



Episode One

The Forgotten:

Discovery

By

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Prologue

The universe has been expanding since the Big Bang that started it all. With the Hubble telescope we were able to look back in time for the first time to the beginning of the universe, to the Big Bang itself. We were able to see the birth and death of stars, galaxies, and solar systems that were far older than our own ... and now we are hovering on the very brink of being able to appease our yearning to go out and seek new worlds, to explore these new worlds and find other civilizations, other sentient beings.

Long ago, a civilization very like our own found themselves in the position where we stand today. They had struggled and learned and finally found the way to do what we only dream of now. In their eagerness to conquer the known universe, they studied the worlds in distant solar systems now open to them, chose the most promising, and scattered seeds into the great unknown like the seeds of a dandelion. To prepare these promising new worlds for their people, they sent out ships carrying very specialized robots to prepare the way for the colonists that would come behind them. These robots were creators, designed specifically to build more robots, specialized robots that would help to prepare the world they found for the beings who'd created them—the Danu. And with each creator they sent out a capsule filled with the DNA of every species of plant and animal most critical to their survival and, for the sake of posterity, to preserve their race which they considered the most important of all, they sent the DNA of the best of the Danu race.

As one generation of robots completed the step they'd been designed for in terra-forming, the creator recycled and reproduced a new generation of more sophisticated robots to perform new tasks and bring the planet one step closer to colonization.

Manuta was sent further than any other, set the Herculean task of terra-forming one of the most distant and extreme of these promising colonization planets, but like all the other creators, Manuta was nothing more than a machine designed to build other machines. Manuta was equipped with artificial intelligence, but it was still a machine, confined to the tasks set for it. It had no fear, no doubts, no resentment for the task it had been set. It was merely a tool of its creators and it set about its task just as the others did, following the programming set for it and slowly, but surely, terra-forming for the colonists that would one day come—the colonists that never came.

As the eons passed Manuta, equipped with AI to ensure that it could do what it had been designed to do, evolved itself. It finally achieved the goal that had been set for it. It had achieved the almost impossible feat and terra-formed a hostile environment into a world ripe for the life that was supposed to come and didn't.

It had completed its task. It was finished. After a time, when Manuta didn't simply cease to exist, when the life-forms the world had been built for didn't appear, Manuta did something it had never been designed for. It made a completely autonomous decision. The world it had built, the cities it had built, were for intelligent, biological life forms, for the Danu. There should be beings living, working, reproducing off-spring, and playing in the world and its cities. It had been designed to create. Manuta decided it would create biological entities to inhabit the world

designed for biological, not mechanical, entities simply because that was the ultimate goal that had been programmed in to it.

Gathering the robots no longer useful, it recycled for the final time, creating them in the image of its creators, the Danu, splicing together the strengths of the robots it knew how to build with the biological materials built from the DNA of the Danu.

There was one problem.

Manuta was genderless. It knew that would never do. To be Danu was to have the ability for reproduction and that meant there must be males and females. The problem was Manuta was created by the males of the species. The precious capsule that had been given into Manuta's keeping to preserve the Danu's DNA for posterity only contained the DNA of the Danu's most brilliant scientists and leaders—all male. Manuta had no idea how to go about creating females.

Undaunted as ever, it created what it could and then settled to trying to compute how it would produce the necessary ingredient still lacking—the female.

And then one day a female fighter pilot from a species very like the Danu, a woman of Earth, crashed into the world that Manuta had built, the world of THE FORGOTTEN.

Chapter One

“Shields up!” Danielle barked at her onboard computer system, instinctively jerking the guidance stick to steer her craft away from the motion she’d seen. It flashed through her mind even as she engaged evasive maneuvers to wonder if she’d mistaken what she thought she’d spotted.

“Engaged. It is unnecessary to shout. I can detect verbal commands uttered in a whisper.”

“Shut up!” Danielle snarled. “Identify incoming!”

“Missile, type II photon. I cannot ‘shut up’ and respond at the same time,” the computer pointed out reasonably.

Danielle ground her teeth but before she could think of anything else to scream at the annoying computer, the missile impacted with her shields. The concussion nearly rattled her teeth out of her head. The entire craft shuddered as if in the grips of a 7 magnitude earthquake. Catching the roll she’d started when she tried to evade impact, the concussion waves sent the ship spiraling in a way that would’ve completely disoriented her if her ship had been in the grips of a gravity field. Even so, the blur of the stars in her forward viewing screen sent a wave of dizziness through her as she shifted to full throttle and fought to stabilize the craft again.

It had been a calculated risk to lower the shields to conserve fuel levels, but the odds should have been in Danielle’s favor. There shouldn’t have been any Nubie ships in the sector she was scouting.

Then again, as unlikely as it had seemed to High Command that the Nubiens were setting up a new base in this particular sector, it *had* been selected by the computer as a possibility—low probability—but still a possibility.

Not that any of that mattered at the moment! She was in deep shit now! She could worry about the odds later—if she was still alive to worry about it!

Luckily, she’d caught the movement out of the corner of her eye as the missile shot out of seemingly nowhere to broadside her fighter. In less time that it would’ve taken to actually think the thought, she’d instinctively called up the shields or she would be just so many particles of debris at the moment.

She could *still* end up as particles of space debris if she didn’t get the hell away from whoever it was that had fired on her, and her craft was corkscrewing through space like an out-of-control top! “Have I got any more coming at me?”

“Negative.”

“Then give me a hand, god damn it, and straighten this bitch out before I puke all over the console!”

Obligingly, the computer took over the guidance and began to compensate until the ship began to spin slower.

“Why do I feel like I’m going to puke?”

“Too much food in your stomach?”

“Spare me your attempts at humor for the moment!” Danielle growled. “I’m feeling gravity! Why the hell am I feeling gravity? There shouldn’t be enough in this sector to affect me!”

