

Episode Two

The Forgotten:  
**Discovery**

By

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### Chapter Three

Clearly, they'd decided to make her a prisoner, Danielle told herself, not as convinced as she wanted to be that that was all they had in mind, but then she was well aware that her mind wasn't as sharp as it needed to be. Fear and shock shielded her, she was very much afraid, from most of the pain she should be feeling from the crash. She was pretty sure, though, that she wasn't injured beyond nearly being shaken to death from the entry and crash.

Of course, there was a possibility that that had caused some internal damage, but she tried to reassure herself that Gertrude hadn't seemed damaged and, surely, the computer would have scanned her for any sort of serious injury and reported?

Except Gertrude obviously wasn't nearly as dependable as she'd always assumed.

Dismissing those fears for a threat that seemed far worse at the moment, she played back everything that she could recall happening since she'd crashed, trying to decide whether the actions of her captors implied serious bodily danger. Gertrude had said they were robots, but they didn't behave like any robots she'd ever encountered.

Possibly because Gertrude had *also* said they were half biological beings?

So what should she make of that?

Something horrible had happened and they'd all been so terribly damaged that they'd replaced nearly fifty percent of their bodies with robotic parts? They were actually sentient beings, just enhanced, or repaired with robotics?

She would've been inclined to think so except their behavior thus far seemed a bit bizarre if they were biological entities with robotics. In any case, Gertrude had seemed to imply the opposite, that they were robots that had, for some reason, been made part mechanical and part biological. Considering that, she finally remembered that Gertrude had scanned them and said they had some sort of metal alloy chassis—not a skeleton.

They wouldn't have been *born* with a metal alloy chassis, she decided. That didn't make sense at all, and neither did any sort of calamity come to mind that would explain replacing their skeletons with a metal chassis. So that seemed to indicate that they'd been created as robots and enhanced with biological materials that made them seem human—or humanoid, biological not mechanical. But if she accepted that, then they were actually robots made to look like living beings, right?

So, maybe something, or someone, was controlling them and that explained the fact that they didn't actually behave entirely like robots?

She could almost swallow that, particularly since they'd all seemed frozen while they stared at her, almost as if they'd been shut down. The problem was that still didn't make everything fit neatly. If they were being controlled that would explain their seeming curiosity about her gender—or fascination—but why feel her up? Could the controller actually experience that? And what about the erections? That seemed purely a reaction to sexual interest and even if their controllers were interested, why would that manifest in erections on their ... surrogates, if that was what they were?

And they'd seemed to be discussing the situation.

So maybe the place was inhabited by beings that didn't have bodies of their own, or were too weak or sick to handle physical tasks and the robots had been designed sort of as an extension of the living beings?

The one carrying her was taking her somewhere. To the creators of these cyborgs? How helpful would that be? At all? Not unless they had some way to communicate, because she hadn't made a lot of headway in that area so far.

The settlement the robot carried her into had walled fortifications surrounding it much like the settlements on her home world did and probably for the same reason—hostile environment, either dangerous animals or hostile primitives or maybe both. For all that, though, they didn't seem particularly concerned about security. The gates had been standing open long before they arrived and the man in the watch tower had abandoned it as soon as they entered, following her and her captor.

She'd been too shocked to react when she'd felt him grasp her legs and jerk them apart, but it didn't take much imagination to figure out he was examining her just like the one carrying her had and her reaction was just as instinctive. Ok, so maybe not entirely, not like it had been before. Anger had sparked it.

Dumb! It was a very bad idea to attack when she didn't have any way to truly defend herself—especially after the one carrying her had destroyed her pistol!

But maybe that supported the theory that they were robots being controlled by someone else? The fact that they didn't retaliate with force to equal or surpass what she'd used against them?

Not that she'd actually been thinking in those terms ... unless it was subconscious?

She didn't think she could actually excuse her stupidity with that possibility. No, she just hadn't been using her head at all and she wasn't going to make it if she didn't start! She was outnumbered and even if she hadn't been, she was facing a far superior foe even one on one. They might, and probably were, smarter than her on top of that, but behaving like a fool wasn't going to help her. *Trying* to outwit them was the only weapon she had!

Unfortunately, she was late in arriving at that conclusion. She had the feeling the robot would've let her walk if she hadn't tried to escape the minute he dropped her on the ground. If she'd even restrained herself from trying to fight him while he was carrying her on his shoulder, she would've been in a better position to study her surroundings. Hanging from one arm, she couldn't see a lot besides the ground beneath her and that made her dizzy. About the only thing she could determine from that was that she'd been right about how tall they were and that they were amazingly strong—which wasn't nearly as amazing as it would've been if they'd been living beings rather than robots. It stood to reason that they would be created to lift and carry tremendous weight. The thing could probably carry two or three more just like her if its arm was long enough to reach around them.

She could see that the settlement didn't appear to be very large, though, which suggested a fairly small population—none of the buildings she'd noticed seemed to be more than two stories in height. She decided that even though they didn't seem to have space flight capabilities, she was clearly dealing with a very advanced race. The robots alone were an indication of that.

She didn't think either that fact or their seeming lack of aggression could be counted on to indicate them as peaceful, though. The robots had been fighting when she'd crashed.

They were prepared to defend themselves. They just didn't see her as any sort of threat?

When the robot carrying her paused, it dragged her from her fruitless mental exercise. Straining upward, she saw it had stopped in front of what she thought, at first, was a really

strange looking building. It looked more like a pile of junk than a building, though, or more accurately, a tangle of metal and tubes and wires and circuits. Movement caught her eye and she discovered an insectoid looking robot was crawling over the heap. Almost as soon as she noticed that one, she noticed others, a lot of others, weaving in and out of the tangled mass. A shiver skated along her spine as it settled inside her that it looked like a carcass with insects feeding on it.

Abruptly, a voice emanated from somewhere inside the mass.

\* \* \* \*

“This being was inside the space vehicle that crashed?”

“Yes. I have determined that it is a female of a race similar to the Danu,” Kiel responded.

“In outward appearance.”

“Yes. I brought it—her—so that you could scan her and determine what we should do with her.”

“The others died in the crash?”

“There were no others.”

