analyze ever order or operation you wanted to do as a captain. And since they acted as if they owned their captain, they were prone to little fits of jealousy as well. Add the fact they always told you what you did wrong and never what you did right, it made for a sometimes stressful situation with a machine designed to make your life easier.

"Look, we don't have much time. My crew is dying out there and I need to get back to rescuing them, if you don't mind."

"Sorry. I was confirming that the audiobots came from the Lanko. One needs to make sure they came from a reliable source since the clonedroids try to get into every system they can. And this bunch doesn't even have any bots of any kind."

I rolled my eyes, very thankful he couldn't see me because I'm sure that would be an issue as well. "So you aren't opposed to us putting these in you?"

"In a previous conversation, Henrietta had told me it may be necessary to use some innovative technology and I trust her." Another silence. "And you," Trevor whispered.

"Thank you. I would never and I repeat never do anything to harm you. You are the heart of the Hannibal, Trevor and we could never do without you."

"I know."

Maybe I should add arrogance to my assessment of the AI. "Okay. There's a vial of distilled audiobots in my hand. Sorry, but they had to come from Javed and myself since we were the only source."

"Eww. That sounds nasty."

I hung my head. "Look, they were cleaned, scrubbed and distilled before we placed them in this vial. Javed made sure they were viable as well. Some of them didn't make it through, but we're sure there's enough for communications between us all."

"They are self-replicating aren't they?"

"Huh?" Now I was confused. *What does he mean self-replicating?*

*I guess we never got around to me explaining everything about the audiobots. In order for them to continue to work efficiently there has to be a certain number maintained in our blood. They let our levels get to a certain percentage, then they turn themselves on*

*and reproduce themselves to get back to acceptable levels.*

Now it was my turn to go eww. *You're kidding right?*

*Why would I kid about that? How close are you to being done? I'm not sure who these guys are, but it seems as if they are preparing to take a stab at us.*

*Trevor has agreed, now I'll get the audiobots into him and we're out of here.*

*Now would be a good time, Bekka.*

"Trevor, look, there's no time to debate this any longer. Javed doesn't think it will be safe outside this door very much longer, so we need to finish this up."

"I see what he's talking about. Let me see if I can zap them in some way and then you can inject me."

"Zap them?"

"Sure, a little EMP will go a long way with the clonedroids. After all, they are part computer."

"Can we get them all that way?"

"No, they learned better since Henrietta did that trick on the Lanko. What I can do is directed bursts which will disable them temporarily at best."

"How much time can you give us?" I felt my gut do another flip-flop as I tried to process what we would really need to do.

"Ten maybe twenty seconds at most."

"I suppose that seems like a lifetime to a computer." I sighed. "I guess that's better than no time. Besides, we don't know if they are good or bad. We think they emoted good feelings before we got here if that's possible. Let me get ready to put in the audiobots first, then you blast them." *Javed, we'll have less than a minute once I inject Trevor.*

*What's stopping you?*

*I don't know. Twenty seconds doesn't seem like much time.* I walked over to the levels console, finding the correct receptacle and opened the cap while outside laser blasts hit the door at an astounding rate. "I guess that tells me what side they are on...Trevor, I'm injecting you in three, two, one." Dumping the audiobots inside I was nearly deafened with the howl I heard, my whole body cringing at his outburst.

*Bekka, we need that EMP now.*

*Didn't you hear that howl? I think I did some damage to our AI.* I went back to the touch screen to what was wrong with the ship's AI.

*Testing, testing, one, two, three. Can anyone hear me?*

*Trevor?*

*That hurt. Did you even think of that when you put those nasty little beasties in me? Did you know they are little computers? Get out of there you little idiot. You can't attach there. The tone was somber and*

indignant, but a little frantic like a human batting away a swarm of bugs.

*You can hear me?* I had the sensation of relief flow through me. Now maybe we would get some real work done.

*I suppose I can, but I don't like it. Your brain is wired weird.*

*Javed, can you hear him, too?* The noise from the blasts got louder as if there were more clonedroids shooting or maybe they did it super fast.

*It's fuzzy, but I can tell there's a new link in the system. We need that EMP now.*

*Trevor, you heard the man.*

*As you wish. This may hurt you as well since your audiobots might be susceptible. I determine within them a backup system, which can recharge using your biological mechanisms. I'll need to figure out another mechanism for the future as I am sure this will work once since Henrietta has used the same trick before. Third time will not not be lucky for us.*

*How long will they be down again?* I closed my eyes and tried to piece it all together

*I don't know exactly since I haven't evaluated the clonedroids yet with the new information I now have. I will do so after the EMP has immobilized them.*

*Would you two quit talking about it and do it already!* This came from Javed as he hadn't been privy to our earlier conversation.

A slight crackle reached my ears, then no other sound. Opening the door, I rushed out to see the

men hovering behind any protection available. I was glad to see no one had more than minute burns on them. "We must go now. Trevor has the audiobots in his system. They're disabled as well, but he thinks for just a brief amount of time."

We retreated the way we came as fast as we could, we observed at least ten clonedroids lying motionless on the ground, hands still clutching their lasers. "That is too strange. They look as if they are sleeping with their eyes open."

Javed looked at me and frowned. "They are in a manner of speaking. At least the cybernetic portions are. When we can, we need to look into what portions of them are shut down after an EMP. I don't want us accused of torture somewhere down the line."

"I can understand where you're coming from as that would be very bad."

The further along our path we went, the more clonedroids we made out on the fringes and it was as if they were tracking us. *Trevor?* I tried our connection. *Are we back up?*

"I don't think we're back up yet." I glanced at Javed. "How did you..." I began, but he cut me off.

"I could tell by the look on your face."

"I didn't realize I had made one."

He smiled at me. "Sometimes your face is very expressive."

Frowning, I almost stopped. "A captain needs a poker face. It's not good if everyone can read me."

"I didn't say everyone."

*Did you call?*

I stopped dead in my tracks. *Trevor?*

*Were you expecting someone else?*

I glanced at Javed and nodded. "We're back up it would seem."

*This is good. Can you hear me as well?*

*It would seem so, Lieutenant Malik. You two realize they are prepared to attack those in the docking bay?*

*Attack?*

*Yeah, Bekka, a full out attack. If you and your friends don't get down there soon, it will be a blood bath. At least with you there, they will have a chance.*

"Come on everyone. We're done here. We need to get to the hanger."