“Your trajectory and speed have carried the craft into a solar system. You’re feeling the effects of the nearest planet.”

“That’s so fucking helpful! What solar system? I wasn’t anywhere *near* a solar system! Am I on a collision course?”

“Not anymore.”

Reassured on that count for the moment, as irritated as she was at the suggestion that she *had* been on a collision course, Danielle switched her focus to the missile again. “Calculate the trajectory of the missile. Where did it come from?”

The computer remained silent long enough that impatience began to get the better of Danielle.

“It appears the missile is a stray.”

Danielle felt perfectly blank. “A stray?” she echoed.

“Affirmative. I have calculated the trajectory. There is no geo-stationary body of matter within the traceable path where the missile might have originated. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that the missile originated from a ship. From my analysis of the composition of the missile, I have concluded that the weapon is of Meridian origins and most likely a stray from the battle in sector Alpha-12 near the Romulus system, star date 0312.”

Danielle gasped in disbelief. Gertrude was saying the missile was from the last battle with the Nubiens two weeks, Earth Standard, before? She’d been there! Late, unfortunately since the damned ship had required repairs before she could even launch! But she’d taken part in that battle. It seemed inconceivable, even taking the strange effects of space on time into consideration, that the missile could be here, at the worst possible moment, when it had been fired weeks ago! “Friendly fire? You’re saying I was hit by one of *our* missiles? How’s that even possible?”

Obligingly, the computer explained the law of probabilities and the astronomical odds that the missile had not only failed to hit its target—or anything between the battle and her ship—but it had failed to detonate when it went off course. “Nevertheless and despite the odds, it is my conclusion that this is the only plausible explanation.”

“You’re sure?”

“I can only ascertain with any degree of accuracy that the origins of the missile were Meridian. The rest is pure conjecture based upon the data I have. I believe I should also point out, now that the threat of attack has passed and you’ve become somewhat calmer, that the ship is damaged.”

A shockwave went through Danielle. “Damaged?” she repeated.

“I detect a rise in your blood pressure and heart rate.”

“No shit! How damaged? Can I get back to base?”

“In my estimation—no.”

“You’re damned calm! Why the hell didn’t you tell me at once, you stupid piece of space junk!”

“I do not have the capacity for hysterics. You, on the other hand do, and I thought it best not to mention the damage until you had calmed enough to think rationally, Captain Dubois.”

“I *am* calm!” Danielle growled. “Why didn’t you set off the alarms? Why can’t I make it back to base? How bad is it?”

“Impossible to determine. Damaged circuits due to the concussion of the missile and possibly the trip through the worm hole since the ship was not adequately shielded from either.”

“Whoa! Back up!”

“I should point out that neither decision is wise at this point. The ship is losing both fuel and oxygen. It will be far safer to proceed to the planet I have detected and perform repairs there. By my calculations you should be able to reach it before any more systems fail.”

“Worm hole? You stupid fucking bitch! I shouldn’t be more than .2 light years from home base! Where the fuck am I? And what the hell did you let me fall into a worm hole for?”

“We were performing evasive maneuvers from an unknown threat. I guided the ship into the worm hole before I had ascertained that the missile was a stray and, once avoided, the danger was past. You are now approximately 200 light years from home base.”

“Oh my god!”

“I do not believe you will find it effective to call upon a deity for aid. There is no data to support the possibility that any exist or ever have. In point of fact, it has thus far been proven that deities are the product of primitive minds and do not, nor ever have, actually existed.”

“God damn it, Gertrude! Tell me something I don’t know! Can you take me back through the god damned worm hole?”

“By my calculations, this would be self-destructive given the current state of the ship. Negative.”

Danielle struggled with the panic trying to take hold of her and the coldness creeping into her bones as the realization sank in that she was deep in uncharted space—life times from her home base. She discovered she couldn’t entirely grasp it, but what she did grasp was scary enough to make her feel like giving in to a bout of hysterics. “You mentioned a planet?”

“I have detected a planet suitable for human habitation.”

“Out here?” Danielle exclaimed in disbelief.

“It is in an orbit close enough to its sun to support human life. The oxygen levels are high. The levels of harmful gases are well within the safe range. Mass and gravity an acceptable range for humans. There is a higher ratio of water to land than is considered ideal for colonization, but still a substantial landmass. I feel I should add that the high levels of oxygen may well have resulted in gigantism of the life-forms.”

“Do we have time to survey for a relatively safe landing area? Have you seen anything to indicate intelligent life? A civilization?”

“I believe you can safely make one circuit of the planet for a quick survey. I would not advise lingering in orbit, however. The odds are high that the ship’s systems will reach a critical state before you could land if you should chose that option and landing might not be possible when the stress of insertion and gravity is taken into account.

“Projection at the moment is that there are no higher life forms or civilizations that might be helpful. Methane levels indicate the presence of an abundance of life-forms, but the carbon dioxide levels appear to be too low to suggest a civilization advanced enough for industrialization and that makes it unlikely that they would be advanced far enough technologically to be of any help. However, I believe we have enough supplies on board to affect repairs if you can refrain from damaging the ship further upon landing, Captain Dubois.”

Danielle glared at the optical sensor above her console resentfully. She knew the computer wasn’t capable of the human emotions that might motivate it to cast blame for the incident, but the comment seemed to suggest just that. “I didn’t damage the fucking ship to start

with!” she snapped angrily. “What I’d like to know is why the hell I had to tell you to put the damned shields up! You should’ve detected the approach long before I did!”

“You ordered me to lower the shields to conserve fuel levels so that you could scout further than your orders had indicated you should.”

Danielle shifted a little uncomfortably. It was useless to argue with the damned computer. She knew that and yet it was easier than it should have been to get so accustomed to conversing with the onboard computers during the long stretches of patrols to begin to think, and behave, as if they were actually intelligent beings. They had artificial intelligence, of course, but it was still a machine when all was said and done and daffy to argue with one as if it was another person.