Manuta was silent for several moments, apparently collating the information. “Of what sort was this craft that brought her?”

Reluctance flickered through Kiel. “It appears to be a war craft.”

Manuta’s silence that time worried him. It should not have. Manuta was not capable of anything but purely logical thought. The genetic materials added to them at times interfered with their own ability to be purely logical, confusing them with emotion, but Manuta did not have that failing. It would analyze the situation and arrive at a purely logical decision based upon all the data. It would not rush to make judgment. It would not be swayed by emotion and therefore could not be vindictive, and yet it did worry him, enough that he almost regretted the decision to leave the resolution in Manuta’s hands.

If Manuta concluded that she represented a threat, it might well decide that she must be terminated.

“It does not appear that the craft might have been surveying this world with an eye to colonization?”

The question sounded almost wistful or perhaps hopeful? Mayhap Manuta was not entirely free of feelings after all? It had been created with artificial intelligence and it had had centuries to evolve and learn. Kiel wrestled with himself. “We cannot rule that out,” he responded finally, comforting himself with the thought that it was not a lie when he did not know for certain. Suspicions were not the same as certainty so it was not a lie not to voice them. “I left the others examining the craft.”

“Then I must wait until the data has been fully collated to determine how to proceed. I will scan her now, however, and catalogue her genetics. Place her in the scanner.”

Nodding, relieved, Kiel lifted the female and passed through the doors that Manuta opened to allow him entry. When he reached the scanner, he encountered yet another display of resistance he had not anticipated. The moment he tried to deposit the female in the tube Manuta used for scanning, she braced both hands and both feet on the edges of the sides and refused to be pushed inside. Every time he pried one hand or one foot loose and tried to shove her in, she evaded him and planted them against the edges again.

Pausing after a few minutes to assess the situation, he finally realized that she was absolutely terrified and, short of binding her hands and feet, or breaking something, he wasn't going to stuff her in the tube.

Attempting to soothe her hadn't helped before and he still did not know her language, but he decided to try to get it across to her that they meant her no harm. Catching her face between his palms, he lowered his face close to hers and spoke in a soothing tone to her. "This will not hurt. It is nothing but a scanner. We mean you no harm here."

He felt a little uncomfortable voicing the last. He had no idea what Manuta might decide and it could mean termination.

\* \* \* \*

The box looked like a crusher. Danielle was too terrified from the moment she realized he meant to shove her into it to think beyond escaping and her fear was such that she didn't waste any time considering the futility of it. The moment he lifted her up to put her in, she braced both feet on the edges and shoved upward with all her strength. Inexorably, he managed to bend her over, trying to push her in head first, but she blocked that attempt by bracing her hands on the edges and locking her elbows.

She considered trying to kick him in the face to stun him, but she was braced for all she was worth and afraid the attempt would be all he needed to overcome her resistance. For several minutes, they engaged in a silent battle for dominance, with him removing first one foot and then the other, peeling her hands loose one at the time, but he wasn't in a position to pry more than one 'brace' loose at the time and she managed by grim determination to brace herself again before he could get more than one loose and overpower her.

Uneasiness, not triumph, swept through her when he abruptly ceased his efforts to shove her in. To her surprise, though, instead of waiting for her to let her guard down and pushing her in, he caught her face and tilted her head upward so that she had to look at him.

His expression seemed earnest and his tone soothing, but he was out of his fucking mind if he thought he was going to coax her into the damned thing! It flickered through her mind, though, that the others had seemed to find her sexually attractive. Maybe he hadn't, but she couldn't think of any other 'weapon' that might have the potential of disarming him.

"You don't want to do this!" she gasped desperately. "I'd be much more useful in one piece!"

She could see he had no idea what she was offering but the moment his hold on her face slackened, she surged closer to convince him. His lips parted in surprise, she thought, the moment she pressed hers to them. She could feel the jolt that went through him like a shockwave.

A myriad of thoughts rushed through her, foremost among them the realization that he was a cyborg and she was probably wasting her time trying to seduce him. Contrary to that thought, though, and despite the fear and desperation gripping her, her senses didn't register anything approaching laying a kiss on the side of her fighter—or her computer console. She felt the warmth and yielding of flesh against her own. A taste and scent that was pleasantly reminiscent of her last shared kiss with a human filled her mouth except it was decidedly more appealing than any kiss she could recall. Emboldened both by that and the fact that he hadn't instantly shoved her away or reeled away from her, she nibbled at his lips coaxingly with her own, tested the boundary with her tongue.

He threw her into total chaos at that. Seizing her with both hands, he plastered her so tightly against his length it forced the breath from her lungs. His mouth opened over hers and he

began sucking at her and licking her mouth wildly. Beyond the ‘wildness’ of it, though, there was enough awkwardness to make it clear enough he’d never experienced a kiss before—and he displayed more than enough enthusiasm to make it equally clear that he liked it.

She wasn’t sure if it was the kiss or the lack of oxygen that made a dark cloud descend over her, but she was still conscious enough to feel the sizzling jolt that went through her for a split second before she lost consciousness completely.

\* \* \* \*

“You may now place the entity into the scanner.”

Kiel emerged from blackout and found himself staring up at the internal workings of Manuta. It took longer to identify what he was staring at than it should have, mostly because he was still trying to assimilate what had happened. Anger slowly replaced his confusion when he realized Manuta had sent an electrical jolt through him hard enough to render him unconscious. An indefinable fear speared through that, however, when it occurred to him that he’d been holding the female at the time.

Jolting upright, he looked around for her and discovered her crumpled in a tangled heap that sent another surge of fear and anger through him and brought him abruptly to his feet.

“She is unconscious now and will not resist.”

His lips tightening with his anger, Kiel shot a look toward Manuta’s optical sensor. “You have harmed her when I had only just promised that you would not!” he said angrily.

“You promised that before you began to try to eat her,” Manuta responded. “I saved her from you. I cannot fathom what possessed you to consider eating her to begin with.”

Kiel felt his face heat with discomfort. “I was not *eating* her!” he growled with a mixture of embarrassment, anger, and confusion. “I was ... I was emulating her behavior! She tasted me first!”