*How's the Valkyrie holding up?*

*It's keeping the survivors alive, if that's what you're asking.*

*It's a she and if I know Athena, she's pissed right now.*

*The Valkyrie has an AI?*

I felt Javed's disbelief filter through the link. Of course, she has an AI. Fallon and I won her my last year of the academy with the hopes of using her to start our own fleet of ships. While she might be a little older, her navigation and AI were top of the line because we were constantly upgrading her when we had a little money. Occurrences happened to prevent us from

*following our one time chosen path. We couldn't dismantle her because we couldn't fulfill our dreams ever if she were gone.*

*Ah.*

There was a wealth of information in that one word. I knew without a doubt, he wondered what else we had kept from him. I slowed my breathing as I didn't want to let him know how his distrust had jarred me back to the reality of the situation.

*Are you two done dancing around each other? We've got a job to do.*

I stopped and looked around at all the people who were with me. I hoped I wasn't leading them into a disaster from which we'd never recover.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I skulked around the landing bay and realized the situation was worse than Trevor had indicated.

*When were you going to tell us?* I didn't care how much frustration was reflected in my subvocalized voice because I was sure it mirrored the absolute look of disgust on my face. Trevor had misled me as far as I was concerned because he didn't tell me the complete situation. I can't believe he thought I would barge in without regard to all the other events happening on this ship. It wasn't about the Phoenix any more, it was about the Hannibal. There were at least twenty-five clonedroids standing in the bay, some guarding the *Capra* and others guarding all entrances except the one we came in. I knew they had herded us like cattle on a direct path to where they wanted us.

I sighed, then crouched down and looked at the same group around me now as were with me less than an hour ago in the control room. Deciding to

verbalize my thoughts for everyone, I gave a slight nod of my head to Javed.

“This isn’t going to be as easy as it was last time. Trevor isn’t just going to be able to do an EMP blast to immobilize them. Matter of fact, he’s mislead us if anything because it will be more difficult than I had thought. We can’t take down all these clonedroids without getting a few of us killed in the process. You all understand this, don’t you?”

I turned and looked at each face of the crew present to try and gauge their thoughts and feelings. In this moment, I wish I read everyone’s mind as it would make life a whole lot easier. Commands could be given in an instant and everyone would know what was expected of them.

*No, you don’t and I need to teach you how to shield your private thoughts from me at all times. Not just the ones where you’re concentrating on it, but naturally in the very instant you decide to do so.*

I ignored the mirth in my head. *Maybe you shouldn’t be listening.* I sighed.

*It’s hard not to because you are always talking to yourself. Want to tell me what that’s all about? Must have to do with the counting.*

I stared at him. *I don’t talk to myself all the time. That would be crazy.*

"What's your thought in dealing with this?" Javed had ignored my last mental comment.

I watched his face before answering. "If I gave myself over to them, you know, surrender because it's me they want most anyway. We all know what I could give them if I buckled under torture."

"And what would that accomplish, Captain?" It was Belkins who asked this and I didn't want to sugar coat the situation.

"It would give us some time...rather you all sometime...that's the best chance we have for right now, I think." I couldn't tell any of them what I thought because it wasn't good.

"And what could time give us?"

"What does time give anyone? A chance to change their fate? Or a chance to change others fate?" I left it at the psychological level because I needed them to think about it as this could go either way so very easily.

"You're asking us to take a path that is against the very core of what we have been trained to do. You're asking us to give up our captain." This came from Belkins who gave me a painful look.

I nodded my head slow. "Yes, yes, I am. But sometimes we look at the greater good and if my capture or death allows the crew and ship to be safe, then that's what the captain is supposed to do. Every captain knows this above all else."

Javed grabbed my arm and forced me to look at him. "What do you think you're doing? Your friend sent me here to protect you and this is so far away from what my job was even supposed to be. Surrender was never an option. This isn't even close to the right thing to do. And you know it."

He touched my cheek with a gentle palm, his hand trailing down to end on my shoulder. His very touch made me doubt myself and what I knew I had to do. My mind whirled with the current situation and what I should do when I heard a small voice inside my head.

*Bekka, are you there?*

I jerked away and turned toward the bay. *Athena? Trevor, how can she talk to me?*

*Well, she is hooked into my bay and once I knew who she was I decided she should share this link as well.*

*Trevor, I would like some warning next time. You know I hate surprises. I wondered if there were a way I could bust his chops to get him to understand he wasn't in charge.*

*Bekka! Bekka! There are people in here and I don't know how much longer I can keep them safe. It's getting hot and then there's the fact the shield will be down in less than ten minutes. What should I do?*

*What you do best, Athena. I looked at Javed who looked furious and knew he had no idea what I meant when I addressed the Valkyrie. Did you and Trevor get all that?*

*Really?*

Her voice went down an octave. There were very few who understood what a Valkyrie was capable of doing and mine was incredibly special. It had been years since she'd be given the order to defend anyone or anything.

*Remember you're on the inside of my ship, the Hannibal. Any damage must be minimal with maximum human lives saved.*

Yes, ma'am. The sultry voice echoed throughout our collective link. In addition, I knew Athena had been itching for battle for who knew how long.

*What is she talking about? Again, I'm going back to my original question. What do you plan to do, Captain?*

I looked again at everyone around me and for a moment I was that young woman back at my very first mission. I swallowed hard. I had put myself on the line there and the outcome was less than admirable or heroic. But then I didn't have the people around me that I had now.

*Trevor, erect a force shield around the Capra. You can still do that, right?*

*You know that will kill anyone within the vicinity of the ship.*

*It doesn't matter as most of them are the enemy. Just do it. I will deal with the aftermath later. How long of a window will that give us to get my people out of the bay? They have set it to blow? Right?* I sat rock still as I reconciled events within me.

*You are correct and there will be about fifteen minutes in which to disable their explosives. The*

*clonedroids will be sending out distress signals the moment they are hit. There is the fact there will be about twenty of them not within the shield area. Those you will have to take out one by one. They are all armed with blasters and a few have a higher caliber weapon like plasma rifles.*

“Okay. Here’s the plan, Trevor will erect a force shield around the ship in the bay. That will take a fair number of the clonedroids out. According to his estimates, he thinks there will be blasters and maybe a plasma rifle or two. Javed can better tell us what it will take to get them out of our way. Last, they have rigged the bay to explode in about fifteen minutes so we’ll need to defuse whatever they set the second we arrive.” I turned and looked at him give a slight nod.

