

Episode Three

The Forgotten:

Discovery

By

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Chapter Five

Danielle not only began to feel the effects of the bruising and battering from the crash but the drugging weariness from very little sleep as soon as conscious began to pierce the blissful state of unawareness. Her mind was too sluggish to do more than register the discomfort, not to supply her with an explanation for it, but the misery that full consciousness promised was enough by itself to send her scurrying toward oblivion again.

She couldn't attain it. Once started, the process seemed determined to progress toward full awareness and, as it blossomed, she became aware of alien surroundings and sensed a presence that brought her swiftly awake.

Blinking her blurry vision into focus, she stared in disbelief at the huge man sitting on the bunk beside her and staring at her as if trying to will her awake. It took several moments to convince herself he really was there and several more for recognition to sink in. Shoving her oddly stiff hair out of her eyes, she sat up and stared back at him, trying to figure out if his presence meant that she should be deeply worried.

She discovered she was too sluggish to react even though her heart had taken a stumbling leap that shot a spurt of adrenaline through her system. "What are you doing here, Baen?"

He frowned. "I have been thinking," he said slowly.

Uneasiness slithered through her. She considered ignoring the conversational opener, but she could see that he was determined to tell her what was on his mind even if he seemed to be hesitant about where to start. "About what?"

He seemed to wrestle with himself, as if he was grappling with what he wanted to say or maybe just searching for how to say it. "Are you mated?"

The question sent Danielle mentally reeling. She couldn't say she was in any state currently to have the mental acuity to think what might be running through his mind, but she certainly hadn't expected what he *did* say. She blinked at him several times, trying to assimilate that question, certain she must have misunderstood. "What?"

Something flickered in his eyes. "It has just occurred to me that you appear to be a mature female and yet we did not find anything in the data to indicate if you had taken a mate."

Ok, so she hadn't misunderstood. She felt her belly clench but even she couldn't have said whether it was from increasing uneasiness and discomfort or if her reception fit more neatly at the opposite end of the scale. She supposed, insane as it might be, it would still be more accurate to say that her feelings were mixed. There was no instantaneous and violent rejection of the suggestion. That was for certain. The question was, *why* did he want to know? Maybe more importantly, would it be better to say she was? Or that she wasn't? Setting aside the fact that she just plain didn't know whether the idea had any appeal to her or not, she certainly didn't want to make an enemy and beyond that, she didn't want to give up the option of trying to seduce him to gain favor if she saw it was necessary. Aside from that one flimsy possibility, she was completely defenseless. "Why do you want to know?" she asked suspiciously.

"I am interested," he said after a moment.

"In what?" she asked blankly, trying to throw off the bizarre sense of unreality that descended over her.

“Mating.”

She went back to staring at him, trying to decide what the hell he meant by that. “You know, I’m really not very wide awake and I’m having a hell of a time following you. I don’t want to be rude, but I’m just not up to playing twenty questions right now.”

He blinked at her and then frowned. “I do not have twenty questions.”

“Figure of speech,” Danielle muttered, having discovered that her hair was stiff and stringy and trying to figure out why. “How often does the shower work?” she asked when she finally remembered why her hair and skin felt disgusting.

It was his turn to stare at her with blank-faced incomprehension. “When it is turned on.”

She glared at him. “Well, it doesn’t!” she said forthrightly. “I managed to get all soaped up last night and then the damned thing went off and I couldn’t get it to come back on!”

“It cycles on five par-sects.”

“Duh!” Danielle snapped irritably. “I figured that out, damn it! How do you make it cycle again?”

“You do not. You are only allowed one per day cycle.”

“Ok, so I had yesterday’s! I want today’s!”

Indignation flickered across his features. “I came to discuss mating.”

“Discuss it later—or better yet, with somebody else. I want a shower. My skin feels hideous and my hair worse!”

His frown deepened, but he stood up and headed toward the shower. Danielle stumbled off of her bunk and followed him. “Wait!” she exclaimed when they reached it. “Don’t turn it on yet! It’ll take a full cycle, at least, to get the soap off.”

She discovered when she’d stripped her clothing off that he was staring at her as if he’d been cold-cocked. “The shower?” she prompted, struggling with the urge to cover herself.

Thankfully, the suggestion was enough to bring him out of his trance. He turned and activated the shower. Danielle leapt past him into the water and began to scrub her hands over herself vigorously. She wasn’t completely satisfied that she’d managed to get all of the dried cleanser off when the water cut off but she felt worlds better and a good deal more alert—alert enough to be more uneasy about his chosen subject in approaching her. Deciding to ignore him in the hope that he wouldn’t bring it up again, she moved past him to the dryer. “I don’t suppose Jalen brought my things from the ship?”

“Things?” he echoed.

“Clothes?”

He frowned. “I do not know.”

“Well, I don’t see anything so I guess that’s a no,” she responded tartly. “As long as you’re here, maybe you could tell me if it’s safe for me to eat the food in the kitchen. I’m starving. I wasn’t sure if it was safe, though, so I didn’t eat.”

He looked vastly disappointed when she glanced at him after donning her clothing and adjusting it. He frowned again, but thoughtfully. “You are much the same as we are. The food should not hurt you.”

Danielle grunted doubtfully. “I don’t like to argue, but I think we’re more different than alike.” Especially the part about him being half robot when, to her mind, that made him *all* robot! If he’d been born human, or humanoid, it would’ve been a different matter, but despite the fact that was easy to accept him as humanoid on some levels, the truth as far as she could see it was that he was a machine—maybe a really fucking confused machine that looked like a gorgeous hunk of man-meat but still a machine.

“The Danu seem to be very similar to humans,” he countered. “You are female and I am male, but we appear much the same.”

“If you say so.”

A look of cunning crossed his handsome features. “Your genitalia appears to be compatible with ours.”

“I noticed you examining mine,” she said dryly, trying to ignore the twin frissons of alarm and—Dare she think it? God she’d been playing war way too long!—interest wafting through her. “I haven’t seen yours, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“I could show you.”

She stared at him blankly, feeling her face heat. There was really no denying the interest that time even if it was heavily laced with uneasiness and wariness. In all honesty, she couldn’t say that his attitude was particularly suggestive, however. She shrugged. She might as well learn what she could about them if they were willing to share—especially since she was getting definite vibes that he was going to be damned persistent in trying to convince her to let him play hide the salami. “Ok. Show me.”