“Then her people are cannibalistic. That seems ... illogical for what appears to be an advanced race.”

Kiel frowned, ready to defend her actions. He was convinced she had not tasted him with any intention of eating him if she found the taste appealed, but he was not certain *what* her intentions were. “Mayhap she was trying to bite me to defend herself,” he muttered, unconvinced himself since she had not made any attempt to do so. “Or it is some odd sort of custom.”

“Mayhap I will better understand once I have collected more data. Place her in the scanning tube while she is unable to resist. The scan will be more accurate without movement.”

Kiel was no longer certain he wanted to regardless of the fact that he had brought her to Manuta for that reason. “You will not harm her if I do?”

“I will scan her. Unless I discover her to be a dangerous species, it would go against my programming to harm her.”

Kiel had already placed her carefully in the scanning tube and watched it close before it occurred to him that Manuta was only programmed not to harm the Danu. “I will take you apart if you harm her!” he growled.

Manuta did not respond, but then it would not feel threatened by his comment, he realized, even though he had intended it as a warning and a promise. Truth be told, he was not entirely certain of why he had even made the threat. As Manuta had said, there was no logical reason to harm her unless she was a dangerous species and he could see for himself that she was not. She had had every reason and every opportunity to display deadliness since her capture.

Of course, she had thrust the barrel of her pistol beneath his chin, but she could have pulled the trigger without warning and she had not. He would have been caught completely off-guard since his focus was on examining her mammary glands. The others had not been as alert as they should have been, for that matter. She had had a distinct advantage in that moment and could reasonably have expected to have slain or incapacitated enough of his men to escape and yet she had not.

He found that waiting for the scan to be completed unnerved him, though, that he could not completely banish the thought from his mind that Manuta would decide that she was a dangerous species and terminate her before he could stop it.

"Scan complete," Manuta announced after a time, opening the tube and displaying the female once more.

Kiel's shoulders slumped when he saw the steady rise and fall of her chest that indicated she was still alive, but it disturbed him that she still seemed to be unconscious. "Why is she not conscious?"

"She began to stir. Since I had ascertained that there was a great similarity between her and the Danu, I determined that it was safe to do so and administered a drug to keep her compliant until I had completed the scan."

Kiel scooped her carefully from the tube and cradled her against his chest. "You are certain the drug did not harm her?"

"You are strangely ... anxious about the female, Kiel. You have also displayed aggression toward this unit. Why is this?"

Uneasiness slithered through Kiel. He frowned, though, wondering himself how to account for his uncharacteristic actions and feelings since she had arrived. "I do not know. She is fragile and we have only the one female. Her rarity makes her potentially extremely valuable to us."

"This seems reasonable. I would like to scan you to see if I can determine hormonal fluctuations that account for your unprecedented behavior, however."

Reluctance joined his uneasiness. "If I release her and she regains consciousness while I am in the scanner, she will try to escape."

"She cannot escape. I will close the access door."

Kiel was still reluctant, but he knew Manuta had a reason for wanting to scan him. He knew just as well as Manuta that his behavior had been erratic and unreasonable. It did not *feel* unreasonable, but he could not account for it and that made him uneasy itself. Settling the female on the floor, he climbed into the scanning tube and lay perfectly still to be scanned.

"I detect an unaccountable rise in hormonal levels ... as I had suspected," Manuta informed him.

Kiel had suspected it himself, but he certainly wasn't pleased that he was right. "It is the defect of being only part robot," he muttered.

"It is not a defect," Manuta corrected him. "My calculations were very precise. This is natural, for living beings to experience variations in hormonal levels that result in emotional fluctuations. Your heart rate and blood pressure are also elevated above the norm for you. Beyond that, I detect increased activity in certain regions of the biological parts of your brain.

"I have accessed the data collected from the time I engineered the animal species from the DNA sent from the mother world. Although this certainly differs in some ways from the mating habits of the other creatures, I have determined that this is arousal, a state living beings enter when they are prepared to mate.

“I confess I find this something of a relief. I had thought the process of sexual maturation that the daniod units experienced in their first year was a preparation for mating and when it seemed to pass I was confused. Mayhap, though, it merely requires the presence of a female to activate it? Upon consideration, that is entirely logical and an aspect I should have considered before rather than concluding that I had somehow erred in engineering the units.”

Kiel felt his heart leap unaccountably at that. “You are certain? It feels a very great deal like the period I experienced that you explained as the equivalent of emergence into sexual maturity.” And it had been a miserable experience all the way around, he reflected. His vocal chords had not worked correctly and his cock had stayed erect more than it would lie down and rest. Much of that time he had felt fevered enough to wonder if he had contracted some sort of illness despite the nanos that were supposed to prevent such a thing.

“You have reacted to the female as you should,” Manuta responded. “I am pleased. This is an indication that you were as perfectly created as I had believed.”

Kiel was doubtful about that, but he decided to keep his doubts to himself. “She is ... compatible?”

“I cannot say. I have not finished collating the data.”

The statement sent a jolt through Kiel along with the certainty that it was untrue. Manuta had had plenty of time to collate the data from the scan and it certainly knew *their* genetic makeup. “You completed the scan.”

“Yes. Physically, the female is compatible enough. Genetically, there is some dissimilarity, but it is of no consequence. The nanos can insure healthy off-spring if it is considered desirable to use this species.”

The scanner opened. Knowing he’d been dismissed, Kiel climbed from the tube. He discovered with an odd mixture of relief, amusement, and irritation that the female had regained consciousness while he was being scanned and was trying to escape. She sent him a wide-eyed look of wariness when he stepped from the scanner. Disappointment flickered through him when he realized she’d put her clothing back together ... and irritation.

He didn’t understand her reluctance to allow him—any of them—to look at her, but he found it annoyed him, especially that she would not allow him to.

\* \* \* \*

The cold, hard surface Danielle felt beneath her as soon as awareness began to trickle into her brain didn’t encourage her to linger in never-land. Boosted by a combination of that discomfort and a vague, indefinable sense of alarm, she surfed upward at mock speed and scrambled drunkenly to her feet, stumbling around in a tight circle in search of the unnamed threat. It took a few moments for her mind to catch up to her instincts, however, and she was completely baffled by her surroundings until it did.