“As far as we know, there are three ways you can take down a clonedroid. One is to pull the chip out of their head. That is if they have one, because not all of them require a chip to become a mobile thinking being. If there’s a chip, it’s behind their right ear. You can also blast it, which might make them go berserk, so that would be the last option. We don’t need to be letting one of those loose in this ship.”

“What we need to look for? I mean what distinguishes them from us?” This came from one of the younger crewmembers.

"Good question. There is a small scar above the right ear. However, if you get close enough to find it, you're as good as dead. Unless you are part cybernetic, you can't win against them in hand-to-hand combat. Any more questions before I go on to the next method."

He glanced around the room and his eyes settled on my face.

"I'm good." I knew if I didn't answer, he'd wait until I did.

He gave a quick nod. "Another way is to take a sharp object and to stab it into their left eye. That will scramble their internal coding and they will wait for an update from whoever upgrades them. Again, this way can be used in hand to hand combat and would be used as a last resort because you are way too close to them if you can do this."

"Do we need to twist it?" This came from Belkins.

"No. The very fact you went through their optical orbit is enough to scramble their programming for a while. It makes their short term memory go haywire and we don't know what it does to their long term memory."

This piqued my interest. "Are you saying that their brains go offline then or do we hurt them biologically?"

"We don't know. We've never had one of these in the lab long enough to study. The longest

they've ever lasted in the brig has been a few days. It seems that they have some sort of self-destruct sequence either embedded in them or sent to them. They can cause extensive damage when they self-destruct."

"And the last way?" I was impatient as we needed to continue moving forward.

"The last way is to take that same sharp object and stab them between the third and fourth rib on the left side as their heart is like ours. Matter of fact, their organs are almost all the same except they only possess one of each normally. Who knows with these newer models."

"Let's not kill anyone unless we need to do so. I'd like to disable them if at all possible." I shuddered at the thought.

Javed grabbed my arm and forced me to look at him for the second time. "There will be those who are programmed to do us great harm. You might as well get your mind around the fact you will be required to kill some of them no matter what Fallon told you to offer them. I'm sorry."

This was not an option I wanted to hear about. I knew I had not given them the benefit of the doubt in the beginning, knew I hadn't been fair in any way. But this wasn't about being fair, it was about doing the right thing which kept the crew and ship safe. "I understand. We all need to do what is necessary."

*I can sense you hesitating...what is wrong with you?*

The concern in his voice was palpable and it was a concern I wasn't about to let myself feel. Once it was all over, I wouldn't need to explain *things* to him. Events weren't always what they seemed and my secrets got closer to the surface with each passing moment. *Nothing, let's get this done.*

I rose and walked out into the middle of the bay without a backward glance. It was now or never.

*What the hell are you doing?* Trevor was very loud in my mind.

*Have you not heard a word I said?* Javed's tone held a touch of fear.

*Give me a minute. Don't follow me. Yet.* I kept my back to him because one look would undo me.

I listened to their cries, but could not allow them to distract me whatsoever. I understood the duty to my ship and its crew.

*"Well, well, look who decided to show up."*

It was Garrison and I swallowed hard. I had sparred with this man many times and more than once had landed on my butt. I wasn't sure if that was on purpose to make sure it seemed as if he beat me or what exactly. All I knew was this man was someone I did not want to fight because if he

had any cybernetic hardware on him I couldn't guarantee I would best him.

"I want my ship back."

"That's what I like about you, Captain. You're always direct." His eyes were flat, dark and emotionless as he spoke to me. It was like the angry man who existed before had been replaced by one even more cold and calculating.

"I never knew you liked me." I took in the distance between the two of us. A mere fifteen steps and I expected to cross that distance very quickly. I zeroed in on him physically. He was completely clonedroid which meant every part about him was underlain by a malamintine skeleton and something no natural human could best except if they were another cybernetic being. I might—I shook my head and cleared my thoughts. I couldn't think about what I had or didn't have or even my capabilities during this moment. I had to concentrate.

"Like is the incorrect word if truth be told, Captain. I always thought you were a bitch that needed to be taken down." The smirk on his face said it all.

I had always known the man had disliked me and now his clonedroid flat out hated me. I could use that hate or I could flounder like a duck out of water. But this was my ship and all the AI were loyal to me as were the human crew including

some of those which were clonedroids as well. And maybe more clonedroids would join us once they knew my secret. "A bitch huh?"

I began a slow circle around him, aware of my surroundings. *Athena and Trevor, you need to be ready. Don't shoot to kill any of them except the leaders. Then find the explosives and make sure Javed knows where they are.*

*And who are those leaders you want us to target?*

*The ones with him. To his left is Nathan Jamir and he's been a friend of Garrison since he enlisted. The other is Reginald Cunning. I don't know much about him. I do know they are all from Earth. Maybe that's a place we need to take a harder look at.*

*Maybe, but I don't like the odds against you. Trevor's concern was evident.*

*I have all of you plus the crew. Javed, you guys must be ready, too, because when I make my move it will be hard and swift and more than likely, Garrison will be dead within seconds. Or at least, the clonedroid Garrison will be.*

*Bekka, you can't take him on! I heard the panic in his voice and smiled to myself.*

*Never tell me what I can and can't do. Watch and see why I got the name the Phoenix.*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I started a slow circle around them, watching their every move. And what I did wasn't lost on them.

"Don't think that your stealth will scare us, Captain. We're new and improved and can kick your ass."

I laughed, continuing to move as I flexed my hands. "Did you ever wonder why they called me the Phoenix?"

"It's because you're such a bitch and you have a temper. You can't do anything else." That was Cunning and I realized he sure wasn't living up to his name. I laughed again because he nor anyone here had a clue as to why I had gotten that name. Most thought it had to do with my appearance.

"Ah...the red hair says it all...huh? Fast temper, no brains. Wrong assumption, boys." Again, I mentally gauged the distance between us.

"It can't be more." His look of arrogance reminded me of a bear ready to challenge his prey.

"It's always amazing what idiots can convince themselves of when they are clueless," I murmured.

"Don't call me an idiot." Garrison glared at me with a spark of emotion.

"What do you want me to call you? Smart?" I stopped and put my hands on my hips. "Now, that would be an outright lie because the one you replaced was a buffoon." I smiled at him, knowing what my comment would do to his ego.

He was by my side immediately and his hand was around my throat. *Everyone, do what you were told now*, I screamed through my mind link with the AIs and Javed. *Don't get anywhere close to me while I fight this bastard.*

In that moment, the loud crack of my neck reverberated throughout the bay as my head flopped to the side. I could hear them all scream my name and felt sorry for them.