He shoved his loincloth down. Her heart leapt jerkily at the monolith he displayed. Trying to ignore her heart palpitations, she leaned closer for a better look, but she had to admit that it definitely looked like a human penis—a bit bigger, but then so was he. “Just as I thought.”

He seemed disconcerted. “It is different?”

“Nope. Pretty impressive, though. Does it do anything besides stand up like that?”

He frowned. “It also goes down. Not often, but sometimes.”

“Oh. You can put your thingy on again. I don’t suppose you have breakfast-type food?”

He blushed. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, he adjusted his loincloth once more.

“You have no interest in mating?”

“Honestly? I think I’m just too stressed out about being captured and held prisoner to fuck at the moment, but if I decide I’m in the mood, I’ll let you know. Can we focus on feeding me?”

Clearly disconcerted, he followed her as she loped down the stairs, heading for the food preparation area, and then settled on a stool, watching her, an expression of confusion and irritation marring his features that she was at pains to ignore.

“I do not understand.”

“What?” Danielle asked absently.

“I have an interest in mating. Why do you not?”

Danielle turned to look at him in surprise. “Just like that? One look and you’re captivated?”

He considered that. “Yes,” he said finally. “I think it is time.”

“Oh! That’s flattering! Sorry. I guess it isn’t my time,” she said dryly.

He perked up at that. “When will you be in cycle?”

“What?”

“You said that it was not your time. Do you know when that will be?”

“Oh! It doesn’t work like that for us. I guess we are different.”

“How does it work?”

Danielle stared at him for a long moment. She really, really didn’t want to get into a discussion about sex, or mating—and she strongly suspected he was a lot more interested in sex than mating—but she was hungry and he seemed pretty focused on sex. “I tell you what, find me something to eat and we can discuss this will I eat, ok?”

Perfect breakfast conversational topic!

Rising from the stool immediately, he moved to the cabinets to study the food on the shelves and took one down. Removing the foil-like material used to seal it, he moved to what she assumed was a cooking or heating unit and placed the bowl-like container inside. After pressing the panel, he stood staring at the unit for several moments and then took the container out. It was steaming, making it clear she'd guessed correctly. When he'd placed the container on the counter, he moved to a drawer and took out an odd looking eating utensil that seemed to be both a fork and a spoon and laid it beside the container.

Danielle settled on the stool to study the contents. Deciding it looked like some sort of eggs, she picked up the utensil and carefully tested it. Relieved to discover it tasted like eggs, whether it was or not, she dug in. He settled a vessel containing water beside her and then sat down on the stool opposite her once more, studying her expectantly.

Danielle threw him a speculative glance, but she could see he wasn't going to let the subject drop until she'd convinced him that it wasn't something she wanted to consider—at least not at the moment. “Before I get too involved in this, I need clarification on one point.”

“What point?”

“Are we talking about mating here? Or just fucking?”

He frowned, obviously searching his memory for the meaning of the word. Not surprisingly, he came up empty. She was fairly sure Gertrude hadn't had *that* word in her memory banks!

“Ok, I can see you're confused. We have fucking—this is recreational sex—just for fun, you know? And then there's the process of finding a life-partner, or mate, someone to live with. Of course, people rarely mate for life anyway. It isn't any more natural to people, humans, to mate for life than it is for other animals. Even when they actually mean to mate, they're really only talking about staying together until they find somebody else. I'm guessing you're talking about recreational fucking, though, if that erection was anything go by?”

He stared at her, blinking as if she'd thrown sand in his eyes. Slowly, his dark brows descended in a frown. “I do not understand these concepts. This is ... the human customs? The beasts we have mate by season.”

“Yes, well, the beasts we have usually do, too, but we aren't beasts. We're sentient beings, which means we think about it a lot and not just seasonally. I'm not sure we enjoy it any more than they do—some of them *really* seem to enjoy it—but they don't have the capacity for thought that we do and they're almost as interested, or more interested, in eating. In fact, the mating you're talking about, which leads to reproducing, is something we don't often do even when we have a partner. You have to control the number of children you have, after all. There are a lot of things to consider—feeding and taking care of them foremost, but also you have to consider the impact of your reproduction on society as a whole and the impact to the environment. When the population gets out of control, everything else does.”

Danielle managed to finish her meal while he was struggling to assimilate what she'd told him.

“I am interested in mating,” he said finally. “We have no off-spring. I would like off-spring.”

Danielle's belly tightened. For the first time since she had met him, she actually studied him and realized that the overall impression that he was an attractive male was an understatement. Despite his alien appearance, maybe because of it, he was a good bit better than ‘just attractive’. All things considered, she supposed she shouldn't have been surprised. He'd

been created, she reminded himself, in a lab, she supposed. Clearly, any defective genes were rejected and only the best accepted and used. He was physical perfection and beyond that, his personality had a definite appeal, as well, even though the current subject was one of the most disconcerting conversations she'd ever had with a man. He had the look of a huge, dangerous warrior, and yet there was an innocence about him that appealed strongly to the nurturing instincts in her.

It was more than a little flattering that he seemed focused on taking her as a mate, that he had instantly decided he wanted her to bear his child. How often did a woman get that kind of proposition? Damned rarely!

Of course, there was the little matter that there wasn't another female of any description within light years as far as she'd been able to determine, but she couldn't help but find it vastly appealing that he wanted children from her, not merely a fuck buddy.

With an effort, she pushed the thoughts aside. "Aw! That is so sweet! As flattering as that is, though, my people are at war and I'm a soldier of the Federation. It's my duty to return to battle as soon as I can. I could be looking at serious repercussions if I don't get back soon aside from the fact that I'm needed for the war effort."

She considered leaving it at that but it occurred to her forcefully that it really wasn't wise to completely dismiss his interest when she might discover she needed an ally. There was no surer way to man's heart, clearly, than through his dick. "I suppose I could consider a recreational encounter if I was going to be here a while but, in all honesty, I'm really wound too tight at the moment to consider it now. Maybe when I get to know you a little better and get used to this place?"

Better, she decided. She hadn't made any promises, but she hadn't refused either. Maybe dangling the carrot would do the trick?

Before he could think up a response to that, Jalen entered the habitat, halted abruptly at the sight of the two of them in the eating area and then stalked toward them, anger in every line of his body.

Uh oh. Maybe she was reading more in to it than she should have but she had the uneasy feeling that he'd had pretty much the same thing in mind as Baen had and he wasn't happy that Baen had beaten him to the punch.

