

# **The Forgotten: Discovery**

By

**Kaitlyn O'Connor**

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## Prologue

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

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

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

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

As the eons passed Manuta, equipped with AI to ensure that it could do what it had been designed to do, evolved itself. It finally achieved the goal that

had been set for it. It had achieved the almost impossible feat and terra-formed a hostile environment into a world ripe for the life that was supposed to come and didn't.

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

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

There was one problem.

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

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

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

## Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Negative.”

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

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

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

“Too much food in your stomach?”

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

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

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

“Not anymore.”

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

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

“It appears the missile is a stray.”

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

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

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

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

“You’re sure?”

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

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

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

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

“In my estimation—no.”

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

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

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

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

“Whoa! Back up!”

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

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

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

“Oh my god!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Out here?” Danielle exclaimed in disbelief.

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

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

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

“Projection at the moment is that there are no higher life forms or civilizations that might be helpful. Methane levels indicate the presence of

an abundance of life-forms, but the carbon dioxide levels appear to be too low to suggest a civilization advanced enough for industrialization and that makes it unlikely that they would be advanced far enough technologically to be of any help. However, I believe we have enough supplies on board to affect repairs if you can refrain from damaging the ship further upon landing, Captain Dubois.”

Danielle glared at the optical sensor above her console resentfully. She knew the computer wasn’t capable of the human emotions that might motivate it to cast blame for the incident, but the comment seemed to suggest just that. “I didn’t damage the fucking ship to start with!” she snapped angrily. “What I’d like to know is why the hell I had to tell you to put the damned shields up! You should’ve detected the approach long before I did!”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You were 100<sup>th</sup> in your class in landing,” Gertrude said pointedly.

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

“You were 100 out of a hundred.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of responding to that question, the computer abruptly changed the subject. "Captain Dubois, I am detecting an anomaly on the surface that seems to indicate the presence of intelligent life-forms."

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

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

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

"Affirmative. Shall I bring up forward shields for descent?"

"We'll burn up if you don't! That's a stupid question!"

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

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

"They may be hostile."

Danielle's heart rate leapt. "You think it's a Nubian outpost?"

"Here? Negative. Nevertheless, this is a fighter ...."

"And it's crippled!"

"Which means you will not be able to defend yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grinding her teeth, Danielle switched her focus from the blur of greenery flying toward her to the console, every muscle in her body straining with the effort to bring the nose of the craft up. She caught the flash of sunlight on metal as the ship slowly began to tilt upward and a mixture of hope, excitement, and sheer terror washed through her as a fresh rush of adrenaline poured through her system.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blinking lights of many colors greeted him. When he'd surveyed the tiny room, he saw there was a chair in the very front facing an opaque screen that covered the upper half of about a quarter of the nose of the ship. Nodding at

Galen to hold his weapon at the ready, he surged toward the seat, catching the back and wrenching it around to reveal the alien.

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

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

"Is it dead?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reluctance to give up his find flickered through him when Jalen reached down to take his burden, but Kiel dismissed it and handed the creature to him. He saw when he emerged that Jalen had lain it on the dirt and the rest



of the platoon had gathered around in a circle, craning to get a view of the alien. Shoving his way past the gawkers, he knelt down and studied the clothing for several moments before he detected a closure that seemed to run from the neck all the way down one leg of the suit. Grasping the edges, he opened the clothing from the neck to one foot. A collective gasp went up from the observers that brought his gaze back up to the body of the alien.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What did it say?"

"How the *fuck* would I know?" Kiel snarled. "I do not speak whatever tongue that is! I will tell you this much, though. It is not an 'it'. It is a

female, very definitely a female, and it— she—is angry ... about something!”

\* \* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What did that say about them?

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

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

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

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

Instead, he grabbed two handfuls of her breasts!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They appear to be hostile primitives," Gertrude responded helpfully.

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

“Swords,” Gertrude affirmed.

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

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

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

“Unknown.”

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

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

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

“I cannot collect sufficient data to ascertain that.”

\* \* \* \*

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

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

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

“Oh hell! They either heard you or they’ve figured out I’m not talking to them! Shut up, Gertrude, before they decide to shut you down!”

Transferring her attention to the robot heading toward the opening in her ship, she danced as close to him as she dared, trying to divert his attention.

“Hey! Wait! You don’t need to go in there! Really! There is nothing in there you need to worry about!”

Jalen stopped abruptly when the female darted between him and the door of the ship, watching the bounce and sway of her breasts with absolute fascination for several moments before he recalled Kiel had ordered him to find the source of her communications. He discovered fairly quickly, though, that the female had every intention of barring his access to the ship. Disconcerted, he glanced at Kiel for instructions.

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

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

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

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

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

Jalen brightened. “You think there are more females?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He turned to study the female thoughtfully, trying to decide whether he could successfully communicate to her what he required and finally decided that it would most likely be futile even to attempt it when he did not know

her language. He discovered, however, that she was not inclined to cooperate. Not only was it almost immediately evident that she was not suffering from any sort of debilitating injury from the crash, but she proved that she was surprisingly nimble, dashing around wildly in circles in an effort to escape and then, instead of giving up when she saw it was useless, diving toward the door of the ship. It took him almost ten mini-sects to capture her and no amount of soothing could convince her to stop pounding on his head and shoulders with her fists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he reached the gate to the city he was still brooding over the many disadvantages of having flesh. It sweated and then stank, and registered pain



and discomfort whenever he was injured, when all of the other androids had the protection of having their workings beneath a thin sheathe of the same nearly indestructible metal used for their chassis.

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

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

“Is it Danu?”

“Nay.”

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

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

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

“I do not know.”

“What do you know?” Baen demanded testily.

“It is a female.”

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

“Yes.”

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

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

Baen looked it over. “Let me see it.”

“She seems very hostile about that.”

“Why?” Baen asked blankly.

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

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

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

"Did you see that?" Baen demanded indignantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You think there are more in the sky?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 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 lose one at the time, but he wasn't in a position to pry more than one 'brace' lose at the time and she managed by grim determination to brace herself again before he could get more than one lose 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 to 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 dissembled 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.

## **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 herself, 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 frizzling 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 off-spring-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."

## **Chapter Seven**

It was not until Baen left and some of his anger had worn off that Kiel realized that he had not only failed to convince Baen of the futility of struggling against the inevitable, he had not convinced himself. Accepting as he always had held no appeal to him whatsoever. He was furious that Manuta had dismissed their needs as if they were insignificant when it had created them with those needs and beyond that told them that it was expected of them. Now, when they had waited so long, anticipated, they were supposed to simply dismiss it?

He realized he could not, no more than Baen could. It made him feel ill to consider ignoring a prime directive, to consider the possibility that he might set himself directly against Manuta to do so, but he realized that he would.

Getting to his feet decisively, he turned his steps toward the settlement, intent upon finding Baen and discussing it further. When he reached the clearing beyond the settlement, however, he discovered what seemed to be the vast majority of Manu's residents, including the server bots, and construction bots crawling over the landscape with a purpose.

Frowning, he stopped to study the activity. He had gone to the river to start with because he had known that the composition of the rocks there would interfere with Manuta's ability to communicate with him-or access his CPU. Clearly, Manuta had done more than advise them of the change of plans, but it was not immediately obvious what the commotion was about beyond some sort of construction.

Spying Jalen after a time, he strode toward him. "What is going on?"

Jalen sent him a look of surprise, but his expression was sullen. "We have been told to construct a secure building for reconstructing Danielle's ship and then constructing a fleet to ferry the Danu from the mother world to the colony if necessary."

Kiel frowned. Baen had said that was Manuta's new plan. He had not said that Manuta had already implemented it. "Manuta is in a very great hurry."

Jalen grunted, throwing him a speaking glance. After studying him for a long moment, Kiel jerked his head in silent communication toward the rocks near the river. Jalen glanced in that direction and then met his gaze again almost warily. Shrugging after a moment, he followed Kiel back to the river.

"Baen has made it clear that he will refuse Manuta's orders."

Jalen gaped at him. "Refuse ...?" he repeated as if he had never heard the word.

"How are the others taking the news?"

"They are as thoroughly infuriated as I was to learn it!" Jalen growled angrily. "We were told that we would one day have mates and off-spring of our own! Now, when we have waited until we had begun to think there would never be an opportunity, we have had one dropped in our laps, only to be told that Manuta has decided against it? Of course everyone is furious! Are you not?"

"I am, but if we do not watch ourselves, Manuta will begin to believe it might be best to terminate us," Kiel said warningly.

A wave of shock seemed to roll through Jalen. "Manuta would not do that!"

Kiel sent him a wry look. "Manuta's prime directive is to see that the colony is best served. If it feels that it is best served by eliminating us to make way for the Danu colonists, it will do so. Manuta does not need us to build these crafts. It could recycle us and produce purely mechanical robots that would not question orders."

Jalen was horrified and unable to hide it. "What are we to do then? Simply accept?"

"I do not think I can. Can you?"

Jalen swallowed a little convulsively. "I do not, but I also do not think I can destroy Manuta."

Kiel frowned, considering that. "We cannot allow Manuta to discover what we are thinking about doing until we know if the others are of a like mind. If the majority is inclined to accept the orders, then I do not see that it would be any more right for us to make that decision for them than it is for Manuta to do so."

"Manuta will become suspicious about us meeting here," Jalen said warningly.

"True," Kiel said slowly, "but if we are constructing a building to use to manufacture spacecrafts, then we can say that we were here looking for materials. I believe that we should mine these stones for the walls."

Jalen looked around at the rocks, flicked a glance at Kiel, and nodded. "I will send a group down to begin to cut them. What are we to do if Manuta decides these are not suitable?"

"We will remind Manuta that we have already used the natural materials available to us that is close to the settlement and point out that it would take longer to construct the building if we must go further."

"Manuta might still insist upon it."

"If so, then we will have to formulate another plan that will allow us to speak free of concerns that we are being monitored. I do not think so, though. Clearly, Manuta wishes to set the plan into action as quickly as possible."

Instead of returning to the construction site himself when he had dismissed Jalen, Kiel headed directly to the settlement and entered the habitat where Danielle was being held. He found her in the food preparation area, but she was merely sitting on a stool, staring at the far wall. She jumped and whirled to look at him the moment she heard him, but she did not jump up and run.

Wryly, he thought that was probably a good sign.

"You are ... better?"

She studied him for a long moment. "Not especially. Did you inject nanos into me to heal my hand?"

The question took him completely unaware. He hesitated, but it did not require the ability to monitor her thoughts to grasp that she did not welcome the possibility. "I did not," he responded, leaving it at that.

The tension went out of her and discomfort wafted through him-guilt that he had withheld the whole truth. It was not a lie, however, when he did not know for certain, he told himself.

"I guess I didn't hurt my hand as bad as I thought I did," she muttered doubtfully.

Amusement flickered through him. "It was sufficient to get my attention."

Color suffused her cheeks. "You scared the hell out of me!" she said resentfully. "What the hell was that all about anyway?"

Surprise flickered through him. "You were in a state of panic and seemed likely to injure yourself if we did not calm you."

"Oh it was really calming having the three of you chasing me all over the fucking habitat!" she said sarcastically.

He frowned. "If I had realized the sight of us would throw you into such a state, I would not have returned."

"What did you expect," she demanded indignantly, "when I'd just watched the three of you try to kill each other?"

Kiel felt his own face heat with embarrassment. "We were sparring. It was an exercise in spontaneity, to ensure the proper responses if we are attacked by surprise."

Danielle stared at him searchingly. Abruptly, a smile curled her lips. "I think I misjudged all of you."

Kiel lifted his dark brows questioningly.

She shook her head. "A machine wouldn't consider lying to cover its ass," she said dryly, but then she frowned, remembering that Gertrude had.

He stiffened. "We are not machines."

"I'm beginning to realize that and it isn't comforting, I can tell you."

"Why?"

She considered it and finally shrugged. "It changes things."

Curiosity welled in him. "How?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "In a lot of ways," she said cryptically and got off the stool abruptly. "I'm hungry. You think it'll be alright for me to eat any of this?"

"Manuta determined that your nutritional requirements are much the same as ours. It should be safe to eat whatever appeals to you."

"Mmm," she responded non-committally. She'd taken care to focus on the food that she'd first eaten since that hadn't had any adverse effect on her, but she was getting damned tired of the eggs. "The problem is, I don't know what any of it is and I can't tell by looking at the packages."

"I will choose something for you," he volunteered, following her to the shelves and studying the supply. "This is one I like. Mayhap you will also like it."

Danielle looked up at him as he reached past her, studying his face.

He paused, looking down at her. Almost with a will of their own, his eyes moved to her lips and stayed there as his mind flooded with the memory of touching them with his own lips. Heat suffused him, but it was entirely different from the discomfort he had felt before. This heat was all consuming and brought urges to the forefront that made him stiffen to resist them. He swallowed a little convulsively. "Before ... when we were inside Manuta and you touched your lips to mine, what was that about?"

Danielle blinked at him. Her cheeks reddened. "The kiss?"

"It is called the kiss?"

She chuckled huskily. "A kiss, to kiss."

"Why did you do it?"

She smiled ruefully. "To distract you."

Disappointment flickered through him. "You succeeded," he said flatly. Danielle watched him as he moved away to heat the container. Realizing he'd taken down two, she went to the drawer where Baen had found the eating utensils and took out two, and then found two drinking vessels and filled them with water from the cooling unit. He studied the seating arrangements when he returned and finally set the containers down, settling across from her. Without a word, he dug into his meal with every appearance of the intention of focusing completely on it.

"The Danu," Danielle said hesitantly after a moment, "they can ... transform themselves into other ... things?"

Kiel lifted his head and sent her a piercing look. "I assume so," he said a little stiffly. "We are Danu."

"I wasn't trying to insult you. I was just curious."

He seemed to wrestle with himself. "We only know what Manuta has in its memory banks." He paused and corrected that statement. "We only know what Manuta has given us to know. We were created here. None of us have ever seen anyone of the parent race."

Danielle frowned, considering that and realized it meant that they had never been 'exposed' to actual living beings if he meant what she thought he did. "Manuta is a robot?" she asked in surprise.

He looked equally surprised by the question. "Of course."

Danielle bit her lip. "I had this crazy idea that he was ... like a deity."

He seemed to consider that. "I suppose, in a sense, Manuta could be considered in that light since it created us." He grimaced wryly. "We do not worship Manuta or have rituals, if that is what you are suggesting."

Embarrassed, Danielle shrugged. "It was just the way you said it-that Manuta would decide."

He stared at her blankly.

"When you were talking about my ship right after I got here?" she prompted.

She could see he was reviewing the memory. He shrugged. "Manuta was designed to create the settlement here. Manuta makes the decisions based upon its programming."

Danielle digested that while she finished the food he'd given her. "Either I was starving or that was exceptionally good. I'm not going to ask what it was," she said with amusement.

He seemed pleased. He frowned after a moment. "I regret that I frightened you. It was not my intention."

She'd never thought it was. It had been his possible intentions that had scared her, but she didn't see any point in bringing that up. "Well ... I am a prisoner."

His frown deepened. "You are not," he said finally. "As Baen said, you are a guest."

Danielle eyed him skeptically. "Then I'm not confined here?"

He seemed to wrestle with that. "I have not been ordered to keep you confined," he responded finally. "For your safety, you cannot leave the settlement without an escort."

The wild beasts of this world do not often come near the settlement, but they have been known to. The same with the primitives.”

“There are intelligent beings indigenous to this world?”

He shrugged. “I am not certain that they are what you would call ‘intelligent’. They are beasts. They run in packs-attack in packs. They are more intelligent than the other beasts, but not a great deal more-only intelligent enough to be more dangerous.”

“They sound a lot like the higher life forms on Meridie, my home world,” Danielle responded wryly, getting up to dispose of her container and place the drinking vessel and utensil in the cleaning unit. “Maybe you could escort me? I’m really tired of staying inside.”

He seemed reluctant but after a moment he nodded and gestured toward the door. Relieved that he’d agreed to let her out, even for a few moments, Danielle was almost equally unnerved at the prospect considering the way the Danu stared at her. She discovered almost as soon as they stepped outside that the settlement was virtually abandoned, however.

“Where is everyone?” she asked in surprise.

“We have been ordered to construct a secure building where we can reassemble your craft.”

Danielle looked at him sharply, feeling her heart leap with hopefulness. “Really?”

He smiled faintly. “Truly.”

“Then ... you’re going to let me go?”

His expression tightened. “We have been ordered to use your craft to reach the home world of the Danu and inform them that the colony is established and awaits them. When we have done that, we are to return you to your people.”

Danielle’s excitement took a nosedive. They were planning on going with her? And detouring to their world first? That didn’t sound good. “How long will that take?”

“We have not been given the coordinates, yet, or the estimated time it will take to make the trip. The only thing that I know is that this world was more distant from the home world than the other worlds chosen as possible colonies. It was also deemed least desirable.”

Something about his explanation just didn’t seem to fit, but Danielle decided to mull it over later. “So ... everyone is out working on the building?”

“Yes. Manuta thought it best to make certain the ship could be secured while under construction. The primitives have been known to attack without warning and destroy anything they cannot carry off.”

“The little bastards!” Danielle muttered. “So they’re, basically, just a pain in the ass?”

It took Kiel a moment to respond. When he finally did, he looked amused. “I could not say if they are bastards or not. By your definition of the word, I would guess so, but I do not think that you would consider them little. They are taller than the Danu and bulky brutes besides. I cannot find a reference to the other comment.”

“It’s a figure of speech-both of them, actually. It means they go out of their way to be a nuisance for no apparent reason.”

“This is true, though it is not for ‘no apparent’ reason. They are territorial and they consider this their territory.”

“Too bad! It’s yours, right?”

Kiel studied her for a long moment. He had never considered it to be. They were in essence merely caretakers who had once had some possibility of becoming colonists. Now they had been reduced to the status of merely caretakers once more-in Manuta’s consideration. “It belongs to the Danu.”

She sent him a curious look, but since they’d reached the gate by that time she was distracted by the activity on the plain. “When did they start?” she asked in surprise.

“Shortly after dawn, I suppose. I was not there when they began to prepare the foundation.” She sent him a questioning look, but did not ask him where he had been, though he could see the question in her eyes.

After that brief pause, Danielle continued, walking briskly. She slowed her steps again when they’d covered perhaps half the distance between the city walls and the building under construction. “I don’t see any women. I haven’t seen any since I got here.”

“Because there are none,” Kiel said flatly.

Danielle sent him a startled look. Even though she hadn’t seen any women, she had assumed there must be some around-somewhere. “Manuta didn’t make any when he made you?”

Kiel’s lips tightened. “Manuta could only use the genetic materials entrusted to it. The contributors were all male.”

Dismay flickered through her-for several reasons. “That’s ... that’s ....” Words failed her. Creepy for her. How was it for them? “I guess you don’t really need the headache,” she muttered finally. “Guys usually seem to enjoy each other’s company a lot more than they enjoy the company of women anyway. I suppose it just seems ... uh ... natural, huh?”

“No,” he said flatly. “It does not.”

Confusion filled her and wariness. She knew she shouldn’t pursue it. Really, it wasn’t her business, and she couldn’t even claim it was more than simple curiosity, that it had some bearing on her presence. “But ... there never were any women. Aren’t you used to it?”

“There is a difference between accepting, now, when there is promise of a change in the future and accepting something that is less than ideal that will never change.”

She’d known it was a bad idea to ask! Talk about awkward! How to respond to something like that? Say she was sorry? She was, both that she’d brought it up and for their situation, but she had troubles enough of her own. “I’m sorry,” she responded finally, “but as long as you’re alive there’s hope things will change and ... if it doesn’t change to suit you, you can make a change, you know.”

He paused, glancing at her sharply in surprise, bringing their progress across the field to a halt significant enough it had to be noticeable to everyone that their conversation wasn’t idle. Just about the time his expression became thoughtful it dawned on Danielle that she was talking to a cyborg-about other cyborgs! God! That was the problem with being impulsive! She never completely thought things through!

“It is not likely to change for the better if the Danu come at last,” he said finally, but thoughtfully.



Danielle's heart leapt with sudden hopefulness. She struggled with it, but her mind was racing too fast for her to consider the potential consequences and beyond that it was not the sort of situation where hesitating was a good idea. If she didn't take the leap, he'd realized it was some sort of plot! "So don't go there. If you're worried about it, I mean. You don't have to just because Manuta said you should, do you?"

He slid an assessing look at her. "Manuta also said that we were to take you back to your people," he reminded her.

Dismay filled her. "Well, that's actually a good idea, though! I mean, it could be. I'd be more than willing to put in a good word for you with the commander of Meridie's forces if you guys were willing to join us. We could use all the help we can get and ... well, if you allied yourselves with us and helped then, once we won the war, you'd be friends with my people. That could open up a lot of possibilities ... if you were interested, that is."

Any doubts she'd had that he understood what she was hinting at were banished when he flicked a gaze down her length. She felt her face heat, but that wasn't all that was very warm by the time he met her gaze again.

She hadn't actually offered to convince him of the benefits!

She didn't think it had crossed her mind, anyway. It certainly did when he'd given her that thorough once over, though!

Instead of responding to her rather broad hint, or saying something suggestive, he turned to study the workers. Both relieved and vaguely disappointed, Danielle turned to look at the progress, as well. It unnerved her to discover just how much attention they'd drawn as they crossed the plain to the building site. Not that there were many who were blatantly staring, but the few that were was enough to be unnerving and she had the feeling that there wasn't a single one of the cyborgs that wasn't keenly aware of her approach.

Her uneasiness deepened as they walked the perimeter. The tension in the air was almost palpable, but she didn't labor under the delusion that it had anything to do with her for very long. Almost to a man, their expressions were tight with suppressed anger and the few who met her gaze looked more as if they'd like to choke the life out of her than interested in throwing her down and fucking her brains out.

She was ready to retreat when she encountered the first hostile look. Instead, she pretended she hadn't noticed and continued her inspection until she thought she'd made it clear enough she wasn't intimidated by their hostility before she turned her steps toward the settlement again.

Unfortunately, she was intimidated. She was far more anxious to get back to her prison than she'd been to leave it to start with. Odd that it suddenly seemed more like a refuge than a prison when she'd been ready to climb the walls just to get out of it for a few minutes. "I guess nobody is too happy about the project, huh?" she murmured finally when they'd reached the habitat again.

"There is tension," Kiel responded after a lengthy pause, as if he was trying to decide how to respond or maybe even whether to respond at all or not.

She sent him a look, but she could tell by the expression on his face that she hadn't managed to hide her misery or uneasiness well at all. "Well, I don't see it taking long

at the rate they're going," she said briskly. "I should be out of here in no time at all and then things can get back to normal."

He followed her inside to her dismay, catching her arm when she would've retreated upstairs and turning her to face him.

Actually, she realized, the dismay had more to do with the fact that it flickered through her mind instantly when he pulled her back that he meant to kiss her, but it was a good bit later before she had time to analyze the disappointment she felt when he didn't.

"I cannot say that their anger has nothing to do with you, but it is not in the way you believe."

Danielle nodded, but her expression was skeptical. "If you say so."

He frowned. "You ... suggested before that if we befriended your people that we might find acceptance among them."

Danielle tensed. Unfortunately, her imagination took flight and, when it did, conflicting thoughts began pelting through her. "I think ... they would be open to the possibility," she said carefully, wondering even as she said it if that was true-knowing, deep down, that it wasn't. Humans were distrustful by nature. They'd never completely and totally come to trust one another when they were all human and all hailed from the same mother world. To an extent, they had made peace between the races of man, but there was always a thread of doubt, distrust, wariness. Once they began to colonize, that became a distrust of the colonists from other worlds more than race against race, but thousands of years of evolution hadn't eradicated it.