"Now you've pissed me off." I couldn't even imagine what they thought as I stood there with my neck so broken.

I had to wait for a few seconds before I could pop my neck back in place. Already, my eyes were changing colors, I could tell by the way they stung, as my body started doing what Orchid had made it capable of doing all those years ago as my heat level increased. The look on the clonedroid's face was priceless and I knew what they saw as I

had watched the change overtake me only once in a mirror.

Javed's incredulous voice exploded in my head. *You can regenerate immediately?*

*Like a Phoenix and more. Do your job.*

Laser fire was all around me as my small team started to take out the other clonedroids, which were on high alert. Athena used her small laser canons and opened the hatch for her occupants to escape. The moment I caught a glance of the people running down the ramp, my attention was drawn back to Garrison.

"You heard me. You've pissed me off." I reached up and drove my fingers between the third and fourth ribs like Javed had told me. He bent over and reached for his chest, but he didn't go down.

He grabbed a knife from inside his boot and came up slashing. "That used to work, but you'll have to better than that. See we learn, too."

I swallowed hard, realizing they had changed their anatomy since Javed had last gotten information. I didn't know if I could take him. Sure, I could heal from whatever he sent my way, but I still only had the strength and the stamina of a normal woman. A woman with a few upgrades, I chided myself as my skin became too hot to touch.

*I heard that. What do you need me to do?*

*The might of your malamintine is what I need.*

In an instant, Javed was by my side, shooting at those targeting me. *We've got to pull his chip.* I could see more people coming from behind us with laser in their hands. Within seconds, the shooting stopped as the two groups faced off.

*Javed, we've got more company than I expected.*

"Now you're dead, bitch. We've got you outnumbered."

"Not so fast, Garrison," one of them said. "We're here to help our captain, not you." The man had his laser pointed at his head. "Captain, I can take his chip out with one shot, do you want me to take the shot?"

I gave a quick glance back to the new group of clonedroids who had joined us when Garrison shot forward and sliced my arm in a vicious swipe. Blood coursed down my arms and dripped to the bulkhead below. Spilling blood always made me more than mad, it made me livid. I watched the red liquid as it pooled beneath my hand and life slowed down to spin around me in measured beats as the adrenaline ran rampant through me. I heard each drop as it hit the metal with a plop-plop-plop sound as everything closed in. Then it was as if I was possessed as my hand flew out and connected with Garrison's solar plexus, causing him to crash against the side of the Valkyrie and Althena. Everyone could hear his

malamindine enhanced bones crack with that one touch.

I walked up to stand over him and knew what he saw as I looked down at him. My eyes flamed amber like a wildfire instead of their normal green and my skin looked as if it would burst into flame any minute as the heat rose from my body in steamy waves. This was as close as a human would ever come to going berserk without tumbling over the edge. "I'll give you one chance and only one before I destroy you so utterly no one will know what you even were. Join us and live free."

His chuckle was evil and made my skin crawl. "We will replace all of you. You'll be begging to join us, to do our bidding."

"I guess that's a no." I smashed my fist between his eyes, which I knew would stun him for a few moments at best before he could recover. Twisting his head to the right, I poked a finger behind his ear until I found the scar and dug deeper as the malamintine practically melted around my hand.

"No, no...you can't do that! You can't know our weakness!" His eyes moved rapidly to and fro as I continued to dig into his head.

I sensed him begin to struggle and there were many hands holding him down as I pulled the chip from him as his skull melted around my hand. I stood and held the chip up to the light,

wondering what made this one so special. I looked at Javed and smiled.

“You’re eyes and your skin.”

It wasn’t an accusation, just a statement. His eyes searched the rest of my face and I closed mine to block seeing his. “I know. They’re amber right now and if you look close, you can see the cybernetics whirling as they go back to their normal green. I can see to the subatomic level if I need to do so. And my body temperature gets high as you all note I can melt malamintine. Hell, I could melt the ship’s bulkheads if I need to do so.”

“When?”

“When what? When did it happen or when did Orchid do their repairs?” I looked at him confused as to what he really asked.

A flash of anger crossed his face. “Maybe you should start at the beginning.”

I wanted to place my hand on his arm, but held back because I didn’t want to do him any damage and smiled wryly. “You’re right of course, but first we need to clean up this situation and take the ship back. Then there are the explosives.”

“And I estimate you have five minutes to undo them.” Trevor’s voice boomed in the bay.

“Of course, the mission first, but I will need those answers. If not now, soon.” Javed appeared to barely contain himself, as unleashed anger flooded his face.

I nodded once and turned to the crew standing around me with various different looks on each of their faces. "I've had a few upgrades myself over the years. And no, I'm human with a few cybernetic parts along with lots of genetic changes. And I'm not at liberty to discuss what any of them are. Let's say that I am well suited to being a captain on this ship. And certainly not a mother hen like they tried to peg me! At least not the way the crew thought."

I looked over those I knew were clonedroids. "Thank you for coming to help us. It could have been a lot worse. What was the final count?"

"Five dead and ten wounded for the humans, Captain. Three dead and none wounded for the clonedroids. That doesn't count the five which were sliced in two when the shield went up. From what I can tell, all of them that were with Garrison surrendered to the first human crewmember they found." Belkins came hobbling over. "What's next, sir?"

"Explosives first, then we've got to take the ship back and get out of here as fast as we can. If what the comm officer has told me is correct, they've been sending out signals into subspace to a dead area."

"She's correct, Captain." One of the women clonedroids pushed her way to the front. She was short with light blonde hair and very fit.

"Your name?"

"Communications Specialist Jessica Matthews, sir." She gave me a crisp salute despite the circumstance.

"Any message back from that area yet?" I returned her gesture.

"No, sir, we've gotten no sign of another ship back. I haven't been to the comm room since yesterday though when a lot of us were banned from the area."

I nodded once. "Could be a whole fleet coming our way and we wouldn't know it right now." Looking up, my glance caught Javed's. *Trevor, scan the quad any way you can and get back to us right away. And where are the explosives?*

*Yes, Captain. And the explosives are on Athena's undercarriage.*

*Really?* I started laughing long and hard. "We won't need to worry about any explosion."

"Why's that, Captain?" Belkins came to stand behind me and Javed.

"Belkins, let's say that my little Valkyrie is even more enhanced than I am in many ways. Athena, you heard Trevor say the explosives are on your undercarriage, didn't you?"

Her sultry voice boomed throughout the bay. "Oh, the pimple that was on my ass? Don't they know the difference between my belly and ass? It was explosives?" She let out a computer's version

of a sigh. "People are so dumb, Bekka. Do they think I would allow an explosive on my body? Especially with people around? Really now."