Then again, maybe he was just pissed off that Baen was fraternizing with the prisoner at all?

"What the hell are you doing here, Baen?"

Whatever he'd said didn't sit well with Baen. He bristled, instantly transformed from 'awkward suitor' to dangerous warrior.

"I am feeding the prisoner," he said coldly. "No one bothered to explain anything to her and she is not familiar with this place. What are you doing here?"

Jalen divided a suspicious look between them, but he looked distinctly uncomfortable. *"I came to see that she understood how everything worked!"*

"As you see, I have undertaken that task. So now you can leave again."

"You are not my captain!" Jalen growled.

"I am a superior officer, however."

"And I am your captain," Kiel snarled from the doorway, "and I would like to know what the fuck you are both doing here with the prisoner!"

All three sent a startled look toward the entrance, having been so caught up in their argument they hadn't noticed Kiel's arrival. Unnerved both by his sudden appearance and his obvious anger, Danielle rose abruptly, wondering whether to retreat or not.

"I came to check on the prisoner," Baen said stiffly. "And it is a very good thing I did. She had not eaten because she was afraid the food might be poisonous to her. I gave her a protein meal since I thought that would be the least likely to harm her even if she cannot eat the same foods that we do."

Briefly, Kiel was disconcerted since it had not occurred to him to check, but it was only briefly. *"She has access to water and to food and we have no reason to think that it would harm her in any way. She is also, until Manuta says otherwise, a prisoner of the Danu and it is forbidden to fraternize with enemies of the Danu!"*

"Did Manuta designate her as an enemy?" Baen demanded, knowing full well that Manuta would have made a general announcement if that were the case and advised everyone.

Kiel's lips tightened. *"She is an alien who arrived in a ship of war."*

"She is a stranger who crashed among us and is in need of help. The Danu do not make war on women and, furthermore, it is their custom to offer hospitality and succor to those in need. We are Dunu. We may also be robot, but that does change who we are."

As infuriating as Kiel found the situation, he was not of superior rank to Baen and realized he could not order him out. He was tempted to dispose of military protocol altogether and simply beat him unconscious and pitch the bastard out the door. As appealing as that prospect was, though, Manuta had already commented on his behavior and he did not want to risk that Manuta might decide to rid them of the source of conflict. *"Granted,"* he said finally, *"but as a military man you should at least admit the possibility of threat and consider that fraternization with a potential enemy is not wise before we have determined the extent of possible danger."*

Baen wrestled with himself, but there was no denying the logic of Kiel's assessment. Regardless of the fact that he did not see her as an enemy or any possible threat, he had nothing to base that belief upon whereas Kiel at least had some reason to feel as he did. Danielle had admitted herself that she was a soldier. He shrugged. *"I do not see that we can come to a true understanding without any interaction. The data contained in her onboard computer was useful but not adequate for determining whether we should consider her people as a potential threat or not."*

"Actually, it was entirely adequate," Kiel argued. *"Her people set out to conquer the known universe and met another race similarly inclined, which is how war came about to begin with. There is no reason to believe that they would prefer to ally themselves to us over claiming Marchet, as well."*

As angry as that made Baen, he realized Kiel had a point. It could be argued that their colony was well out of reach, but that did not change the fact that her people were aggressive. On the other hand, it could also be said that the Danu had done the same. None of them knew if the Danu were inclined to make war to forward their own plans of expansion or not. Unfortunately, pointing that out to Kiel also did not win the argument.

"That is true. The Danu may have been willing to make war to claim what they coveted of the livable worlds. They may have warred over the worlds they colonized, but that only makes it more likely that our people would consider hers enemies, not less."

Baen glanced at Danielle and saw that she was frowning worriedly as she tried to follow the conversation between them. Clearly, even though she could not understand their language, she could understand that the discussion involved her. *"We are frightening her,"* he said flatly.

"You and Kiel are frightening her," Jalen immediately disputed. *"I merely came to look after her welfare so do not include me in this!"*

Baen narrowed his eyes at him. *"You do not believe that I am actually fooled by such a flimsy excuse to be alone with her?"*

"It is no more flimsy than yours!" Jalen snapped. *"In fact, it is the same excuse, gods damn it! Why is it weak when I use it to come here and it is not when you do?"*

"Because I am an officer and she is an officer and it is common courtesy extended even to prisoners!"

Kiel was about to dispute Baen's claim when it abruptly occurred to him that, as an officer himself, the statement not only paved the way for him to visit the prisoner whenever he liked, but it also eliminated interference of the general population. There were only fifteen captains in Manu compared to five hundred eighty five foot-soldiers. *"Exactly! She is to be extended every courtesy, even as prisoner, for her rank. However, unless you are specifically ordered to attend the prisoner, you may not! Moreover, since it was my company that captured the woman, I am responsible for her!"*

Baen narrowed his eyes at him. *"I believe that would be Manuta's decision, not yours, and I, for one, cannot see that happening. You are clearly biased in your opinion of her and Manuta would expect logic to rule the day rather than emotion!"*

"You are not biased?" Kiel demand angrily. *"Exactly why is it that you sneaked in here then?"*

Baen's face flushed. *"I did not sneak."*

"It was merely an amazing coincidence that you were not seen?" Kiel said dryly.

"Apparently," Baen responded coolly. *"I believe I will take my leave since I am off duty now and must report again at dusk."* He turned to Danielle, considered whether he could think of some subtle way to remind her to consider his offer and finally decided he could not. He had planted the seed, however, and mayhap she would consider it without a reminder?

It occurred to him that, even though Kiel had won the battle for now, that did not mean that he would ultimately win. *He* had thought to propose a mating first, by Manuta's circuits!

It also occurred to him that he might annoy Kiel and Jalen without revealing his ultimate goal and he smiled teasingly at Danielle. *"You must send for me if you have any further trouble with the bathing facilities. I would be most happy to help you with it again."*

Smiling challengingly at Kiel and Jalen, he strode toward the door, pleased with their reaction even if he could not say that he was particularly pleased with his attempt to convince Danielle to be his mate.

Kiel and Jalen exchanged a long look and then turned to study Danielle speculatively.

"He helped you to bathe?" Jalen demanded indignantly.

Kiel had wanted to know that himself although he had not wanted to ask. Instead of reprimanding Jalen when he did, therefore, he merely turned to Danielle questioningly, awaiting the answer.