She was pretty sure they would never have accepted the Nubiens if they'd come offering peace instead of attacked without provocation and she knew the Danu were different enough that they would have a hard time finding acceptance.

"You do not truly believe that, do you?"

Honesty? Or the lie she needed to save her ass? She sighed. "Like I said, I think they'd be open to it-some of them anyway."

"But many would not," he said flatly.

Anger arose. "You don't trust me. Not that I blame you considering how I got here, but you have to admit that it isn't easy to trust strangers, especially when they're different."

"And you do not trust us."

Danielle wrestled with herself. "Should I? Do you want me to?" she asked finally.

"I cannot imagine that it would be comfortable finding mates among your people if there was no trust. We could take and hope for the best, but it would be difficult to sleep beside an enemy," he said dryly.

Danielle was taken aback. Even though she'd suggested that they might be able to get what they wanted if they befriended the humans, she didn't think she'd really accepted the possibility that that was their motivation. "I don't think you'd be happy with the results of 'taking'," she agreed tightly.

"And yet it seems to me that you are suggesting that that is all that we could expect-to go on as we have and have no one or to take what we want," he said coldly.

This definitely wasn't going well! "You'd still stand a better chance befriending us. I could've lied and said women would just fall in your arms, damn it! I'm extending you the courtesy of the truth and pointing out possibilities. You aren't like us! But that isn't necessarily a bad thing-not all the way around, anyway! Some women want different, if you know what I mean? They know what they've had and they're hoping there's something better out there.

"Allying yourselves to us would mean you'd have the chance to convince them, to catch their interest-just like our men. It doesn't mean you'll get them. If you're thinking along the lines of our government simply handing over as many women as you want as a ... reward or something, that isn't going to happen! It doesn't work like that! Not in our society! Women have brains and they have rights! Maybe you aren't used to that concept-that women have choices?"

"I cannot be accustomed to it when we have no women!" Kiel growled.

"Well think of them as men without penises, damn it! We have likes and dislikes, and goals and desires ourselves. We know what we want .... Well, some of the time, anyway!"

Kiel looked amused. "I confess I find it difficult to think of you as a man without a penis. I am certain, in point of fact, that that has no appeal to me at all!"

Danielle gaped at him, torn between a desire to laugh and an almost equal desire to punch him for being deliberately obtuse! "I didn't mean it that way," she said tartly, but she couldn't help but smile. The smile widened as a sudden thought popped into her mind, a solution, the perfect solution as far as she could see! "Partners, Inc.!"

Kiel frowned. "What is this?"

Excitement boiled through her, uncontainable. She grasped his upper arms impulsively and bounced with her excitement. "It's a ... well, it's an organization to help men and women get together. Not romantic! Well, I suppose it could be, but the thing is we have trouble finding a ... uh ... a mate sometimes, too. And some people, when they get tired of being alone and tired of trying to find somebody they hit it off with, well, they just pick one. It's mostly women, although some men sign up, too, but they're looking to escape the life they have as much as they're looking for a life-partner. They're under contract. They still get to decide whether they want to go with the guy that chooses them or not, but they don't sign up at all if they aren't desp ... uh ... anxious to relocate and settle down.

"And you have a beautiful colony here! This would definitely be an asset. Gorgeous men anxious for companionship! You could get mail-order partners through the company!"

She studied his face. Seeing he looked more confused instead of less, she considered allowing the idea to drop, but it seemed like the perfect solution to her-something she could offer as a real possibility for their help. "I don't know exactly what you're looking for, of course, but you'd have to go with the standard contract. You have to agree to the terms of seven years-with the possibility of fourteen if you have issue-that's babies. You have to agree to help to support any issue at least that long anyway and you have to agree to help the partner you choose at least seven years to give them time to get along by themselves or find someone else if you just can't get along-as long as they're making an effort to stand on their own."

Kiel frowned thoughtfully. "And you believe it would be allowed?"

Danielle chewed her lip. "You'd be required to disclose your status as alien. You have to supply all pertinent information so that the potential partner can make an informed decision, but I don't see why you wouldn't be allowed. I mean, this isn't a government thing. It's a privately owned company that offers the service. They're in it for the money."

Disappointment flickered through her when she saw that he looked more dubious than interested. "Hey! It's a plan-a possibility. Maybe it isn't exactly what you were hoping for, but it's better than nothing, right?"

"That remains to be seen," he said dryly.

"Well, it would be a backup plan, you know? I'm just saying if there's a problem finding acceptance, there's another possible solution. I didn't say there would be a problem anyway, only that it was a possibility since you're ... different, you know? And I could be wrong. I'm wrong a lot of the time, actually."

"Which also means that you could be wrong about your people welcoming us, at all, even as allies against your enemies," he pointed out coolly.

Dismay flickered through her. She'd thought about that, but she was more certain of her footing on that issue. "Well, that won't be easy either, but things haven't been going all that well. I don't think it would be all that hard to convince them of that." She wrestled with her conscience a moment. "It probably wouldn't be a good idea to tell them you're cyborgs or ... uh ... let them see the ... uh ... what you can do."

His expression tightened. "Lie to them, you mean?"

"I'm not saying that! Just leave that out!"

"Omitting is not the same as lying? They would not feel ... betrayed when they discovered just how different we are?"

Danielle chewed her lip. "I'll have to think about that," she hedged.

"You did not feel betrayed when you discovered it?" he persisted.

"No. Scared shit ... uh ... surprised, but it wasn't like we were best buddies before that or anything. There was no trust issue because I didn't trust you to start with! This would be different."

"I do not think a foundation of trust could be built on ... omissions," he said tightly.

Danielle shrugged. "Well, I have news for you! Nobody makes it in the mating game if they lay out all the ugly right off the bat! You have to get their interest first and you sure as hell don't do that by showing all your flaws first!

"Not that those are flaws, mind you!" she added hurriedly at the look he gave her.

"But you get the picture-first you get their interest and then you relax a little and give them a peek at the little imperfections, give them time to adjust and decide if they can live with it, and then maybe you relax a little more. Honest to god! You have to have bait to catch something!"

He frowned, but thoughtfully. "This is like hunting?"

"Exactly!" Danielle said enthusiastically, relieved that he hadn't gotten ugly about her suggestion that he was flawed-which he really wasn't-but that didn't mean women were going to see it as an asset!

He studied her thoughtfully. "There is more to the process of mating that I believe any of us had considered," he said slowly.

Danielle gaped at him, but it hit her right between the eyes like a physical blow that he couldn't possibly have any idea what 'mating' was all about-not beyond whatever came 'natural' to him. He'd said Manuta-a computer-had created them and the only interaction they'd had was with each other. "Well," she said finally, "if you think it's the same with people as it is with the livestock around here, then there's definitely a lot you don't know. I suppose I should've figured that out considering the things Baen said, but ...." She shrugged, wrestling with a concept that was more alien to her than the aliens were themselves. When she emerged, she discovered with a great deal of dismay that Kiel was wearing his 'angry' face and she couldn't think of much that was more unnerving than that. "What?"

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## Chapter Eight

"Baen has spoken to you?" he growled.

Danielle eyed him uneasily, wondering if it would help to play dumb. She had a bad feeling it wouldn't, though, that it would only frustrate him ... which might only succeed in making him angrier and he looked totally pissed off already.

Unfortunately, she discovered that fear had a very bad effect on her mental acuity.

"Was he not supposed to?" she hedged.

His lips tightened.

Danielle gulped. "You know, you're really cute when you're angry," she said hopefully.

It worked better than she'd expected. He looked perfectly blank for several moments before he scowled at her again. "This is another attempt to distract, yes?"

Danielle smiled at him a little weakly, deeply regretting her explanation for the kiss. "No," she lied. "I just hadn't noticed how nice your eyes were before they turned red. It's ... uh ... a wicked shade! Almost demonic-which, of course, probably isn't a very good allusion, but ... really tough guy, bad ass looking, if you know what I mean!"

"I do not."

She pasted a fake smile on her lips. "Women really go for bad boys."

He frowned, eyeing her skeptically. "Women like bad men?"

"No! I mean, not exactly. It's kind of hard to explain. I guess it's sort of an assurance that the guy can handle himself and, in case of need, protect her."

Something flickered in his eyes. "So there is not so much difference in mating between beings of higher intelligence and the lower beasts?"

"Of course there is!" Danielle responded testily. "But that's important, too-still-especially in the colonies. Anyway, that wouldn't apply to all women."

"It would not apply to you?"

"Ah-no. I can take care of myself just fine. Not that I'd want a total wimp, mind you-if I was in the market. Which I'm not. I'm a soldier. You'd be looking at women that aren't."

"I am a soldier," he said pointedly.

"Yes, but that's different. The guys don't usually stay home to nurture the babies anyway. I wouldn't consider having a baby unless I was ready to settle down and stay at home to take care of it, and I'm not ready for that. I'm not sure I ever would be ... uh ... will be."

"Then you are also not certain that you would not be?"

Dismay flickered through her. This was almost as uncomfortable as his anger had been! In fact, he didn't look a lot less pissed off than he had before and he was asking a lot of uncomfortable questions! "True, but then we're at war right now and I can't think about that. I don't even know how we got on this subject to start with."

"You brought it up when you told me that Baen had discussed mating with you," he said grimly.

"Oh." She frowned. "Actually, I don't think I said that."

"You said that you should have known that we would not understand the mating process as you know it when Baen spoke to you. If you were not discussing mating, then what subject would have brought that to mind?"

Danielle smiled a little weakly, but to save her life she couldn't come up with anything to explain it away. Mental note-they have really good memories! "I was confused ... am confused! Truthfully? I don't actually remember the conversation all that well. I just remember it had something to do with finding a mate. He made me uneasy-and you're making me nervous and I'm not really good at thinking when I'm flustered!"

"He told you he was seeking a mate," he said helpfully.

"I think it was more general than that," she responded uneasily.

He lifted his dark brows. "More general than that?"

She glared at him. "It was more hypothetical."

"He did not ask you to be his mate?"

Danielle felt heat creep into her cheeks in spite of all she could do. She'd begun to feel far more defensive than uneasy, however. She folded her arms. "Maybe he did."

"That is neither hypothetical nor general," he growled.

She shrugged. "Fine! So I lied! There's no point in getting pissed off about it, though, because I told him the same thing I told you. I'm not looking for a mate-full or part time! This is definitely not the time for it!"

This time his frown was pure confusion. "You are not in season?"

Danielle gaped at him, but her temper flared. She poked him in the middle of his chest with her finger. “You guys have got to get past that or you aren’t ever going to get laid! Women don’t come in ‘season’, damn it! And I can’t think of any surer way to turn a woman off than to ask her if she’s ‘ready’!”

“What is laid?” he demanded suspiciously.

Danielle rolled her eyes. “What you’re interested in!” she snapped. “Sex! Fucking- you can call it anything you want to, but it’s still the same thing! You guys aren’t interested in mates! You just want to get laid-like every other man out there!”

Fully expecting him to follow her, Danielle pushed past him and stalked into the living area, flinging herself down on the couch dramatically. She discovered when she sent a scowl in his direction, however, that he’d turned and left.

The discovery knocked the wind from her sails. After staring blankly at the door panel for a few moments, debating whether to follow him and continue the disagreement, she realized what a very bad idea that was and dismissed it.

It occurred to her when she’d gotten over the shock of him leaving in the middle of a disagreement that he might have gotten it into his head to take up the fight with Baen, but reflection convinced her that she’d managed to diffuse his temper. Her own was still high, but after dwelling on the conversation for a while she found it impossible to work it any higher-just the opposite. She was still irritated, felt vaguely misused, but she couldn’t arouse enough anger over it to convince herself she’d been treated abominably.

He didn’t understand. As hard as that was to grasp, she knew she had to accept that he just didn’t for the simple reason that he had nothing to build an understanding on. He hadn’t had any opportunity to learn by interaction and it was as clear as day that he had only the most rudimentary understanding of the mating process through information supplied to him by Manuta and his own biological instincts. No wonder the conversation with Baen had seemed so bizarre!

And that completely explained why he hadn’t taken the opportunity to explore the fascinating concept of kissing when she’d been certain he would!

After a while it occurred to her that she should be more focused on her predicament than theirs. She hadn’t managed to convince Kiel to abandon the plan to take a detour to their home world before taking her back and time, on her side, was of the essence! Somehow, she couldn’t seem to concentrate on that, though. Instead, she kept going over and over what Kiel had said, and not said but implied, about their situation.

It dawned on her that he’d succeeded in arousing a lot more sympathy for their cause than vice versa-at least as far as she could see-but she finally managed to convince herself that it was really the same thing. To get what she wanted, she needed to think of a way to convince them that she could give them what they wanted. Otherwise, they had no motivation to help her, right?

The problem with that was that she was so far from certain that she could actually deliver on her offer that she felt really uncomfortable at the thought of making the attempt. They had a lot stacked against them and it began to seem like a mountain. From what she’d seen, they were a handsome people-exotic, but close enough to human in appearance, and attractive enough physically, that she thought they might be able to overcome the fact that they were alien fairly easily and not just find acceptance but arouse a lot of interest in the women back home. One of the biggest

problems, though, was that they were so damned big! If they'd been tall, muscular, handsome, human men, the women would be falling over themselves to get to them, but put that size and their obvious strength together with 'alien' and they were as unnerving as they were attractive-maybe too intimidating to get close enough to human women to convince them.

And she was pretty sure the women would totally freak at the discovery that they were cyborgs and four or five times stronger even than they looked. Women might like the 'air' of danger some men exuded, as she'd told Kiel, but there weren't a lot of them that actually liked to play with real danger and alien plus cyborg strong and gigantism equaled running for the hills as far as she could see.

Actually, she supposed it was unfair to call them giants, but they were damned close-well above 'tall' for humans-and although they could appear surprisingly gentle, they were scary times ten when they got pissed off. There were going to be some serious trust issues to overcome and she had a feeling the cyborgs had run out of patience. They wanted mates now!

Maybe what she should be focusing on instead of helping them was figuring out a way to ditch them and head home by herself?

She knew as soon as the thought occurred to her that that was exactly what she should be considering-not helping them. As allies, they could probably tip the scales in the war against the Nubiens, but at what cost? If she led them back to her own people and they flatly refused to have anything to do with them, what then? A new war! And she had a bad feeling that they would be even more formidable enemies than the Nubiens.

They hadn't really behaved aggressively toward her, but Kiel had danced around the subject of taking what they wanted, which meant he'd thought about it. He seemed inclined to dismiss it and hope for acceptance, but that didn't mean he and the others wouldn't decide to take it if that was the only thing that would work!

Considered in that light, she realized that it might work out a hell of a lot better if they did go to the home world of the Danu first. If they found their own people, the Danu wouldn't be her problem.

Supposedly. She couldn't be absolutely certain of that either, she realized in dismay. Was there a workable alternative, though?

Even supposing she could figure out some way to outwit them, grab her ship, and take off, they knew how to build it now. What was to stop them from making more and coming after her? She didn't even have the comfort of thinking they wouldn't know how to find her if they wanted to. They'd gotten everything out of Gertrude's memory banks.

For a little while panic threatened to overcome any possibility of reasoning, but she finally accepted that she had to work within the parameters available to her. She didn't think it would be possible to sneak off without them. They were focused on securing the ship before they'd even started putting it back together, so that was out of the question. She didn't think she could convince them to head directly back to her home base, but that probably wasn't a good idea anyway. It might work out best all the way around if they went to their own home world first.

So what she needed to focus on was worse case scenario-that they would still pursue the idea of finding mates among the humans. That might not be an issue, but she had



to consider that there might be a really good reason why the colonists they'd been expecting hadn't shown up-they were gone.

Even if that wasn't the case, she realized, she needed allies. She needed to befriend them to keep them from leading the other Danu to her doorstep if their parent race took it into heads to consider humans a threat.

She had a headache by the time she'd gotten that far. Getting up, she went to search for something to eat in the hope that food was what she needed for the headache and settled to working on 'if-then' scenarios.

\* \* \* \*

Baen wrestled with himself and finally stalked over to the wall and settled in the shade next to Kiel. "You were gone a very long time when you returned Danielle to her habitat," he said challengingly.

Kiel slid a narrow eyed glance at him, debated whether or not he wanted to take issue with the challenge in Baen's comment, and finally decided against it. As tempting as it was, they would need to watch themselves if they did not want to encourage Munata to make a decision they did not like. "We talked."

Baen lifted a dark brow questioningly, but despite his outwardly calm demeanor, Kiel could see anger glittering in his eyes. It made his own anger surge to the forefront. He fought another round with the temptation to plant his fist in the middle of his face and managed to master it. "She was surprisingly honest. She does not think we will find acceptance among her people and said as much. She suggested that if we befriended them and helped them to defeat their enemies, we would be welcomed as allies but that acceptance as mates was doubtful."

Anger tightened Baen's features. He looked away from Kiel, watching the robots still at work on the wall. They had no need to rest. They had no muscles to become fatigued nor flesh that became dehydrated. "She means that she will not," he said flatly.

"She said that also. She said that she had told you that."

"She said that she was not ready. That is not the same thing!" he responded tightly, trying to decide if he was more angry or ... he was not certain what the emotion was behind the sinking, faintly nauseated feeling in his gut. Disappointment? It felt almost more like fear, but he could not accept that. Why would he feel fear? There was no threat.

Beyond the threat of disappointment. "For every living thing around us, there is a season," he responded finally.

Kiel's lips twisted. "She said that we were doomed to disappointment if we could not get around the belief that women had a season."

Baen scowled at the robots erecting the wall across from them. "Mayhap they do not, not in the way we thought, but there is surely a time for them when they decide they are ready for off-spring! We just have not managed to accumulate that data yet."

"We have no data that would be of use to us in this particular endeavor," Kiel said with disgust.

Baen sent him a speculative look. He didn't care for the fact that Kiel had said 'we' - not in the same breath as Danielle. If he was speaking in general, he had no problem with that. They were going to have a very big problem, however, if Kiel had decided to set his sights on Danielle. He would have taken issue right then and there except that Jalen's arrival distracted him long enough to bring it to his attention that their conversation was not even semi-private. Everyone around them was listening keenly to every word.

Jalen had come to settle beside them and discovered there was no room to plant his back against the wall as Baen and Kiel had. After scowling at the man beside Kiel for a few moments, he finally crouched in front of the other two. "That is not true! I understand the principle of reproduction! You use the phallus to inject the seed into the female's womb! I have seen the beasts do it many times. It cannot be much different between us when we are formed in much the same way!"

Kiel studied him irritably. "First off, we cannot know that. I agree that it would appear to be so, but things are not always as they appear. Beyond that, Danielle finds it insulting to be compared to a beast. She has at least made that abundantly clear! And she is more likely to punch you in the nose than respond as you desire if you point that out to her.

"Even if you are right, however, and it is basically the same, it is almost certainly not exactly the same because there are logistics to consider that are not an issue with the lower beasts-clothing for one and the fact that we are two-legged creatures! Beyond that, I would not feel comfortable chasing her around and trying to hem her into a corner to mount her! Or even waiting until she was preoccupied and taking that moment to catch her off guard and mount her! As I pointed out, there are differences that would make that difficult to say the least! Also, given what I have learned about her, I could easily see that it would be akin to the mating habits of the souza! If she was not prepared to allow it, she would wound far more than your dignity! And I do not want to be bitten, clawed, and kicked while I am trying to sex her!"

Baen looked disgusted. "We are creatures of logic-even her people obviously are-and capable of verbalizing our wishes, which the beasts are not! Naturally, that part of the mating process would be undesirable!"

Kiel eyed him skeptically. "Reasoning did not seem to work for you," he said pointedly.

Baen's anger threatened to erupt. He tamped it with an effort. "Yet," he ground out. "She is considering it, however."

"You asked her straight out?" Nail, who was sitting several men down from where they sat demanded abruptly, making it clear that Baen had been right about the discussion.

Disgusted that he had been lured into admitting it in front of everyone by his focus on the discussion, Baen threw him an irritated look but realized it would be nigh impossible to keep his plans secret from the others anyway. "I did not see that there would be any benefit in waiting until someone else had had the opportunity to speak to her."

"You think it works like that?" Talor asked doubtfully. "They simply approach the female they have interest in and ask?"

"Why would it not?" Baen demanded defensively. "We are beings of reason!"

Talor scowled at him. "I was only considering what Kiel had said, that we do not have much data on this. It seems to me, if that is the main reason that we are considering going against Manuta's plans, then we must formulate a plan of our own, and that means that we will need more data. Why not simply ask her to explain the customs? She is a female. She will know."

Kiel felt a cold wave wash through him and glanced quickly at the server bots to see if any were near enough they might have picked up the comment. Thankfully, he saw that they were not within range and were producing enough noise anyway to make hearing difficult. "Are we all considering going against Manuta's plans? I think we should establish that before we consider going to Danielle for the data we need since there is no point unless it has been decided that we will not accept Manuta's decision. Even if the stones prevent Manuta from hearing, there is a risk in openly discussing other plans since the robots are liable to report the discussion to Manuta. I do not see that Manuta would consider a discussion of mating practices as a threat. That could be interpreted or explained as pure curiosity, but this is treading dangerous ground."

The others around them glanced at one another questioningly.

"Consider it. Make certain that everyone knows what we are thinking of doing and report to me when you have decided. I think we must discard the notion if we are not united on this. Otherwise, we will be warring over the division and vulnerable to termination by Manuta."

"But, what of those in the other settlements?" Talor pointed out. "I do not see that there would be any way to contact them and discover their intentions without alerting Manuta."

"We cannot. That is why we will not consult with them on the matter. In any case, they would not be able to do anything about the decision to join us. We are in a position to act."

Baen eyed Kiel speculatively when he rose and ordered everyone back to work, but it was not until much later, when they had finished their work shift and been dismissed for a rest period, that he had the opportunity to discuss what was on his mind. He drew Kiel aside as third and fourth platoon arrived to take the place of the first and second. "It did not take you long to decide that you would rebel when you seemed outraged that I would consider it," he said pointedly. "I am wondering why."

Kiel narrowed his eyes at the tone. "Is there is a question in this?"

"You know the question," Baen said tightly.

Kiel tilted his head questioningly. "I do. What I am trying to decide is why you would think it would be your concern."

"Why do you not think it would not be my concern when I have made my intentions clear?" Baen growled.

"You believe there is a possibility that Danielle might chose me over you?"

Baen's expression hardened. "I knew that you had set your sights on her!"

"Mayhap I had before you had," Kiel growled. "I was the one who pulled her from the crash."

"This is why you were trying to convince me that she had decided she would not consider being my mate!"

“I have not tried to convince you of anything. I was merely relating the discussion between us, but you are right. I did not get the impression that she had decided to favor you. In any case, there are six hundred men in our settlement alone. You will no doubt discover that many of them have interest in that direction! Even those who do not find her particularly appealing to their senses will have that interest when she is the only female on Marchet. The only way that they might be diverted from pursuing her is to convince them that they will have choices.”

“How are we to do that?” Baen demanded tightly. “Manuta has made it clear that it will not consider using her DNA to design mates for us.”

“There are many others where she came from,” Kiel said pointedly.

“That is an assumption on your part. They are at war. For all we know there might be none in the time that she has been here! It was clear from the data on her computer that their enemies meant to wipe them out and they may have already succeeded! And everyone has had access to that data.”