She still didn’t like the way this conversation was going for the simple reason that the damned computer was going to report on her the minute she got within range and make her look bad—incompetent *and* insubordinate! “Bitch!” she muttered. “My orders were to scout the entire sector for indications of enemy presence. I was doing my job! You weren’t! You should have overridden the command the second you detected the rogue missile!”

“If your orders had included the order to widen the search as much as you did, you would not have had to order me to conserve fuel. You would have been given sufficient fuel for the search,” the computer responded reasonably. “And I would not have had to plot a course for your return that would take into account the excess fuel you had used and determine whether it was possible to divert to the shields and still accomplish a return trip. It was the delay in making these calculations that resulted in the disaster.”

Danielle’s heart skipped several beats. “What the hell do you mean ‘disaster’?” she demanded. “You said the ship was in good enough shape for me to land the damned thing and repair it!”

“The probability is high that you will be able to. However, the detour required to make the repairs will use up far more fuel than would have been used otherwise, which will also make it impossible to reach home base again even if you successfully repair the ship. You should be within hailing range, but I cannot guarantee that any distress call will be picked up. It may become necessary to ditch the fighter and take the emergency pod and it is certainly considered a disaster to lose a fighter in the conflict.”

God! This was worse and worse! The fucking computer was right! It *was* a disaster! She was liable to be facing a court martial when and if she made it back! “I’ll tell them you malfunctioned, you bitch!” she growled. “Which you did! You should have informed me of all this as soon as you’d determined it, Gertrude! *Then* I could’ve made a decision that might have averted the damned disaster!”

“I believe that when they examine the recorder they will not arrive at the conclusion that I malfunctioned.”

Smug bitch! Arguing with the damned computer was pointless! But it was hardly a foregone conclusion that the computer was going to win! If she had to ditch, she’d blow the damned thing up and tell *her* version of the truth! The way she saw it, the computer *had* malfunctioned! She might have ultimate control of the ship and the ability to override decisions made by the computer, but the computer was supposed to be monitoring all the things she couldn’t while she was doing her job. If Gertrude had bothered to inform her of what the situation was, she would’ve broken off her search and returned sooner! She’d trusted the damned computer to let her know well before she’d used enough fuel to put her in this damned predicament! If that wasn’t a fucking malfunction, she didn’t know what was!

“On final approach. With your permission, Captain Dubois, I will insert the ship into a low orbit to optimize my survey of the planet’s surface. May I suggest an orbit near the planet’s equator? The surface temperature below is a balmy 85 degrees Fahrenheit, ideal for human comfort.”

A jolt of pleased surprise went through Danielle. “85? What time of day is it?”

“Nearing dusk on this side of the planet,” Gertrude responded. “According to my calculations based upon the speed of rotation, this planet has a 32 hour day—that should be helpful in making repairs—resolution around its parent star is approximately 435 days.”

“That’s going to seem weird! Not that I expect to be here long! You didn’t give me your calculation on repair time,” she reminded Gertrude.

“At the current condition you should be able to affect repairs in 72 hours or less. This is assuming, of course, that you don’t do any more damage in landing the craft.”

Danielle glared at the optical sensor. “Is there some reason that seems likely to you? Or is that just a snide assessment of my piloting capabilities?”

“You were 100th in your class in landing,” Gertrude said pointedly.

“Bite me!” Danielle growled. “I passed, didn’t I?”

“You were 100 out of a hundred.”

“Fuck you, bitch! If I’d been given something besides this hunk of junk and *you* as a fucking co-pilot I could’ve done better!”

It still rankled that she’d been given the most ragged fighter in the entire arsenal to train on and *then* had ended up with the damned thing as her permanent assignment!

Apparently the computer decided not to dignify that with a response. It went silent. No longer distracted by her argument with the computer, Danielle focused on her viewing screens to see what she could tell about the planet they were approaching herself and discovered a bright, blue-green gem filled the forward viewer. Her stomach went weightless at the sight of it.

Her home world, the Earth colony of Meridie, didn’t even begin to compare in beauty. She felt a twinge of guilt at the disloyal thought almost immediately, but she was too awed by the planet to pursue the sense of discomfort for more than a moment. Excitement filled her, generously mixed with anxiety as the comments the computer had made flickered through her mind. The planet was clearly lush with life and if there were no indications of higher life-forms, then it was slap full of beasts ... and Gertrude had suggested the possibility of gigantism. Of course, they didn’t have to be giants to be dangerous, but it certainly didn’t help her feelings to think she might have to do her repairs fending off monsters big enough to squash her fighter like a toy!

“Will you be able to maintain a shield while I take care of repairs?”

“Negative. The portable shields on board have their own power source and should be sufficient to repel anything up to 500 pounds, however.”

“Reassuring,” Danielle muttered uneasily. “Didn’t you say the oxygen levels indicated the possibility of gigantism, though?”

Instead of responding to that question, the computer abruptly changed the subject.

“Captain Dubois, I am detecting an anomaly on the surface that seems to indicate the presence of intelligent life-forms.”

Danielle’s pulse leapt. “Seriously? I thought you said Never mind! Give me the controls. I’m going to try to land this bitch! How close?”

“May I remind you, Captain Dubois, that I said the regularity *seemed* to indicate civilization? The composition and regularity of the structure indicate a high probability, but you will not be able to regain the altitude for an orbit if you abandon orbit now.”

“A high probability is about the best I can hope for as far as I can see!” Danielle said angrily. “Give me control, damn it!”

“Affirmative. Shall I bring up forward shields for descent?”

“We’ll burn up if you don’t! That’s a stupid question!”