Danielle divided a surprised look between the two men. As indignant as she was that they'd asked, though, she could see that Baen's parting comments had thoroughly pissed them both off. She wasn't certain why—unless they had designs on her themselves, but although she had already suspected Jalen might, she found it hard to swallow that Kiel did considering the

way he'd behaved around her. Finally, she decided that it just might be suspicion, not jealousy in any form. "He turned the shower on for me," she said tightly.

Kiel's eyes narrowed. "You could not figure that out yourself?"

He was accusing her of trying to seduce Baen, she realized abruptly! That might not have occurred to her if she hadn't considered it, but since it had it didn't take much searching to make the leap. "I only managed to get soap all over me last night when I used it before the damned thing shut off!" she said defensively. "I couldn't get it to come back on after that and didn't know when I'd be able to. Nobody bothered to explain anything to me!"

"So Baen was so obliging as to help you to bathe?"

Danielle narrowed her eyes at Kiel. Resentment over being falsely accused shouldn't have prompted her to remove all doubt with a lie, but as contrary as it was, she didn't try too hard to resist the temptation. "I had to have someone to wash my back!" she snapped. "Otherwise I might not have gotten all the soap off before the damned shower cut off again!"

The rage that washed over Kiel's face caught her completely off guard. A wave of cold crested over her as it registered that she'd managed to convince him his suspicions were right and it had made him furious. Turning abruptly on his heel, he strode briskly toward the door. Jalen was nearly on heels. In point of fact, he was making every effort to pass him.

Danielle stared after the two of them uneasily, debating whether to follow them and try a little damage control. She discovered that she was too thoroughly unnerved to even attempt it, however.

Her shoulders slumped when they'd exited. In fact, it seemed every ounce of strength left her. Looking around a little dazedly, she spied the stool she'd been sitting on before Kiel had arrived and wilted onto it weakly, trying to bring order to the chaos in her mind.

One question kept pounding through her, though. What had she done?

Discovering after a few moments that she needed to know just how bad of a mess she'd gotten herself in to, she jolted off the stool and raced toward the entrance. The door, she discovered, wouldn't open for her, but after staring at it blankly for a moment, she remembered the habitat had windows and began a frantic search for one. She found one within a few feet of the main entrance, but she wasn't particularly happy at the view she got.

Despite the fact that Baen had left several moments before the other two men, he hadn't made it to his destination before they caught up with him. The window went from opaque to transparent to reveal a nightmarish scene just as they reached him. Kiel clamped a hand on Baen's shoulder. Baen whirled and met Kiel's other hand, balled into a tight fist.

Danielle sucked in a sharp breath, gaping at the men in disbelief as Baen flew backward as if he'd been sucked off his feet by some powerful, unseen force. He struck the side of the building he had been nearing and rebounded. Landing on his feet as if he hadn't been thrown around like a ping-pong ball, he swung a punch at Kiel's face.

Jalen caught his arm mid-swing, swiveled him around to face him, and punched Baen in the belly.

"Oh shit!" Danielle gasped, trying to wrap her mind around what was transpiring. She couldn't. Guilt flitted through her along with the suspicion that she'd set the entire fight into motion by speaking without thinking it through first. Doubt rode the heels of that because it just didn't make any sense to her that anything she might have said or done would create such violent conflict. On the heels of that doubt, another surfaced, complete confusion that they were behaving so much like jealous lovers when they not only weren't, but they weren't even *real*!

She could understand robots mimicking the behavior of humans. A lot of them did because they'd been designed to imitate human-like behavior. Even Gertrude did that when she couldn't possibly feel the emotions behind it or understand them, and *she* wasn't even *built* to interact with humans that way.

This more nearly resembled a bar fight than anything else, though, and it completely blew her mind. *How* could they react like that, even to emulate? *Why* would they?

As horrified as she was watching the battle transpiring on the streets, she couldn't seem to move any more than she could think straight. Within moments of engaging the brawl, though, the remainder of the cyborgs close enough to see what was happening did something equally human-like. They rushed to the scene to watch, blocking her view.

Even that might not have finally released her from her trance except for one *really* unnerving discovery.

The other cyborgs were clearly in a huge rush to get to the scene to watch because they sprouted *wings* and *flew*!

Chapter Six

Danielle hadn't even managed to pick her jaw up off the floor from shock at the discovery that the Danu cyborgs, at least some of them, were capable of ... simply growing wings at will and taking to the air when she made another discovery as the crowd parted briefly before the brawlers.

Jalen, Baen, and Kiel could do a lot more than simply sprout wings at will. They could *completely* alter their appearance. For one second, she could recognize them. In the next Baen sprouted wings and horny growths and claws, and his skin began to look a lot more like Nubien skin than human—almost reptilian. Kiel sprouted tan fur, claws, and became more feline in appearance and Jalen—she wasn't sure what he turned himself into but it looked like a cross between a feline and the thing Baen had become.

A wave of cold crashed over her when Kiel lifted his head, seemed to stare straight at her, and opened a jagged-toothed maw to issue a challenging bellow. It galvanized her, unlocked her frozen limbs and sent them into mindless, frantic motion. Whirling, she fled, racing in a panicked circle around the habitat several times in a useless, if desperate, search for a way to flee. Encountering the stairs in her second circuit, she fled up them, stumbling and sprawling out about halfway up. The pain seemed to loosen the grip of shock and panic on her mind, however. By the time she'd made it up to the second floor, she realized it wouldn't do her any good even if she did find a way out from the upper floor.

Racing down the stairs again, she made another useless circuit of the habitat and finally began to search the rear wall frantically for one of the disappearing windows. When she finally managed to find one, she checked the entire perimeter of the aperture for some way to open it. Discovering that there *was* no way to open it, she looked around for something to help her make a hole and finally grabbed one of the stools from the kitchen and slammed it against the 'window' with all her might.

The concussion sent a shockwave of pain all the way through her hands and arms and into her shoulders. Without panic driving her, she wasn't sure she could've broken the material. Sheer terror had lent her extraordinary strength, however, and the thing shattered.

And then it did something completely unexpected.

Shards flew outward in every direction, seemed to freeze in the air, and then flew back toward the hole she'd just punctured—which she discovered didn't lead outside at all. Even as her mind grappled to assimilate that what she'd thought was windows was some sort of viewing screens, the pieces she'd shattered flew back into place and reassembled themselves.

Danielle was still gaping at the panel, the stool in her hands, when the entrance opened. Whipping her head in that direction at the sound, she spied Kiel.