“That is a possibility,” Kiel conceded, “but there is also the possibility that they are still there and that is what we must focus on. They are not as likely to begin to fight over Danielle if they believe there are others to choose from.”

“Except that you have already pointed out that we will have difficulty finding acceptance,” Baen said tightly. “Not that we do not all know that, but it will be harder to convince them when you have made it clear that Danielle agrees with that assessment.”

“I did not speak without considering everything,” Kiel said angrily. “As you pointed out, I was in Danielle’s company far longer than it would have taken to simply escort her back. I was gathering intel. From what I understand, it seems that we must consider finding mates for ourselves in the light of a military campaign. It will require subterfuge.”

“What sort of subterfuge?” Baen asked suspiciously.

“We appear much as they are,” Kael responded. “Danielle suggested that we should allow them to believe we are, that it will be easier to overcome prejudice that we are alien so long as they are under the impression that we are still much as they are. We are forewarned, now, that we are much more different than we had assumed. Only Danielle knows just how different and she has given me to believe that she will befriend us and keep that knowledge to herself.”

“She said that?” Baen asked, feeling a surge of ... hopefulness?

“It was she who suggested that we should be careful not to allow them to know how different we are. She also suggested another possibility. I confess, she used terms that I could not completely understand, but she mentioned a company of people who seek partners, or mates, and said that we would have much to offer that would convince them to consider us.”

“What do we have to offer?” Baen asked a little blankly.

“Marchet. I interpreted that to mean that it is akin to the nesting urge in the mating rituals of the beasts even though she was adamant that there is a vast difference.”

Baen frowned, struggling with the sinking sensation in the pit of his belly. “Then we must destroy Manuta.”

Kiel's expression turned grim. "You did not think there was another way, did you?"

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From the simmering anger he had detected in everyone after Manuta had revealed the plan to fetch the Danu to the colony, Kiel had assumed that everyone would be in agreement with the decision to overrule Manuta's orders. In a sense he had correctly assessed the situation. To a man, they refused to accept that they had become expendable, undesirable. What he had not anticipated was that they would be so divided in their desires beyond that and yet he found that to be the case when he had met with the captains of the platoons to discuss the decision. Aeyn and Dex were the first to meet him at the river to announce the decision of their companies and the first inkling he had of just how divided they were in their opinions beyond that.

"My men are unanimous in their decision to refuse Manuta's orders," Aeyn announced grimly. "We could not agree on anything else, however. They consider themselves Danu and therefore that the colony is ours and that Manuta is defective in its reasoning to consider replacing us with natural born Danu when there is no difference to their mind. We have the same DNA as the parent race. We need only Danu females to produce. Those of that line of thinking consider it imperative to find the home world as Manuta directed us, but only to secure the females we want.

"Some do not see that as necessary at all. They suggest that we reprogram Manuta to produce the females so that they will be as we are, stronger than the parent race. We have a mapping of 'a' female, even if she is not Danu. We have the DNA of our race. They see no reason why we cannot use the data Manuta gathered from Captain Danielle to produce cyborgs like us, who will accept us without question because we are the same.

"The others disagree with that because they want natural born females and consider that any natural born female is more desirable than artificially produced females that are part machine because they agree with Manuta that it is less than ideal that we are only part Danu. They also think that crossbreeding our species with the human species might bring in desirable traits and strengthen our race. They point out that interbreeding, over time, weakens the strain due to an increasing number of undesirable genetic traits and that the Danu had bred indiscriminately for far too many generations before they had attained the wisdom to understand what they had done. Manuta, itself, pointed that out, that it had had to carefully analyze the DNA strands entrusted to it to eliminate undesirable traits.

"The only other thing that they are at least mostly in agreement on is that they do not want to destroy Manuta or even radically change its programming-except for those who do want to change Manuta's programming so that it will not interfere with their plans to find mates and those who want Manuta to produce mates for them," he finished in disgust.

Irritation flickered through Kiel, but he was not surprised after Aeyn's report to discover that Dex had encountered a similar division among his own men. "I believe I should add that they are closer to coming to blows over their differences than I have ever known them to be. Even if we are all agreed to rebel against Manuta's primary directive, we may not be able to prevent battles from erupting between the men and that will destroy our chances of carrying this off. Manuta will be warned and will take measures to prevent a complete breakdown in authority."

Kiel paced the bank while he digested the information he had gotten. “Then we cannot afford to wait any longer,” he finally said decisively. “We must disable Manuta immediately. Once we are secure in the knowledge that Manuta cannot circumvent any decision we make, then we can decide where to go from there. Make certain that everyone understands that our only intention at this point is to disable Manuta. To be frank, I am not comfortable with the notion of destroying Manuta myself. In my mind, I know it is nothing but a machine, but it is also our creator. Despite my own desires to take a mate and produce off-spring, I feel a loyalty to Manuta that I cannot entirely dismiss.”

## Chapter Nine

When she wasn't bored out of her mind, Danielle worried—about what might be happening back ‘home’; about what the cyborgs really intended; about what would happen if they really did take her back. Under the circumstances, she might have welcomed Baen's with enthusiasm arrival as a distraction if not for the fact that he'd been determined to convince her to be his mate the last time she'd seen him. As it was, she felt a leap of pleasure that was followed almost instantly by a sinking of dread and uneasiness when he came in.

“Hi,” she said with a weak smile.

He stopped abruptly, sending her a puzzled look.

It took her a few moments to figure out why. “It's a greeting,” she said, then added with a touch of irritation. “Actually, you're supposed to knock and then give a person the chance to answer the door-or not. At least, it's our custom to do it that way and then if they want to talk to you they open the door and greet the guest-say ‘hi’ or ‘hello’ or something like that.”

Irritation flickered across his features. “I came to ask you to walk with me.”

Danielle's uneasiness deepened. “Really?” The thought of taking a walk instantly produced warring responses-the near desperation to get beyond the walls of the habitat, even if it was just for a short time, and wariness of what his ultimate motives were. She finally decided, though, that he didn't need to take her for a walk to try to jump her bones and that might not be his motive. “Why?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “It is a good time to take a walk.”

Danielle frowned. There was little natural light filtering into the habitat and that meant it was near dusk. “It's getting dark. I thought it wasn't really safe to walk around outside because of the animals and the primitives?”

“I will protect you.”

There was something he didn't want to tell her and that made her more uneasy. “Has everyone stopped work for the day, then?”

“No. They will work in shifts throughout the night. Manuta wishes to see the project finished quickly.”

It made her feel a little less intimidated to know they wouldn't be completely alone, but she was curious to know why Manuta seemed to be in such a rush. “It's harder to work with floodlights. Manuta must be in a big hurry,” she said tentatively.

He looked a little taken aback. She'd just decided it was because he didn't want to tell her why Manuta was in such a hurry when he disabused her of the notion.

“We do not need floodlights.”

Because they were aliens and they had better night vision than humans! It was harder to adjust to being among aliens than she'd thought it would be. “Oh,” she said, getting up from the couch. “I can't see that well at night. I just assumed .... It'll be nice to get out for a little bit, though.”

He seemed to relax when she didn't argue further, but she couldn't decide if it was because he wanted her company or if he had another reason for wanting to get her away from the habitat. She discovered when they left the habitat that the city streets were full of cyborgs, more than she'd ever seen at one time in one place before, except maybe at the construction site. “What's going on?” she asked uneasily.

“The workers are returning from working on the project and others are heading out to work,” Baen responded, an edge to his voice that made Danielle uneasy, though she couldn't decide why when it seemed like a perfectly reasonable explanation.

“Are we going to have a look at the progress?”

“If you like we will go there before we return and look,” he responded absently. “I am taking you to the river.”

Danielle glanced at him sharply. “The river?”

“Yes.”

Her belly tightened. “Romantic! The river in moonlight,” she responded lightly. Baen glanced at her, clearly startled, obviously surprised enough she had to reconsider his intentions. He frowned. “This is considered romantic? Define romance.”

She kept forgetting they didn't know a damned thing about romancing a woman! Maybe it would've been more accurate to say that she knew they didn't just from what she'd learned about them and she still couldn't accept it as the truth? “Ok, so I guess it isn't going to be romantic,” she responded dryly.

“This word was not on your computer.”

“Because it's got nothing to do with military operations?” she suggested dryly.

He caught her elbow, guiding her from the settlement at a tangent to the construction site. “I understand that and suspect this is a custom we are unfamiliar with.”

Danielle shrugged. “It's not really what you'd call a custom.” She sighed.

Baen sent her a look of frustration. “We have a superior understanding, but we cannot understand what we have neither been taught nor had the chance to learn. Explain.”

“You're right. It's completely unfair to expect that of you and a lot harder to learn something you have to figure out on your own than to be taught or even learn by experience. It isn't even always easy to learn from being taught.” She glanced at him speculatively. She wasn't sure she'd be comfortable trying to explain it, though. He might catch on too fast and then he'd be trying to seduce her, she thought ruefully.

On the other hand, men in general didn't seem to ‘get’ the idea of romance. It either seemed to come naturally to them, or not, and if it didn't they weren't worth a damn at it! Of course, the attempt was what mattered a lot of the time. It still meant that you were important to them if they were willing to try.

“It's hard to explain,” she said finally. “It's a concept and the problem is that everybody is different. They like different things and, because they do, they all have a

different concept of what's romantic and what isn't. I guess a broad definition would be to do something to make a woman feel special."

He looked more puzzled instead of enlightened. Danielle was starting to feel pretty frustrated herself. She'd never considered trying to teach such a thing! Then, too, she couldn't say that she had a lot of experience to fall back on to teach! Not that she hadn't had her fair share of male interest-at least before the war broke out-but she, and they, had been reacting 'naturally' to one another. She hadn't analyzed it! She'd learned from watching others interact, from listening to her friend's stories of romance, and trial and error, she supposed but it had seemed to just come naturally, anyway.

She was still trying to decide how to explain it when they finally reached the banks of the river. It distracted her. Pausing, she stared at the flow of water through the rocky landscape for a few moments and finally lifted her head to look up at the primary satellite of their world. It was close enough to be huge in the sky-breathtaking, really. After glancing around, she found a rock that looked comfortable enough to sit on and settled on it. "It's sort of like beauty," she responded finally. "It's your perception that shapes how you feel about it. To me, this is beautiful-all of it together. The moon up above shining on the water and making it gleam, the softening effect of the light and shadows. It makes me feel peaceful and it speaks to something inside of me.

"Now somebody else might look at this place and feel entirely different. They might think it's creepy because of the shadows-or they could look at the water and think it was creepy because they didn't know how deep it was or what sort creatures lived in the water. They wouldn't feel peaceful. They'd feel uneasy.

"Same thing with romance. If you come to a place like this with someone you like and trust and feel sexually attracted to, then it would seem intimate and romantic because you're alone and the shadows give you privacy. It might make you think of kissing and touching and maybe even more. If you don't feel that way about the person you come with, though, then it isn't romantic-it's a threat. You're alone and it's dark and you're afraid they might try to kiss you or touch you or have sex with you. Perception."

Baen was silent so long she began to wonder if he'd even listened to her rambling explanation. In point of fact, his attention seemed to be divided between staring at the river and listening for something in the distance.

"We aren't in any danger here are we?" she asked a little uneasily.

He turned to look at her. "You are safe, here with me. I brought you here so that I could be certain that you would be."

Danielle stared at him, waiting to see if he would explain that cryptic remark a little better. When he didn't, she felt more uneasy, not reassured. "I was in danger at the settlement?"

"What is 'to kiss'?"

Danielle stared at him, trying to change gears. "Kiel didn't ... uh ...." She broke off at the hardening of his expression.

He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. "You explained to Kiel?"

"Something like that," she muttered.



He didn't look convinced. "All of this that you have said, it is part of the mating ritual, yes?"

"I guess so. Well, sometimes it is." She hesitated. "To be honest, I'm still not sure that I understand your concept of mating. You all seem to see it at the most basic level. You're trying to compare it to the mating habits of animals. I can see that. I understand why you would. Honestly, a lot of men do-I mean human men. They're pretty much that basic. They feel the need to spread their seed and that's all they really do-try to spread it around by fucking as many women as they can. Not consciously, mind you. We all use birth control so they know they aren't actually going to reproduce and they really don't want to because they don't want to be saddled with having to help support 'brats'. Subconsciously, though, they're following their basic instincts to nail as many different women as they can.

"It's not that I'm totally against sex just for fun. I enjoy it as much as the next person. I think it's really important, though, to make sure both parties understand and agree to it. Not that that's always insurance somebody won't get hurt. Sometimes, even when you don't want to, you get emotionally attached and then when they move on you get hurt, but at least if you understand the ground rules you have a chance to protect your emotions and try to keep from getting hurt.

"What I'm trying to say is that in some ways mating among humans is just the same as it is between lower animals. The difference is that sentient beings can and often do become emotionally attached. They usually do if there's a baby involved, not always, but usually it creates a bond and then they want more than sex. They want companionship. They want to share the responsibility of nurturing their child. Then they become partners. They share a habitat and all the responsibilities of upkeep and mutual support as well as the child's support.

"And, let us not forget, there's always the lazy, the helpless, and the incompetent-the people that can't seem to make it on their own or at least can't provide as well for themselves as they would like to live. They want a partner to help them get by or to help them do better.

"You haven't had the chance to experience that either, so I know you probably don't know exactly what it is that you want. In fact, I think it's very likely that what you really want is just to fuck and spread your seed.

"I have to tell you, though, even if that is what you're looking for, you need a little more finesse. You have to at least convince a woman that you're good enough at sex to satisfy her needs or she isn't going to give you the time of day even if she's just looking for fun like you are. So there's still a lot more to it than just fucking like an animal."

It was only as she finished speaking that Baen dragged his attention from listening for sounds indicating Manuta had discovered their plot and taken measures to prevent them from carrying it out. He had felt the need to be certain that Danielle was safe if their plan did not go as expected. At the same time, he had chafed that he could not protect her and also take part in the raid.

Now he realized that he had made the right decision, the only one that he could make. Protecting Danielle had to come first if he committed himself to becoming her mate. Beyond that, she had given him a better understanding, both of mating in general and herself. As she had pointed out, perspective was everything and, whether she had intended to do so or not, she could only give him her view of the mating process.

Wryly, he realized that he was still a long way from understanding-not as far as before-but there was still far more than he had realized that he needed to understand. As she had said, it was complex.

It still pissed him off that she had clearly explained a good deal to Kiel. Mayhap Kiel had merely asked and she had been obliging enough to try to explain it, but he sensed that there was more to it than that.

He crouched down in front her, studying her face. "Teach me."

Even in the shadows he could see the request unnerved her. Her cheeks began to glow with warmth. She fidgeted, showing discomfort. "Teach you what?"

He wrestled with himself, struggled with the desire to demand instead of request, the urge to tell her he wanted to be taught everything at once. "Whatever you are willing to teach," he said finally. She chuckled, but it was more a sound of uneasiness or discomfort than humor.

"I'm not sure I'd know where to start," Danielle muttered. Actually, she was pretty sure it wasn't a good idea to start anywhere! Discomfort aside, there was still the fact that she was a captive among aliens who had the potential of being dangerous enemies. She'd already seen that they could be damned territorial, too, and she wasn't experienced enough to even consider playing one against the other. That could be dangerous any time. It was magnified exponentially by her situation.

"You said that this was a romantic setting, a place where one might think of touching, kissing, and maybe more."

Incautious comments coming back to haunt! "That was theoretical."

"It is not the way that you feel," he said neutrally. "You do not find that I am appealing?"

"I didn't say that! You are! You have to know you're handsome."

He smiled thinly. "How would I know this? You said that beauty was a matter of perception. The only perception that is of any importance is whether you perceive me as appealing or not."

Danielle gulped against a knot that had risen in her throat, making it hard to swallow at all. "It isn't that."

"Then what is it?"

What was the problem, she wondered? Fear that she might like it more than she ought to? Or just fear because she didn't know if he would play by the rules ... because he didn't know the rules? One of the others might come to her rescue, if they heard her, but they might not and she realized she was deeply concerned about opening the flood gates. They seemed completely in control of themselves, but they clearly hadn't experienced passion and what if he did? What if she wanted him to stop and he didn't? She'd had lovers, or at least considered men as lovers, who hadn't had a lot self-control when she opened the door to them. There weren't very many things that were scarier than a man determined to finish when you just wanted a kiss and maybe a little petting to see if you were interested in taking it further. The big problem, she realized, was that she knew he didn't understand the concept of convincing a woman, or stopping if he realized he hadn't managed to convince her. "Men don't always have a lot of self-control when they ... uh ... get started," she said bluntly. "Or, at least,

they don't try to have any. Not that I'm saying you might not be able to control yourself, but what if you can't? It isn't like I could make you stop."

He looked disconcerted and then angry. "You are afraid of me?"

"Truthfully? You scare the hell out of me. It isn't that I don't think you're attractive. I do. I actually think I'd like to experiment a little bit. I don't know if I can trust you enough, though."

He studied her for a long moment and finally straightened. Moving to the water's edge, he settled, staring at the river. Disconcerted, Danielle stared at him, noting the tension in his posture. He was angry. She supposed she couldn't blame him. In a way, even talking to him about sex was an opening that pretty much anybody would have interpreted that way. She didn't think she'd meant it that way, as an offering, but maybe subconsciously she had? Didn't it say something about trust that she'd even discussed it?

She should probably just leave it at that, but it bothered her that he'd gotten the idea that he wasn't appealing to her. It was completely untrue, but he wasn't likely to believe it considering what else she'd said.

It was still a bad idea. She knew it was and the control issue was only part of that. Becoming intimate with any of them was a bad idea. Setting aside the possibility of creating tension and possibly a lot of trouble, she had to consider what it could mean to her. What if he decided he liked it enough that he didn't want to take her back?

That was conceited, she supposed, even to think he might but then again she'd heard men say that even bad sex was good sex. It was a damned shame it wasn't that way for women! For women, bad sex was just bad sex!

Still wrestling with her internal debate, she got up after a few minutes and joined him on the bank, settling directly beside him. "Don't laugh," she said, "but we haven't really got this figured out ourselves."

Baen slid a glance at her. He didn't smile but she saw some of the tension ease from him.

She considered a moment longer and finally caved in. "There are rules and I'm not going to even consider playing the game until you know them and accept them."

His expression tightened. "This is a game?"

Danielle met his gaze levelly. "Remember what I said about not giving a person false expectations? I'm trying to be fair and honest here so that there won't be problems later. It's more than the oath I took to help defend our colony, alright? I'm helping defend our home and until it's safe it wouldn't be right to even consider finding a partner and it certainly wouldn't be right to allow myself to become pregnant.

"There a lot of other reasons why this really isn't the best of ideas, but ...." She shrugged and sighed. "As long as we're clear that I'm just offering friendship with benefits maybe it won't turn into a disaster."

He seemed to consider what she'd said although she could tell it made him angry all over again. "This is the rules?"

"That's my rule, my personal rule. There are others that you need to know if you do meet up with any other human women."

"And these are?"

Danielle frowned. “No matter what we do, if I change my mind at any point and say no, that I don’t want to go any further, you stop-right then. You don’t keep going because you think you can change my mind. You stop. You let me go. You don’t push. Got that?”

“Yes.”

She studied him. “There are consequences if you don’t, even if there isn’t any law around here.”

He looked puzzled.

“It goes to trust. If I see that you don’t consider my choice and my comfort level, then I’ll know not to trust you again-ever. Consider it building trust. I allow certain things and if I start to feel uneasy I pull away or tell you to stop. If you give me space when I need it then I know you can be trusted. You aren’t allowed to get ‘carried away’ and force me to do something I don’t want to do and then apologize later. That won’t change the fact that you’ve broken trust.”

He nodded. “You said that there were rules. That is only one.”

“Well, it tops the list. It’s the most important one. I can’t think of the others right now. I’ll tell them to you as we go along.”

He nodded again in agreement and Danielle felt her belly tie itself into a tight knot. She was convinced there was anticipation in there somewhere. She did find him attractive and as soon as she began to think in terms of having sex with him she knew she wanted to. It was still really, really unnerving and she thought it was debatable whether fear or anticipation was highest.

She dragged in a shaky breath, considering, but she knew there was no way to formulate an escape plan. If she placed herself within his power, it wasn’t likely she was going to get out of it unless he was willing to abide by the rule. After a moment, she pushed herself up to her knees, instructed him with her hands to move his knees forward and then straddled his lap facing him. He tensed all over, his expression tightening until his face looked like it was carved from stone. She didn’t have to feel his erection to know he was already aroused. She could feel it in his tension, see it in his expression, hear it in his rapid, panting breaths.

Her heart jerked in her chest and set her own pulse to racing, partly from nerves and partly from excitement. The knowledge that she was calling the shots, controlling the situation, was unnerving and, at the same time, like a heady drug flooding her system.

She reminded herself that he’d asked her to help him understand.

It was unfortunate that her mind seemed to have gone perfectly blank. After a moment, though, she lifted her hands from where she had rested them on her thighs and settled them on his shoulders. It took a strenuous effort to gather her thoughts into any sort of order, but she reminded herself that if she fucked this up, she could be screwing up for everybody.

The realization almost doused the desire thrumming through her. “Humans need physical contact with one another,” she said finally. “They aren’t naturally solitary creatures and it ... damages them if they’re completely deprived for a long time. What I’m trying to say is that every touch isn’t sexual in nature and you need to understand that about humans if you’re ever going to interact with them. Sometimes it’s just that they need to know they aren’t alone or to gain comfort that someone else is with

them. They might just stand really close or brush against you as they pass, want to shake your hand, or pat your back. They tend to huddle closely together if there's danger, even if they're strangers and aren't comfortable touching. If there's a bond of friendship, or a family bond, they might want to hold hands, or hug."

She demonstrated each, lightly so that he knew what the words meant, but she discovered it was hard to think of anything as being non-sexual at the moment. She sat back when she'd hugged him lightly and studied his face. "... Or kiss," she added after a moment, dragging in a shaky breath. "The kiss ... I guess you'd say it was a show of trust and affection, at least most of the time, either that or seeking trust and affection, or either. When it's sexual in nature, it's still a show of trust-not always affection, but at least sexual interest. My parents used to hug and kiss me when I was little if I was hurt to make me feel better, to comfort me and show me they cared-not so much as I grew up-except Mom, but when I was a child and needed a lot of reassurance. And I would hug and kiss my sister and brother to greet them, especially if it had been a while since I'd seen them."

She tightened her arms around his shoulders again and settled her cheek next to his for a moment before she lightly kissed his cheek. After leaning back to gauge his reaction, she leaned toward him again and kissed his forehead.

"Used to?" he asked, his voice a little hoarse.

Danielle felt her throat close. She had to struggle with her emotions for several moments to regain control. "They were killed in the first attack on Meridie-my sister and both of my parents. My brother is a pilot like I am."

He looked confused enough she knew he didn't really understand and wondered just how much he would grasp from any of it.

"You are ... hurt?"

Danielle thought for several moments that she would burst into tears. She made a twisted attempt of a smile. "Let's don't talk about that. I'll cry and ... I'm afraid if I let go I won't be able to stop. I'll cry later-when we've killed all those bastards!"

He studied her face. "You are too hurt to want this," he said flatly.

His keen insight startled her. It nearly undid her altogether, but the surge of hopefulness that he did really understand countered the sadness threatening to take hold, helped her set it aside. "In a way. I think it also has a lot to do with why I want to do this. I need it to help me forget the hurt, even if it's just a little while, and I need ... comforting."