"Please take care of it. I know you can as you're more adept at it, let me know when you're done so someone can clean it up." I shook with laughter for a second more.

"What's she going to do?"

I looked at Javed. "Probably melt the wires first, then maybe the explosives. It all depends upon if she thinks they're an item we'll need in the future. But don't worry. We aren't in any danger. She's very thorough."

Again, I scanned the people in the bay and realized I had to speak to the whole group. I climbed up the steps of the Capra and looked over the group and knew I couldn't have a better crew whether clonedroid or humans. "I know that none of you knew about my special capabilities until today. Please keep it that way as it could be beneficial to us as a whole sometime later in this battle. What the enemy doesn't know can destroy them."

I looked over the group again, seeing many expectant faces, some known, some not. "Evil is still evil and the humans can't fight this one alone. I didn't understand the meaning of what my friend, Commander Fallon Montgomery, asked me to do until right now. You all accepted me for

what I am even now that you know I'm more than your average human. So I ask all of you who are clonedroid and humans as well...join us and live free."

I watched as people, both clonedroid and human, talked amongst themselves and turned to Javed. I couldn't ascertain what was in his mind at the moment and knew there would be a reckoning at some point in the near future.

"Captain?" One of the clonedroids who had joined us when we needed it most, came to the front of the group. "I'm sure you'll want to hear it from all of us as an individual, but I think I can say for the group which came with me, we are all with you. You always treated us fair no matter what. I don't think that will change now you know some of us are clonedroid."

"What's your name?"

"Chief Comm Officer Hayes, ma'am. Like I said, I highly doubt your treatment of us will change now we're something not quite human."

I rolled my eyes as I heard a snicker from the man I knew I loved. "Please, don't call me ma'am. Sir will do." I returned my look to the rest of the crew. "And the rest of you...do you agree with Hayes?"

Resounding ayes echoed in the bay. "And you humans, you will learn as well their strengths and

weaknesses. We need to be assets to each other not enemies."

Belkins stepped forward, looked at me and then turned to Hayes holding out his hand. "Any man who comes to save the captain is a friend of mine."

I swallowed hard as I fought the tears, which threatened to spill over. This would be a new world with new rules and for some reason I was glad I would be a part of it. "Good. Now does anyone have any information about the bridge and the rest of the ship?"

"The bridge is being held by a contingent of twelve people, all clonedroids at this point." Hayes began.

"Any we can say are loyal to the ship?" I brought up my wrist comm and punched in a few codes until we had a 3-D holographic image of the bridge. "Tell me where they are located, Hayes."

The hologram accurately showed the bridge, which was devoid of most crew at the moment. I could assume they were in other areas. Hayes touched three spots on the screen, all the command areas, as well as four more by the captain's chair, long range scanning, ship monitoring and the AI station. It was the last one that caused me some problem.

*Trevor, are you okay? According to the data I'm reading, I can see someone is standing next to your station on the bridge.*

*Don't worry, Bekka. I have the man chasing his tail right now.*

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. *Is he doing it on purpose?*

*Maybe.*

*"Who is the one by the AI station?"*

*"That would be Ensign Beckett, sir."*

*"Esau Beckett?"* I stopped and stared at Hayes. I couldn't believe my luck. I had mentored the kid online at the academy from my cabin on this very ship.

*"That would be him, sir."*

I started to chuckle and turned to Javed as this would be easier than I thought. "The kid is very loyal and wouldn't hurt a flea. If the programming they give the clonedroids has the same personality traits as the original, you can bet he's trying to figure out how to stop them. We need to head back to the others so they know that we're all okay. Trevor, secure the bay and make sure nobody else can access this area."

I turned on my heel and began to walk down the corridor toward the secure engineering room. I knew he was next to me before he touched my elbow and I wasn't quite ready to face him yet.

*We will talk about this, you know.*

*I know. I'm not sure I'm ready for it.*

*Ready for which part? The part where I say we have more in common than I first thought? Or the part you tell me how sorry you were to keep this secret from me?*

I swallowed hard, but kept my face forward. No one needed to know what I thought at that one moment in time. *A little of both, if you insist.*

*I think I'm more interested in knowing why you kept it a secret, not that it was a secret.*

*How about I was ashamed. I kept my face averted as I didn't want him to see any emotion in my eyes.*

*Ashamed of what? His fingers lifted my chin to look at him, but I pulled away.*

*The reason I had had the upgrades at all were the fact that I screwed the pooch on my first assignment. It was either modify me or lose me from what they said. I screwed up so bad, the entire group I was with were killed. It sounded so much like your mission when you told me I hoped we would be kindred souls.*

*And here I thought you didn't like me because I had robotic part. Now I find out it was because you were ashamed of who you are.*

*What? My head snapped his way. I was appalled at his thoughts. I would never do that. I've always had a hard time with people even before my accident. Fallon was the one I had allowed to become close to me. It amazed everyone when they gave me a command position as this was the last place I ever thought I'd be.*

He nodded once. *Then you excelled at it, became better, more of what they needed. And you carried a lethal punch, ready to call upon it when necessary.*

*In a way. There's a trigger.*

*Blood.* He stopped and pushed me out of the way to address the crew following us. "We'll meet you back at the secure room. Be prepared to do some fast planning and maneuvering to get our butts out of here. We've a few points to get straight before we join you."

"Captain?" Belkins stood at my shoulder as did a few of the other crew.

"Look, I'll be fine. Start getting together all the weapons you can. Also, try to set up some kind of medical facility. The hall going starboard from the secure room should be big enough for now. I'm not sure how long we'll here, but it's my hope we'll have the ship back in less than twenty-four hours."

"You got it, Captain. But if you're not back in a half hour, we're coming to find you."

"Thanks, but we'll both be there very shortly."

I watched the rag tag unit which had hidden in the landing bays or shuttles pass by as almost each and every one of them had to reach out and touch me in some way. I smiled and grasped each hand as they moved down the hall. I made the few medics we had stop so I could say a comforting word to each of the wounded. It almost took

fifteen minutes to get them all moving away from us and before I could turn to Javed.

He shoved me against the wall, his lips swooping down to claim mine. It was almost bittersweet in its tenderness and wanting. *I love you.*

There it was, plain and simple. No strings or questions to force me into a relationship I didn't want. I closed my eyes, thinking about how lonely my life had been before this man. With this man, I could share my life as we had some special bonds others did not. *Me, too.*

*Me, too, what?*

*I love you, too.*

He looked deep into my eyes, his hand cupping the back of my neck. *We can never keep secrets from each other.*

*I know. That can ruin many a relationship.* I could fall into his dark brown eyes and never come up for air.