It looked like Kiel. She didn't know if it actually *was* Kiel after what she'd just seen and she certainly wouldn't have been relieved if she'd been sure it was him. Uttering a scream, she pitched the stool at him and took off at a run.

She slammed into a wall so hard it rattled her brain in her skull. Two arms came around her, but before they could lock, she uttered another scream and dropped, slipping from his hold and then diving between his legs. Scrambling to her feet, she discovered Kiel was standing in

front of her. He grabbed her shoulder as she whipped her head around to see who was behind her that she'd just escaped from and discovered Baen had come in with him. Dimly, she remembered she'd seen Jalen and Baen behind him when she'd spotted Kiel, but even as that registered, she jerked away from Kiel before he could close his grip and took off at a tangent to the two men.

Jalen, she discovered, was standing in front of the entrance like a goally. Screaming again, she changed directions and raced up the stairs. Either they were slow to follow because they thought they'd effectively cut off any chance of escape or she was moving at mock speed. She managed to gain the upper floor before the three converged on the stairs. A desperate search for something to use as a weapon or to beat her way through a window-slash-monitor or the wall seemed in vain, but there was a smallish trunk at the foot of each of the two bunks on the upper floor.

It nearly unhinged her shoulders when she jerked one up, proving it was a good bit heavier than she'd expected and awkward enough it wasn't likely to make a good weapon. Instantly discarding that possibility, she headed to the area along the wall where she'd found the 'window' the night before and slammed the trunk against it. It shattered, throwing pieces in every direction, but it also revealed a small hole and daylight. She swung the trunk again before the thing could reassemble itself and knocked a chunk out that looked as if it might be big enough to crawl through.

Pitching the trunk, she dove for it, managing to get her head and one arm and shoulder through before the damned thing closed around her. A new terror rolled through her as she felt the thing close around her. She clawed at it uselessly for several moments, but although it seemed to crumble, it reformed faster than she could remove it.

Someone grabbed her legs. Screaming, she kicked wildly, but it was useless. She was drawn inexorably back inside. Panting for breath, shifting instantly from flight mode to fight mode, she launched herself at Kiel the moment he let go of her legs. She managed to connect her fist to his jaw with her first wild swing, but she never landed a second. A hand settled on her shoulder. She felt a stinging pain shoot through her neck and then darkness descended over her like a clap of thunder.

"What the fuck did you do that for!" Baen bellowed at Jalen.

Jalen threw him a furious glare. "You would prefer she hurt herself trying to take Kiel's head off?"

Baen relaxed fractionally and grasped her limp arm, lifting her hand to examine it. "You are right," he agreed reluctantly. "She has damaged her hand."

Kiel removed her hand from Baen's grasp and scooped her up. Carrying her to the nearest bunk and settling her on it, he straightened and stared down at her, frowning.

"What do you think provoked that ... panic?" Jalen asked after a moment.

Kiel lifted his head, his lips tightening. "She watched. I saw her standing at the viewer."

Baen stared at him in disbelief. "She is a soldier! Why would that throw her into such a state?"

Kiel frowned thoughtfully. "Mayhap when she saw us she thought we had come to fight her for provoking the battle between us?"

"Why would she think that?" Baen growled. "And exactly how do you figure that she provoked the fight?"

Kiel exchanged a look with Jalen. "She said that you bathed her," he said, his voice rumbling with renewed anger.

Surprise flickered across Baen's face. He glanced down at Danielle speculatively. "If her intent was to create conflict," he said slowly, "why would she panic when it worked?"

"Mayhap she did not expect to get caught up in it?"

"She either expected it or she did not," Baen snapped. "You cannot have it both ways! I would like to know what prompted her to tell you that I had bathed her to start with! I cannot think of any reason why she would have simply decided to announce that."

"*You* implied it!" Kiel growled. "Jalen asked her if it was true and she said it was."

Baen shifted uncomfortably. "Then *I* provoked it," he said tightly. "I do not know why you are determined to fault her when I was the one who created conflict. As far as that goes, I would like to know why the fuck you thought it was sufficient provocation to attack! It is not as if it is *your* business whether I helped to bathe or not!"

"Look!" Jalen interrupted, surprise in his voice. "By Manuta's circuits! She has nanos! Why would she have nanos?"

Distracted from their brewing resumption of their disagreement, both Baen and Kiel glanced quickly at Danielle's injured hand and saw that Jalen was right. They were familiar enough with the rapidity with which nanos repaired their own damage to know it when they saw it, particularly since the purely organic creatures they were familiar with did not heal even half as quickly.

One possibility to explain their presence leapt almost instantly to Kiel's mind. He had shared himself with Danielle in a way that was intimate enough to have 'infected' her with his own nanos. He could not be sure, of course, without a scan, but it was certainly the most likely scenario. He felt certain that she would not have them otherwise.

It seemed to him that Manuta would have detected them in the scan it performed, but then he did not know that it had not since Manuta would not tell him the results. In point of fact, now that he thought of it, the fact that Manuta had not mentioned it seemed to confirm that it had detected them. Manuta *had* said that the nanos would ensure compatibility.

When he emerged from thought, he discovered that Baen was eyeing him with hostility. Abruptly, he seized him by the throat.

"Fucking hell!" Jalen growled. "He has given her *his* nanos!"

They might have resumed their battle there and then except that Danielle regained conscious at that moment, sucked in a frightened gasp, and tried to escape. Reluctantly, Baen released his hold on Kiel's throat and leapt forward to hem Danielle in before she could scramble off of the bunk.

Before any of them could think of anything to say that might allay her fears, Danielle disabused them of their confusion as to why she had reacted so seemingly excessively when she could not be a complete stranger to battle.

"What are you?"

Disconcerted, Baen, Kiel, and Jalen exchanged questioning looks. "Danu," Baen responded flatly.

"How did you do that? And don't tell me you didn't all change out there because I saw it! I saw all of you change into ... into *something* else! Some kind of animals!"

Kiel did not know about the others, but he had no idea what she was accusing them of at first. He was downright insulted about the way she had said it when he finally realized that he had been angry enough that he had changed forms to draw upon the strength and agility the animal form gave him. The accusation in her voice made his anger rise, but the revulsion in her tone sent a sickening wave behind it. "We are Danu," he said tightly.

“She cannot change forms,” Baen said abruptly. “That is why she was so frightened. She thinks we are beasts ... monsters.”