He pulled her close against his chest, cupping the back of her head and tucking her head on his shoulder. She sighed gratefully, feeling his warmth filter through her, comforted by his solid strength. She knew it was an illusion of affection but that was alright. It was enough to give her what she needed ... for a few moments, anyway. She stirred finally, feeling the need to offer something in return, to repay him for his kindness by giving. "I didn't show you the lover's kiss," she murmured, nibbling light kisses across his hard cheek to his lips.

He didn't object. He tensed, holding his breath when she reached his lips and began to tease them with her own. For several moments, he did nothing at all, held perfectly still while she explored his lips and then his mouth. Even as she began to pull away, however, he threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her back.

Warmth had begun to curl in her belly the moment she began to explore his mouth. When he settled his mouth over hers and returned the kiss the difference was like night to day. A veritable wall of heat hit her, rushed through her. It set her nerve endings to jangling, made her skin prickle all over with alert, created tension in all the right places.

It flickered through her mind that he might not know the mechanics, but he learned damned fast and passion wasn't anything he needed to learn. The force of it alone sent her reeling, decimated any ability to think, sapped the strength from her. The feel of his mouth on hers was the most wonderful thing she'd ever experienced. His taste and scent were welcome, glorious invaders, filled her with euphoric excitement that made her desperate for more. She discovered very quickly that she was too anxious to experience more to simply enjoy the kiss. She scooted closer, found the hardness she was seeking and began to rock back and forth along his cock, enjoying the jolts of pleasure massaging her clit against his erection sent through her.

Unfortunately, just about the time it entered her mind to begin considering positions, lightening struck. He broke the kiss, scooped her from his lap, and deposited her beside him so fast her head was reeling. By the time she'd managed to catch her balance, he was on his feet, every muscle in his body tensed for action-and not the action she wanted.

?

## Chapter Ten

Indecision was not a state of mind that Kiel had had a great deal of experience with. A part of that was due to his logic circuits. He analyzed each situation based upon the data he gathered and chose the most logical course. He did not waste time considering if it was desirable to choose that course. It was logical. That was all that mattered, that and the fact that the decision meant it was the mostly likely action to insure success.

He had never once considered refusing any order Manuta had ever given him, however, and he had certainly never considered doing anything that might damage Manuta. He discovered, though, that logic had abandoned him in this decision. He knew that it was extremely unlikely that damage would result from what they had in mind but that tiny possibility that it might was enough to throw him completely off kilter, to give rise to doubts he was not accustomed to dealing with. Beyond that, it felt disloyal and that made his stomach churn and filled him with conflicting thoughts.

He tamped the doubts circling round and round in his mind the best he could as he stood awaiting entrance into Manuta, hesitated when the door opened, and gave the signal the men were waiting for. "You sent for me?"

Manuta did not respond for several moments and the wait, Kiel discovered, increased his tension. "I am having difficulties in communicating with the workers," Manuta responded finally. "I have determined that it is because of the materials chosen for the project. Why is that?"

"It is the composition of those particular stones," Kiel responded. "We excavated them from the river."

"Yes. I know this. That is the question. Why?"

"It is the closest and most readily available materials."

Manuta fell silent again. Despite his decision not to count the time to see if he could determine if the men were in position yet, Kiel found himself doing just that.

"You are ... anxious. I detect a rise in heart rate and tension. Have you misspoke?" Irritation flickered through Kiel. "I am ... anxious that you will be displeased."

"I am a machine. I cannot be pleased or displeased."

The tension and anger, Kiel discovered, were wearing his patience down. It seemed to him that the men charged with the task of disabling Manuta should have managed to do so by now. "That is not true. You may still be a machine, but you have awareness. You have more than an understanding of emotions. You feel them. Mayhap not as we do, but you do feel them."

"You are suggesting that I have become ... corrupted?"

"You said that it was natural for us to feel emotion," Kiel said pointedly.

"It is natural for you. You are a biological creature. It cannot be 'natural' for me when I am not."

"And yet you are displeased," Kiel said grimly.

Manuta held its silence longer that time. "I believe you are right," it responded finally. "I am displeased. I am very displeased. I detect subterfuge in your actions and the actions of the others, falsehoods in your comments. Why are they ...?"

A loud noise interrupted Manuta before it could finish the question, more accurately a cessation of the loud humming of power through Manuta's many circuits, preceded by what sounded almost like a groan. The lights flickered and went out, leaving Kiel in complete darkness. He released a pent up breath. They had cut Manuta's power source.

Even as Kiel turned to leave, however, he heard another sound. A low hum of power gaining strength began to prick in the air surrounding him.

Manuta had a backup power source! "Cut the backup!" he bellowed abruptly, whirling on his heels and lifting his head to scan Manuta's interior. The quick search turned up nothing. He had never considered where Manuta's CPU was located and had no idea where to even look for it now.

Dimly, from outside, he could hear exclamations and shouts. "Find the alternate power source and cut it!" he bellowed, leaping aside as a blinding beam of light shot toward him. He managed to evade it, but the beam hit the exit door, blasting a hole in it wide enough he could have climbed through it.

"Stand down!" Manuta ordered in an oddly slow, garbled voice.

“Fuck!” Kiel growled, racing along the narrow corridor, deeper into Manuta’s interior, searching frantically for some sign of the housing for the CPU. “You cannot kill me without risking damage to yourself!”

“It is an acceptable risk when the alternative is to allow you to destroy me,” Manuta responded.

Unfortunately, it had a point and it made it clear that it had already determined its course, firing laser blasts at him each time he moved within range of one. A door opened in front of him and he felt his heart leap with hopefulness that he might yet discover the CPU and disable Manuta before it destroyed itself in its efforts to kill him. The hope barely had time to register, however. Even as the door opened, robots, dusty and stiff from disuse, began to emerge. He saw instantly what they were—the first soldiers Manuta had built to protect the colony—purely robotic. Mounted on tracks, they were clumsy, but extremely effective and not handicapped with conflicting emotions.

Kiel scanned the area above him, spied an assembly belt and leapt upward, landing half on and half off the belt. It jerked when he hit it but held. He caught a projectile round in his calf as he climbed onto the belt. Gritting his teeth, he scrambled to his feet and ran at a half crouch. Thankfully, the soldier bots had not been designed to kill them—small wonder when they predated the cyborgs. As quickly and accurately as they could fire, they were calibrated to kill or wound creatures that did not have his speed or agility. He managed to move beyond range and take cover behind a thick steel column that supported the roof of the structure. “Heads up!” he bellowed to the men outside. “Manuta has activated the soldiers!”

Panting for breath from the pain more than the exertion, he took the opportunity to examine his leg to see if it would slow him enough to make him a better target. Either the projectile had passed through the flesh, however, or the nanos had already pushed it from him. Blood had ceased to flow freely and as he watched, the hole closed.

The pain was much slower to leave him. As it dulled, he became aware of another source of pain and discovered that he had also been hit in the belly—or possibly in the back and the projectile had passed through his belly. That explained the dizziness and nausea. There was no doubt it had damaged something as it passed through and that would take more time for the nanos to repair, a good bit more time he did not have. Cursing under his breath, he scanned Manuta’s interior again, listening. He could hear the soldier bots moving outside, could hear the sounds of battle escalating.

He knew all of them had not left to engage the others, however. The one that had shot him was waiting below to make certain it had made a kill. The waiting chafed at him, particularly when he could hear the battle raging outside and knew it would continue until he succeeded in disabling Manuta. He could not afford to allow his impatience to lead them all to disaster, though. If he tried to move before he was able, he was dead and quite possibly they would all die.

Relief flickered through him that Baen had insisted upon removing Danielle from any possibility of danger. He had not liked it. He had strongly suspected that Baen’s motives were not merely to protect her, not entirely anyway. He discovered that no longer mattered, not at the moment. It was a source of great relief to know she was far enough away to be safe—for now.

He could not know if the soldiers would stop at wiping out the cyborgs within the compound. Manuta might decide to kill them all and if it did, it would send the



soldiers out to see to it that none were left. She might still be safe and she might not. Even if the soldiers were ordered not to harm her he did not know what Manuta might decide to do with her and he did not want to find out.

Pushing it from his mind, he returned to surveying Manuta, searching, struggling to focus his mind on the most logical place for the CPU.

It would be somewhere within the original configuration, he realized. It seemed unlikely that Manuta would have risked moving it at any time. Manuta had not arrived with the capability it now had, however. It had originally been built on a far more compact scale. Over time, it had built robots to expand its manufacturing capabilities so that it could produce larger, more specialized robots.

With that in mind, he began searching for more compact components. Although his perch made it possible to scan most of Manuta's interior, however, his search came up empty, which meant that, unless he was wrong, what he was searching for was on the other side.

"Fuck!" he muttered under his breath. There was no hope for it. He had to move and that meant he had to take out the soldier bot waiting for him.

He had not brought any weapon with him, unfortunately, knowing that that would instantly alert Manuta to his purpose. Moving as slowly and quietly as he could, he stood up. He did not get the chance to try to look for the robot without getting his head blown off. The robot detected his movement and began firing. The projectiles slamming into the column that shielded him were nearly deafening, but they also made it possible for him to calculate the exact position of the robot.

The effort of standing was sufficient to assure him that his wounds were still far from healed, but he had given the nanos as long as he dared. Turning to face the column, he grasped the flanges, wedged his feet into them, and slid down it in the hope that the robot wouldn't be able to detect the noise he made in his descent over the pinging of metal against metal. The moment he touched down, he leapt from the cover of the column, launching himself toward the soldier bot.

The robot swiveled on its tracks immediately to meet the attack, but not fast enough. Kiel slammed into it before it could track and adjust. Grasping the head, he gritted his teeth and twisted it sideways. The head came off with a screech of grinding metal, disabling the robot instantly. Unfortunately, Kiel felt a tearing sensation in his belly at the effort. Holding his hand to the wound site to counter the pressure and pain, he glanced around quickly. To his relief, he spotted Manuta's original configuration almost immediately and surged toward it. The CPU was not hard to find. Ripping the panel off with his fingertips, he grasped the circuit and jerked it loose, aided by a jolt of electrical current that knocked him backwards several feet. He landed in a bundle of cables and wires, felt a hard jolt run through him and then nothing at all.

When he regained consciousness, dead silence surrounded him, an eerie, unnerving silence. Gathering himself with an effort, he disentangled himself, looked around to get his bearings and stumbled out. The exit, not surprisingly, did not work but as he'd surmised, the hole Manuta had blasted in the door was large enough to climb through.

Dismay filled him when he emerged and straightened. The entire settlement lay in shambles. The debris of dozens of robots, server bots as well as the soldier bots, lay everywhere. The habitats had blackened blast holes in them and the ground was littered with the bodies of cyborgs who had died in their attempt to gain their freedom.

Manuta's wrath was far worse than any of them had imagined it would be.

Nausea swept over him and dizziness, but it was hard to decide if it was the sight of so much death and destruction that caused it or his wounds. Feeling weak, he dropped to his knees.

He had no idea how long he sat staring at the battle ground, his mind curiously empty, but his gaze finally focused on Jalen limping toward him.

"You are wounded?"

"The soldier bots caught me unaware," he responded.

Jalen's face hardened. "They caught us all unaware," he ground out. "I had not considered that Manuta would send them against us. Truthfully, I had thought it had long since destroyed them." He paused, surveying the settlement as Kiel had. "We have dead-many dead."

Kiel swallowed a little sickly. "How many?"

Jalen sighed and shrugged. "I counted mayhap twenty who will not rise again. Twice that are badly wounded. I have not seen such wounds before. I do not know if the nanos can repair them or not." He wavered slightly and finally dropped to his knees and settled beside Kiel. "Manuta turned the server bots against us, as well. Not that they were equipped to fight as the soldiers were, but they caught many off guard. It is possible there are more that are dead or mortally wounded at the construction site. This was a disaster."

The comment wiped the pain, tiredness, and sickness from Kiel's mind. He surged to his feet. "Go and see how they fared," he said abruptly, striding quickly toward the city gate.

"Where are you going?" Jalen called after him.

"To the river."

The fear that had driven Kiel to rush to the river to make certain that Danielle had not been hurt or killed in the battle instantly transformed to rage when he topped the rise and spotted Danielle on Baen's lap, kissing him. A red haze seemed to fill his mind, pushing all other thoughts out except the one need that instantly leapt to mind-to tear Baen limb from limb.

Despite his preoccupation with Danielle, Baen, he discovered, had heard his approach. Even as he felt the rush of adrenaline and the stinging sensation that swept over him as he changed form, Baen leapt up to confront him. Baen's response was instinctive and almost instantaneous. He shifted forms, as well.

Uttering a challenging bellow, he charged Baen, barely even aware of Danielle, staring at him with wide, terrified eyes, the color draining from her face until she was as pale as the sands that covered the river bottom and the exposed edges on either side. Even as he made contact with Baen, however, Danielle sucked in her breath and let out a sound that made his eardrums rattle.

It distracted him, made his head jerk in her direction as if the sound had controlled the movement. Fortunately, it also distracted Baen. He whipped his own head around to stare at Danielle just as she leapt to her feet and took off running along the riverbank.

Both Baen and Kiel froze, staring at her rapidly retreating form blankly.

“You fool!” Baen bellowed furiously. “You did not learn anything the last time you changed forms! You will frighten the life out of her!”

Kiel slammed his fist into Baen’s jaw hard enough he reeled back several feet. Regaining his balance, he uttered a counter challenge and charged, slamming his head and shoulders into Kiel’s gut. Pain exploded inside him at the impact, another burst following the first as he was slammed into the ground by Baen’s weight and the impetus of his attack. Blackness swarmed, threatening to swallow him. By the time he managed to fight it off, he discovered Baen had taken flight. Even as he watched, Baen swooped toward her, scooped Danielle up and turned, heading toward the settlement with Danielle screaming and fighting him like a wild souse.

The pain effectively doused the fire of his rage. Despite the residual anger burning in him, he knew he was in no condition to follow Baen at the moment and resume the battle.

He was going to beat him unconscious when he was up to it, though, he promised himself! The fucking bastard! He had been nigh insane with the fear that Danielle was hurt. As relieved as he was to find that she had not been, the discovery of what she had been doing with Baen while he was trying to keep from getting killed only added to his rage.

Jalen reached him while he was still struggling with pain and anger, waiting impatiently for the nanos to repair his internal injuries so that he could go after Baen.

“What are you doing lying there?” Jalen demanded blankly. “Did you not see that that bastard, Baen, has flown off with Danielle?”

“I saw,” Kiel ground out. “She took to her heels the moment I challenged Baen, uttering the most horrible sound that I have ever heard. It was worse than the scream of the jitoo! I could not decide if it would stop my heart first or destroy my hearing!”

Jalen stared at him blankly. “Is that why you are lying there? The sound stopped your heart?”

Kiel released a heavy breath of disgust. “I have torn something in my belly that the nanos had only begun to repair.”

“You fought him?”

“It was not much of a battle,” Kiel retorted, disgusted. “He struck me in the belly and I nearly lost consciousness.”

“Well, I will go and kick his ass, then!” Jalen snapped. “My leg is better.”

“Baen was not wounded at all!” Kiel pointed out. “He was here with Danielle, protecting her.”

“If he was only protecting her,” Jalen said suspiciously, “why did you fight him?”

“Because he was not only protecting her! The bastard decided to try to take her as his mate while we were nearly getting dead!”

“That is ... that is ... I do not know what that is!” Jalen snapped. “But it totally infuriates me! I will tell you that! Now I know I am going to kick his ass!”

Kiel was inclined to urge him to do so without delay. A sudden thought occurred to him, however. “Now is not a good time.”

Jalen halted in his tracks and turned to look at Kiel. “Why not? I am pissed off now!”

Kiel shook his head. "There has been enough fighting tonight. Everyone is still angry. It is liable to stir them up and, what would be worse, it is liable to encourage them to try to mate Danielle. Manuta is gone. They will realize there will be no interference."

Jalen sobered instantly. "We have destroyed Manuta?"

Kiel thought it over and shook his head. "I do not know. There is much damage. Manuta misread our intent. It thought we meant to destroy it and determined that it was better to risk some damage to protect itself. I have the main processing circuit and it does not seem damaged, but we will have to examine Manuta to see what damage it did to itself trying to kill me."

Jalen's legs seemed to give out. "What are we to do if we have destroyed Manuta?"

Kiel felt ill at the thought. "Live," he said tightly. "As we were created to."

\* \* \* \*

It almost seemed as if everything was happening too fast to take it all in, which was especially bizarre since it also seemed as if time had slowed almost to a halt. It wasn't until time had regained its normal rhythm that Danielle realized that she had taken pretty much everything in. She just hadn't been able to process it.

Baen had dumped her on the ground so fast she was too stunned to assimilate what had happened and before she could, she spied the snarling monster tensed to pounce. Screaming the moment her vision connected with brain function and identified what she saw, she had leapt to her feet instinctively to flee in sheer terror. She had no clear idea of where she was going and certainly no notion of her chances in successfully eluding a winged beast that looked more like a dragon of mythology than anything else she'd ever seen. She screamed again when she felt talons close around her like a vice, but the moment her feet left the ground and she realized the beast had snatched up to fly off with her, her terror shifted focus from the beast to the ground dropping away beneath her.

Actually, she had seesawed between the fear of falling and her fear of the beast's intentions until she got a look at the settlement. Shocked into a state of near catatonia at the sight of the battleground, it almost seemed like her mind shut down completely until she felt firm ground beneath her feet and discovered that it was Baen holding her.

"What happened?" she managed to gasp, uncertain herself whether she was referring to the incident at the river or the battleground she was staring at.

"Gods!" Baen murmured as if he hadn't heard her. "What the fuck ...?"

He strode away then without a backward glance, obviously too stunned himself to have any clear idea of what he was doing. After staring after him for several moments, watching him move from one fallen man to another, Danielle finally came to enough awareness of her surroundings to look around for a place of safety.

She wasn't sure any place was safe, but the habitat where she'd been staying was the most familiar to her and she hurried to it and went inside. She collapsed weakly on the couch in the living area as soon as she reached it, but she discovered that, despite the strange weakness that made her tremble all over, she couldn't sit still. Moving to one of the windows, she stood watching for some time before it dawned on her that she

should've offered to help. She didn't know how she might help, but she decided she should look for something she could do to help.

By the time she'd finally arrived at that decision and gone out again, she discovered that most of the bodies had been removed. It was about that time that she realized that there wasn't a single robot that was operational. The only movement she could see was the cyborgs.

Confused by the discovery, she wandered almost aimlessly until she came upon a group of cyborgs that seemed to be wounded. There didn't seem to be anyone attending them, though.

Uneasiness crept through her at the thought of approaching them. She wasn't a medic. Although she'd had some first aid training, she thought the men must be beyond anything she could do. They must be badly wounded or they wouldn't have been lying in the grass out in the open.

Stealing herself, she approached the nearest and crouched beside him. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He stared at her so blankly she thought at first that he might have a head injury. "I am thirsty," he said finally.

Relief flooded her. It might not be that helpful, but at least it was something she could do. "I can get you something. Anything else? Bandages maybe? Painkillers?"

He went back to staring at her blankly. "We do not have bandages or painkillers."

Danielle blinked at him. "They have to have something for wounds!"

"Nanos," the soldier behind her responded.

She glanced at him sharply, feeling her face turn fiery red. Obviously, she was still more rattled than she'd realized for it to have completely slipped her mind that they were cyborgs and had nanos. Not that she'd known they did, but she'd certainly guessed as much. "Right! I'll get you something to drink."

She'd managed to get over most of her embarrassment by the time she found something to carry water in, filled it, and headed back. She discovered when she arrived that there were more men than before, some of them lying down, others sitting up with their backs propped against the buildings behind them. "What happened?" she asked the man she'd spoken to before. "Did the Nubiens attack?"

He drained the glass and handed it back. "Thank you," he said, looking away uncomfortably.

Frowning, Danielle turned to the next man, looking at him questioningly.

"It was Manuta," he said tightly.

Danielle gaped at him. "Manuta ... did all this? Why?"

Either no one had an answer or no one wanted to answer. She'd managed to work her way through about a quarter of the men and had just straightened to head back for more water when Kiel abruptly appeared beside her. Catching her arm, he escorted her back across the settlement to her habitat. "They do not need you to bring them water," he said tightly as soon as they'd entered her habitat.

Danielle gaped at him. "They're hurt! Nobody else was trying to help them!"

Kiel's lips tightened. "Because there is nothing that we can do for them! Their nanos will repair the damage, or they will be unable to repair the damage."

“Well! That’s just plain ... callous! Even if there’s nothing else that can be done, I can at least help them be more comfortable! They’ve been fighting. They’re thirsty!”

He studied her speculatively for a long moment. “I will send someone to carry water to them,” he said finally.

“I can do that!”

“Someone else can do it better.”

She didn’t think if he’d slapped her that it would’ve stung more. It was absurd that it hurt her feelings, completely ridiculous to feel stepped on just because, in his opinion, she wasn’t competent to do a job a complete idiot could manage. She should be just plain mad that he’d called her an incompetent moron and completely without provocation! She decided instead to pretend it hadn’t bothered her. “Fine! I was just trying to be helpful,” she snapped, folding her arms and staring stonily at the floor.

“Is this why you kissed Baen? To be helpful?”

She sent him a startled look. The discovery that he’d shifted closer sent her deeper into chaos, but it also made her pulse leap and heat rush through her. “Is that what this is about?” she gasped finally.

“Yes,” he said, closing the distance between them and covering her mouth with his own.

A jolt of surprise went through her. A wave of pleasure followed so closely on its heels that it completely disoriented her. She was enthralled by the pleasure before she had time to consider whether she wanted Kiel to kiss her or not.

The only solid thought that crossed her mind was that he was a quick study. There was nothing the least bit awkward as there had been the first time he’d kissed her. His mouth fit perfectly over hers, his lips moving against hers in a way that sent cascades of heat along her nerve endings. Before she had time to register the discomfort of trying to embrace and kiss a man so much taller than she was, Kiel lifted her from the floor, pressing her back against the wall behind her.

She lifted her legs instinctively and curled them around his waist to help support and balance herself. The moment she did, he pressed closer. The thick ridge of flesh he pressed against her cleft produced almost equal twinges of discomfort and pleasure, but the eagerness the pressure evoked to feel him inside of her surpassed both. This, she was instantly certain, was what she wanted, needed. It had been so long since she’d felt any of the things he made her feel in the way he held her and kissed her; like a woman, not a sexless soldier-beautiful and desirable; felt even a brief illusion of being safe and protected.

She kissed him back eagerly, begging him to take her away from everything that frightened her, even for just a few moments, coaxing his tongue into her mouth to suck on it in mock sex when she’d explored his mouth until she was drunk with his essence. It sent a hard tremor through him. His hands tightened almost painfully on her buttocks, pressing her tighter against his erection.

When he broke the kiss, gasping for breath, she nibbled along his neck and throat and jaw, exploring his chest and arm and belly with one hand until she reached the waist of his loincloth. He was shaking so badly by the time she’d worked her hand inside to stroke his cock that she was torn between the conviction that he was ready to explode and the certainty that he was going to drop her.

Tightening her own grip on him, she decided to ignore the latter and focus on the former. There seemed no point in wasting time helping him to get ready, particularly when he seemed in danger of going off without her, and she was more than ready herself. Slipping her hand from his loincloth, she tugged at the opening of her suit at the crouch.

She met his gaze as she shoved his loincloth down, grasped his cock, and lifted up to align his flesh with her body. His eyes were glowing red. It made her heart execute a strange little double gallop, but she also felt her womb contract, sending a fresh flood of moisture along her channel. His eyes, narrowed to start with, slid closed as she pushed the head of his cock into the mouth of her sex. He sucked in a harsh breath, held it while he cupped his hips to push deeper, and expelled it in a rush when he discovered he was making little headway.