*This leads me to my own confession.* A shadowed passed through their depths and I knew there was more he hadn't told me.

I looked at him bewildered. *And that is?*

*You're imprinted on me. I couldn't get rid of you if I wanted to. Fallon saw to it.* His fingers rubbed the nape of my neck, the heat instantaneous.

*What? You allowed them to imprint you? Of all the lame... Imprinting could have devastating effects on the recipient if not done correctly.*

*They needed to make sure I would protect only you, Bekka, no more. They did what they thought best.*

*Wait till I get hold of Fallon. There was something more, I know it. I'm going to beat her blue.*

*Can you wait until she has the baby first?*

*I frowned at him and bit my bottom lip in frustration. She has always tried to set me up with men. She told me she'd find a way to make sure that I had someone to rely on forever. I can't believe you were the gullible schmuck. She could have at least told you what you were getting yourself into.*

*I personally don't think it's such a bad trade off, do you? He tugged on me, forcing me to look at him.*

*I smiled up at him, knowing my friend had picked my perfect match, and leaned in for a quick kiss. Not at all. She'll be surprised to know the Phoenix has risen again.*

## EPILOGUE

What makes the worth of one person more than another? Does it matter if that person were part machine and part human as long as his or her heart and soul are pure? Or as long as they protect and love each other enough to ensure the survival of the species? Of both species? Yes, I am seeing them as a new species because they are a combination of us and robotics. I don't know how. I do know those are the questions we'll need to answer over the next few years because many will go by and people on both sides will die before this uprising is over.

It took us less than twenty-four hours to secure the Hannibal and less than two to leave the Jaxxon Quadrant far behind. But that wasn't before we had bombarded the hell out of the mining colony we were trapped circling. It would be a long time before the UFF got another malamintine vein that large. And the IUA wouldn't be happy with me

either once I explained to them why we had to destroy the little planetoid.

But all that would wait as I find myself in the captain's stateroom on the Lanko for a very special reason. The birth of my best friend's child...a child she was never supposed to birth...and now he's here. The delivery was routine by all accounts, but this was special because no one knew if my Fallon was the original or not even though she had been pregnant. She didn't possess robotic parts, but there was a lot she couldn't explain.

Javed came up behind me and put his arm around my shoulder. *Some of the best days are when babies are born.*

"Are you two still subvocalizing your thoughts to each other?"

"And what if we were?" I turned to see Fallon 2 looking at us with a quizzical expression on her face.

"Well, it would be a first. The audiobots are not geared to stay alive nor reproduce that long in a human system. Their lifespan should not exceed more than about two months."

I give her a sly smile. "I think they were altered a little bit. And since they are still being exchanged through bodily fluids..."

Javed squeezed me a little as his warm chuckle slid through my mind. *I think you've confused the poor woman.*

"Altered? How could you alter them? I've looked over all your records and you don't possess the mental capacity to do..."

"Fallon 2, can't you give it a rest this one day? And please tell me you've chosen another name for yourself." A weary Fallon looked up from the bundle in her arms.

"I guess so. And I'm still thinking about my new name. It has to be perfect."

*Did you see that look from Aidan?* I glanced Javed's way.

*Yes, I did. He's more than a little uncomfortable with the subject of me altering my audiobots. I almost think that he knows more about it than he's revealed. But they need to know exactly what you're capable of doing and how.*

"It's okay, Fallon. I've had a lot of questions about this event and a few other questions have come up during the past few weeks, which need explanation. If you come over to the Hannibal, you will hear them telling the tale in the pubs on how the Phoenix rose again." I threw a sweet smile at a very shocked Aidan. "Now let me hold your son."

I hesitantly took the baby from her arms and gazed down at the little face all relaxed in sleep. After all, he was the first baby I had ever held. He was a beautiful boy and with any luck, his life

would be wonderful. "Any idea on what you're going to name him yet?"

Fallon smiled at me. "We've decided to call him Phoenix Aidan Chapel. See, Bekka wouldn't fit in this case. And to top it off we've decided to get married."

I looked at her surprised. "Married? Really?"

"I think two people who are parents of a third should be married. I'm odd that way." Aidan's gaze held mine.

I laughed. "I don't think that's odd at all. A little old-fashioned maybe, but it's the way it should be."

"I see the Phoenix has changed in more ways than one." Javed squeezed my shoulder again, giving my back a gentle caress.

Fallon glanced briefly at Fallon 2. "Fallon 2, could you please take Phoenix to Doctor List? He told me he wanted to check out the baby to make sure he was fine."

The young woman narrowed her gaze. "Didn't he do that already?"

"Does it matter?" Fallon gave the younger woman a fierce look.

She threw up her hands. "All right, I get it...you want to talk to your friends alone...well, all you had to do was ask. When do you want us back?" Fallon 2 walked over to me and I handed her the infant.

"Give us about a half an hour and if the Doctor says it's okay, take him to meet the crew on the bridge. And you better make sure Henrietta can see him. She'll make my life a living hell if she hasn't *seen* him before anyone other than the medical team and those in this room."

"Yes, ma'am." She turned and walked out of the room, all the time cooing to the child in her arms.

"I know what I saw on the vid screen before, but it's amazing. She is an exact copy of you physically when you were younger." I returned to stare at my best friend.

Fallon swung her legs over the side of the bed and Aidan was at her side the moment he realize she would get up. "Thank God, it ends there. I don't know what I would do if she were exactly like me mentally. It's almost as if she's still learning."

"Do you think you should be up this soon?" Aidan gave her a concerned look.

"I just had a baby. Women do it all the time and according to my family line, women in my line had an easy time of it because most of them had more than one. I'll be slow for a while. Help me into my robe." Once he had helped her into her robe, she indicated the small table next to a command console. She sat down and turned back to us. "Why don't you sit down and tell me every

detail that's happened? And don't leave one iota out of the telling."

*We might as well sit down. She's get it out of us anyway. She's good that way.* I moved to sit in the chair next to her.

*I agree.* Javed took the chair next to me and across from Aidan.

"And don't you two subvocalize to each other. That will become annoying." Her steady gaze didn't waiver.

"Yes, sir." I frowned at her. "I've never seen your commander mode before. This will be interesting."