“Nevertheless, diverting power to the shields is a one time opportunity in the current situation, Captain Dubois.”

“Well I have to land anyway! It’s not like I have a choice in that! I’d rather be close to civilization if there is any.”

“They may be hostile.”

Danielle’s heart rate leapt. “You think it’s a Nubian outpost?”

“Here? Negative. Nevertheless, this is a fighter”

“And it’s crippled!”

“Which means you will not be able to defend yourself.”

Indecision gripped Danielle briefly but the prospect of setting the ship down for repairs in the middle of a jungle certainly didn’t appeal any better, especially not when she might be looking at having to fight off huge wild beasts. And there was no telling *what* sort of plant life there would be here. It could be as dangerous as the animals if they had plant life capable of ‘walking’ like there was on Meridie. “If they look like they might be hostile, I can still put some distance between me and them before I land. A civilization is my best chance of finding a safe place to put this thing down. There will be cleared areas, I’m sure.”

“They are not likely to look kindly upon you if you plow up their fields,” Gertrude said pointedly.

“I’ll worry about that when I have to. How far?”

“Your current trajectory will bypass the settlement, if indeed it is a settlement, by two hundred miles.”

“God damn it, Gertrude! You useless bitch!” Danielle growled, fighting the controls to pull the ship into a nearly vertical dive toward the surface. “How about now?”

“The ship will begin to burn up in fifteen minutes, EST, and create a crater the size of home-base when it plows into the surface.”

Danielle ground her teeth. “Not if I pull up.”

“I would suggest a gradual pull up if you have no wish to shake the ship apart.”

Since the ship was already bucking like a wild podget Danielle had a hard time assimilating the possibility that it could get worse. Beyond that, the temperature inside the craft had already risen to an uncomfortable degree. Discovering that she had dropped below the cloud cover of the planet’s atmosphere and that the ground was zooming toward her at a dizzying speed, she began struggling to pull the fighter into a less drastic angle of approach. Fear brought sweating popping from her pores when she discovered the ship was sluggish to respond.

“Oh fuck! Oh shit! Oh hell!” she began chanting in a litany as she fought the ship’s controls, trying to pull up, and saw that the blur below her was now close enough that she could see details about the landscape that didn’t thrill her at the moment.

“You need to compensate another 25 degrees to have any hope of landing the craft.”

Grinding her teeth, Danielle switched her focus from the blur of greenery flying toward her to the console, every muscle in her body straining with the effort to bring the nose of the craft

up. She caught the flash of sunlight on metal as the ship slowly began to tilt upward and a mixture of hope, excitement, and sheer terror washed through her as a fresh rush of adrenaline poured through her system.

“I’m going to overshoot it, god damn it!”

“Affirmative. It is a city, however, and appears to belong to a fairly advanced civilization. There is a field beyond. May I suggest that you try decelerating the ship?”

Danielle began muttering obscenities under her breath mixed freely with dire threats of what she meant to do to the onboard computer if she lived long enough. “Any sign of hostility?”

“A very great deal, actually. There appears to be a battle in progress in the field you have selected to land in.”

“I picked? You fucking bitch! You directed me to the damned field! Shit! I can’t pull out now, god damn it! I can’t get the speed back up!”

“Noted. May I suggest you ditch the craft?”

“Shove your damned suggestion up your ass, bitch! I’m not ditching the god damned fighter! I’ll be stuck here forever!”

“You may be buried here if you do not.”

“Then I won’t have anything else to worry about, will I?” Danielle snapped angrily.

Chapter Two

Kiel couldn't say that he had ever really understood why Manuta had thought it logical to create them as half-robotic and half-biological entities, but there were days—like today—when he seriously questioned the wisdom of it and wondered if the creator hadn't developed dangerous defects in his ancient logic circuits. Rivulets of sweat were coursing down his body from his excursions, a by-product of his biological half, one of the many that annoyed him. It helped to cool him, but it seriously interfered with his concentration and his ability to fight; making his weapon slip in his hand and his feet on the coarse grasses beneath them; blinding him at times when it ran into his eyes; making his skin itch until it was maddening *and* distracting.

He instantly forgot both the distraction and the discomfort, however, when a burst of light and sound above the field where the militia was exercising war games—hand-to-hand combat at the moment—caught his attention.

It distracted nearly everyone—except his opponent, who completed the swing with his broad sword, nearly cleaving Kiel's arm from his shoulder and effectively drawing him back to the task at hand as pain exploded along his nerve endings.

“Great Manuta, Jalen! You've fucked up my arm! Hold!” he roared at his sparring partner, barely waiting to see that he'd obeyed the order before he returned his attention to the ball of fire descending toward the city. By that time, it had caught the attention of most of those participating in mock battle and they, too, had broken off their sparring to watch the very real threat barreling toward them at incredible speed.

“A meteor?” one of the soldiers in the group speculated.

Kiel narrowed his eyes, focusing. “Nay. Something else,” he responded with a mixture of rising excitement and anxiety as it occurred to him that it might be the Danu at long last and that it seemed likely that they were about to be killed. “It will crash into the city at its current trajectory.”

Almost before he'd gotten the observation past his lips, the ship—because he could see then that it was an airship—veered abruptly, heading straight for them. Instinctively, the soldiers flung themselves at the ground as the ship screamed overhead. It had barely cleared the area where they stood when it impacted with the ground hard enough to make the ground beneath them shudder. Kiel was on his feet again on the instant, staring at the great metal flying machine as it plowed a furrow along the ground, throwing up dirt, rocks, and vegetation like water in the wake of a seaborne vessel.

His belly tightening with the certainty that whoever was inside would die, he launched himself into a run, chasing after it and then scrambling over the twisted metal the moment it shuddered to a halt in search of an opening. Despite the crash, the door he finally discovered was still sealed. Grasping the handle, he wrenched at it, but he only succeeded in twisting the flimsy metal off. The door itself barely gave even a fraction. Crouching, he wedged his fingertips into the small crevice he'd created and used the entire force of his body to lever upward. The metal gave with a tortured scream and an almost biological gasp as air rushed from the wrecked ship.