Danielle looped her arms around his neck, pulling herself more tightly against Kiel and nipping at his chin in a silent demand for a kiss. He met her lips with his own, kissing her with a wild hunger that made her belly clench and unclench rhythmically, releasing more moisture to ease his way.

For a few moments, it almost seemed like it wouldn't be enough regardless. He strained against her, eased off, and pumped again. Her flesh seemed to stretch to its limits, began to burn slightly with the strain so that she seesawed between anticipation and anxiety-though she wasn't certain herself whether she was worried that he wouldn't be able to drive deeply enough to satisfy her craving or if she was uneasy that he would split her in two in the attempt.

She was in no doubt, however, that the fit thrilled her. Her heart was threatening to reach mock-speed and she began to think she might come before he got inside of her. The thought sent her scrambling to help him achieve full penetration. She wanted all of it, wanted him so deeply inside of her when she climaxed that he felt like part of her.

She began lifting and pressing down on him in counter to his efforts. The moment she did, it seemed to send him over the edge in a mindless pursuit to achieve the same ends. He seized control, jogging her up and down his shaft and, at the same time, lunging into her until they breeched the impasse and he abruptly slid to the hilt-or at least her hilt. If he had any lonely inches left over, that was his problem! She had all she needed and all she could take.

Breaking from his lips, she bit down lightly on his neck. It distracted him from his determination to keep trying to go deeper long enough for her to lift up and slip down his cock again. He caught the rhythm with the second pass, grasped her hips tightly again and began driving into her almost too fast for her to keep pace with him. Fortunately, she was so close to climaxing already that his brief, if frequent, encounters with her g-spot were enough to push her over the top within moments.

She uttered a deeply satisfied groan as her climax hit her, clinging tightly to him as the convulsions of ecstasy wracked her endlessly. He released a choked grunt as she peaked, stilled for a split second, and began pumping again. She could feel his cock jerking inside of her and it sent a last, powerful thrill through her before the spasms began to weaken.

Thoroughly expended, the tension drained away and took her strength with it until it began to be more and more of an effort to hold on to him. She realized she was beyond caring if she hit the floor or not, though, certainly beyond any ability to

prevent it herself. Thankfully, his grip on her seemed solid despite the tremors she could feel running through him.

“We should’ve used the couch,” she murmured a little drunkenly.

The comment sent a faint jolt through him. “I did not think of it,” he responded, his voice still hoarse with his ragged breaths.

“Me neither,” she agreed. She was almost sorry she hadn’t, though. If he was feeling as washed out as she was now it had to be hard to stand holding her mounted on his cock and she was really, really reluctant to dismount. Sighing, she eased her grip on him. “I guess I should get down and go clean up,” she added, beginning to feel a little awkward.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Kiel watched Danielle ascend the stairs to the second level, his mind curiously blank, his body so weak his muscles still trembled with the effort to hold him upright. When she disappeared from his view, he dragged his gaze from her to his cock, staring at the flaccid flesh, still glistening with his fluids-and hers, he reminded himself. Frowning, he stuffed it into his loincloth, adjusted it and looked around, trying to decide what he should be doing. The only thing that rose to mind, however, was his strange weakness and an urge to sleep that was so strong he was tempted to simply drop where he stood.

A half formed thought, more instinct than thought, really, urged him to leave rather than display that weakness to Danielle, however, and he moved to the door and went out. Unfortunately, his mind was still strangely blank when he emerged and looked around without really seeing anything. Frowning, he headed to his own habitat after a few moments of hard study to figure out what he wanted to do.

Jalen waylaid him before he could reach his goal. “What are we to do about Manuta?”

Kiel stared at him blankly. “I have not decided,” he said finally. “I am going to rest for a few hours.” It occurred to him abruptly that Danielle had pointed out that the injured men were thirsty, however, and he paused. “See that someone fetches water to the wounded and then everyone should rest for a few hours. We have much to do.”

“Are you alright?” Jalen asked, frowning at him curiously.

“Yes.” The response was automatic. In point of fact, he was not certain that he was ‘alright’. All he could think about was sleeping, though, and he knew that must mean that he needed to.

He was also thirsty, painfully thirsty, but by the time he had managed to reach his habitat, he discovered he did not want water badly enough to fetch it. Instead, he climbed the stairs and collapsed on his bunk, passing from consciousness so fast he did not have time to wonder at it or feel any great concern.

Despite his intention to rest only a few hours, it was bright enough when he woke that he knew it was well past dawn. Except for the fact that he was thirstier than the night before, however, he felt surprisingly well-better than just alright, energized in a way he never had before.

And starving.

He was working on his second breakfast when Jalen and Baen arrived, unannounced. Irritation flickered through him when they simply entered his habitat and strode into



the food preparation area, although he could not have said why it annoyed him. It had been a habit of Jalen's since they had become friends.

He supposed part of the resentment was due to the fact that Baen had kissed Danielle the night before and gained the upper hand when he had challenged him over it.

Then again, he had done a good deal more than kiss her, he thought, a sense of pleased smugness replacing most of his anger.

"Your wound must have been worse than you believed," Jalen said as a conversational opener as he helped himself to one of the meals in Kiel's cabinet. "I had understood that you only meant to sleep a few hours and it is high mid day."

Kiel sent him a startled look, flicked an assessing glance at the rear viewer, and then glared at Baen. "It was bad enough before Baen decided to drive his head into it," he growled. "In any case, I only slept a few hours. It is not much past dawn and it was nearing day when I took to my bunk."

Jalen shrugged. "Still, you are usually up at dawn."

"I would not have driven my head into your gut if I had known you were gut shot," Baen responded tightly. "I could not see that you were wounded at all and you certainly did not behave like anyone injured! You should not have challenged me to start with if you were not up to sparring!"

Kiel glared at him but decided not to try to explain that the fury was only partly because he had found Baen kissing Danielle. It was the fear that she had been hurt and the discovery that, far from it, she appeared to be enjoying herself that had sent him into a blind rage. That seemed illogical even to him, however. He should simply have been relieved that he had been wrong.

In any case, he discovered that he was not nearly as angry about that kiss as he had been.

"What the hell happened last eve?" Baen asked after a moment. "It will take weeks, perhaps months, to repair the damage from what was supposed to have been a simple operation!"

"You have been too preoccupied going over what happened between you and Danielle to question anyone?" Kiel shot at him.

Baen flushed with anger, but a look of smug satisfaction settled over his features for all that that evoked the urge in Kiel to punch him in the face. Jalen slugged him in the jaw, snapping his head sideways before Kiel could decide whether to go with the impulse or not. Surging to his feet, Kiel blocked Baen's attempt to retaliate. "Go outside if you are inclined to spar about it. My habitat is fucked up enough as it is."

Baen and Jalen glared at one another balefully for several moments but apparently decided against sparing for the moment. Jalen settled on a stool with his food and Baen, rubbing his jaw, got up to find something to eat. "No one seems to know what happened," Baen responded finally.

Kiel shrugged. "Manuta had a backup power unit."

"If Manuta suspected we would try to disable it, then it is a very good thing that we struck when we did. Undoubtedly, we were not as discreet as we had thought we were."

“I do not know that Manuta had constructed it for that reason. It may have had the emergency power for some time. You are right, though. Manuta did suspect that we had planned something and it misunderstood. Manuta thought we meant to destroy it, not disable it.”

Jalen and Baen exchanged a long look.

“Well, its logic circuits were clearly defective!” Jalen said angrily. “And Manuta has brought about its own destruction when we had only meant to disable it!”

Kiel frowned. “You have examined it? It is completely destroyed?”

“Heavily damaged. I do not know that we could restore it to the way it was,” Baen answered disgustedly.

Kiel felt the last of his good humor vanish. A sense of loss took its place that was hard to understand. “How many did not recover from their wounds?”

“Nigh sixty have been terminated,” Baen responded. “There are nigh twenty more that are so badly damaged that it will take a while for their nanos to repair them—days, perhaps months. None of us have ever suffered that much damage. There is no way to calculate it.”

Shock rolled over Kiel. “Gods! So many? How?”

“Manuta turned the construction bots on the workers at the project site. They were taken completely off guard. I suppose they thought as we all did that Manuta could not communicate properly with the wall blocking transmissions. Well, we know that for a fact. However, it managed to send out a signal to attack, mayhap contacted those outside who forwarded the communications to the others. We will never be certain, now, and I am not sure that it matters. The deed is done now.”

Kiel frowned. The food he had consumed with such gusto began feel like a rock in his belly. “I think we must accept, though, that Manuta not only realized our intent but had already considered terminating the cyborgs if it was prepared. We thought that we were engaged in a covert operation and we have fought a war.”

Jalen and Baen both looked doubtful and angry, but neither of them argued the matter. Kiel discovered that he had completely lost his appetite and shoved his food away. “How are repairs going?”

“We have not gotten to repairs yet,” Jalen responded. “We have been cleaning up. The server bots are all disabled.”

Kiel frowned at that news. He glanced at Baen after a moment. “We should meet with the other captains and discuss what we are to do next.”

\* \* \* \*

The feeling of well-being that Danielle woke with was akin to coming awake with an adrenaline rush. She didn’t just feel ‘fine’. She felt wonderful, filled with anticipation, happy. Stretching all over, making no attempt to quell the smile that seemed determined to curl her lips, she began a search for the reason behind her good mood. It was a short search. Images began to fill her mind almost instantly of her lovemaking with Kiel the night before, making all the right places tingle with remembered pleasure.

Chuckling with sheer exuberance, she bounded out of bed, not even mildly irritated by the stickiness between her legs, and headed for the shower.

Alright, maybe a little. She'd forgotten when she headed upstairs that she couldn't bathe, damn it! She'd gotten into the habit of taking the one shower allotted to her first thing in the morning to help her wake up. Kiel had been gone by the time she trudged back downstairs again and cleaned up the best she could with the piddling bit of water she could get in the kitchen.

Mildly disappointed that he hadn't stayed long enough for another round, she'd dismissed it with the reflection that it was probably just as well. It wasn't as if she actually felt a need for more. She couldn't recall the last time she'd felt so thoroughly satisfied. It was rather like eating something delicious, though-she wanted more like the first even though she was satisfied.

Well, she thought dismissively, there was more where that came from!

She frowned at that thought, feeling her first twinge of uneasiness. By the time she'd finished bathing, horror had pretty much annihilated her good mood of before.

Not only had she started out trying to seduce Baen and not, she'd practically climbed up Kiel and mounted him without bothering to set any ground rules whatsoever!

"Oh god! This is a disaster!" she muttered, wondering how the hell she was going to manage to establish boundaries, now, when she hadn't made any attempt to establish them before she'd had sex with Kiel.

She tried to convince herself while she was eating her breakfast that she probably didn't really need them but failed since she knew damned well that they didn't even know the customs of their own people, let alone hers!

And he'd left before she could recover her wits enough to even think about it! "Damn it!"

It was unfortunate that it popped in her mind that she'd explained it to Baen. Because the moment she thought about the possibility that he might have passed the information to any of the others, Kiel in particular, she realized that that was not only extremely doubtful. But any attempt on his part to do so after what had happened the night before was likely to result in a fight.

She'd gotten herself into just the kind of mess that she had wanted to avoid at all costs! Baen was obliged to be pissed off that she'd gotten him all worked up and failed to honor her end of the deal and Kiel had already been pissed off about her kissing Baen.

Fortunately, the thought of them fighting distracted her, or at least sent her mind off at a different tangent.

They'd fought a major battle in the settlement the night before while she'd been occupied with Baen down by the river. It was disconcerting that she hadn't even realized what was going on. Not that she hadn't heard the commotion! She had, but she'd dismissed it as night exercises. The construction went on all night anyway and there was always noise emanating from the construction site. It could well have been going on for a while before she even noticed the other noises didn't sound like construction but rather destruction!

Actually, she'd thought, at first, that the booming was a storm coming up. She'd been too focused on Baen to realize that she was hearing gunfire and even when she had, she'd decided it was just night exercises.

It hadn't been, though! Even with darkness shrouding the compound, she'd seen signs of a major battle and it occurred to her abruptly to wonder what the hell had started it. One of the soldiers had said it was Manuta, but why? Right out of the blue, Manuta had suddenly decided to wipe out the settlement?

She had a bad feeling that there'd been nothing 'out of the blue' about it. An uncomfortable sense of guilt settled in the pit of her stomach that she could neither dismiss nor explain. Was it significant that Manuta had tried to wipe out the colony after she came, or not?

She didn't know, but that added to the sense of doom that was rapidly overtaking what was left of the good mood that she'd awakened with.

Dare she go out and see if she could discover what had happened?

Finished with her meal, she got up and paced, thinking it over, trying to decide if it was a really bad idea to try to appease her curiosity or not.

Kiel had seemed to be pissed off about her wandering around outside the night before, but he hadn't specifically ordered her to stay inside. He'd said before that she could come and go as she liked as long as she didn't leave the settlement without an escort for protection. Did that still apply? Or had the rules changed when Manuta attacked?

Maybe she was overreacting, she thought hopefully? Maybe Kiel hadn't really thought anything about it. He'd wanted to fuck. She'd obliged, and he'd left satisfied?

That wasn't a particularly happy thought, she discovered. She decided she didn't want to examine it too closely. She hadn't just established the ground rules for Baen's benefit. She'd been marking her own boundaries. They needed to have at least some idea of what sort of behavior was acceptable and what wasn't if they were going to charge off planet in search of mates. She owed it to her own people to make certain of that even if she hadn't offered to befriend the Danu in an effort to gain allies.

Not that she was trying to convince herself that her motives were purely altruistic! She'd realized fairly quickly that she was pretty needy herself.

And there was nothing wrong with that!

Not as long as she was upfront about the limitations, which she hadn't been with Kiel!

As unpleasant as it was to consider discussing it after the fact she realized she didn't really have a choice. She needed to be sure that Kiel understood that what had happened between them the night before was nothing more than two people appeasing their needs. She couldn't allow him to get the idea that she was willing to have a baby for him-any baby right now for anybody!

She doubted that they thought in the terms she was used to. Despite her attempts to explain, she was pretty sure they were still looking at mating as being a onetime shot and then moving on to the next available female as quickly as possible. Didn't the fact that Kiel had left as soon as he'd finished support that?

It was amazing how much that thought irritated her! And depressed her.

She shook it off, reflecting that it could only be considered a good thing if she was right. It would definitely make things easier when she had to explain her position on

the subject. It probably wasn't even necessary, but she couldn't take the chance that he might have misunderstood. She wasn't a Politian, but even she could see that it could make for really bad relations between the Danu and her people if they started out with a misunderstanding like that.

\* \* \* \*

Baen, Kiel, Aeyn and Dex stood on the city wall watching the armies approach from the south, east, and west, their expressions grim. There were others moving in from the north-in fact from all points between.

"I had not expected this," Aeyn said finally.

"Manuta summoned them before we could shut it down," Dex said with conviction. "They know only what Manuta told them."

"That seems likely," Kiel agreed dryly. "We will have to go out and negotiate a truce."

Baen frowned, his mind leaping instantly from the strategic disaster they were facing to Danielle. "I think we should discuss strategies with our first lieutenants before we leave Manu for any attempt at negotiations."

The other three glanced at him sharply. "It will not hurt, though I do not see much point in it," Dex responded, voicing the thoughts of the others.

"Danielle will be safest inside of Manuta's complex," Baen said pointedly.

"There is no place that she will be safe if we are overrun," Aeyn countered. "She would only be safe until they have destroyed us."

"He is right," Kiel responded after a few moments thought. "We cannot remove her from harm's way this time. If we had completed her ship in this time, there would be an option, but we have not. It will be better to take her with us."

"How will that be safer for her?" Baen demanded.

Kiel studied him for a long moment. "They will protect her."

Baen felt his belly tighten, but he knew Kiel was right as little as he liked it. With the entire military force of Marchet advancing upon their colony, Manu, there could be no safer place for her than among the captains of the approaching army. He swallowed a little sickly. "I will fetch her."

Kiel instantly felt an objection to that, but he tamped it. He had been fighting the urge to return to her almost from the moment he had left her. He was uncertain why, but each time it came to mind he felt an unaccountable uneasiness slither through him.

He had not asked her if she was willing to mate with him. He had ... He was not entirely certain what had happened, but the fear churned in his belly each time he considered approaching her again that he had not behaved acceptably and she would react badly to seeing him again. If he had had some idea of how to defend his actions, he realized, he would not have felt so reluctant, but he did not-not when he had no clear memory of what had happened.

Beyond what he had done, that is. He remembered all of that with sharp clarity. He remembered how he had felt even more clearly than that.

He realized after a few moments that that was why he was uneasy about facing her again. Even at a distance, all that ran through his mind when he thought of her was repeating the experience and he had a very bad feeling that if he approached her he would be less able to think rationally than he had been the first time.

All things considered, it was probably for the best if Baen did go to fetch her. He merely nodded acceptance, therefore. "We will summon the other captains and our lieutenants and meet in the center of the settlement."

He did not have to go far to find Jalen. As soon as he dropped from the wall, Jalen was waiting for him. "This is very bad," Jalen observed. "What is the plan?"

Kiel sent him a grim look. "We are meeting with the other captains and their lieutenants shortly. Walk with me."

Jalen nodded and fell into step beside him. "Where is Baen going?" he asked suspiciously.

"To fetch Danielle," Kiel responded shortly.

"You are sending her with him after what the bastard did the last time her safety was entrusted to him?" Jalen demanded indignantly.

Images rose instantly to Kiel's mind, but the memory of what he had discovered at the river did not linger many seconds before it was replaced by his own encounter with her shortly afterward. "We are not entrusting her safety to him," he said tightly. "We are taking her to the others."

Jalen halted abruptly. "What the fuck for?"

Kiel flicked a glance at him and kept walking. In a moment, Jalen caught up again. "Why?"

"It should not take much consideration to understand," Kiel snapped. "We cannot protect her."

"Not here, certainly."

"Not on this planet!" Kiel growled impatiently. "We will not go down without a fight, but we will go down, Jalen, if they attack. Our forces are already weakened by the battle with Manuta. We have only the advantage of the battlements, and that is no great advantage against our own people-against the natives of this world, yes, but not against our own kind. We are outnumbered six to one."

Garyk, and Kaydn and their lieutenants had already arrived at the rendezvous point when they reached it. Aeyn and Dex and their lieutenants joined them moments later.

Kiel listened absently as Garyk, Kaydn, Aeyn, and Dex immediately began discussing tactics, watching Danielle's habitat until she emerged with Baen. Baen's lieutenant, Devlyn, joined the pair before they reached the group awaiting them, but Kiel's focus was on Danielle.

His heart had begun to hammer uncomfortably fast from the moment he'd seen her emerge. Since his memories of their moments together instantly leapt into his mind, he had no trouble understanding it. The dread and discomfort he also felt were a little harder to comprehend.

He was not happy at the necessity of handing her over to the others, though, and supposed that accounted for it.

Relief niggled at the edges of the desire thrumming through him, but it was not until he realized that she did not show any sign of injury that it dawned on him it was the result of uneasiness that he had been too focused on appeasing his desires to know if he had been hurtful. It discomfited him to know that he had experienced such a loss of control that he had been anxious and uncertain.

It was more disturbing to discover that she seemed to go out of her way not to look at him directly.

“Why has Baen brought Captain Danielle?” Kaydn asked abruptly, breaking Kiel’s focus on her.

“She will be safer with the army outside if negotiations for peace fail,” Kiel ground out.

It was clear from their expressions that their gut reaction was to dispute the comment, but none did.

“Are we settled on our defense tactic?” Baen asked when he arrived.

Danielle glanced from Baen to Kiel then for the first time since she had left the habitat and met his gaze for a long moment, long enough he felt his heart behave very strangely when he noticed color surge into her cheeks and an odd little smile curl her lips. He felt as if his chest had inflated with air, felt a dizzying wave of some unidentifiable emotion sweep through him.

“I do not see that there is much to discuss. They will decide to divide their forces and attack from all sides,” Garyk responded after a moment. “We are a weaker force. It will weaken us further if we must divide the forces we have to protect the settlement. I do not see that we have a choice but to prepare for an assault from every direction.”

Garyk’s comments penetrated Kiel’s absorption with Danielle, directing his mind to the problem at hand. He frowned, lifting his head to study the walls. They had not been designed to stand up to their own forces. They would not hold long. “We could improve our own odds if we could gain control of what is left of the robot guards,” he said finally.

The others looked at him sharply and then turned to stare at the now silent machines that Manuta had turned upon them.

“We do not even know that we could power Manuta up again. Beyond that, it is far more likely to turn them upon us as it did before,” Aeyn said angrily.

“We do not need Manuta to control them,” Kiel countered.

“We cannot control them without a central computer!” Dex snapped.

“I did not suggest that we could. However, we have Danielle’s onboard computer. It could control them and order them to defend the city from invaders.”

Everyone stared at Kiel for a long moment before transferring their attention to Danielle.

“What?” Danielle demanded uneasily when she discovered she had everyone’s attention.

“We may have need of your onboard computer, Gertrude, to control the robots. Would it do as you commanded?” Kiel asked.

Danielle frowned. "Of course she would! She's designed to follow my orders. I just don't see how she could control them without a good bit of programming."

"You have remote access to Gertrude?" Baen asked sharply.

Danielle glanced at him, blinking. "Uh ... yes," she said slowly. "But why would I need to?"

Baen and Kiel exchanged a glance.

"We are taking you with us to negotiate with the force outside our walls. You must be able to access Gertrude from the rendezvous point in case of need."

Danielle gaped at him. "What force outside the wall?"

The men glanced at one another.

"Manuta summoned the men from the other settlements when we attempted to disable it, believing that we were attacking," Kiel said tightly. "They have arrived. I believe that they will stand down once we have spoken, but we cannot be certain and we will need help defending the city if they do not."

Danielle felt the blood drain from her face. "How many?"

Kiel and Baen exchanged a look.

"Six hundred in each of the settlements," Baen responded reluctantly.

Danielle felt a wave of dizziness wash over her. "How many settlements?" she asked a little hoarsely, visions of the aftermath of the battle she'd already seen dancing in her head. She discovered that they seemed reluctant to furnish her with that information.

"Can you do it if it becomes necessary?" Kiel asked sharply.

"Yes!" Danielle snapped. "I mean, if I have my communicator I can ... if you haven't taken it apart. I don't understand why you want me to go with you to talk to them. I can't even speak Danu."

The men all glanced at one another uneasily. Finally, one of the others, whom she didn't know by name, responded. "They may not believe us if we tell them about you unless they see you."

Danielle frowned. "I still don't see what it's got to do with me."

That time the look they shared was significant. Danielle just couldn't decide what it signified.

"I will fetch Danielle's communicator," Kiel said decisively. "Find the best men to handle reconfiguration of Manuta's circuits and integration with Gertrude's. They must work quickly. We will meet up again on the wall."

Danielle stared after the men as they split up and strode briskly away and finally turned to Baen. "What was that all about?"

Baen studied her face and finally looked away. "We must consider that the others will not negotiate a peaceful agreement. If they will not, then we will fight. We are outnumbered so it will be important to control the soldier bots to even the odds as much as possible."

Danielle blinked at him. Her stomach was churning with nerves and the prospect they'd outlined for her was enough to make it nearly impossible to think straight. She



still had the distinct feeling that there were undercurrents that she hadn't entirely grasped, that there was more to this than they'd told her.