“Well fuck!” Jalen snapped in disgust. “It was not bad enough that she knows that we are cyborgs—not natural born? Look what the two of you have gotten us in to now!”

“Do not act as if you are not as much to blame for this as we are!” Baen snapped. “I did not see you holding back!”

“It does not matter what she thinks of us,” Kiel said coldly. “We are what we are.”

Baen turned to stare at Kiel speculatively when he stalked off but after glancing at Danielle piercingly for a long moment, he turned and left, as well. What was there to say after all? She was appalled by what they were. That was all too obvious. He did not think there was any way to change that and words were unlikely to.

He was still thoroughly pissed off about it, however—all of it, especially the suspicion that Kiel had had the gall to attack him only because he *thought* he might have touched her when it was as clear as day that Kiel had done a good deal more than scrubbed her back! He would have challenged Kiel again once they were outside the habitat but, upon reflection, decided that it might be best to find a quieter place to work off his anger without quite so many witnesses. “I will meet you before my shift at the riverbank,” he growled.

Kiel halted abruptly and turned to look at him. “Fine!” he snapped. “If you think it will make you feel better to get your ass kicked, so be it!”

“It will make me feel better to kick your ass!”

* * * *

It took Danielle a long while to settle down after her discovery about the Danu and the nerve frazzling experience of being chased by them when she had no avenue of escape. The shock and fear almost seemed to drop away in layers, hardly noticeable at first, mostly because she was incapable of coherent thought even after they’d left her alone and she began to descend, slowly, from high alert.

Their absence by itself wasn’t enough at first to comfort her. She listened intently for a long time for any sound indicating they might be coming back. After a while, when she began to think they wouldn’t, relief began to trickle through her, thawing her, slowing the hectic, chaotic ping-ponging of thoughts through her mind until she began to make some sense of them.

It occurred to her after a long while that, despite the unnerving discovery, there actually *was* no change in her situation. The fear that she’d been lulled into a false sense of security by their very calm and reasonable attitude began to sprout holes like a crumbling dam.

Why be terrified of them now when she hadn’t been before?

It seemed reasonable and yet it took her a while to decide whether she was lying to herself because she needed to believe that or if it actually made sense.

She finally decided it did. They weren’t different only because her perception of them had changed. They were either always a terrifying threat to her survival or they never were and still weren’t.

She had accepted, at least in her subconscious mind, that they *could* be a threat to her continued good health. On the surface, she supposed the similarity in their behavior to Gertrude’s had lulled her, the knowledge that they were a lot like the AI robots and computers she was familiar with. None of *those* were a threat to her unless, like Gertrude, they malfunctioned and failed to alert her to danger. They weren’t a direct threat, though, because they could not deliberately fail to protect her or ignore a threat and they could not actively pursue

harm, could not set out to hurt her, because of the fail-safes programmed into them to protect humans.

She'd known the Danu, as the cyborgs called themselves, didn't entirely fit into the same category. She thought she'd tried to make them fit into what was known to her, though. As she so often did with Gertrude, she had felt comfortable enough to interact with them as if they were actual living beings while, in the back of her mind, she'd assured herself that she was safe to do or say whatever her impulses suggested because there wouldn't, *couldn't*, be dangerous repercussions.

She thought at least part of the mindless panic that had gripped her was due to the fact that that comforting veil of self-deception had been ripped away, revealing the threat she'd been working hard to ignore.

But, beyond illumination, what had really changed?

Nothing. She didn't know what had been used to render her unconscious, but they could certainly have done a lot worse and hadn't. In her mind, she hadn't really done anything to provoke an attack, but it was clear to her now that she'd thoroughly pissed them off and they might've thought they had adequate provocation.

The anger had stunned her. She hadn't been expecting it and that was from trying to fit them into the pigeonhole she was familiar with. She'd leapt from dismissing them as 'smart robots' in that instant to her experience with human behavior—fury plus deadly battle plus 'they're coming back' equaled retaliation.

It hadn't, though.

Why hadn't it? Not that she was complaining, but they were either unpredictable, living beings, or they were logical, predictable robots.

Maybe they really were both—in every sense of the word? That didn't exactly make them a lot different, in that way, from a completely biological organism—humans anyway. Humans were reasoning creatures and as long as emotion didn't get in the way they could be expected to behave reasonably. Piss them off and right away they dropped IQ points and devolved into beasts at the mercy of their instincts.

Maybe it wasn't a bad thing that they'd shocked her out of her complacency even if it had been one of the most unpleasant experiences of her life? She'd thought she was being wary of them but, upon retrospect, she decided she'd taken too much for granted—namely the false sense of security that they couldn't and wouldn't harm her because they were robots and had no reason to.

She needed to keep it in the forefront of her mind that they could be very, very dangerous!

Unfortunately, all that could do was scare the piss out of her. The chase had been enough to convince her that the prison, even if it wasn't a dark, dank cell, was damned secure. Recalling abruptly the way the 'windows' had reacted when she'd tried to break them, she realized that the only thing that would explain such strange properties was nanos.

That shouldn't have been the shock it was, but there was no getting around the fact that it unnerved her. She was surrounded by robots of all kinds and shapes. This entire world, obviously, was ruled by them.

Nano research, because of the huge potential threat they could represent, had been severely curtailed, though—in *their* society. To see it used here for something as mundane and commonplace as a viewing screen was extremely unnerving.

Truthfully, she supposed she—pretty much everybody—had almost a phobia about them, maybe even more of a phobia than they had of dangerous micro-organisms—which was completely illogical. Without nano technology, they would never have managed to conquer such deadly diseases as cancer. However, their potential use as a weapon of mass destruction had resulted in limiting the use of them to the most dire circumstances and the government guarded and regulated nano technology more assiduously than biological weapons if possible.

She knew it was purely psychosomatic, but the moment she realized the presence of nanos was the only explanation for the ‘windows’, she began to itch. Struggling to ignore the urge to scratch, to convince herself that it was purely imagination that she had something crawling on her, she tried to focus on better understanding her situation.

It occurred to her abruptly to wonder if the presence of nanos also explained the Danu ability to change forms at will.

She frowned, considering it, but as likely as that now seemed to her there was still the fact that they’d indicated it was a Danu trait.

So maybe it was nanos that allowed them to change form at will, but natural to the Danu? Or maybe they’d ‘inherited’ it?

So was that yet another threat that she hadn’t considered? Could their nanos change ‘hosts’ at will?