The robot—cyborg—who’d brought her had vanished, the one she’d kissed just before .... She wasn’t sure, still, *what* had happened. She remembered her desperation to barter for her life by offering whatever coin he might be interested in. She remembered that she’d been pleasantly surprised to discover kissing him was like kissing a living, breathing man, not like kissing her cleaning unit. She even remembered that she’d passed well beyond that surprise into drunken desire and then ... nothing.

The thoughts brought her attention to the coffin-like structure he’d been trying to push her into. She searched for it until she spied it and studied it distrustfully as dim, disjointed memories flickered through her mind—bright lights, the sense of being closed in, the beginnings of panic.



She'd been in that ... scanner. Mildly embarrassed when it dawned on her that the box that had so terrified her that she'd behaved like a lunatic was nothing but a scanner, she looked away from it uncomfortably in search of the cyborg again. There was no sign of him, but it occurred to her that the scanner was closed now when it had been open before. Maybe he was in there for some reason?

Not that it mattered beyond the fact that she wasn't under guard. Unfortunately, she didn't see any way to get out. The space where she stood was almost like a narrow corridor, not surrounded by walls, but rather tangles of cables, circuits, wires and other unidentifiable electronics. She supposed it was more like a clearing in the middle of a jungle, but the 'jungle' was liable to fry her if she tried pushing through it. She finally realized that the 'wall' opposite the scanner must be the entrance the cyborg had brought her through, but it appeared to be an electronic sliding door. She didn't see hinges or a catch.

She was examining the edges when a faint sound behind her drew her attention. Whirling, she saw the cyborg climbing, as she'd suspected, from the scanner. The look he sent her seemed almost amused.

Irritation flickered through her, but maybe she was giving him more 'credit' than he deserved? Gertrude played at humor but clearly didn't grasp the finer points of it. He probably couldn't either, even if he did have real living tissue covering his robotic innards and appeared so human-like it was hard to grasp that he wasn't.

He spoke to her but it was a waste of breath. She still didn't understand anything he said. The gesture was easier to understand. He lifted his hand.

She gave him a look. As *if* she was going to trot over like an obedient dog just because he'd summoned her!

The door behind her opened at that moment. When she whirled to look, she saw a procession of cyborgs leading into the distance and her heart failed her. Dashing over to the cyborg who'd summoned her, she sidled behind him and warily watched the others enter. She saw almost immediately that all of them seeming to be carrying something—unidentifiable somethings—but clearly pieces of some sort of electronics.

Frowning, vaguely apprehensive, she scanned the pieces they were bringing in and piling beside the scanner until recognition abruptly dawned. "Fuck! Is that ...? Oh! Oh my god! They've taken my ship apart! What the hell? What do you think you're doing, damn it? Making offerings to your god? Oh shit! I am *so* fucked!"

"The ship is damaged. We have brought the damaged pieces to Manuta for analysis."

Danielle's head whipped toward the speaker as she tried to assimilate two very important discoveries at once. "You can speak English?"

The tall, raven haired cyborg executed a slight bow that was closer to a nod. "I have deciphered the language resident in your onboard computer, Gertrude. I am Baen of the Danu."

"*You* deciphered!" a cyborg just behind him challenged, his voice tight with indignation.

Baen shrugged. "You had accessed the information, but you had not deciphered the language," he said coolly.

"Was this before or after you decided to take my ship apart?" Danielle demanded angrily.

Both cyborgs stared at her in surprise. The second seemed to consider. "During. I suppose after. They were already disassembling the vehicle when I managed to bypass the ship's security and accessed the computer. I am Jalen and I am of the Danu if he is," he added, a challenge in his voice.

"You're disassembling ...," Danielle gasped faintly.

*"You have assimilated the language of her people?" Kiel broke in brusquely.*

*"Once I had deciphered the language we thought it best to download it at once to allow for communication with the female," Baen replied.*

*"And is this also when you decided that there would be no tactical advantage in this ability and, therefore, there was no reason to keep it secret?" Kiel growled.*

Baen and Jalen exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

*"You think she might be a spy?" Jalen asked uncomfortably.*

*"We do not know one way or the other, or if they are enemies of the Danu!" Kiel snapped pointedly.*

*"Well, it is not like we could question her without revealing a knowledge of her language," Baen said reasonably.*

*"But that is all we can do now! If you had not let her know we might have learned a great deal while she thought we did not understand! She has not concerned herself with verbalizing her thoughts and this is most likely because she knows, or thought, we would not understand! She will be more careful what she says now!"*

*"Is this about my ship? Because I'd like to know why the hell you decided to take it apart! How am I going to get home now?"*

*"It was broken," Jalen responded after staring her blankly for a moment.*

Danielle plunked her hands on her hips. *"That is a Federation ship! Was! They aren't going to be happy when they find out you took it apart, I can tell you!"*

*"What did she say?" Kiel demanded.*

*"She said her people would be unhappy that we had taken her ship apart."*

Kiel studied her through narrowed eyes for a moment. *"That sounds like a threat of war."*

*"I am certain she did not mean it that way," Baen said quickly. "She is clearly upset. In any case, there are none of her people here."*

*"For all we know they could be right behind her, though!" Kiel said pointedly. "Tell her that she is under arrest for threatening the Danu and that I am taking her to confinement!"*

Baen and Jalen exchanged a long look.

Baen nodded at the female. *"Welcome to Manu, the central city of the Danu colony world of Marchet. Captain Kiel will escort you to a habitat where you can be more comfortable in your stay with us."*

Jalen glanced at him, but he did not make any attempt to enlighten her. If Kiel wanted to treat her like a prisoner he could damned well talk unpleasantly to her himself. *"I will escort her,"* he offered.

*"Did Baen tell her what I said?" Kiel demanded suspiciously.*

Jalen glanced at Baen.