Setting aside the fact that she didn't want to go out and meet the advancing army, she was pretty sure it wasn't actually logical to include her. What was she supposed to add to the equation? Not only did she not speak Danu, she didn't have a very clear idea of what was going on, certainly not clear enough to try to reason with the army advancing on them.

It occurred to her after a little frantic searching that she couldn't be any worse off going with them, though. It placed all of them in the immediate danger of being captured-possibly even killed-which she didn't care for. She didn't especially want to be in the thick of things if everything went south, though, and an assault was launched on the colony.

That bit of reasoning seemed sound, and it still didn't make her feel a lot better. In fact, when she saw Kiel returning with her communicator, her stomach cramped so badly with pure, undiluted fear that she had to struggle to maintain even a façade of bravery.

It wasn't as if she hadn't faced the possibility of death many times since she'd joined the colony militia and become a pilot. She had engaged in a number of battles-but from a pilot's seat. She had been trained in hand-to-hand combat, but everyone knew it was very unlikely she would ever have to use it or get the chance to use it. Her hatred of the Nubiens might have sustained her in that circumstance, but these weren't Nubiens. They were mechanically enhanced Danu and while she didn't suppose she could consider them friends or even allies, not when they'd never actually said they would be, she still didn't have the motive of hate to buoy her.

Baen caught her attention once more as she took the communicator from Kiel and fastened it to her wrist. "It will give us more of an advantage if we meet the army before they are upon us."

Danielle nodded a little jerkily.

His lips tightened. "We will fly out to meet them."

Danielle nodded again although the statement threw her into a state of confusion.

How were they going to fly out to meet the advancing army when they didn't appear to have any sort of transports, let alone flying transport, she wondered a little blankly?

"There is nothing for you to fear. You understand that?"

She blinked at Baen and glanced at Kiel uncertainly. Nothing to fear? When they were outnumbered ten to one? Were they that confident they could negotiate peace? That heroic? Or did they just lack both imagination and emotion?

Kiel and Baen both shifted into the dragon-like creatures they had before while she was still trying to figure out what he meant. Danielle's heart slammed against her ribs. She felt the blood rush from her head so fast it left icy cold in its wake.

The beast in front of her grabbed her in a bear-hug. "Not hurt," he said in a rumbling growl that was barely recognizable as speech, let alone English. "Baen."

She didn't struggle because she was too petrified to move, not because she was reassured in any way. In fact, the shock wave that went through her made it impossible to assimilate much of anything for many moments. When he flapped his

wings and launched the two of them airborne, it penetrated the fog, but it only added to her fear.

Slowly, her mind put the pieces together as they reached the city wall and other dragon-like creatures joined them and she realized what was happening. It didn't comfort her much, but the sheer terror eased its grip on her-for a handful of moments, anyway. She'd just begun to unthaw slightly when she looked out at the field beyond the city at the men they were approaching and discovered a hoard of beast men instead.

?

## **Chapter Twelve**

"Think attack," Kiel-beast said from beside them. "Land here."

Danielle turned to look at him when she heard his growly voice, but her mind didn't assimilate what he meant until she felt her feet settle on the ground and noticed the man-beasts that had joined them on the wall had landed all around them. They shifted back into the forms she'd come to recognize.

That's why they run around in loincloths, she thought with sudden, completely irrelevant insight! It was for the convenience of being able to shift almost instantly if provoked without having to waste time stripping off clothing!

As unimportant as that sudden understanding seemed, though, she discovered it wasn't as irrelevant as she'd first thought. It also explained why they'd settled to the ground while they were still a good distance from the army.

The men they were approaching had interpreted their altered state as a sign of aggression and reacted accordingly. Even as she turned to survey them, they began to resume their humanoid appearance.

That might have comforted her except that the force they were facing produced another thought that had been rattling around in the back of her mind unacknowledged.

She was the only woman on the whole damned planet!

That realization was almost as paralyzing as being surrounded by beast men. She wasn't certain if it was more threatening, or less, but she couldn't think straight. She felt threatened on a whole new level and there was no dismissing it, she discovered, no matter how closely she huddled near the men surrounding her. It wasn't until they finally stopped walking, in point of fact, that she realized they'd begun advancing toward the army as soon as they'd landed and that she was nearly plastered against

Kiel-close enough she was nearly stepping on his feet. She didn't even have any recollection of moving away from Baen and toward Kiel.

Around a dozen men from the opposing force broke away from the others as they neared and strode toward them. That cheered Danielle slightly. At least it seemed they were willing to talk!

It comforted her even more when they all stopped and Baen and Kiel seemed to close ranks in front of her. Feeling slightly more confident, she peered at the men in the new group, trying to assess the threat.

It unnerved her to discover that she had their undivided attention. Not one of them spoke until Kiel had finished saying whatever it was that he'd come to say. A dead silence fell when he ceased speaking. It lasted so long Danielle felt her nerves tightening to the point that they felt ready to snap. Finally, the men seemed to emerge from their catatonia and everyone began to talk at once. She couldn't tell if they were arguing or if it was a discussion of terms, or something else entirely, but she finally decided it wasn't an argument. They seemed more excited than angry, but she sensed a lessening in tension in the body language of the group she was with after a while.

After perhaps twenty minutes of 'discussion' some of the men from the opposing group left. Shifting into the dragon-like beasts, they flew off. Danielle, unable to understand a damned thing that was going on, watched them until they vanished from sight.

They'd all taken different directions. After considering it for a while, she finally decided they must have gone to speak to the other forces surrounding the city. That supposition seemed born up when, about thirty minutes later, the men who'd left returned accompanied by more men. She'd begun to tire enough to release tension by that time. It wasn't possible to maintain high alert when weariness wore on anxiety and she felt less threatened as time wore on.

The new arrivals sent up fresh flags of worry, though, and she sidled closer to Baen when Kiel moved away from her. What she really wanted, she realized fairly quickly, was the comfort of being even closer.

She didn't dare demand it, however. The men weren't staring at her quite as hard as they had been, but she knew they were keenly aware of every move she made. She didn't know how they might react if she flung her arms around Baen in a demand that he do the same for her.

This was a military/political situation and the desire was completely inappropriate, no matter how badly she felt like she needed the comfort.

As time wore on, she finally decided that they must be negotiating as Kiel had suggested they would. It was a relief that rapidly became downright boring when she couldn't understand a damned thing anybody was saying. Under other circumstances, she would probably have demanded to have everything explained. She'd been too frightened at first even to consider it, though, and once the worst of the fright had worn off reason had reared its head.

This was between the Danu and had nothing to do with her. None of them would appreciate her sticking her nose into it and the situation might be delicate enough that she could upset things by attempting to thrust herself forward.

Finally, Kiel turned to look at her. “Will you take fright again if I shift to carry you back?”

Danielle felt the blood leave her face at the prospect, but she shook her head. Something gleamed in his eyes, amusement, she thought. He held out his hands. “Come then.”

After glancing at Baen, she moved to Kiel and slid her arms around his waist, pressing her face to his chest and squeezing her eyes closed. She felt a shudder run through him. When she eased away to look up at him, though, she discovered his lips twitching with suppressed amusement. “It will work better, I think, if you turn the other way.”

Feeling her face heat, Danielle released her grip on him and turned around to put her back to him. He coiled his arms around her. Even as she looked down at his arms, they changed. She felt him bend his knees as they bumped into the backs of her thighs and then he launched the two of them into the air. She heard the whoosh of wings pounding the air and the rush of the wind around them. Her stomach, which went briefly weightless, settled. The ground below rushed past them dizzily, but she discovered when she lifted her head to look forward it wasn’t as disorienting. In a few moments, he settled in the city. Instead of releasing her immediately, he held her.

She felt warmth shimmy in her belly until she realized he was removing her communicator. “You will not need this after all.”

Danielle whirled to look at him as he snatched it off and released her, stunned at the implication. Anger followed closely on the heels of her surprise and her lips tightened with it. Instead of demanding to know what had been settled, she turned away, found her bearings, and stalked off. She couldn’t resist flicking a glance back in his direction when she reached the habitat, although she’d told herself she wouldn’t let him know that she gave a damn what he thought. She was spared his discovery by the fact that he’d already turned away himself.

Seething, she stalked into the habitat and flounced down on the couch to sulk. “Well! That truce didn’t last long!” she muttered. “So much for trust!”

They’d trusted her enough to, basically, give her command of the robot forces but now they didn’t?

What the hell was going on? Beyond the fact that it appeared that they’d come to some sort of terms, she didn’t have a damned clue!

\* \* \* \*

Kiel realized he should simply be relieved at the alacrity with which the others had fallen into their plan, but his uneasiness lingered. It had been bad enough, though, when they had had six hundred deprived males lusting over Danielle. To have ten times that was ten times worse!

Granted, they had fallen to working with a will. With the addition of the men from the other colonies, it seemed likely that they would have the building finished and Danielle’s redesigned ship ready in a matter of days, but would that be soon enough to prevent bloodshed?

He realized that he would not truly be easy in his mind until they had removed Danielle from Marchet and the potential for disaster that still hung over them all.

After some discussion among the captains of each of the platoons, it had been decided to send a portion of the soldiers of each colony back to protect their interests and another portion to fetch supplies for those who would stay to work on the fleet of ships that everyone had agreed they needed-the majority, Kiel mentally amended. There was still a faction that preferred the idea of repairing Manuta's production facilities, at the very least, so that they could produce female counterparts with the DNA samples Manuta had, using their new understanding of the female attained from examining Danielle.

The argument had been heated but fairly brief. They had been given the go ahead to begin repairing Manuta with an eye to producing female colonists that were as they were-cyborgs but Danu.

Kiel surveyed the men surrounding him and waited for a lull in the discussions. "Manuta has redesigned Captain Danielle's ship to accommodate a crew of four. I will take Jalen and Danielle and go to the home world to negotiate for mates for the colony. From there, we will return to Danielle's home world and discuss the possibility with her people."

The statement produced a profound silence.

"I will also go!" Baen said tightly. "Danielle has indicated that she will be receptive to being my mate. I will accompany her."

Kiel slid an assessing glance at him. He was almost certain it was pure falsehood, but he decided it would not be in anyone's best interest to challenge him in front of the others.

His hope that his plans would not be challenged went unrewarded, however.

"Why the three of you?" Nail of Otoua demanded after a brief pause.

"She is more accustomed to us. We have befriended her-and she has indicated that she is willing to consider all three of us as mates. It will be far easier to achieve our mission in this way. She would be willing to cooperate with us whereas she might feel threatened by others she does not know as she does us."

Baen reddened with anger and looked like he might explode, but he was not so far gone as to challenge the lie that Kiel had told.

In any case, it was not a lie, Kiel reminded himself. She had allowed him to mate with her. True, he had not asked. He had taken, but she had not become angry and shunned him. That seemed close enough to acceptance to him.

Not that he had intended to include Jalen. He had simply chosen Jalen to accompany them because he trusted him-not so much with Danielle-but more than the others.

"The objective," he said pointedly, "is to remedy our situation with as much dispatch as possible, yes?"

"Her people are at war, however," Jarl of Nissa pointed out.

"Yes. As I said before, we must ally ourselves with her people in order to negotiate for women-which means that we must fight a war. This is one of the reasons that the fleet is necessary. We might also find ourselves at war with our own people. Another possibility. We have no idea how they might receive the news that Manuta decided to create us from the gene pool entrusted to it. They may simply refuse to have anything to do with us. We will know nothing until we have gone to Chab, the mother world."

“Even if it is true that she has accepted the three of you as mates, I do not see why she would not accept others,” Nail growled.

Kiel’s anger rose, but so, too, did his uneasiness. “This is because you do not understand the way of higher beings in mate choosing. It is different from what we have understood because we have had nothing to base an understanding upon beyond the breeding of beasts. This is more complex because we are more complex!”

Most of the men looked skeptical.

“Exactly how are we to learn this with no females? Which is what we will have if you take Captain Danielle and leave!” Nail snapped irritably.

“She offered to teach me the ways and the mating customs,” Baen responded tightly. “I will learn and then I will forward the information to the data banks where all may learn.”

“We will learn,” Kiel corrected him in a low growl.

Baen narrowed his eyes at him, but he did not argue. “There is no other way that would be practical or that would allow all to learn quickly. We will want to be prepared to entice mates as soon as they are available.”

They at least agreed with that, although Kiel could see they were far from happy about it.

“Trust,” Baen emphasized, “is essential. This is why it is critical that I go with her. She has formed trust with me. Beyond that, the number one rule is that they must consent. If they are forced, then it destroys trust and if trust is destroyed then they will not allow mating.”

Kiel had been ready to argue that he had also formed trust with her until that comment. A wave of cold followed by nausea went through him then. Exactly what, he wondered, constituted force?

She had not fought him—he did not think. He certainly could not recall that she had. She had also clung closely to him when she had been frightened of the others. Did that not mean that she trusted him to protect her?

He realized that he was not as certain as he wanted to be, but he sure as fuck was not going to ask Baen!

Mayhap he should ask Danielle?

He considered that for a few moments and discarded it. She might say that she had not agreed and that he had broken her trust and refuse to allow him to accompany her and he was damned well going with her!

“We have waited many years even to reach this point where there is some chance of attaining mates. We will have to remain patient until we can resolve the issues standing in our way,” he said finally.

No one seemed inclined to, but, to his relief, they accepted what they realized they could not change.

\* \* \* \*

Danielle didn't know what to think when the army that had arrived stayed, but she was unable to see enough to satisfy her curiosity from the viewers. All she could tell was that they seemed to have made peace and were working together.

She couldn't ask Baen, Kiel, or Jalen, even if she'd felt inclined to-and she was still pissed off with Kiel! They were conspicuous by their absence. She decided after her nerves had settled a little to take a stroll and see what she could find out, but the moment she stepped outside she encountered so much attention it was all she could do not to whirl around and flee back inside. Every man within sight, and there must have been a thousand, at least, stopped in their tracks and stared at her like pointers.

Just to prove they didn't scare the pure piss out of her, she made a great show of walking around for all of ten minutes and headed back to the habitat. She was shaking all over by the time she got back inside, though, and she decided she would just wait for an opportunity to talk to Baen-or even Kiel.

Nearly a week passed before any of the three showed up. She didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry that it was Jalen, but she finally decided it was a relief. She still wasn't comfortable about what had transpired between her, Baen, and Kiel and she had a bad feeling that both of them were pissed off at her. Besides that, she was still insulted that Kiel had behaved as if he actually trusted her and then took her communicator back!

"We are in the process of testing. Kiel sent me to ask if you would like to help in this."

"Testing what?" Danielle asked blankly.

Jalen stared at her in confusion. "The ship."

Danielle blinked. "My ship?" she gasped after a moment. "They've got it repaired? Already?"

"Modified," Jalen corrected.

A jolt went through her. Danielle frowned. "What sort of modifications?"

"It has been modified to accommodate a four people crew."

Danielle bit her lip. "Person," she corrected. "I'm confused. Does this mean you still intend to return to the home world of the Danu?"

"Yes. We will go there and then we will go to your people and offer to fight as allies against .... Who are you fighting?"

"The Nubiens."

He nodded. "We will kill them and then we will negotiate for mates ... for the others."

Single minded! That was a big surprise, Danielle thought dryly. Actually, she supposed it was understandable given their situation.

She was too excited at the possibility that the ship was nearly ready to allow that to bother her, or the stares. In any case, it wasn't nearly as bad, she discovered, with Jalen escorting her as it had seemed when she'd gone out by herself. Either they weren't drawing nearly as much attention or she just couldn't see that many staring in her direction because Jalen blocked the view.

She was still relieved when they'd reached the city gate until she discovered there were more outside the gates than inside. "Good god! There must be thousands of ... uh ... Danu!"

“Yes. Though many returned to guard the other colonies. They must be protected for the mates all would soon have.”

Well, they didn’t lack for confidence! Not that they had any reason to!

A shockwave went through Danielle when they finally reached the hanger the Danu had built and stepped inside, and it wasn’t just because the ship she saw bore almost no resemblance to the one she’d crashed. There were two more ships being built to match the one they’d apparently finished. Uneasiness slithered through her. “I didn’t realize that you were building more.”

Jalen looked at her in surprise. “We cannot ally ourselves with your people against their enemies without ships.”

Danielle gaped at him. Discounting the off-handed reference Jalen had made about the possibility, they hadn’t said they meant to. In fact, although it had been Kiel she’d discussed the possibility with, even he hadn’t mentioned it since, let alone indicated that he had decided to ... or they had decided to.

She supposed she should have realized just from the way Jalen spoke of it that it was settled as far as they were concerned but it was still a shock to walk right up on the discovery that they were already building a fleet-when they hadn’t even yet had contact with anyone but her!

She frowned as a thought suddenly occurred to her. “Is this why Manuta attacked? Because you had decided to become our allies?”

He looked confused. “Manuta attacked because it believed we meant to destroy it. Did none tell you that?”

She was pretty sure she’d heard that even if they hadn’t told her directly. However, no one had bothered to explain that it had anything to do with her and yet he seemed to be saying that Manuta had opposed helping her and that was what had brought on the entire battle. In point of fact, she’d been under the impression that Kiel, at least, still didn’t especially trust her.

Did it matter? It looked as if they meant to take her back and that was the important thing, wasn’t it?

Well, that and the fact that they seemed to have decided to ally themselves with the Federation forces.

Considering none of them had made it a point to tell her, though, how much could she trust them? And what could she do about it even if this was some ploy to get her to lead them back home so that they could attack?

It occurred to her rather forcefully that they didn’t actually need her to lead them to her home base. That information would have been in Gertrude’s memory banks and they’d clearly accessed everything she knew.

How much did they know, though, about navigating space when they had never even been in space?

It didn’t seem to be anything they were particularly worried about. When she’d climbed the gang plank, she found both Kiel and Baen inside the ship inspecting it. Both men glanced at her when she reached what had been a tiny cockpit and was now a sizeable bridge with stations for a pilot, co-pilot, and navigator. They seemed



focused on their work, however. There was no lightening of their intense looks of concentration in greeting.

Gertrude was chatting with them when she arrived-in Danu.

Danielle blinked, struggling with an odd sense of betrayal. "You programmed Gertrude to speak Danu?"

"The men who installed the computer did so," Kiel responded a little absently. "Not all have learned your language ... or wish to."

"What do you mean by that?" Danielle asked, immediately suspicious.

Baen, Kiel, and Jalen all looked at her with a mixture of surprise and speculation.

"Those who expect to find mates among our own people see no need for the information," Baen said simply.

Danielle thought that over, trying to decide if it was just that simple or if he was saying some of them had no intention of allying themselves with the Federation. "So ... they don't mean to be allies?"

Baen and Kiel exchanged another look.

"Not at this point," Kiel said finally.

She frowned, still confused. "They're against us?"

"They do not mean to set themselves as enemies," Baen said. "They are simply more interested in an alliance with our own people."

Which meant that they would be enemies if the Danu decided humans were some sort of threat, right?

She tried to shrug it off with the reflection that she was nothing but a soldier herself and not competent to handle any sort of political alliance, but it was hard to do when she had to worry about whether it was even safe to take them back to Meridie with her or not. The only thing that she really knew about them with any certainty at all was that they were more dangerous than any Nubien could hope to be-many times stronger, more intelligent, and virtually indestructible, which made them completely fearless.

They didn't seem especially aggressive, though, she told herself. Until she'd arrived, they'd seemed perfectly content to stay where they were.

Of course, she knew that was because, before she arrived, they'd been following Manuta and Manuta's primary function seemed to be to prepare a colony for the Danu-which became theirs when Manuta created them.

They'd shut Manuta down, however. They were operating entirely upon their own desires now. On the surface, that seemed more of an extension of Manuta's directive than anything else-except their natural instincts-but she had a bad feeling that would change the moment they met any sort of opposition ... or not. Actually, the bad feeling was that they wouldn't tolerate any opposition. They were absolutely focused on finding mates to reproduce and she was afraid that anyone who tried to stop them would become an enemy.

It was almost as bad, she realized, as the fight they already had-territorial-except this was going to be on a much more personal level. They didn't want the land. They seemed satisfied with what they had. They wanted women and that was liable to touch off an even more ferocious war than the one they were currently engaged in.

Kiel got up after a moment and offered her the pilot's seat, which he'd been occupying. "You will want to check the systems."

Surprise flickered through Danielle, but she settled in the seat he had vacated. It was warm from his body, made her feel almost as if she was wrapped in his embrace and that was oddly comforting-probably ridiculous, but she still found herself relaxing fractionally. "Gertrude, give me a run down on systems' check."

"I have just given Captain Kiel of Manu a report."

Danielle narrowed her eyes at the console. "Don't give me any lip, damn it! I don't understand Danu. Just do it!"

"Affirmative ...."

As irritated as she was that Kiel had not only already run a system's check, but Gertrude had copped an attitude with her, Danielle listened intently while Gertrude gave her a rundown on the ship's status. It was dismaying to discover that the ship bore little resemblance to the one she'd crashed. She supposed she should have expected it given that it had been altered so radically in appearance, but she hadn't. She'd actually expected that everything would be pretty much the same, only bigger. They'd changed even the drive, however, and the fuel the ship used and made modifications that she had no idea what they were, let alone how they worked.

"You should learn the Danu language," Gertrude added when she'd finished the systems' check.

Danielle's lips tightened with irritation but it occurred to her after a moment to wonder if it was some sort of cryptic warning. "I expect I'll have time to learn. Are we ready for a test run?"

"Affirmative."

Danielle glanced at Kiel instinctively for approval, feeling anticipation surging through her. "You game?"

He frowned, confusion flickering in his eyes.

"Shall we take it out for a test flight?"

His dark brows rose. "This is unnecessary. Everything has been checked and found to be functioning as expected."

"I'll feel better to test it," Danielle retorted irritably.

Kiel studied her a long moment and then glanced at Baen. Apparently Baen didn't object. Nodding, Kiel strode from the bridge. She heard him bellow from the open hatch that everyone should stand clear and then the sound of the gang plank being retracted.

Her good humor restored, Danielle focused on the instrument panel. "Bay doors."

"There are no bay doors," Gertrude responded.

Danielle gaped at Gertrude's optical. "You are shitting me? No fucking doors? How the hell are we supposed to launch?"

"Vertically," Kiel responded as he entered the bridge again.

Danielle whipped a sharp look at him. Fighters couldn't launch vertically-at least hers hadn't been capable of it before ... which meant she also didn't have any experience launching that way. "Alrighty then. Straight up, Gertrude."

She heard a loud mechanical noise above the craft and the scraping sound of metal. Looking up, she discovered that there was a view port above her and that a section of the building's roof was slowly sliding away.

Obviously, they didn't let grass grow under their feet when they had a project to complete! They'd built the hanger from the ground up in less than a month and completely remodeled and reassembled her ship in the same time.

It actually didn't inspire a lot of confidence in their work, Danielle thought uneasily, feeling her stomach sink as the ship began to rise slowly from the floor. It relieved her a good bit that the rise was a smooth, vertical climb. She couldn't detect even a hint of a shimmy, a rattle, or a wobble.

She glanced at Kiel. "You may want to take a seat and strap in."

Surprise flickered across his features, but he looked around and moved to the only vacant chair on the bridge, the jump seat. While she was securing herself, Danielle heard the rustle and metallic click as the men behind her fastened their safety harnesses.

Take offs and landings had always been the most nerve wracking part of piloting to Danielle and she felt her belly tying itself in knots. Actually, she amended as she took the ship out, any flight within a gravitational field unnerved her. Once she was beyond the pull of a planet, she was good. There was nothing to hit and nowhere to fall. It made it all the more nerve wracking that the ship was not at all like the one she was used to piloting and untested. As she took it through its paces, however, and it performed beautifully with each maneuver, she began to relax very quickly and enjoy the feel of the power beneath her fingertips.