Not the nano technology that she understood. Due to the fact that nanos were used almost exclusively in medical applications, they were ‘programmed’ to match their host and only them. Otherwise they would be seen as invaders by the body and wouldn’t be able to perform the task set for them—which was usually collecting and destroying cancerous cells.

She wasn’t as convinced as she wanted to be even after she’d thought it over long and hard and come to the conclusion that it not only seemed unlikely, but it also seemed that she would’ve noticed if their nanos had the tendency to migrate from one place to another. They weren’t much bigger than a cell, which meant they couldn’t actually be seen by the naked eye, but a mass exodus from one host to another would certainly be noticeable. She wasn’t any happier about the situation. She wanted to be positive, not pretty sure, but it didn’t look like that wish was any more likely to be granted than a swift return home.

Anxiety about her continued absence reared its ugly head at the thought, effectively distracting her from her lingering fears about the Danu and she finally got off the bunk to pace and think—or rather to try escape her thoughts.

Despite what she’d told the Danu, she didn’t picture herself as being of great importance to the war effort, but everyone was needed. Beyond that, she had had no news since she’d left base to scout for pockets of Nubiens. She had no idea how much time might have passed since she’d fallen down the wormhole. Like that area of space where she’d been, it was uncharted and a variable that couldn’t be calculated. She might be here a month, or years, and still be able to pop back through the wormhole on top of the time she’d left—or hundreds of years earlier or later.

Even if she could leave it might make no difference at all to anyone but her and there might not be a home to go back to, either because the war was lost while she was gone, or she arrived back before anyone had settled Meridie.

Her head began to throb with the round of thoughts and it finally occurred to her that she hadn’t eaten anything. Tension and useless thought was enough to account for the headache, but food couldn’t hurt, she decided, heading into the food preparation area to see what she could find.

It was only when she began to take the meals from the shelf to examine them that she recalled slamming her fist into Kiel's jaw. Pausing mid-action, she withdrew her hand and examined it. It didn't even look bruised!

Frowning, she struggled to think back to just before she'd blacked out. It seemed to her that she could recall excruciating pain exploding through her entire hand and all the way up to her shoulder, but she couldn't detect even a twinge now.

Her belly lurched, but she fought the thought that had made nausea waft through her.

She couldn't remember anything clearly! She might not have hit him at all, might have only managed a glancing blow! She couldn't leap to the conclusion that they'd used nanos to heal the damage to her hand when she wasn't even sure she'd hurt herself!

* * * *

"The Earth woman is faring well in captivity?"

Discomfort wafted through Kiel since he had not seen Danielle in two day cycles—not since they had terrorized her by showing her that they were so different from her species. In retrospect, he supposed he should have considered the possibility since she was clearly of another race if not an entirely different species, but she had *appeared* so similar to them

On the other hand, he had no reason to suppose she was not faring well. She had everything that she needed. No doubt, she was still terrified, but they had kept their distance so as not to exacerbate the situation.

Actually, he supposed the others had kept their distance for very much the same reason he had—which was not as much for her comfort as his own. It was illogical to allow her perception of him to alter his perception of himself, but there was no getting around the fact that it had. Manuta considered them superior creatures. It had even hinted from time to time that it considered them more superior than their parent race since it had eliminated the weaknesses of the parent race to damage and disease in constructing them. It was absurd to feel that he was defective now, when he knew better, only because Danielle looked upon them as monsters—not merely beasts, which would have been bad enough, but unnatural, nightmarish creatures.

"We have kept her confined. I thought it best until we understood her presence here and also for the sake of order in the colony, but she has all that she needs. She is doing well."

"And yet somehow she has managed to disrupt the peace anyway," Manuta responded.

Kiel flushed. "Some disruption was only to be expected. Having an alien among us, especially under the circumstance, requires some adjustment to our routine, but there has been no disorder ... *per se*."

"The cybernetic units have been instructed to execute random acts of violence for some reason?"

Kiel felt the heat in his face increase. He shifted uncomfortably. "There have been a few incidents of ... spontaneous sparring. The primitives are not creatures of logic, as you well know. They are given to random impulses. We thought it wise to adjust our responses accordingly."

Manuta was silent for so long that Kiel felt an unaccountable resentment begin to rise within him. It was illogical to feel it when he was well aware that he had spoken complete untruths and shaded the truths he did voice, but he felt it nonetheless.

"This is a byproduct of your biological makeup," Manuta said finally. "There is no more logic to it than the actions of the primitives. I have determined after much consideration that it is natural to living beings, a part of the mating process. The males strive to convince the female

that their genetics are superior to that of others to entice her to mate by challenging the other males.

“It is neither ‘wrong’ nor ‘right’, but the way of natural beings and I cannot fault any of the cybernetic units for behaving as nature compels them. However, it is far more disruptive to order and peace than I had anticipated. I believe I erred in not considering that, by making the units physically superior I was also creating beings far more dangerous than their completely natural counterparts.

“Logically, one would assume that if there were more females there would be less competition, but I fear that would not be the case. You are not all precisely identical because each of you has a variation of the DNA entrusted to me. If you were, there would be no reason to try to prove your superiority over one another to capture the interest of females.

“In any case, the creation of cybernetic units was never considered ideal, merely a failsafe to ensure that Danu inhabited the colonies built for them. Apart from the threat of disorder, producing other females using the Earth woman’s DNA would only further corrupt the strain which I have already corrupted by introducing cybernetics in to. It was not an ideal solution to begin with, creation of Danu cyborgs, although I believed so at the time. Given the situation, it was a logical decision. Partly because it made the units stronger and virtually immune to any sort of invasion by micro-organisms and partly because purely biological entities would have required nurturing for many years before they reached maturity and I was well aware that I was inadequately prepared for that task.”

Kiel could not completely identify the emotions churning inside him at Manuta’s assessment, but the combination brought a wave of nausea with it. He swallowed a little convulsively. “You will not use the woman’s genetics to create mates?”

“As I said, it would not be the most desirable situation. In any case, I should have expired long ago and I could not undertake such a task when it seems the likelihood is far greater that I could not complete it than it is that I could. There are six hundred units in Manu alone—ten settlements with six hundred each. Producing only a fraction of those needed might well lead to a total breakdown of the society created here and destroy it. There is a great possibility that it could even if I succeeded if the sampling of behavior in less than one week is anything to go by.