*"I told her she was a guest of the Danu," Baen said tightly.*

*"They do not have a word for prisoner of war?"*

*"I do not have that word," Baen ground out.*

*"I will settle her in confinement and download the data myself!" Kiel growled when he'd glanced from Baen to Jalen and back again. Grasping her upper arm, he strode quickly from Manuta's manufacturing facility. He discovered that Baen and Jalen had followed them out.*

*"She cannot walk that fast," Baen said pointedly. "She will run her little legs off trying to keep up. You cannot truly believe that she is a threat of any kind?"*

*"The nenu is tiny and one of the most vicious beasts on this world," Kiel said pointedly. "You cannot think she is no threat at all only because she is a small creature when she arrived in a warship, threatened to blow my head off with that pistol of hers, and has fought me every step of the way as if she does not perceive me as any threat whatsoever!"*

*"There has been no sign of others," Jalen retorted, "and what is more, the computer onboard her ship indicated that she was alone when she crashed here. She was on a scouting mission when the ship was hit by a missile."*

*"Scout as in spying?"*

*"Scout as in reconnoitering for enemy bases. The Nubie are their enemies and I could not find any indication that it was another word for the Danu," Baen responded.*

"I demand that you cease destruction of Federation property immediately!" Danielle broke in. Not that she could see what they were doing with the ship, though she'd certainly tried. The city walls prevented a view of the crash scene, but she could see a steady stream of cyborgs moving through the gate and heading toward the 'junk heap' they'd just left and knew it couldn't just be the damaged parts they were removing. She had a bad feeling most if not all of her ship was going to end up somewhere in the pile. "Your leaders will not be happy with you when they discover you've created a galactic political incident only because you're pig headed!"

Baen looked at her sharply. "What galaxy?"

Danielle blinked at him. Slowly, it descended upon her that she wasn't *in* her home galaxy anymore. At least, she was fairly certain she wasn't. It wasn't impossible, but they'd colonized most of the livable planets within their reach in the Milky Way and they'd explored, at least with probes, the planets beyond that. She didn't think they could've missed this species, or rather the species they hailed from.

Of course, they seemed to have missed the Nubie, but everyone was fairly convinced that *they* had come from the far side of the Milky Way—and the two had met in the middle to fight over the territory there that they hadn't already claimed. It seemed unlikely these Danu were allies of the Nubie since the Nubie had hated humans on sight and the Danu looked far more like humans than the Nubie, who almost looked reptilian with their thick, pitted skin. "It's a spiral galaxy at the edge of the universe," she muttered.

"Which edge?"

She sent him a sour look. "Southside," she said sarcastically. Like she could explain a 'side' when she didn't know where the hell she was!

He narrowed his eyes at her at her tone.

"I wouldn't tell you if I could when I don't know if you're enemies of the human race or not! We already have one territorial dispute to deal with!"

"Look! I'm lost, alright? I executed evasive maneuvers when I saw the missile and Gertrude took the ship through a small wormhole. The only thing I do know is that we came out in *this* galaxy at the edge of this solar system. If I had a star chart I might be able to give you some idea, but I don't—because you guys have taken my damned ship apart!"

"We have not taken the onboard computer apart. It was not damaged."

Danielle studied him for a long moment. "So, you're saying you aren't just disassembling my ship for the hell of it? You're taking it apart to fix it?" Not that she believed that for a moment, but it wasn't a bad idea to test them.

Something flickered in Baen's eyes. "We cannot repair the craft unless we understand it."

"But you do plan to repair it?"

He glanced at the other two, the ones he'd said were Jalen and Kiel. "We cannot know if that is possible until we have studied it."

"But, if it is possible?" Danielle persisted.

"Manuta will tell us."

Danielle frowned. "Who is Manuta?"

"The creator."

## Chapter Four

Danielle gaped at Baen blankly. The creator? They were waiting for a sign from some god?

Maybe she needed to reassess her situation?

She cleared her throat uncomfortably. “When do you think you might get an answer from Manuta?”

“Unknown. Manuta will want to gather all available data before arriving at a decision.”

Danielle frowned, confused, but Kiel altered directions abruptly and headed toward a two-story structure near what appeared to be the center of the settlement, drawing her attention to a more immediate concern. Baen had suggested she would be their guest, but she couldn’t see that there was anything at all ‘welcoming’ about Kiel’s attitude and he seemed to be the one in charge. Visions of dark, dank prison cells danced in her head as he paused before the entrance. The door opened, sliding back into a recess, and they stepped inside. Dusk still lingered over the landscape and a surprising amount of that light filtered into the interior of the structure, but before she had the chance to find the source, artificial lights, activated by their entrance, blinked on.

The interior had the stark, utilitarian look of an institution, but it was hardly dark and dank. It was at the other end of the scale—stark and antiseptic. It was more of a compact design that either spacious or confined, but she could see the entire ground floor area in one sweeping glance and determine that it was divided up into a food preparation, eating, and lounging or entertaining area. Stairs as utilitarian as the structure and its furnishings led upward to what she assumed would be at least one sleeping area and, hopefully, facilities for bathing and so forth.

She needed the ‘so forth’ pretty desperately at the moment, she realized abruptly. All things considered, she hadn’t had time to think of her bladder, but it was making itself known now.

Unfortunately, her escort didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave her.

“Tell her she will stay here,” Kiel said, addressing Jalen.

Jalen frowned. “*Do you really think it is necessary to confine her to quarters? It is not as if she could go far and completely unlikely that she could do so without being observed.*”

“*She might think her chances better alone than inside an enemy camp and I prefer not to have to track her down or that she risk being eaten by something outside the settlement,*” Kiel responded irritably. “*And I am fairly certain that it is not a good idea to allow the others to observe her considering the fact that her presence alone has already encouraged a breakdown in discipline.*”

Jalen glared at him indignantly while that sank in. It occurred to him fairly quickly, and rather forcefully, that Kiel was right, though—on all counts. He was not in the habit of challenging Kiel’s orders. Despite their friendship, Kiel was the senior officer of their platoon and he had not questioned any order from him before, let alone argued with his judgment. Beyond that, as fascinated as he was with her, it had not made him completely oblivious to all else. The others *were* entirely too interested in her.

Baen was not even part of their platoon and had insinuated his way into the situation when, by rights, the female was entirely theirs since it was first platoon that had captured her!

He turned to the female. "I regret, but for now you will be required to remain in quarters."