"You don't have to be so smug about it." She crossed her arms and almost pouted. "I didn't want to be in this position. You of all people should know that better than anyone. I think we've all been manipulated by Orchid in some way." All eyes turned toward Aidan who shrugged.

"I can't confirm or deny your accusation. Once Devlin went rogue, I was sent out on what they considered minor assignments because it seemed as if they thought I shared his beliefs. I was surprised when they brought me here to protect Fallon."

"I'm not." I rubbed my chin for a moment. "It fits if they want this to be a situation which tugs on heart strings and brings it all home. After all

you two did meet at the academy even if you are a few years older than she is. They knew you liked her, I guarantee it."

Javed looked at me with an ironic glance. "You think the IUA would do put their own people in jeopardy?"

"I'm not saying they would do it on purpose, but I do think if it suits their purpose they will allow aspects to slide. An item whose importance hasn't been determined by them, but by the Orchid group for example." I looked at each of them before settling on Fallon once again.

"I would agree with Bekka on this. It would seem the IUA is turning a blind eye to a lot of questionable sections which they gave the impression they had a better handle on." Fallon turned to look at Aidan. "Like knowing what your brother was doing all along. Or the fact they altered Bekka while we were in the academy."

I shifted restlessly in my chair. "So you knew it was more than the red hair and green eyes, huh?"

"You were different after the accident. At first, I couldn't understand what your problem was. Then came the time you turned beet red when you cut yourself. Your eyes went all weird when you saw your own blood and that was the first clue you weren't the same anymore." She held my attention with a steady gaze. "I never pushed you because I always had a hunch you'd tell me the

full story someday. I guess it never came while we were young."

"It was all so hard to accept as I wasn't given the choice. I woke up that way, then was told about it. And you need to look at it from my perspective. I was a young woman who had her whole future in front of her. When I failed on that mission so miserably, what could I say to anyone?"

"Understandable and that seems about right on how Orchid operates. Everyone is in the dark until the mission or item is about to be executed before the parameters are even given. But I can say this, they must have thought you were dying or they wouldn't even try what they did. Plus you must be participating in a mission which they were interested in at that moment in time. You, Bekka Taylor, were a person of some importance to them for whatever reason." Aidan watched me for a few seconds before turning his attention back to Fallon.

Shuddering, I gave a quick nod. "I was in pretty bad shape when I came in. We had been on a recon mission in the Baxter district of Ulara when we were ambushed. But these people they wanted us to scope out for terrorist activities were poor which made me think we were in the wrong place. They used whatever they had for weapons. I got a bucket of acid thrown at me and had put out my

hands to prevent it from getting in my face. It was too late as the liquid had gotten to my eyes."

"That explains the eyes, but what about the healing?" Javed gave me an intent gaze before reaching out to clasp my hand.

"It caught me in the chest and my hands as well. I was a mess when I came in, so they put me out very quick."

"What all did they do to you?" The concern in Fallon's eyes made me pat the back of her hand.

"It was a long time ago now and I hope I've moved beyond it at last." I held up my hands for all to see. "I have some metal in them as well as extra sensory touch cybernetics on my fingertips. It's weird some time. I don't know about the healing, it was there when I woke up."

"I think I can answer that one." Aidan's hands were steepled in front of his face. "There were some experiments going on in Devlin's research group. I don't know much, but I remember rumors about people being injected with the genes from other species, which had rapid healing. That would be the experiment which fits the bill in your situation, Bekka."

I shook my head. "I don't know, but when I woke up, my eyes were different and I was totally healed. It took me a while to adjust to the robotics in my eyes and the first time I touched another person I almost went into sensory overload."

Javed watched me with his beautiful dark eyes for a moment, then gave me a sad smile. "I remember the period after surgery well myself. It's hard to get synced up, but once it is, you wonder why you were so resistant."

"Yeah. I guess you could say so. I know I tried to hide this for a fair portion of my life." I looked at each of those around me. "But now it seems as if using this...gift...for lack of a better word, might help to save us all."

Fallon smiled. "So, I take it you're on board."

I nodded once and squeezed Javed's hand. "I'm on board and I've brought converts."

Laughter filtered through the room and I knew I was exactly where I belonged. Among friends and with my lover, among the stars and helping to make the world the way it was supposed to be. For everyone.

Now an exciting sneak peak of book 3 in the Orchid series, *Not Quite Human*, coming in 2010!

## PROLOGUE

*Constantine Bridge 1800 hours*

She couldn't understand why she was so damn cold when the bridge of the Constantine was so hot. Jinty Beton blew her hair out of her eyes for what seemed the millionth time since crawling under this console. Pulling herself out, she couldn't take it anymore and decided to go and get a warm sweatshirt.

"Just where do you think you're going, girl?"

She frowned to herself and wished she could have one moment when her uncle didn't question her motives. He always thought she goofed off or did a wrong procedure when fixing their spaceship.

"Uncle, I'm freezing and need to get a sweatshirt before I can complete the repairs. Otherwise, I'll be there for hours because my

fingers will be frozen." She stood and looked at the man as he seemed to contemplate what she had said.

"You know you haven't been quite right since our stop on Klammath 9, don't you?"

She wracked her mind trying to figure out what the man was telling her. "I don't have any clue as to what you are talking about. We only had four hours dockside and I spent most of mine picking up supplies for our guest. "

"Speaking of our passenger, we're supposed to pick him up ship side at 1000 tomorrow instead of the next day. All repairs must be done by 0800...do you have that, girl?"

She rolled her eyes and turned away from him. "Yes, sir. Now if you let me get back to what I was doing, I'll have the communications up in less than an hour."

"Any idea what went wrong?"

She turned back to the man and made a face. "Yeah, you bought crappy parts, Uncle Ulrich. You know you're supposed to check with me first."

The gruffness softened a bit. "I couldn't wait. You know we need this paying fare right now."

She gave a heavy sigh and nodded once. "I know. I wish we didn't have to take the IUA commander freaks everywhere."

"Now, Jinty, is that anyway to talk about people."

She tilted her head and gave him a dirty look as she leaned back on the bulkhead. "What would you have me call them, Uncle? They aren't human yet they aren't robots either. All of them have some cybernetics any more. Freak seems like an appropriate word to me."

"That isn't how your aunt and I brought you up. And you know you're not..."

"What? Not quite human myself? Yeah, I know. Who wouldn't know with you reminding them every time weird items come up."

The pudgy man with the graying beard stood there for a moment. "We couldn't leave you to die with the rest of your family out there. You know that! We've never done anything to make you feel like you didn't belong, like you weren't one of us."