“I feel that the female represents a far better solution to our dilemma, regardless. She has brought a ship to us that was designed for long distance space travel and by doing so has given me a workable design. I have carefully analyzed the materials and parts and redesigned the craft to accommodate more.

“The units must access this data and begin construction. Once completed, you will use the craft to reach the mother world and make contact with the Danu. You will inform them that the task set for me is completed and the colony awaits habitation. You will then return the female to her people.”

The nausea Kiel had been battling increased. “We are to take her back?” he repeated, knowing he had heard and understood the orders and still hopeful that he had not.

“Yes.”

“What is to become of us?”

“The Danu will decide. That is not my prerogative.”

Kiel frowned. “It we are to take her back to her people, are we to leave her there and return? Or consult her people as to whether to return or not?”

“They are at war. I merely suggest that you make the attempt to return her. The modifications in the craft may make that impossible. It may be considered an enemy craft, in

which case I am certain they will destroy it. If they decide to capture it instead, then the crew will be considered prisoners of war and the decision of their disposition, naturally, will be with the humans.

“This is why it is imperative that the ship go directly to the Danu first. I cannot communicate with them. They must be informed that my mission was completed.”

Kiel was not certain if that was a dismissal or not, but he turned away and strode from Manuta, struggling with the sickness churning in his belly, the anger that mixed generously with a myriad of emotions he could not decipher for the simple reason that he could not untangle them. He managed to master the urge to vomit after a time, but he discovered that he had left the settlement far behind before he was really aware of his surroundings.

Stunned to find himself on the banks of the river where he had sparred with Baen not many days before, he looked around a little blankly and finally, since he felt strangely weak, he dropped to the ground and sat staring blindly at the water as it flowed past him, watching the bobbing flotsam on its surface. He did not know how long he sat there, unaware of his surroundings and the passing time, but Baen distracted him after a time when he crouched beside him.

“You are behaving strangely,” he commented brusquely.

Kiel dragged his gaze from the water and stared at Baen. “I am not in the mood to converse,” he growled.

“We can always spar instead,” Baen responded tightly.

Kiel considered it, but as angry as he was, as much as the idea of pounding on something appealed to him, it seemed he had no energy for it. “Later, mayhap. At the moment, it does not have that much appeal.”

“It has a great deal of appeal to me!” Baen ground out, surging to his feet and beginning to pace along the bank. “Actually, I believe it would be far more appealing to take that gods damned machine apart!”

“We are to be discarded now? We are no longer of any use beyond building the machines Manuta says that we need to fetch the Danu here?”

“He suggested that?” Kiel asked blankly. “He did not tell me that. He said that we would rebuild Danielle’s craft and take it to the home world to inform them that his mission was completed.”

“He told the rest of us that we must begin preparing to transport them. He has decided that that is a possible explanation for why they have not come, that some event has transpired since he was sent here and they are not able to follow as planned.”

Kiel’s belly tightened, but he did not see that that made a great deal of difference in the scheme of things. As Baen had pointed out, they were to be discarded, replaced by the parent race, which was now more desirable.

Truthfully, they had ever been aware that they were not the most desirable solution, merely the only one that Manuta had been able to come up with due to the limitations.

“We were designed and built to create our own society! To take mates and produce offspring—to have family units as the Danu do!” Baen said angrily, almost as if he had read Kiel’s thoughts. “Now we are of no use for that? Undesirable surrogates for our parent race?”

“We are not machines! We do not need Manuta to think for us! To decide what is best for us! In point of fact, Manuta has not decided what is best for us at all! It is as if we are nothing and it does not matter what *we* want!”

Kiel stared at Baen blankly for several moments while that sank in. “You are suggesting ... mutiny?”

Baen stopped abruptly, glaring at Kiel furiously. “Mutiny? Manuta is *not* our leader! In a sense, I suppose, being our creator makes it our parent, but only in the loosest sense! Manuta is nothing but a machine. *We* are not merely machines! In point of fact, we are no more machines than *her* people are who have cybernetic limbs to replace damaged ones! Where it counts, we are as real as any other living organism! *Why* can we not have what we were told we were created for? Only because Manuta has new data and has altered the plan accordingly?”

“*I feel* the urge to mate, gods damn it! I am capable of it. I see no reason why I should not claim a mate and reproduce!”

Kiel surged to his feet angrily. “If you are thinking that Danielle will suit you, then you are defective in your logic circuits, not merely feeling the pull of your biological instincts! She will not have you—any of us—now that she knows how different the Danu are from her own species!”

“She did not say that she would not!”

“She has not allowed it either!” Kiel shot back at him. “Are you blind to the way she reacted to all of us when she had seen us?”

“That does not mean that she could not accustom herself to it!”

Kiel eyed him angrily. “You are not thinking like a rational being! We are not the same! Small differences would matter little, but this is no small difference and it is something we need to consider as well as she! Any offspring you had would only be half Danu. She cannot change forms as we do and that means that her offspring might also not be able to! Is that desirable to you?”

“It is acceptable,” Baen ground out. “Even if we found mates among the Danu women the risk would be there that the offspring would not be as strong as we are because they would not have our cybernetics!”

“The Danu women would not consider us desirable mates for just that reason!” Kiel muttered. “There is no point in thinking in that direction!”

“You do not know that!” Baen argued.

Kiel sent him a level look. “It is logical to assume that,” he responded. “Why would they choose what they must see as corruptions of their species when they have their own males? We know that we are stronger and faster than a completely natural being would be, but we cannot pass that to our offspring and therefore it is useless to consider it as an asset. They would not consider it an asset. Most likely, they would be as frightened of it as Danielle is!”

Baen frowned. “Danielle did not find that frightening,” he said finally. “She may not have found that it appealed to her, but she was not afraid of us until she saw that we could change forms at will and since we only call upon the change when necessary there is no reason why she could not grow accustomed.”

“Mayhap. I do not agree, but that is not the point. The female chooses the male most likely to produce strong, healthy offspring—but those traits they choose are of their own species, not another that would be seen as a corruption of their species. She would not want to risk the possibility that her offspring would inherit those traits when she is appalled by them!”

Baen studied him for a long moment and finally shrugged. “If that is the way you look at it I will certainly not try to dissuade you. For myself, I am satisfied that she will suit me. She is appealing in face and form. She is intelligent. She has excellent survival instincts and what she

lacks in size, she more than makes up for in speed and ferocity. Until she says she will not consider it, I will pursue it. I do not give a fuck what Manuta's plans are."

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