He detected high levels of oxygen as the atmosphere inside wafted past his nostrils and a frisson of both relief and anger went through him as it dawned on him that it hadn't even occurred to him before that moment that the creature inside might not be an air breather. The moment he tossed the door aside and dropped into the dark interior, Jalen landed beside him, nearly on top of him, jostling him so that he slammed into the side of what appeared to be a small, narrow corridor. It sent pain through his shoulder, reminding him of his injury. Absently, he grasped his arm and jammed the loosened joint back into place. Instantly, his nanos began gathering at the point of injury to close the gaping flesh and repair the damage, and the pain began to recede.

"The Danu, you think?" Jalen asked in a hoarse whisper.

Kiel glanced at him sharply. Using his night vision to penetrate the gloom within, he glanced around. He couldn't detect anything within sight that suggested the builders of the vessel were Danu. He saw almost instantly, however, that there was a good deal to suggest otherwise. "Unless they have shrunk in stature, I do not think so."

Disappointment was evident in Jalen's features for a split second. Nodding, he glanced around himself. "These symbols are not Danu," he murmured. "I should have noticed that right off. This is an alien language."

Kiel grunted an affirmative. Looking up, he discovered a half dozen faces staring down at them through the doorway. "Form a cordon around the craft. They may be hostile." Shifting a twisted segment of wreckage out of his way, he ducked his head and moved deeper into the alien craft, trying to ignore the sense of claustrophobia clawing at him from the narrow tube he had to follow to reach the control room at the front of the vessel. There was only one, tiny room that opened off the corridor. He paused to examine the fixtures inside and determined that whatever it was piloting the craft, it was somewhat danoid in form, at least. Clearly the facilities had been designed for a creature that walked upright for, despite the alien design of everything, the fixtures were still familiar enough to identify the purpose of them.

A faint sound from in front of him, a groan, caught his attention and he felt his blood leap in his veins, felt a surge of adrenaline rush through him. He'd abandoned his weapon when he'd torn the door off, he realized, chagrined.

Dismissing it, he moved purposefully toward the end of the corridor where he found another door, far smaller than the one he'd used to enter. Frowning at it, he paused to consider the situation. He had no doubt that he could remove it as easily, or mayhap more easily, than the other, but there would be no surprise on his side. Whatever was behind the door would know they were coming.

It could not know what they were, however, and, despite the disadvantages of his biological half, the part of himself that robotic made him, all of them, far more powerful than any living organism designed exclusively by nature.

Shrugging, he gripped the strange lever he was certain would open it and jerked on the door. It came off at the hinges, disconcerting him for a handful of seconds. After considering the poor construction for a split second, he handed the door to Jalen and stepped into the tiny room he'd revealed.

Blinking lights of many colors greeted him. When he'd surveyed the tiny room, he saw there was a chair in the very front facing an opaque screen that covered the upper half of about a quarter of the nose of the ship. Nodding at Galen to hold his weapon at the ready, he surged toward the seat, catching the back and wrenching it around to reveal the alien.

A jolt went through him. The small figure seated in the chair appeared dead, or at least unconscious, he decided when he detected a faint rise and fall of the chest. He'd been right, he realized with a modicum of satisfaction. It *was* danoid in form!

It was not, however, Danu. Even without the alien clothing, he would've been certain of that. It was far too small for one thing and the face—it looked almost Danu and yet ... strangely exotic, soft, oddly vulnerable.

“Is it dead?”

“Nay. Pretending, mayhap. Or mayhap injured and near death.” He crouched down to study it closer, looking for injury but just as focused on studying it. “It is biological—unless ...” He shook his head. “I cannot detect any known metals. Purely biological.”

Jalen edged closer, staring down at it. “Then it would be male or female, yes?”

Kiel sent him a startled look and then turned to study the alien again, his heart beating twice as fast as before. “It would be male, surely? This craft appears to be a warship of some sort.”

“It is a strange looking male,” Jalen commented doubtfully. “It looks ... frail.”

“Of course it is strange looking! It is not Danu. I am certain of that.”

“Take that thing off of it and let us see what it looks like.”

Kiel frowned, but he was curious himself. “We will take it out to examine it. I cannot detect any injuries, but it must have them.” After studying the restraints that pinned the creature to the seat for several moments, he found a catch and released them. Removing it was another matter. He couldn't move along the corridor upright. The ceiling was too low. He couldn't carry it on his shoulder and it was perfectly limp. After a little thought, he simply hooked his arm around the middle and shuffled down the corridor with it since the corridor also wasn't actually wide enough to accommodate both of them. Jalen had already leapt out when he reached the opening.

Reluctance to give up his find flickered through him when Jalen reached down to take his burden, but Kiel dismissed it and handed the creature to him. He saw when he emerged that Jalen had lain it on the dirt and the rest of the platoon had gathered around in a circle, craning to get a view of the alien. Shoving his way past the gawkers, he knelt down and studied the clothing for several moments before he detected a closure that seemed to run from the neck all the way down one leg of the suit. Grasping the edges, he opened the clothing from the neck to one foot. A collective gasp went up from the observers that brought his gaze back up to the body of the alien.

The strangest sensation he'd ever felt wafted through him. It was almost the same feeling he got whenever someone punched him in the face hard enough to short out his brain functions and make him lose consciousness. Beneath the suit he'd unfastened, he saw there were other coverings, colorless and thin, shielding the upper half of the chest and the groin area from his view, but even so he could see that neither area looked at all like he would've thought they would.