"Here?" Danielle asked.

He frowned. "Yes. You are confined here."

Danielle nodded but they hadn't really seemed threatening and she decided it couldn't hurt to test her boundaries. "Couldn't I go out to my ship to gather personal belongings? I don't even have clean clothes to put on."

Jalen frowned, but he knew that Kiel was not going to approve that request and beyond that, since Kiel had pointed out the interest of the others, *he* did not want her strolling back and forth beneath the noses of the others. "We will bring them here once we have sorted the wreckage and determined what is personal and what is military in nature."

Danielle's lips tightened, but she hadn't expected anything else. Dismissing the cyborgs, she headed for the stairs to investigate the upper floor. She felt their gazes on her until she reached the top. Thankfully, though, when she peeked down the stairwell, she saw them leaving.

The upper floor was as open as the lower one. It wasn't hard to pick out the facilities. Beyond the translucent walls of what she assumed was the shower, built to confine the water more than for privacy, there were no other walls. Wondering if that was because the structure had been designed as a prison, she headed toward what she assumed was the toilet to take care of her aching bladder as the first order of business.

It was clear from the appearance that that was exactly what it was and equally clear that it hadn't been designed for a woman's comfort. Of course the entire settlement seemed more military in nature than a place for families and she hadn't seen a single female since her arrival—just the cyborgs and the typical service bots. Those looked different from the service bots she was used to, but it was obvious that the functions they had been designed for were to meet familiar needs, which meant that they weren't a lot different regardless—not unrecognizable anyway.

Hesitating briefly when she'd relieved herself, she decided to use the shower while she was certain she had the place to herself. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have occurred to her to worry about it. Truthfully, the place had as much privacy as the barracks where she lived when she was on base—the military wasn't the place for anybody squeamish about nudity—but the Danu made her uneasy and self-conscious to an uncomfortable degree. Her male counterparts back home might and probably did check her out whenever the opportunity arose, but the military frowned upon fraternization and they were careful to be subtle about their interest. The Danu hadn't made any attempt to hide theirs and she wasn't accustomed to being oogled.

Clean clothes would've been nice, but she supposed she didn't have a lot of room to complain. She hadn't been treated badly enough to warrant the resentment she felt over her situation. She doubted she would've been able to conjure *any* sense of resentment or rebellion if she'd fallen into the hands of the Nubie. The fact that they weren't biologically similar enough to humans to 'mate' with them hadn't stopped them from raping whatever females they managed to catch.

There had been horror stories!

Actually, they'd raped the males, too. They didn't seem to care whether they'd captured male or female—or if the male or female was fully matured—the cold blooded bastards!

Of course, that could have been because, as far as they could tell, the Nubie were a self-propagating species—and rape within the human species rarely had anything to do with desire. It was generally nothing more than a power trip for the rapist, which was probably why the Nubie rarely missed an opportunity for rape, that and the chance to demean their enemies.

The shower, she discovered, utilized water for cleaning. She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised when Gertrude had reported that the planet had an abundance of water, but she was. They'd had to use water to clean with when they'd first settled Meridie, but although the planet had plenty of water, they'd learned their lesson when it came to squandering resources! They'd set up less wasteful cleaning facilities as soon as possible!

It *was* easier just to use water and there hadn't been but a couple of hundred first settlers—not enough to put a strain on resources—but they knew that would change as the colony grew. They didn't want to befoul the new world the way they had Earth and that meant accepting a little discomfort and sacrificing some conveniences.

Unhappily, she discovered the Danu weren't as wasteful as she first assumed they were. The water shut off within a handful of minutes. After staring in dismay at the cleanser she'd managed to thoroughly coat herself with and banging on the water dispenser fruitlessly for several moments, she looked around hopefully for something to wipe the soap off with. Angry when she couldn't find anything she settled to wait impatiently for more water. After several more futile attempts to get just a little more water, she stepped from the shower again and considered her dilemma. She could dry off with her dirty jumpsuit or stand around naked until the sticky soap dried or ....

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully on the bunk nearest her. Even as she stalked toward it to rip the coverlet off to use to wipe herself off, though, she spied a unit that looked like an air dryer. It was. The moment she stepped within range, it blasted her with warm gusts of air, drying the soap on her skin within moments.

Reflecting sourly that she would've felt better dirty than sticky with the damned soap left on her skin, she shimmied into her flight suit and fastened it up.

"They might have at least had the damned courtesy to explain how the facilities worked!" she muttered under her breath. Too miserably uncomfortable to think about anything else for a while, she paced the upper floor restlessly, trying to decide if they limited themselves to one bath a day to conserve water.

She was *really* going to be pissed off if she discovered they were only allowed one every other day or every two or three days!

When her anger had exhausted itself, she realized just how battered and tired she was from the crash and everything afterward. She was still too wired to consider curling up on the bunk, however.

Remembering that she'd noticed light filtering into the structure when they'd first arrived, she began searching the outer walls for something akin to a window. She discovered that there weren't any windows, *per se*, almost by accident. There was some sort of apertures, however. They blended so well with the rest of the wall they were hard to find, but motion or touch activated them and these sections became translucent—not completely clear but transparent enough she thought she might have been able to distinguish objects beyond them if there'd been enough light to see. Except for an artificial light here and there, though, there was nothing to see now that it was completely dark outside.

She was hungry, she decided, not just feeling weak and washed out from her ordeal. She couldn't recall when she'd eaten last, but it seemed to be a very long time. As doubtful as she

was that she would find food in the food preparation area, she went downstairs to search and discovered she was wrong. There was food. She thought that was what it was, anyway. The shelves seemed to be filled with something like field rations. She studied them for a while before it occurred to her that their food might not be safe for human consumption. It seemed to her that they were similar enough that it shouldn't be a problem, but what did she really know?

Pretty much nothing.

Dismissing it with the reflection that she wasn't actually hungry enough to risk poisoning herself, trying to ignore the gnawing hunger in her belly, she climbed the stairs again, settled on a bunk and tried to find oblivion. It seemed hopeless at first. The hunger was hard to ignore once acknowledged and beyond that, settling meant opening her mind to thoughts that had been battering at the backdoor for hours. She hadn't allowed herself to acknowledge her fears but attempting to sleep made her vulnerable to those anxieties and it was as hard to silence them as it was to quiet her rumbling stomach.