"That's the problem, Uncle. I am one of you, I'm not sure IUA understands that yet." She turned and stomped toward her cabin.

"And I suppose you're the one who'll make them understand?"

She shook her head and waved her uncle off. She didn't have time to listen to his gibberish any more. "Maybe I am," she stated under her breath once she was in her room. "Maybe I am."

\* \* \* \*

*Centaurus Ready Room 1900 hours*

Commander Brodie Lamont looked at Captain Jensen and the command crew of the Centaurus. He had prepared them the best he could, now he had to go and talk to the next ship on his list. He couldn't believe it had been six short months since, Commander Fallon Montgomery had taken over the UFF initiative. During that short time, she had completely turned the IUA on its tail making more demands than any other commander in history.

At this point, he tried to field as many questions as he could since each ship he had talked to had had some clonedroids in their compliment. Some had joined them, some allowed themselves to be sent to the prison planet of Alderaan and others had died. Each of those choices had weighed heavy on the IUA. It was his mission to make sure everyone involved knew how important everyone was to IUA, human, clonedroid or cybernetically enhanced, it didn't matter.

He had been surprised when high command had reassigned him to Montgomery until he learned Aidan Chapel was her second. He had been Aidan's first commanding officer and that brought with itself a different set of complications. Brodie had always thought Aidan undisciplined in many ways, his brother even more so. It didn't surprise him when he found out Devlin had been behind the whole clonedroid scheme. That twin had always had a unique sense of self-importance.

He rubbed his face and rolled his head as the muscles of his neck were extremely tight. He could see out of the corner of his eye, the enticing looks Ensign 2<sup>nd</sup> class Adson gave him. While she was an attractive girl, he wasn't into drooling junior officers. No, he liked his women to know what they wanted and not be afraid to show it or reach out and grab it for that matter. Then there was the fact, she had no meat on her bones. He liked his women curvy, with full breasts and buttocks that he could wrap his fingers around. What was with all the skinny women? *Downright unhealthy*, he thought to himself and tried his best to stifle a yawn.

He had been on this trip for much longer than anticipated. He got up from the table and looked around. "Gentlemen and women, take the rest of the evening to look over the information I gave you. If you have any more questions, we can meet back here tomorrow at 0800 if Captain Jensen is good with this."

"Commander, I think that would be a good idea. When's your shuttle arriving?"

"The Constantine will be picking me up at 1000."

"Constantine? Isn't that an independent Valkyrie?" Jensen questioned.

"It is. With the ships being as far apart as they are right now, the IUA is contracting independents to move us all around. It keeps them all guessing."

"We'll be on the lookout for him, sir."

Brodie nodded once. "If that's all, I am off to get some much needed rest. I've been traveling between ships for almost a month now." Picking up his briefing material, he walked out the door. *Damn, I'm tired*, he thought as he tried to walk straight down the hall. He was glad that his room was so close.

"Commander, wait a minute."

He closed his eyes as this was so not how he wanted to end the night. He knew how he looked and sometimes had hated it. Sexy as sin one woman had told him. Women flocked to him and while there were times he would use them, there were very few in his life that he had wanted for more than a moment's pleasure. Brodie waited till she caught up to him as he was sure it was the young ensign sitting across from him. He kept walking and was soon by his door before he turned to her. "What can I do for you, Ensign?"

"I was wondering if you'd like to get a drink, sir." She stood at near attention, her dark hair and eyes not unattractive, but certainly not floating his boat tonight.

"Maybe some other time. I'm too damn tired tonight to care." He closed the door on her startled face and kept his chuckle to himself. It was obvious she wasn't used to rejection. One-night stands were common on ships, but he was beyond those type of relationships. He threw his papers on the table and flung himself on his bed.

He allowed his thoughts to drift and wondered what attracted him to a woman any more. He had to think hard as to when he'd last seen a woman who even caught his eye. He sat up and thought as he took his clothes off and crawled in naked between the cool sheets. He didn't care what academy training taught him, once he had his own command, he always slept nude. Head on pillow, he folded his arms, placing them behind his head and let his thoughts wander back to the last enticing woman he had seen.

There were a few on this ship, but none of those made him want to grab his cock and pump it for relief. There hadn't even been anyone on the last ship either. Hell, the last one was...no...in Klammath 9. His head went to his cock as he thought about the dark haired beauty. She had barely come to his shoulders with her close-cropped curly hair, intense blue eyes and perky breasts. Then there was her ass. God, he wanted to spread those cheeks and bury himself up to the hilt in her luscious body.

His hand gently grasped his shaft, which grew slow in response to his thoughts. It had been a long time since the thought of a woman had made him want to do himself. Hell, he could get anyone he wanted and he knew it. But there was a spark, an unknown about the Constantine's engineer that turned him on.

Maybe it was her name...Jinty he believed someone said...as he had had to turn away from

her to keep his mind on business. But now, it was time for him to reflect on her and his desire as his hand slid up and down his hard shaft, rolling his thumb across the mushroom head, pulling the moisture of his precum down the around the rim. Still, it wasn't enough as he knew he wanted her like he hadn't wanted a woman in a long time. Masturbating wasn't going to change that fact.

He dreamed that the sensations he felt came from her mouth, licking his hard cock in long strokes. He hoped those lush lips would wrap around him as she sucked him from start to release. Going down further with his hand, he hoped she would lick his balls, making them tighten in response before he shot his load. He stroked himself yet again and knew he needed a little more and ran his hand on his abdomen, dreaming it were her touching him, her stroking him.

He was almost too tired, but thinking of her having her cunt dripping for him tossed him over the edge and in a flash it was over as thick jets of cum shot across his taut belly. Next time he would have the real deal under him, calling his name as he buried himself in her tight body. As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered if the two-day trip would be long enough to get Miss Jinty Beton in his bed.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lynn Crain realized at an early age she wanted to write. She took the long way to that goal by doing a variety of things like nursing, geologist, technical writer and computer manager. During her free time she weaves fantasy, futuristic and paranormal tales as well as erotic stories for various publishers. She lives in the southwest with her husband, son, one dog, three cats, three snakes one of which is named Psycho. During the very hot, southwestern summers, she can be found traveling throughout the US and Scotland or other cooler climates to recharge her muse. She is a past board member of the Romance Writers of America, past EPPIEs Chair for EPIC and immediate past EPIC President. She loves hearing from her readers at [lynnccrain@cox.net](mailto:lynnccrain@cox.net)