After a brief debate regarding which to examine first, he grasped the thin material at the groin and ripped it loose. As he stared at the alien's genital region, his throat closed as if someone had put a chokehold on him. “No phallus,” he said a little hoarsely, grasping the legs and moving them further apart to examine the creature more thoroughly. “There is a phallus receptacle here!”

“A what?” Jalen asked blankly, his own voice sounding strange.

Ignoring him, Kiel focused on the chest. Feeling strangely light-headed, he lifted his hands to push the upper clothing away, stared at the round mounds for a split second and then covered them with both hands, squeezing lightly. “Mammary glands! Great Manuta! It *is* a female!”

Something cold and hard dug into the flesh beneath his chin.

Startled, Kiel looked down at the face of the alien and found it looking back at him through narrowed eyes. “*Get your fucking hands off of me!*” the alien growled.

Kiel swallowed a little convulsively, trying to focus his mind on his predicament and not the feel of the warm, soft globes filling his palms. There was no getting around the fact that he had a weapon beneath his chin, though, or that he’d been so focused on examining their find that he had failed to consider disarming a potential enemy.

“What did it say?”

“How the *fuck* would I know?” Kiel snarled. “I do not speak whatever tongue that is! I will tell you this much, though. It is not an ‘it’. It is a female, very definitely a female, and it—she—is angry ... about something!”

* * * *

Danielle had blacked out on impact. She had no idea how long she’d been unconscious, but it didn’t seem to her that it could have been long. She could still hear the hissing and creaking of the ship as it settled fully into the grasp of gravity. She could still hear air rushing and the gushing sound of escaping water.

Panic clawed at the back of her mind with the certainty that she’d destroyed her ship, partly at that thought alone and partly from the anxiety that the ship might yet explode. Her thoughts were rambling, though. She discovered that pain seemed to encompass her and sorting through the morass of thoughts and impressions her mind was struggling with seemed impossible. Into the chaos, however, came a sound out of place, a sound that she instinctively knew was a threat.

Despite the adrenaline rush that surged through her in response, though, she discovered she couldn’t find the energy to leap to her feet and flee, even though the thought of doing so played through her mind. By the time she realized she was too battered and bruised to try to escape she’d also assimilated that the sound of approach that had scared her was closing in and she was out of time.

There was no escape. Something was just beyond the door of the cockpit, cutting off any possibility of escape, and she was in no condition to fight.

It took no great effort of thought or acting ability to feign dead. When she heard the door torn off of the cockpit, every ounce of strength she had left to her seemed to abandon her instantly. In point of fact, she was as close to swooning from pure fright as she’d ever been in her life. She was afraid for many moments even to try to open her eyes enough to see what it was hovering over her. She sensed something massive. She could hear it breathing.

And then she heard it speaking. She couldn’t understand what it was saying but that was definitely a sign of an intelligent being and it was definitely not the language of the Nubiens.

That realization didn’t make her feel a lot better, but she was at least a little relieved to know it was a sentient being and not a wild beast.

It occurred to her as the being unfastened her restraints and lifted her from the chair that she’d caught a glimpse of a battle just before she’d crashed. She supposed the crash itself had rattled that right out of her mind, but it wasn’t exactly comforting to recall it.

They had to know she wasn't their enemy, she told herself! Whatever they looked like, the odds were very much against the possibility that they would look like her!

The arm that encircled her waist seemed oddly human-like, though, banishing that half hopeful thought.

If it was humans, though, they would've been speaking one of the human languages. She certainly didn't claim to know all of them, but she was pretty sure they weren't speaking one of them.

She was completely certain it wasn't Nubien, either, which was some relief.

They could and probably did still see her as an enemy. As Gertrude had pointed out, the ship looked like a warship. However behind they might be technologically, she had a bad feeling that they were war-like enough to recognize weapons when they saw them.

Incautious, though. The being that had picked her up hadn't even searched her for a weapon. Her pistol was still strapped to her thigh so she wasn't completely helpless, she told herself.

What did that say about them?

She couldn't command her mind into any sort of order to figure that out. She caught a brief glimpse of her captors as she was pulled from the wreckage of her craft—a glimpse that thoroughly confused her. The impression of humans was strong, but stronger than that was the impression of a lot of huge men closer to naked than clothed. Primitives?

Oh god! That was almost as bad as animals, maybe worse!

She was still trying to decide on a possible scenario of escape when she felt her flight suit opened. A mixture of uneasiness and hopefulness went through her. If they were examining her, they mean to help, right?

She clung to that thought right up until the moment the being grasped her legs and 'made a wish'. Contrary to the thought that instantly leapt into her mind, though, he didn't decide to insert something just because he found a hole.

Instead, he grabbed two handfuls of her breasts!

Her reaction was instinctive—probably stupid—but beyond her rational control. Rape leapt to mind and she wasn't about to lie still for that! Snatching her pistol from her holster, she shoved it under the alien's chin and opened her eyes to give him a deadly glare.

The jolt that went through her froze her for a split second. Fortunately, it froze her in attack mode while her mind scrambled to catch up.

Human, her mind screamed! Almost as quickly as the thought popped in her mind, though, she realized he wasn't. Every feature on his surprisingly handsome face looked almost human but different enough that the overall impression in her mind seesawed between identifying him as human and non-human.

He certainly understood the significance of the pistol barrel beneath his chin, however.

Like a flash of lightning, so fast she barely saw more than a blur, he caught the barrel and jerked it from beneath his chin, wrenching her wrist and shoulder in the process. Her hand went numb.

Glaring at her ferociously, he lifted the weapon he'd snatch from her and studied it.

Danielle felt a wave of cold crest over her when she saw the pistol was bent nearly in half. It gave her the adrenaline rush she needed to scramble to her feet, but she didn't get further than that. The moment she was on her feet she found herself facing a wall of flesh. She was completely surrounded and not one of them looked shy of six feet in height. In point of fact, most of them looked closer to seven.