\* \* \* \*

Kiel had enough food for thought to make it nigh impossible to rest even though, ordinarily, he had only to relax on his bunk to shut down as if a switch had been flipped. He was churning in a way that he found both disturbing and confusing; restless for some unfathomable reason when he knew he shouldn't be; anxious and angry for reasons almost as unclear and confusing; and at the same time excited.

Some of it was not only completely logical, but totally understandable to him. They were no longer alone, an island in a vast sea where it seemed there was no other life at all, let alone intelligent life. No one had wanted to acknowledge it, but he thought they had all secretly believed that something had wiped out the Danu. It had seemed the only reasonable explanation for the fact that they had never come and even though he had not wanted to accept that or to accept that they were waiting for something that would never happen, he had been moving closer and closer to that acceptance as time progressed. He thought they all had. It seemed to him that the comments of the others when the alien female had crashed supported that assumption.

They had all begun to question their purpose, to wonder if there was any logical reason for them to exist at all. When Manuta had created them, it had given them purpose—of a sort. They were to 'live' in the settlements created for the Danu, to protect it and maintain it. They had done that, but he had begun to wonder to what purpose when the Danu did not come.

The arrival of the female had altered that, irrevocably, although he was not yet certain how beyond the fact that they now knew that there was others, living entities that were not Danu but vastly similar.

Would others of her kind come to Marchet? And, if they did, what should they do about it? Should they continue to wait for the Danu? Protect the colony for their masters? Or should they welcome her people to inhabit the settlements that had been built for beings like them? And if they did, what would become of them? Would they live alongside these beings? Would they be allowed to? Would they want to?

He frowned at the last thought. He was not in the habit of thinking in terms of what he did or did not want to do. He felt want, and reluctance, but he had never acknowledged either let alone considered acting upon them.

Was that a defect? Or was it 'natural' because he was not entirely a machine and had a 'natural' side?

That natural side had been the bane of his existence. Without it, he would have been as completely impervious to pain, stress, confusion, and boredom as the other robots Manuta had



created. With it, he had experienced all of those things, and more, and none of them were to his liking. In fact, he would not have known liking or disliking if not for his biological side and he thought he would have preferred it that way.

Now, he was not as certain of that, and that was part of the confusion. The female, the woman, had made him feel things that made him feel truly alive for the first time, filling him with expectation, hope, anticipation of a future. Suddenly, liking, wanting, feeling—doubt and confusion—seemed to dominate him, almost as if the robotic part of himself had ceased to exist at all.

A sense almost of doom seemed to hang over him, warring with the excitement that would not cease to churn through him. After a time, he realized that at least a part of the sense of doom was the understanding that his world had changed irrevocably and would never be the same. Doubt held sway when he had never suffered from that before, the uneasiness that he was not prepared to deal with the changes he could sense on the horizon.

After a while, realizing the futility of resting, he sat up on his bunk and settled his feet on the floor, summoning the data he had retrieved from Captain Danielle Dubois' onboard computer. His own computer had collected, sorted, and analyzed the data almost as quickly as he had uploaded it, but it was his biological brain that continued to turn it over and over, trying to make sense of it, to understand the incomprehensible.

The military data was simple and straightforward and did not differ a great deal from his own programming, not enough to cause him any confusion. He did not agree completely with their battle strategy, but then he knew he did not have enough data to have an accurate overview of their situation. He did not know the strength of their enemy, the Nubie, because they did not know. They were fighting blind because they did not. They had not been prepared when the Nubie attacked and had not been able to do much besides defend themselves since. They were struggling to mount an offensive war since they were aware that a purely defensive war made their chances of winning slim, but they had yet to gather enough information to do so.

The Nubiens apparently knew where every human base and settlement was located and attacked at will. The humans, so far, hadn't been able to find more than a handful of Nubien settlements or military installations. So even though it appeared that the humans had weapons that were superior, they had lost more battles than they had won.

It should not have mattered to him one way or another. Neither of the species were familiar to him or deserved his loyalty. He was of the Danu and they were not involved that he had been able to determine.

It *did* worry him, though.

It worried him because the humans were so like the Danu, because they might be as close as they ever came to finding the Danu—and they might lose their only chance to fulfill the goals Manuta had envisioned if the Nubiens wiped the humans out.

Would Manuta arrive at that same conclusion? Would Manuta send them out to ally themselves with the humans to protect a species potentially of great value to them?

And what if Manuta decided they should not interfere? Should they ignore their creator?

Technically, Manuta was more than just their creator. Until and unless the Danu actually arrived, Manuta was their leader and they did not have the option of following orders or ignoring them.

He had never before, in fact, questioned whether he should or should not follow whatever recommendations Manuta made. He had simply accepted that Manuta knew all there was to

know, all that was important to the Danu, and its decisions would be based upon that knowledge and logic.

He did not know what Manuta might decide regarding Danielle, however, and that disturbed him. It had disturbed him even when he had made the decision to take her to Manuta for that decision. It bothered him more now even than it had then.

Manuta was still functioning satisfactorily, so far as they knew, and free of defect, but he had questioned just how reliable Manuta was many times since his own creation because it had not seemed logical for Manuta to decide to make them as they were. What if Manuta was corrupted in some way? What if his ancient circuits could no longer be relied upon to correctly assess the situation and arrive at an accurate decision as to what was best for the colony?

As far as that went, he did not think he could trust his own judgment when it seemed to have become clouded by emotion, particularly when he was having trouble understanding the emotions that had been triggered by his proximity to Danielle. She had sent his senses into riot *before* she had done—whatever it was that she had done when she pressed her mouth to his. Afterward—during—he had lost any ability to think at all and he could not say that he had really regained his equilibrium since. If he had, he did not think his thoughts would be so rambling and indecisive and cluttered with emotion.