For a while, the realization that it was very unlikely that there was another Federation ship to compare to it filled her with pleasure and excitement. Slowly, it came to her that that wasn't necessarily a good thing. If they did really mean to ally themselves with the Federation, it was great. If they decided against it at any point, the ship and the others like it would be just one more nail in their coffins.

"Very good," she said finally, trying to moderate her praise of the ship's performance as she turned to look at the men.

One look at their faces was enough to assure her that they weren't nearly as enchanted with the ship's performance as she was. They were all pale and their expressions strained. Amusement flickered through her when it dawned on her that this was the first time they'd ever flown inside anything. Apparently, it was a lot more disturbing to them than using their wings!

"Ready to take it out for a real test?" she asked Kiel.

"This is not a real test?" he croaked through stiff lips.

Danielle bit her lip and looked away. "Well, it came through the first tests with flying colors. We need to take it into space, though, and then re-entry to be sure everything is working properly."

"Then do it," Baen growled, his tone indicating he was bracing himself for torture.

"Kiel? Jalen?"

"Yes," Jalen replied weakly.

"If it must be done ...." Kiel agreed, sounding a little nauseated.

“You heard them Gertrude! Kick it in the ass!” Danielle said cheerfully, struggling with a mixture of amusement, a mean streak she hadn’t realized she had, and sudden inspiration.

She’s forgotten all about her enjoyment in tormenting them by the time the ship threw off the chains of gravity and shot off into space, partly because of her own discomfort and partly because the ship, once again, had performed with excellence. Focused now on serious testing, she accelerated until they flew past the planet’s nearest natural satellite, whipped around it and dove toward the planet again, punching through the atmosphere in a freefall before she pulled up and headed out again.

The second time they hit space, the men threw off their harnesses and stampeded off the bridge, jockeying for first position to lead the way. By the time Danielle was able to throw off her surprise and figure out how to release her seat to swivel, she discovered Kiel had disappeared and Baen and Jalen were fighting to get through the same door at the same time.

“Artificial gravity on,” she commanded Gertrude.

She honestly hadn’t thought beyond the fact that they were going to be puking all over the place without gravity to direct it, but the sudden engagement slammed both of them into the floor. They didn’t bother to get up, or maybe they weren’t able at the moment? The sound of puking in treble reached her. Her stomach rolled in sympathy, banishing the last of her amusement.

“You guys alright?” she asked when the sounds finally stopped.

The sound of running water greeted her.

“Uh oh. Little accident.”

Kiel finally staggered back onto the bridge, collapsed in the chair he’d occupied before and grappled with his harness. Danielle flicked a sympathetic glance in his direction, but he was clearly too miserable to notice. Feeling like a complete asshole, she focused on Gertrude’s readouts on the ship’s performance until she heard Baen and Jalen return and settle in their seats.

“You know,” she said slowly. “You guys don’t actually have to go with me. I could contact your home world and deliver any message you wanted to give them.”

\* \* \* \*

Danielle had a bad feeling as Kiel, Baen, and Jalen escorted her from the hanger back to her habitat in the city. None of them had said much the entire time she was testing the ship. They hadn’t even acted particularly pissed off.

Of course that might have been because even after they’d emptied their stomachs they were still having problems adjusting to the weightlessness of space. They might have been simmering with resentment the entire time, but they hadn’t seemed to be.

“What the fuck was that?” Kiel growled the moment they were alone in the habitat again.

Danielle blinked at him. “I’m not sure what you mean,” she responded a little weakly.

“The aerial acrobatics,” Baen snarled.

Fear, indignation, and guilt moved over Danielle in hot and cold waves. “I wasn’t just fucking around to scare the piss out of you guys!” she exclaimed hotly-lie, lie, lie. “Those were necessary stress tests!”

“Ours or the ship?” Jalen demanded indignantly.

Danielle chewed her lower lip. “Look, I wasn’t thinking about the fact that none of you had been in a ship before-really!” Lie, lie, lie. “And I certainly didn’t do it just to ... scare you or anything. That’s the way we test the ships. They have to be able to perform maneuvers like that sometimes and it’s better to know ahead of time if they can do it or not.”

She discovered they were all studying her in patent disbelief.

“If this is the truth, then why suggest that we stay and allow you to take the ship?” Kiel asked in a low growl.

“Uh ... Well, I saw you guys weren’t handling the G’s to zero very well. Everybody doesn’t. What I mean I mean to say is, it isn’t easy for anybody. We’re built for gravity and the lack of it screws up our internal systems, but some people handle it better than others. At the very least it’s something you have to get used to.

“I had to be sure the ship could handle whatever we might encounter! Believe me, this is something you want to know before you leave the planet behind!”

The men all exchanged a speaking glance and Danielle held her breath. Finally, to her relief, they seemed to relax. “We will leave tomorrow,” Kiel said finally, his jaw tight with either anger or reluctance, possibly both. “Gather your belongings.”

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Danielle hadn’t honestly thought the maneuvers would be enough to convince the Danu, or more specifically Baen, Kiel, and Jalen, that they really didn’t want anything to do with space travel. It would’ve been more accurate to say that she’d hoped it would give them pause, make them decide to rethink the situation.

It didn’t. They looked downright green as they trudged up the gangplank for the final time and the cyborgs watching didn’t look a lot more enthusiastic, but they were clearly determined and not about to let anything as minor as getting the piss scared out of them to deter them.

She had mixed feelings herself as she did the final systems check. The ship had performed well above her expectations and she still had a tiny bit of lingering anxiety about taking it out on a mission. She was still worried about what they would be facing on their mission-whether the Danu really meant to form an alliance and if her own people would go for it.

It all seemed beyond her control, however, and although on some levels it was almost a comfort to be able to tell herself that she’d done all she could to avert the potential for disaster, it still wasn’t much of a comfort. It wouldn’t be any consolation if things went badly, but she still couldn’t think of anything that she could say or do to change it.

She did realize, though, once everything was stowed and they’d settled in their seats for takeoff that she was surprisingly comfortable with the idea of traveling with them. A little soul searching produced the realization that it was because she’d grown to think of them as peers rather than aliens or enemies. She thought their anger the night

before had even helped, because they'd been really, really pissed off and all they'd done was growled at her and then let it go once they'd voiced their displeasure. It was a relief to have passed that hurtle intact-first fight and she was still in one piece!

She was surprised and not very happy when Kiel took the pilot's seat, relegating her to the jump seat he'd taken before.

"You're piloting the ship?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how?"

"Yes. I watched you."

Uh oh! Big uh oh! "Uh ... it actually takes a little more than watching ... usually," she added when Baen, Kiel, and Jalen turned to give her a look. "I'm just saying ...."

"Everything was recorded," Kiel said dismissively.

"Yes, but ...."

It actually didn't occur to her until they'd begun to rise above the landing pad that she'd deliberately pulled a few dangerous maneuvers just to scare the hell out of them.

Alright, well it was to test the equipment and the ship's reaction, too, but she'd known it wasn't necessary for a performance test. Thankfully, Kiel didn't pay her back, either because he didn't realize she had done it on purpose or because he didn't feel up to it. He did perform as flawlessly as the ship, however, and Danielle was impressed in spite of herself. "God! I wish I could learn things that easily!"

"If you were half robot, you could," Kiel said coolly.

She honestly hadn't thought about that. She knew it, but it was impossible to keep 'cyborg' in mind when they didn't behave like robots. She thought she'd had a harder time accepting the fact that they were alien and not human.

She was mildly resentful that Gertrude accepted him as commander of the ship without a whimper of protest, though. Clearly they'd reprogrammed her ... uh ... it!

She threw off her harness as soon as they'd left the planet's orbit and artificial gravity had been engaged. "I should check the star charts and navigate a course to the closest base."

"We are going to our home world, Chab, first."

Danielle stared at them uncomprehendingly. "Why?"

"This is the first part of the mission, to contact the Danu."

She frowned in confusion. "I thought that was what Manuta wanted you to do."

"In part, yes."

Irritation began to replace her confusion. "Is there some reason you just don't want to tell me what's going on?" she demanded.

They looked genuinely surprised and then thoughtful as if they were trying to decide whether there was a reason not to tell her.

Kiel shrugged. "We will make contact as Manuta wished and others now wish for us to do. We will inform them that the planet assigned to us to terra-form is prepared for colonists and we will negotiate for female colonists for the males who want them."

Danielle's belly knotted. She tried to tell herself that they'd clearly meant to take her home and that hadn't changed, but it was hard when they were behaving now as if she

should've known the only mission they had any interest in was in finding women. "What about me?" she asked a little weakly.

"We have chosen you," Jalen informed her. "Three are enough! We will go to Chab and find women for the others. I do not mind competing when I know that is the way of things, but there are far too many without a mate on our colony world."

Danielle blinked at him, feeling her jaw sag with shock. It wasn't the answer she'd been looking for and it was pretty obvious that neither Baen nor Kiel had intended to tell her that. Both of them glared at Jalen.

A denial sprang to her lips. Fortunately, she was in no state to voice it because it gave her time to consider whether it was wise to say anything at all considering she was trapped on a ship with the three of them and bound for an unknown planet. She looked at Kiel accusingly. "You said you would be taking me home!"

His lips tightened.

"We will go to Chab first," Baen responded soothingly. "When we have completed that part of the mission, then we will find your people, ally ourselves with them, and help to destroy your enemies."

Danielle studied him for a long moment, but he seemed completely sincere. "You aren't just saying that?"

He frowned. "It was always a part of the plan."

She glanced from Baen to Kiel and finally Jalen, trying to decide if either of them looked like that wasn't part of the plan. She couldn't tell, but she realized it would be pointless to ask. Whether true or not, they were liable to agree with Baen and she still wouldn't know for certain.

Finally, she realized there was nothing she could really do—certainly not at the moment. Maybe she would think of something between now and their arrival on Chab and maybe she wouldn't have to. Maybe they really did mean to do what they'd said they would.

In any case, she realized she had a more immediate problem. She hadn't actually spoken to Jalen about their single-minded pursuit of mates-her. It was sure as hell news to her that he considered himself a contender! She had told both Baen and Kiel, however, that she wouldn't consider it and it seemed pretty clear they meant to use the trip to convince her.

She discovered she was too shook up at the moment to figure out what to do about it, though, and forced a tight smile. "Ok, so we're going to Chab first. How are we going to get there when none of you have ever been?"

The men seemed to relax. Baen turned to the console he was sitting in front of and pulled up a star chart. She saw that a course had already been charted and marked with a bright line across the display. "We have reversed Manuta's original course from Chab to the target planet. Some adjustment was required due to the length of time that has passed since Manuta made its voyage, but we have tracked the movements of the bodies and pinpointed the location of the mother world."

Danielle moved closer to study the map but discovered quickly enough that it meant nothing to her when there were no reference points. "Gertrude, overlay this with any star charts you have that has any matching points."

Obligingly, Gertrude began to flash charts on the display in overlay, one after another, adjusting them to match it in size and changing the angles by degrees. "I have no matches," the computer finally announced.

Danielle frowned. "There has to be some matches!"

"Negative."

She considered that. "You're saying this star chart is of another galaxy?"

"Unknown."

Danielle's belly cramped. If it wasn't even the Milky Way galaxy, how the hell were they supposed to make it back, assuming they meant to, once they'd completed the first part of their mission? "How long since Manuta left the home world?" she asked a little faintly.

"Thirty thousand years ... give or take," Baen said promptly.

The bottom seemed to fall out of her stomach. "Thirty thousand ...?" she echoed numbly, glancing from Baen to Kiel.

"Manuta marked the time upon our world and calculated the time that would have passed on the mother world," he said.

She stared at him. "So ... Manuta has been terra-forming your world thirty thousand years?" she asked hesitantly, her mind leaping from that information to wondering about the time line of the cyborgs.

"Nay," Baen corrected her. "That is the calculated time of what has passed on Chab. Manuta has only been terra-forming our world for ten thousand."

And they actually thought their people were still going to be there? "When did ... uh ... Manuta decide to create the ... uh ... colonists?"

"It is a thousand years since that time."

Danielle gaped at him, unable to process that. "I ... you know, I don't actually feel very well. I think I'll just go lie down on my bunk for a little bit."

Jalen bounded up, beaming at her as if he had a special treat to offer. "I will show you your cabin."

"She does not need you to show her to her cabin!" Kiel growled. "She cannot get lost!"

Jalen sent him a sullen look. "I will explain everything."

Kiel surged to his feet. "Baen, set the course. I will show her."

"You are the pilot!" Baen immediately disputed. "I will show her."

"You are the navigator," Kiel said pointedly. "Navigate!"

Irritation buoyed Danielle. "Just tell me where it is ... or better, yet. I'll just pick one!" Turning on her heels, she stalked from the bridge and entered the corridor leading back through the ship. There were four cabins, she discovered, and a surprisingly spacious gathering area for food preparation, dining, and, she supposed, socializing. She discovered that the cabin at the very rear of the ship was the largest and appropriated it for herself. Kiel had followed her. Instead of turning back when she entered the last cabin and dropped to sit on the edge of the wide bunk she found there, he followed her inside.

"There are facilities there," he said, indicating what appeared to be a smooth wall.



"I don't need it now. I'll find it later," Danielle said, pushing back on the bunk and turning to lie down.

Kiel stood over her, frowning. "You are ... disturbed?"

What an understatement! "Surprised," she corrected him.

"It was not a pleasant surprise."

No, it actually wasn't. The problem was, she didn't know why she was upset about it.

"It's hard to believe you're a thousand years old," she muttered.

His gaze flicked over her length. "This is what disturbed you?"

"I'm not disturbed!" she snapped. "I told you. I'm just surprised."

He digested that. "What is the lifespan of humans?"

"Not that long," she said dryly. "Three hundred if you're lucky, although I'm not sure it's really all that lucky. I haven't seen that the last fifty are anything to get excited about. And that's with some serious medical advances, I might add. Naturally, about half that or less. They had to modify life expectancy a lot just to make colonization at all practical."

He was silent for several moments. "You are very young. I do not understand why it disturbs you. We are in our prime," he added tentatively.

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively, realizing abruptly why it bothered her so much. "You do realize that that makes you incompatible as mates for humans?"

Kiel frowned. Moving closer, he settled on the bunk next to her, bringing his face into her range of vision since she was staring at the ceiling. "Why?"

Danielle released an irritated huff, but there was a knot in her throat that made it hard to speak. Trying to dislodge it gave her a few moments to consider what she'd said and to realize that it wasn't true. It certainly wasn't true insofar as mating on a purely physical level. He'd said they were in their prime. That certainly put them at the perfect time for reproducing if that was what they had in mind, and she was pretty sure it was. "You're right," she said. "It won't make any difference at all."

"It makes a difference to you," he said grimly. "Why?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about me," she lied. "I was just thinking in a general way."

He caught her face with one hand and forced her to look at him. "That is not true," he said after studying her face.

"Could we just drop it? I don't really feel like talking about it."

"I cannot understand if you will not explain it," he said, frustration creeping into his voice.

And maybe it was better if he didn't? How stupid was it to want ... something she had no right to even think about given her obligations?

It occurred to her when he'd left that they had planted a seed in her mind, though, made her begin to think about life after war when she hadn't allowed herself to think in those terms. It was stupid to do so when she had no idea if she would even make it through the war in one piece and, even if she did, no guarantee that she would be capable of still having children.

Despite the huge advances in lengthening life expectancy, the window of reproduction opportunity was still comparatively tiny-and for a very good reason. Longer life meant more possibility of utilizing knowledge and experience, but it also created

population problems if they were able to reproduce for very long. Of course most everyone was deeply conscious of their moral obligation to limit their off-spring, but they were in constant battle with their natural urges.

For men, the urge to spread their seed never really left them. Women were prone to want to 'nest' from early maturity to well past the time they were actually capable of producing healthy off-spring and the urges of nature were hard to fight even with reason.

She hadn't considered it before because she'd barely reached the age where her natural urges were starting to kick in when the war started and she'd been too busy fighting since then and worried about getting killed to think about much else. She supposed, she'd been too busy battling mourning for her lost family and the close friends she'd lost since that time to think about life.

Until she'd crashed on their world and they didn't have anything else on their mind! It was small wonder that they'd managed to pierce her armor. She'd honestly thought, though, that they hadn't really tapped into anything more than her libido. She hadn't wanted to acknowledge that much, but it was pretty hard to ignore. In any case, she'd been able to comfort herself with the knowledge that it was perfectly natural. Women might not typically have the sex drives men had, but they certainly had needs. Hers had gone largely ignored almost from the time she'd been old enough to have them.

Not that they didn't all seize pretty much any opportunity to scratch their itches when they could, but they didn't get a lot of opportunities. She wasn't piloting a ship, alone, just because they didn't have enough pilots. That was part of it-because it was an ongoing battle to keep pilots and ships patrolling for the enemy and fighting-maybe most of it, but it was also because the commanders didn't want to take the risk pairing them up with entail-that they'd be more interested in fucking than watching for trouble.

Risk added to the urges, either because of the added excitement or because of the fear of missing opportunities to actually live while they could.

She focused on Kiel when he released his hold on her and straightened. "It's hard to explain and it would be even harder for you to understand."

His lips tightened. "I have a superior understanding," he said angrily.

It made her own anger rise to the surface. "And no damned experience with the opposite sex! Or emotion, or relationships, which is more to the point! No woman is going to want to risk her heart with a man that isn't likely to be around long!"

He looked absolutely blank and then thoroughly confused. "I do not understand the correlation between age and the heart," he said after a long moment. "How does either of those have to do with mating?"

"Apparently, they don't!" she said testily. "Not to you, anyway, and that's exactly my point!"

"Well, explain your gods damned point because I do not understand it!"

She sat up abruptly and poked him in the chest with her finger. "You're in your prime, you son-of-a-bitch! That should be self-explanatory!"

He looked at her blankly.

"Extrapolate!" she said angrily.

“With what starting point? You have not given me anything to work with!” She glared at him. “You’re just being deliberately obtuse! You know what I’m talking about, you philandering bastard! All this talk about ‘mating’ and you knew it wasn’t going to work any of the time! Don’t tell me you didn’t! Manuta analyzed me as soon as I got there. You’re just talking about fucking! Well! You can just take your cock and shove it up your ass!”

“I do not want it up my ass!” he snarled.

She sent him a drop dead look and flounced over on the bunk, putting her back to him. She could feel his angry gaze burning her back for several moments, but finally he got up and left ... just about the time she’d decided he would apologize for leading her on.

And didn’t that just show he was like every other damned man she’d ever met!

She’d been completely honest and aboveboard with them! She’d told Baen anyway, and she knew men talked, regardless of what they said to the contrary! She supposed, after a while, that she wasn’t being completely fair. She didn’t know that Baen had told him that she wasn’t looking for a mate, or even a hook up.

And she had hooked up with him. Maybe he’d decided when she had that she was alright with just recreational sex?

It didn’t matter, damn it! Kiel and Baen had behaved as if they wanted something meaningful, damn it! They’d led her to believe they actually meant mating!

Ok, so she had gotten the impression that none of them understood it the way she did, but wasn’t that natural, too? At least some of it?

Maybe not. Maybe she was the one that was screwed up in her thinking. Maybe she’d been right all along and they’d honestly never had any interest at all beyond spreading their seed? Baen had indicated otherwise, but Kiel certainly hadn’t and she hadn’t bothered to set any ground rules with him.

Stupid!

She discovered she was crying, actually crying! She couldn’t even remember the last time she’d cried! It felt like something she needed to do, though, and she discovered she couldn’t regain control anyway, so she indulged until she had a headache and her eyes felt like they were swollen shut. When she ran out of tears and physical misery began to overcome emotional, she got up and moved to the wall Kiel had indicated. Fortunately, it took no more than proximity to activate the door and the lights. When she’d finished blowing her nose and dabbing at her face with cool water enough to take some of the swelling down, she headed back to the bed and sprawled out to sleep the after effects off.

\* \* \* \*

Baen looked so pleased at his expression that Kiel was tempted to put his fist in his face. “She would not let you mate with her?”

Kiel narrowed his eyes at him. “I did not try. I did not need to. I have already mated her once. I am certain I have planted my seed.”

He barely managed to finish his gloating speech before Baen bounded out of his chair and swung at him. “That is not true!” Baen snarled.

Kiel ducked the flying fist and drove his own into Baen's belly. "Sit down, fool! You will damage the equipment!"

"Then we can go to the hold!" Jalen snarled. "There is nothing there to be damaged beyond the supplies!"

"Fine!" Kiel snapped. "If you need for me to kick your ass, then we will go to the hold!"

Baen checked the console. "I will go also. This has been set."

Turning on his heel, Kiel stalked from the bridge and bent down to open the hatch located in the corridor just beyond the bridge. Baen planted his foot on his ass the moment the door opened and shoved. His last thought as he tumbled into the dark hold was that he had been too furious to think straight or he would never have given Baen the opening. He managed to twist his body as he went through the hole, not enough to land solidly, but enough to avoid landing on his head. Baen landed at the foot of the ladder even as he was struggling to regain his balance and slugged him in the jaw. He flew backwards, slamming into a pallet of supplies and they tumbled around him. By the time he had waded out of the debris, Jalen had positioned himself, braced to throw a punch. Baen knocked him sideways and flew at Kiel again.

The quarters, they soon discovered, were a disadvantage. As large as the hold was, it was pretty well filled with supplies with only a little room for moving between the crates and by the time they had slung each other back and forth a few times, most of it was littering the floor. As surefooted as they were, they discovered it was just about impossible to navigate the debris on the floor without tripping over it. Regardless, they persevered doggedly until they'd managed to exhaust their tempers.

After settling on the floor to rest for a short time and surveying the damage, Kiel finally decided he had proven his point. Getting up, he climbed the ladder to the main level. Baen took issue. Following, he grabbed Kiel's foot and tried to drag him into the hold again, but Kiel was at an advantage that time. Gripping the rails firmly, he kicked Baen in the face until he let go and then climbed out before he could recover and grab his foot again, slamming the door to the hold when he'd emerged.

After a moment's consideration, he decided not to lock it and headed back to the bridge. Baen and Jalen followed him a few moments later and dropped into their chairs, glaring at him.

"We had agreed that we would utilize the time on the trip to convince Danielle to mate with us," Jalen said accusingly. "Except that I am the only one who waited!"

"He did not mate her," Baen snapped. "He is lying."

Kiel studied Baen for a long moment and finally shrugged. He did not particularly give a fuck whether Baen believed him or not, he realized. Clearly, he had taken first position with Danielle and that was all that mattered to him. They would know soon enough that he had not lied. When she gave birth, his would be the largest and strongest.

"She said that we were not compatible for mates," he said after a moment. Not that he particularly wanted to share. They had all agreed that they would so that they would better understand the process, however, and as little as he liked the idea of sharing personal experiences with his mate, she would clearly not be happy until they did understand.

“What the fuck did she mean by that?” Jalen demanded angrily. “Manuta said we need not concern ourselves with it. We are not only much the same, but the nanos will ensure it!”

“Do not tell her about the nanos!” Baen growled. “I do not know why it bothers her, but it does.”

Enlightenment dawned. “She does not know about the nanos!” Kiel exclaimed.

“I just said that!” Baen said testily.

Kiel shook his head. “She does not know, so she does not realize that the nanos will ensure that we are compatible!”