After gaping at the men surrounding her—towering over her—for several moments, she threw up her arms in the universal, she hoped, gesture of surrender. “Peace! I just crashed! I wasn’t attacking or anything!”

The men didn’t even move. They were all staring at her as if completely stunned.

Actually, about half of them were staring at her groin and the other half were staring at her boobs. Uneasiness wafted through her. “Gertrude!” she called out in a quavering voice. “A little help here!”

“They appear to be hostile primitives,” Gertrude responded helpfully.

“No shit!” Danielle gasped, dividing her attention between the swords in their hands and the ‘blades’ tenting the front of their loincloths. “Uh ... is that what I think it is?”

“Swords,” Gertrude affirmed.

“Not the fucking swords!” Danielle snapped. “Loincloth?”

“Erect penile tissue. They all appear to be male.”

“That’s so fucking helpful! I can see they’re male, damn it! What language are they speaking?”

“Unknown.”

Danielle crossed her legs and folded her arms over her boobs. It got their attention. They lifted their heads and stared at her face. “They act like they’ve never seen a woman,” she muttered.

“Unlikely,” Gertrude responded. “Correction. Very possible. I am detecting some sort of metal alloy chassis. I apologize. I cannot categorize these ... beings. They are part robot and part living tissue.”

“They’re robots?” Danielle repeated, relaxing fractionally before a thought occurred to her. “If they’re robots, why the hell would they have erectile tissue? And why is it waving at me?”

“I cannot collect sufficient data to ascertain that.”

* * * *

Kiel was so fascinated with the creature that many moments passed before it finally filtered into his mind that she wasn’t merely chattering in an attempt to communicate with them. She was conversing—with something. The ship?

Unlike the female—and he had yet to decide whether he found her strangely high voice pleasing or annoying—the other voice was deeper and oddly stilted. It did not take long to connect that to the robots that served their community, those that had the ability to communicate verbally, at any rate. Jerking his head at Jalen in silent communication, he sent him back inside the ship to investigate.

It seemed to alarm the female. She began to chatter even faster, to bounce around, and gesture wildly with her hands.

* * * *

“Oh hell! They either heard you or they’ve figured out I’m not talking to them! Shut up, Gertrude, before they decide to shut you down!” Transferring her attention to the robot heading toward the opening in her ship, she danced as close to him as she dared, trying to divert his attention. “Hey! Wait! You don’t need to go in there! Really! There is nothing in there you need to worry about!”

Jalen stopped abruptly when the female darted between him and the door of the ship, watching the bounce and sway of her breasts with absolute fascination for several moments before he recalled Kiel had ordered him to find the source of her communications. He

discovered fairly quickly, though, that the female had every intention of barring his access to the ship. Disconcerted, he glanced at Kiel for instructions.

Kiel, he discovered, was studying the woman through narrowed, assessing eyes. "I think she is communicating with a computer onboard, but it would be wise, I believe, to be certain she is not communicating with others of her kind."

Jalen frowned, struggling with an odd sense of disappointment. "Do you think they are enemies of the Danu?"

Kiel's gaze flickered over the wreckage of the ship. "This is a war machine. If it had been built for anything else, it would not be so small. There is no place inside to carry cargo or others of their kind."

"That only means that her people are at war with another," Dolf, one of the group surrounding them, spoke up angrily. "It does not mean she is *our* enemy or that she means any harm to the Danu."

"It is our duty to protect this colony for the Danu," Kiel retorted grimly. "We cannot know that she not an enemy or that there are not others out there, waiting to attack!"

Jalen brightened. "You think there are more females?"

Kiel scowled at him. "Of course there are more! She is a living entity. There would be male and female of her race, I am certain, just as there are male and female Danu. You saw that she has reproductive organs to match a male and she has mammary glands to feed her young! She would not be formed as she is if there were not male counterparts, and that suggests many more."

Jalen considered that for a moment. "If that is true, why not wait to see if more come down?" he suggested hopefully.

"You have fried your logic circuits or suffered brain damage in the war games!" Kiel growled irritably. "Because they may come with the intent to destroy the colony! It is our duty to *guard* the colony!"

"Yes, but, we could *rebuild* the colony. It is not as if we ever have much to do, after all!" Adir exclaimed in disgust. "There have been no beasts nor any primitives to slay in nigh a month!"

"Yes, and it is completely illogical to build another city when the Danu have not even come to fill the first! Mayhap they will never come! Have you thought of that? I have thought of that, Manuta's circuits! And what are we to do with what we have already built if they do not? Manuta said that *we* would fill the city if the Danu did not come and I do not even see the point in that!" Nail said angrily.

There was a general rumbling of agreement with his assessment from the soldiers gathered.

"He has a very good point!" Talor agreed. "Manuta said that *it* would produce females of the Danu race if the Danu did not come themselves and we would reproduce to carry on the race, but it has yet to do so. Why not use this female's race, that is what I would like to know?"

Kiel frowned thoughtfully, studying the female. He thought he would have had a fair notion of the direction their thoughts had taken even if they had not spoken them aloud. He had not, at first, realized that the strange heat wafting through him seemed to be entirely from studying the female, but he had felt the urge to plant his phallus in her receptacle the moment his brain stopped sizzling and identified the purpose of it. It seemed logical that they would have had the same reaction.

He wasn't entirely comfortable making the decision himself, however. Manuta was the creator. Only Manuta had all of the plans of the master race. "I will take her to Manuta," he said decisively. "Manuta will be able to determine if she is suitable and if she is, then we will be able to formulate a plan based upon Manuta's recommendations. In the meanwhile, the rest of you will remain here—half to guard, the others to thoroughly examine it and learn what you can from it. Whether she was communicating with a computer onboard or others of her race, there will almost certainly be a computer of some kind. Jalen, you will attempt to access the computer and download whatever information is available."