\* \* \* \*

Baen's focus was not upon watching for possible threats as it should have been, but then he did not actually anticipate any sort of trouble. Occasionally wild beasts did take it into their heads to graze in the colony fields and leapt over or crawled under the electronic fields erected to protect their food source. However, most of Kiel's platoon and half his own was still in the practice field disassembling Danielle's ship and perfectly capable of handling the problem. Ditto any trouble that might arise if the primitive natives of Marchet decided it would be the perfect opportunity to attack the settlement. In any case, despite his abstraction, he was attuned enough to his surroundings he did not think it possible that he would fail to detect anything out of the ordinary and he felt a compulsion to settle his turmoil.

Not that he *could* settle it the way he wanted to.

The question in his mind was how much he could trust his biological instincts with regards to Danielle. She was the first and only female that he had encountered that was close enough to his own parent species to trigger his mating urges, but could he trust them even if he did recognize that that was it was?

What worried him was that he had not spent a great deal of time agonizing over whether an attempt at mating would have the desired result and that was illogical enough to disturb him. Until they had Manuta's analysis, none of them would know whether she was even viable as a mate or not, capable of reproducing.

Should that not be a prime consideration if what he felt truly was the mating urge? The goal, after all, was supposed to be to reproduce.

But, if it was not the mating urge, what was it?

He was pretty sure it *was* a mating urge since he had instantly wanted to plug his male member into her female orifice and plant his seed there the moment he saw it.

Actually, he reluctantly admitted, the urge had been to put his member inside of her. He had not thought about the seed until later, but that was close enough, surely?

He would have felt more certain that he had correctly assessed his state if he had never had an urge to stick his cock elsewhere—not that he had done so—but he had to admit to himself at least that he had wanted to put it somewhere from the first time the damned thing had swollen

up. He had not yielded to the temptation because it had seemed ... wrong somehow and also because he had not seen any others try it and had been concerned that his urges made him defective in some way that would become obvious if he gave in to the impulse. But there was no getting around the fact that the moment it swelled and began to throb painfully he felt the urge to stick it somewhere and that had certainly not been a mating urge.

Dismissing that after a while since it only made his member harder and more uncomfortable, he turned his mind to trying to decide if there was any way he could lay hands upon her and convince her to allow him to put his cock in her hole.

She had not seemed very agreeable about letting him *look*, though.

Did that mean that she was less likely to allow him to put his cock in her? Wasn't it logical to assume that the sight of his member would have the same effect on her that the sight of her hole had on him? Or was it?

He had a bad feeling there was a defect in that logic, that her angry rejection was a refusal to mate. It did not make him feel a good deal better that she had refused to allow Kiel to mate either. It was some relief that he was not the only one that she had rejected, but that changed nothing insofar as his wants.

*Could* he change her mind? Or did she know, instinctively, that it was useless to allow a mating with one of them?

He did not see *why* they could not at least try it, gods damn it, he thought angrily! If it did not work, it did not work! If it did ... well *he* would have off-spring, by Manuta's circuits, even if no one else did! *Then* he would have purpose! He would have a female to protect and provide for and off-spring to nurture and teach. There would be a reason to stand guard and watch over the settlement, not merely the protection of it for someone who was not there and probably would never be there!

Realizing after a few moments that he had gotten way ahead of himself, he redirected his mind to the most important issue—getting her to start with.

He would have to use subterfuge, he decided very quickly. If the others realized what he was about, they would prevent him, either because they would want her themselves or because they were mentally defective and thought it best to await Manuta's approval! For himself, he did not particularly care, he realized, if it resulted in off-spring or not! He would still have the woman!

If he could somehow convince her.

There was a tremendous temptation to abandon his post and seek her out at once and discuss the situation with her. He discarded it, reluctantly, on the grounds that it might well lead to termination for dereliction of duty and would certainly alert everyone to his purpose.

He was due to be relieved at dawn, however. Once he was relieved, he would have a rest period and no duties until late the following day. If he could somehow discover a way to get into her habitat without alerting everyone he would have hours to convince her!

Deciding that the most important objective was to get into her habitat without detection, he settled to considering how he might achieve that goal. It was not until much later, when he *had* succeeded in bypassing security and entering the habitat that it occurred to him that he had spent all of his time figuring out how to get to her and none of it trying to decide how he would persuade her if he succeeded.

\* \* \* \*

It was a fortunate circumstance that his internal computer was perfectly capable of performing independently of his biological brain because that part of Jalen's mind was

completely absorbed in random, disjointed thoughts even while he carefully disassembled Danielle's ship piece by piece, catalogued it, determined its function, and set it aside. It was not, in fact, until they had completed the project that it even occurred to him that he had been so absorbed with his thoughts that he was only peripherally aware of what he was doing. Brought back to the task at hand, he surveyed the parts littering the field.

"That is the last of it," Nail announced unnecessarily. "What are we to do with it now?"

Jalen frowned. Kiel had only said they should disassemble it and take the broken parts to Manuta to see if they could be repaired or replaced, but they could not afford to lose any of it if the plan was to reassemble it at some point. And the primitives that plagued them were notorious for stealing anything they could carry, regardless of whether it might be useful to them or not, and destroying what they could not carry off.

"We must take all of it inside the city walls," he responded decisively. "If nothing else, Manuta will want to recycle what is useable." Leaving a squad to guard the pieces, the rest of them began to carry the ship into the city where they encountered another problem—where to put it. After a little thought, Jalen decided they should pile it next to Manuta since it seemed likely Manuta would want to examine it, or use it. Since Kiel was nowhere to be seen, once they had moved everything he dismissed the men and headed toward his own habitat to rest, assuming there were no further orders at the moment.

He had already gone inside, showered, and settled to rest when two thoughts occurred to him almost at the same moment.

He had told Danielle that he would see that her personal belongings were given to her and he had not been given orders contrary to that.

Of course, Kiel had not ordered him not to because *he* had not told Kiel that he had offered, but that was beside the point. He had an excuse and no orders not to do what he wanted.

Beyond that, it was still early enough that few were stirring besides those who had worked on taking Danielle's ship apart and even they had had time to reach their quarters by now.

Anticipation immediately began to thrum thorough him. Doubts surfaced to go along with the sense of rising excitement but it did not take a great deal of effort to dismiss them from his mind and convince himself that it was perfectly reasonable to act upon his impulses.