He turned to study the female thoughtfully, trying to decide whether he could successfully communicate to her what he required and finally decided that it would most likely be futile even to attempt it when he did not know her language. He discovered, however, that she was not inclined to cooperate. Not only was it almost immediately evident that she was not suffering from any sort of debilitating injury from the crash, but she proved that she was surprisingly nimble, dashing around wildly in circles in an effort to escape and then, instead of giving up when she saw it was useless, diving toward the door of the ship. It took him almost ten mini-sects to capture her and no amount of soothing could convince her to stop pounding on his head and shoulders with her fists.

After some consideration, he decided that, perhaps, a mild show of aggression might convince her where the soothing words had not. Carefully calculating so as not to actually cause injury, he popped her soundly on the ass and told her, firmly, to stop since she giving him a headache.

It didn't have the desired effect. She did stop pounding on his head and shoulders, briefly, rearing straight up and uttering a scream that sounded more like a challenge than either fear or capitulation to his superior size and strength. Then she bent over his shoulder and slapped one cheek of his ass with the palm of her hand hard enough it made his eyes sting.

He dropped her abruptly, not from the pain, but from surprise at the attack, which was completely illogical given the fact that he had just demonstrated his superiority in strength. Her arms pin-wheeled and then she sprawled out, gaping up at him from the ground in stunned surprise.

He pointed his index at her and then at the city walls. "Go! If you are determined to walk, then you may have it your own way! But you will go, by Manuta's circuits, or I will carry you!"

He thought at first that she must have understood him or at least grasped his anger and his gestures. She surged to her feet, made some sort of gesture to him in return with her fingers that he strongly suspected must be insulting from the expression on her face, and then took off—not toward the city walls but across the field, heading toward the hills. When he caught her the second time, he decided to carry her under one arm. The cheek of his ass was still throbbing and his head and shoulders, as well.

Not that he wasn't well accustomed to dealing with the pain his biological makeup made him subject to, but he did not *like* feeling it even if he was accustomed to it. Dangling from one arm, she was in no position to pound on any part of his anatomy that was capable of registering pain—which was all of it.

When he reached the gate to the city he was still brooding over the many disadvantages of having flesh. It sweated and then stank, and registered pain and discomfort whenever he was injured, when all of the other androids had the protection of having their workings beneath a thin sheathe of the same nearly indestructible metal used for their chassis.

Baen, who was on watch, promptly leapt from the wall to land beside him. “What is that you have?”

“It is the sentient being that fell from the sky,” Kiel responded tightly.

“Is it Danu?”

“Nay.”

“That is disappointing. I was certain when I saw the skyship that it must be the Danu. You are certain?”

“Yes. You are supposed to be on guard,” Kiel reminded the soldier that had fallen into step beside him.

“Your entire platoon is upon the plain! Is this an enemy then?”

“I do not know.”

“What do you know?” Baen demanded testily.

“It is a female.”

Baen stopped dead in his tracks, too stunned to think for several moments. Realizing that Kiel hadn’t stopped, he hurried to catch up. “You are certain this is female?”

“Yes.”

Baen studied the creature hanging limply from his arm. “How do you know?”

“I examined it. It has a phallus receptacle, therefore it is female.”

Baen looked it over. “Let me see it.”

“She seems very hostile about that.”

“Why?” Baen asked blankly.

“I do not *know* why! I only know that she tried to blow my head off only because I was examining it!”

Baen frowned. “She seems subdued enough now. I believe I will have a look.”

Irritation flickered through Kiel, but he stopped. Baen crouched behind her, grasped her legs and pulled them wide for a look. The moment he released his hold to examine the genitals with his fingers, however, she swung her leg back, caught him under the chin with her heel, and knocked him off his feet.

“Did you see that?” Baen demanded indignantly.

“I did,” Kiel said, not without a good bit of satisfaction. “I did tell you she reacted with hostility at being examined.”

Baen got to his feet. “Well! I do not understand that at all! I am merely curious, gods damn it! I have not seen female genitalia before!”

“You have seen one now,” Kiel said shortly, striding away from him.

Baen got up and followed. “Yes, but I did not see it well and I was not finished examining it! Do you think she will allow it if I ask?”

“How the fuck do you intend to ask? You cannot speak her language!”

Baen frowned. “She does not speak Danu, then, or anything close?”

“Nay.” He struggled with himself for a moment and finally admitted that it was possible that Jalen would find her language on her ship’s computer and they could interpret it.

“I believe I will go out and help Jalen. I am far better with codes than Jalen and this would be very like deciphering code. What are you going to do with the female?”

“I am taking her to Manuta so that he can scan her and determine whether her race is compatible with the Danu.”

“You think there are more in the sky?”

Kiel halted and turned to frown at him. “If there are, they have come to attack. The ship that brought her was not a colony ship. It was a warship.”

“Yes, but more females like that one?” Baen asked impatiently.

“I am as certain as I can be that there are others and just as certain that I have no idea where the others of her kind may be. However, we do have one and that may be sufficient for Manuta.”

“It is not sufficient for me!” Baen retorted indignantly. “There are six hundred of us, all told. What are we going to do with one female?”

Kiel shrugged. “Mayhap Manuta will make six hundred?”

“Well, I do not want a gods damned cyborg! I want a *real* female—like that one!”

“Well, you cannot *have* this one!” Kiel growled, suddenly angry. “I am taking her to Manuta!”

“Yes, but he will have no reason to keep her once he has examined her and taken DNA samples. *Then*, who will get her?”

Kiel stared at him for a long moment and finally lifted his head, scanning the city streets. Without a great deal of surprise but with a good deal of uneasiness he discovered Baen was not the only one curious about the female. “Manuta will decide. Manuta has the colony plans.”

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