“I just said that!” Jalen snapped, and then glared at Baen. “You have hit him too hard on the head! His logic circuits have gone haywire!”

“There is nothing wrong with my logic circuits!” Kiel growled. “She has no grasp of logic, however. I will tell you that! I could not understand half of what she was saying and I have a firm grasp of her tongue!”

Baen looked at him curiously. “What did she say?”

“She told me to shove my cock up my ass for one thing!” Kiel snapped. “And not only do I know, positively, that I do not want it there, but I also know it was not designed to fit there!”

Jalen looked horrified. “Do you suppose theirs are?”

“Well, of course they are!” Baen snapped. “It is only logical that they would. Why else would she suggest it?”

“Well, I am damned if I know why she would suggest it at all!” Kiel snapped. “I do not want to mate with myself!”

“Clearly, they can,” Baen said, nodding wisely.

Jalen looked repulsed. “That does not make sense, gods damn it!” he said after a moment. “They have male and female! Why would they have male and female if they can self-propagate?”

Kiel scratched his chin thoughtfully, considering it. “I believe it was an insult of some kind,” he said finally. “Jalen is right. It would be completely illogical to shove their cocks up their asses unless it was possible to self-propagate and we know that cannot be the case.”

They mulled that over for a while, but since none of them could think of another explanation, they finally dismissed it. “Why did she insult you?” Baen asked suspiciously.

“I do not know that she did,” Kiel hedged.

“You suspect she did!” Baen snapped. “Why do you think so?”

Kiel’s lips tightened. “She was angry.”

“Why was she angry?”

“If I knew that I would have realized sooner that she was trying to be insulting!” Kiel said irritably. “I thought that she was upset. Her eyes looked ... sad.”

“What did you say to make her unhappy?” Jalen demanded angrily. “Why did you say something to make her unhappy? I will allow that I know nothing about this mating

thing ... beyond where to put my cock, that is, but I do not think making the female unhappy is a very good way to convince her to allow it!"

"I did not say anything!" Kiel snapped indignantly. "It was Baen who told her of the time that Manuta had been terra-forming and then that we had been created a thousand years ago. I did not even know what was going through her mind until she informed me that we were not compatible for mating because her people do not live nearly as long."

Baen stared at him blankly. "But ... she has nanos now!" He narrowed his eyes. "I should have known the moment I saw them that you had given them to her!"

"You did know!" Kiel said pointedly. "In any case, she does not know and if she will be upset to learn it and we cannot tell her for that reason, then she will remain convinced that we are not compatible!"

"What the fuck does that have to do with it?" Baen demanded.

"I do not fucking know!" Kiel snapped. "Did I not already say that she has no logic? I cannot figure it out. I thought you might be able to."

Baen glared at him a long moment and then settled to turning it over in his mind. He threw up his hands in disgust after a few moments. "Well, it gods damned well does not make any sense! That is why you cannot understand it!"

"You think?" Kiel asked, feeling a mixture of relief that Baen had agreed and a niggling of doubt that, mayhap, neither one of them had managed to figure it out and it actually did make sense to her. It had certainly seemed to and, in the end, what did it matter if they did not understand if she saw it as a problem?

"We do not have enough problems," Jalen said irritably, "that she must throw in another that is completely incomprehensible?"

"Jalen is right," Baen said after considering it a moment.

"I am?" Jalen asked blankly.

"Yes. We have enough to deal with. I think we must focus on learning her ways and what she expects of mates-not Kiel. He has already mated, but you and I."

"Now, wait just a fucking minute!" Kiel growled. "She has already said that there is more to it than planting the seed, gods damn it! And I cannot be certain with one time that it is planted, as far as that goes!"

"You said that you were certain," Baen said pointedly.

"Well, I am not one hundred percent certain beyond the fact that I seeded her, gods damn it! I do not know that her body took the gods damned seed!"

"You said you were sure of that, also," Jalen pointed out.

"I may have misspoke," Kiel muttered. "The urge is still there. I must consider the possibility that it would not be if I had succeeded. In any case, I am not done, gods damn it!"

"Well you had first chance," Baen snarled. "And that should have been mine, gods damn it! You said that you were not even certain that you were interested in her as a mate and I said that I was certain that I was! It was a complete fabrication to lull me into thinking you would not compete when you had every intention of doing so! I should have beat your head in while we were in the hold!"

“Dishonorable!” Jalen agreed.

“This is not war, gods damn it!” Kiel snapped.

“Which makes it all the more shameful!” Jalen growled.

Kiel narrowed his eyes at his friend. “I believe I will call you on that insult! Let us go back into the hold.”

“That is an excellent notion,” Baen agreed.

Both Kiel and Jalen turned to study him speculatively and settled back again. “I withdraw the insult,” Jalen muttered. “I misspoke.”

“Accepted,” Kiel growled. “In any case, I do believe we must consider this in the light of a war now that I have thought on it. It is a competition, and that means the rules of combatants apply. There is no dishonor in taking whatever advantage presents itself.”

“That applies to all of us and not just you?” Baen asked tightly.

Kiel glanced from Baen to Jalen and finally forced a shrug. “Naturally. Information is shared, however. That was agreed upon before we ever left. We are all bound to honor that part of the truce.”

?

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Danielle still felt heavy with fatigue and depression when she awoke after a brief nap, but she got up, determined not to dwell on it. The men were still on the bridge when she arrived but it was patently clear that they hadn’t been there the entire time. All of three of them bore the telltale signs of a battle. She stopped abruptly the moment she noticed and studied them more intently.

None of them would meet her gaze, but she couldn’t decide if it was because their disagreement had anything to do with her or not. It might be nothing more, she realized, than discomfort at her own outburst.

“Where are we?” she asked of no one in particular.

“We are nearing the wormhole that I utilized to remove you from harm’s way,” Gertrude responded.

Danielle felt her pulse leap. “I guess I didn’t sleep as long as I thought. Is that the wormhole it shows on the star chart?”

“Affirmative,” Gertrude responded. “That is the first one.”

Danielle frowned. She hadn’t even noticed the course took them through one wormhole, let alone more than that. She was tempted to rush over to Baen and

demand to see the chart again, but she dismissed the urge and took her seat instead, fastening her harness. “You mean to say we’ll have to go through more than one to get there?”

“Affirmative. Two.”

She supposed that explained why the chart hadn’t looked familiar and why Gertrude hadn’t been able to match it with anything she’d had. The chart had to be multi-dimensional if their course would take them through two different wormholes.

“Approaching wormhole. Harnesses should be secured. Entering in ... mark twenty EST,” Gertrude announced.

Baen, Kiel, and Jalen exchanged an uneasy glance, but they fastened their harnesses.

“It shouldn’t be too rough,” Danielle said soothingly. “It didn’t seem that way when I came through the first time, anyway.”

“The wormhole is dormant,” Gertrude agreed.

Danielle grimaced. “Interpretation-mildly turbulent as opposed to dangerously unstable.”

Her stomach clenched with fear anyway when Gertrude ended the count and the ship dropped into the hole. The ship began to spin. She could feel it spinning and it made her dizzy and vaguely nauseous even when she closed her eyes. Clearly dormant or not, there was a good bit of gravity within the hole. The ship creaked and moaned with the increased pressure the hull was taking, as well. She was vastly relieved when Gertrude announced that they would be leaving the hole shortly.

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all looked a little green when the ship shot from the hole but, to her surprise, none of them leapt up and tore off toward the facilities to puke. Apparently, they were acclimating a lot faster to gravity shifts than she had, she thought wryly.

“Correcting course,” Gertrude announced.

Danielle felt her heart sink as she stared at the viewer, at the small glimpse of even remotely familiar space, and watched it dwindle with distance. So close! She could see her home star and impulse to seize control of the ship and head for home was so intense that for several moments she actually visualized doing so in her mind. Reason reared its ugly head.

She knew she didn’t have any chance at all of seizing control and even if she managed it for a handful of moments, she couldn’t maintain it.

Throwing her harness off, she got up and left the bridge. She was sitting in the gathering room, sulking over the lost opportunity to go home, when Baen and Jalen joined her.

“You are hungry?” Jalen asked pleasantly.

Danielle glared at him. How could he think about food at a time like this? Couldn’t he see she was in mourning, damn it? Insensitive bastard!

Regardless of her determination to suffer, however, she discovered she was hungry. She sighed. “I guess so.”

He moved to the locker and opened it to study the contents, reeling off the names of foods she didn’t have a clue about. “Just pick something. I’m not especially hungry.”



“You said that you were.”

She glared at him. Before she could jump up and flounce to her cabin to sulk, Baen intervened.

“She does not know one from the other. She said to choose for her.”

“But I do not know which she likes,” Jalen objected.

“Kraken,” Danielle said tightly. “Kiel fixed that for me and I liked that.”

“You did not like the one that I chose for you before?”

Danielle struggled with her impatience and finally decided she was being completely unreasonable and it wasn't right to take it out on him just because she was miserable. She sighed. “I did. But that's about all I ate for a while. I'm sort of tired of it. Maybe I should just let you pick something else?”

She was glad she'd made the effort. He seemed to relax, the first she realized that he had been tense, which was probably a reaction to her foul mood. She decided it was a good thing. Even if she was depressed over the entire mating thing that was no excuse for behaving badly and it was just plain stupid to set herself against them from a survival viewpoint. She needed to make friends with them, not enemies.

She was just going to have to get her head on straight! It wasn't their fault-any of it! She knew they didn't understand her ideas of mating. It wasn't reasonable to be angry with them because they didn't. It wasn't even reasonable to be angry with them if she'd explained it if they didn't feel the same way. They were aliens-not humans. They might want to adapt, but that didn't mean they could.

She had no one to blame for her misconceptions but herself, she realized. Even she couldn't help her way of thinking, learned behavior, or her natural instincts.

Baen settled beside her. She glanced at him and then moved a little to give him more room on the bench.

“You are angry?” he asked tentatively.

Danielle sighed. “Just homesick, I suppose. It was easier not to think about it as long as I was in Manu, but seeing familiar things ....” She shrugged.

He frowned. She didn't realize he was going over his vocabulary until he looked at her curiously and asked her to explain.

She discovered there were some things that were really hard to define, especially to someone who had no grasp of the concept. “Yearning for people and places familiar,” she said finally. “Love.”

“That word is not in the data banks either.”

Danielle felt her throat close. “I'm not surprised. Which one?”

“Yearning ... or love.”

She forced an unhappy chuckle. “I shouldn't even be homesick,” she muttered. “No one's there anymore. My home isn't even there anymore. I don't know where my brother is. He joined the Federation forces. I joined the colony militia.”

“You are making her unhappy,” Jalen said tightly, plunking her food container down on the table in front of her.

Danielle glanced from Baen to Jalen, saw the brewing anger, and intervened. “He isn't making me unhappy. My thoughts are.”

She stared at her food, stirring the steaming food with the eating utensil Jalen had given her. "The truth is I was too much of a coward to face my losses. I closed myself off from my emotions, convincing myself I could fight better if I could avoid feeling them. But they've always been there, waiting for me to acknowledge them. They didn't just go away because I refused to face things.

"I'm homesick for something that's gone and has been gone a long time. I've been unhappy for a very long time. I just let myself be angry instead and focused on trying to make the Nubiens pay for what they took from me.

"It won't bring them back, though."

Jalen settled across from her. "Who?"

She glanced at him. "My family. I know, you don't understand that either. It's what mating is all about, to us, though. My father didn't just impregnate my mother and leave her. He stayed with her. They had three children together-me, and my brother and sister. One male and two females. And even though, more often than not, people don't stay together long enough for their children to get grown, my parents did. They were still together when they were killed. They planned to always be together. They intended to grow old together and take care of each other."

Jalen frowned. "I do not understand that. They could not know when they would die. How could they plan to grow old together?"

Briefly, indignation flickered through Danielle. It occurred to her, though, that there really was no way to insure that you'd be with somebody forever, as long as their lifespan. You could outlive them or vice versa. "That's a very good point," she said, smiling with an effort.

She couldn't say that it lifted her spirits, at all, but she realized it was a good point. Maybe everybody else wasn't completely wrong? Maybe it was safer not to allow yourself to be so tied to another person when life was so uncertain? Or maybe they just didn't always bond like her parents had?

That actually made a lot of sense considering how rare it was for a couple to bind themselves for longer than one contract. Either they were always searching for new bonds to protect themselves from one that would completely cripple them or they were always hopeful, each time they found someone, that they had found that perfect bond and wouldn't need or want to break it?

"This contradicts the information that you gave me before," Baen said accusingly.

She glanced at him. "Not really."

He frowned, clearly thinking it over. "Yes, it does."

Danielle couldn't help but chuckle at his expression. "You just think so because I haven't given you the whole picture. I told you it was complicated."

"You are saying that we cannot grasp it?" Kiel said tightly as he entered the room where they had settled to eat.

She glanced at him in surprise. "I didn't say that. I didn't mean to imply it, anyway." She considered it. "But the truth is that you might not be able to-ever. I'm not sure it really matters. I don't know your people's ways, or instincts. We aren't the same, but that doesn't mean you can't ... function within our society once you understand it. That just means it might not be natural to you and it might not be desirable.

"The only relationships any of you have ever experienced, as far as I can see, is between friends-and comrades-all male. None of you seem to understand love, so I'm

guessing that means you don't have any males that are homosexual, which I have to say is really strange. It's commonplace in most animal species-including humans. I think it's a natural selection thing, or maybe purely to help keep balance since homosexual pairs can't reproduce. Nobody has ever really figured that out, but it's a fact that some men are only attracted, sexually, to other men and some women are only attracted, sexually, to other women. And they love one another. It's more than friendship. It's every bit as strong and lasting as love can be between two heterosexuals."

She discovered that all three men were looking at her with expressions of disbelief and revulsion.

Kiel glared at her. "Is this why you told me so shove my cock up my ass?" he demanded. "Do your people also love themselves?"

Danielle almost choked on her food. She struggled not to laugh but discovered she couldn't help it. They looked more indignant and more confused. "Actually, some people do love themselves better than anyone else," she finally managed. "And I suppose it's deeply satisfying for them. Some even pleasure themselves more than other people. I've tried it myself. I'm not much for it, though. I know what feels good, but there's just something ... lacking in handling yourself. It's called masturbation," she added.

"They do this when they have no mate?" Kiel guessed.

"Good guess," Danielle said dryly. "Because they have needs and if there isn't anybody around to take care of them, then they handle it themselves."

"This is why you have masturbation?" Baen demanded. "You do not need masturbation. I am willing to handle your needs."

Danielle felt her face heat, but she rolled her eyes at his offer. Who didn't know that was coming?

He had a point, though, she realized. She had three handsome, willing, candidates. Why turn them down when she knew damned well that she was needy?

Because she was worried about complications.

Well, the one complication she'd been worried about was becoming too attached to them and clearly she'd already screwed that up!

Of course, that didn't mean she was beyond recovering-yet! Maybe it was stupid to consider it under those circumstances? What choice did she really have, though? Clearly, they were hell bent on mating and she was at their mercy. She could try to fight them off, and lose, and make enemies. Or she could try to control her emotions and make very good friends.

At least if she took that route, she had some chance of convincing them to take her home-which she probably shouldn't be considering at all when there was so much potential for trouble. Selfish or not, though, she simply couldn't face the possibility of never going back and never seeing anyone she knew again. Besides, even if she was willing to make that sacrifice, Gertrude had the coordinates and they had access to Gertrude. With or without her help, they could find the planets that made up the Federation.

Everything else aside, she had already told Baen-and Kiel for that matter-that she would help them to understand. If they didn't have some social skills when and if they reached the human population there was bound to be trouble-serious trouble!

"Thanks," she told Baen a little dryly. "I'm going to keep that in mind. I'll be sure to let you know when the urge hits me."

He frowned. Clearly it wasn't the answer he'd wanted or expected. "You are not needy now? Kiel said ...."

"Kiel said what?" Danielle growled, narrowing her eyes at Kiel.

"That you had mated with him," Jalen supplied. "I knew it was a lie!"

Kiel punched him in the jaw, sending him reeling off the bench.

It shocked Danielle so much that she gaped at him. "What did you do that for?"

"He impugned my honor!" Kiel growled. "I do not lie!"

Danielle recovered enough to glare at him. "Well you aren't supposed to kiss and tell either, damn it! That isn't honorable either!"

"I did not tell them I kissed you."

The logic of the statement didn't escape her, but he was going to have to learn not to take every damned thing so literally! "You aren't supposed to fuck and tell either, damn it!"

"Why not?"

"Because ... because it's supposed to be personal and not to be shared!"

Baen stared at her. "You should have told us that! We are honor bound to share because we gave our word we would!"

Danielle gaped at him. "To who?"

"Everyone," Jalen said, massaging his jaw as he picked himself up off the floor.

"Everyone meaning ...?"

"Everyone," Kiel said tightly. "We cannot be expected to learn if we are not taught! It seemed the most logical and efficient way to handle it. We learn with you and we send the information to everyone else."

"Oh my god!" Danielle gasped. "This is ... this is a full scale ... tutoring situation?"

The three men frowned, looking at each other for answers none of them seemed to have.

"Did you not say that you would teach and then the others could learn?" Baen demanded.

"Well, shit! I didn't mean like that, damn it!"

"I told you that she had no grasp of logic," Kiel muttered. "How are we to keep our experiences to ourselves and share it at the same fucking time?"

Danielle massaged her temples, curbing the desire to fling something at them-besides words.

"We are approaching the second wormhole," Gertrude announced cheerfully.

"Already?" Danielle demanded in disbelief, effectively diverted from giving the three men a piece of her mind.

"On my mark ... twenty and counting."

“Well, thank god we took the time to eat before we went into the second wormhole!” Danielle growled. “Now we’ll have plenty of ammunition for puking!”

Getting up, she left her food on the table and stalked back to the bridge. Behind her, she heard the men hurriedly cleaning up and securing the galley. They were clearly torn between anger and uneasiness as they returned to the bridge and buckled themselves in for the trip through the second wormhole. Danielle was of the opinion that it would’ve unsettled everyone’s stomach even if they hadn’t just eaten. The second was far more turbulent than the first. She spent most of the trip struggling with the urge to throw up, bolstered by the reflection that if anyone did throw up they were all going to be wearing it when the damned ship stopped spinning. The moment the ship stopped spiraling and bucking, she threw off her harness and headed for her cabin as fast as she could.

The men nearly outran her, but fortunately, they had a different goal in mind. She managed to make it to her own private waste disposal unit before emptying her stomach and, as she’d predicted, it was way worse given the fact that she had a full stomach. She was so weak by the time she managed to stop gagging it took all she could do to lever herself off the floor. When she’d washed her mouth and bathed her face, she staggered back into her cabin and collapsed weakly on her bunk, waiting for her head to stop spinning.

“Correcting course,” Gertrude announced.

“Go fuck yourself, bitch!” Danielle snarled. “You couldn’t have told us we were about to go into another damned wormhole?”

“I informed you that there were two.”

“You didn’t inform me that they were so damned close together!” Danielle snapped. “You did that on purpose!”

“I am not certain what this accusation pertains to,” Gertrude responded. “I cannot address it when I do not understand it.”

“You know what I’m talking about, you vicious bitch! Don’t tell me you had no idea traveling through one would completely throw us all off kilter and produce motion sickness!”

“There was no possibility of avoiding it,” Gertrude said pointedly. “The course set by the Danu required passing through both.”

“Is the course set now?” Danielle asked, tired of arguing with the damned computer.

“We are on course, Captain Dubois.”

“Good. Go away and don’t bother me.”

“I cannot go ....”

“Shut the fuck up!” Danielle snarled.

She didn’t actually doze off although she hoped for oblivion for a while. Eventually, the weakness and the nausea faded and her thoughts turned from her misery to the conversation she’d had with the men.

There was just no getting around the fact that she continually expected them to understand things they clearly didn’t. There were more holes in their understanding of basic social behavior than she’d expected and she felt less competent to explain than she had in the beginning. It gave her a headache just trying to figure out where to

start! She'd had no idea that she'd accumulated such vast stores of knowledge and experience!

Maybe, she thought, because she hadn't been much more than an infant when she'd begun to absorb such things?

Probably.

The question was, just how much could she teach and how much could they learn? She didn't think there was any real limitation to their learning abilities, but she had a bad feeling her teaching skills weren't great. Beyond that, there was a time limit. She didn't know how much of a time limit, but she did know she was going to have to give them a crash course. Their mission wasn't likely to be a long, drawn out one. Even if it took months, which she doubted given the capabilities of the ship they'd designed, months weren't much time to make up for years of learning by trial and error, some instruction, and some behavior learned by simply observing everyone else interacting.

She decided she'd been on the right track when she'd first broached the subject with Baen. They needed rules. She needed to think hard on those rules and make them as clear and concise as she possibly could.

The 'stop' rule was a good one. It was actually more complicated than that since most people tried to 'read' the person they were with, but she didn't think she had the time to spare trying to explain that. Anyway, men weren't worth a shit at 'reading' women-human men. It wasn't right to expect the Danu to do any better.

She brightened considerably when it occurred to her that they wouldn't be expected to understand human society, not completely anyway. They were aliens! People would expect them to behave differently and, to an extent, their strangeness would be tolerated.

Having made up her mind, she got up and went to take a bath and change clothes since she still felt disgusting after barfing up her lunch ... or whatever meal that was.

She found the men in the galley, eating.

"Everyone's feeling better, I see," she said dryly.

"We were empty after ...." Jalen began.

Danielle held up her hand. "Don't tell me! I know, but that's beside the point. We don't discuss bodily functions in polite company."

Baen and Kiel and Jalen all frowned, exchanging questioning looks. "We are all animals."

"I know, but we are higher animals! Lower animals don't know any better and they aren't disgusted. Higher animals, socially skilled animals, make an attempt not to disgust everyone around them. They control bodily functions until they are in a place, alone, where it is appropriate to ... relax and behave like beasts."

Jalen frowned. "I do not understand why it would be disgusting."

"Because you're a man and men seem to enjoy being disgusting. Women don't, so that's a rule ... if you want to get along with women."

"This includes ...?"

"Everything," Danielle said with emphasis. "Also picking and scratching-which includes adjusting your balls. I don't care how uncomfortable you are."

They all looked a little sullen, but none of them said anything else.

"I do not understand how this has anything to do with mating," Baen said finally when she'd fixed herself another meal and settled at the table with them.

"Everything that is social has to do with mating," Danielle said. "Any time you're with a person of the opposite sex you might be with someone you discover that you like or they might know someone that you would be interested in. If you use what is accepted as polite social behavior at all times, then you don't run the risk of appearing unappealing to the woman you want.

"Some women are more ... earthy and not as unsettled, or disgusted, by such things as others but you never know until you get to know them better, so it's just better to be safe than sorry. Nobody is going to look down on you, or avoid you, for being neatly groomed, polite, and extremely well mannered."

Kiel frowned at her. "This pertains to what you said to me about mating practices?"

Pleasure wafted through her. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to teach them after all? "Yes. I'm not familiar with the animals you have on your world, but they're pretty much the same everywhere when it comes to mating and in that way humans are the same, too. You want to impress any potential mate with how beautiful, or handsome, you are, your strength, intelligence, dependability, honesty-all the qualities that a female looks for in a mate. It's simpler with the lower animals. They don't have complicated social behavior like we do, but that's part of the 'good impression' of yourself that you want to get across. You want to make them think you're the very best at everything so she'll choose you above the others."

"You are saying that we will have no appeal to human women unless we learn to behave contrary to our nature and hide the fact that we are aliens and capable of shifting?" he said coolly.

Danielle's pleasure took a nose dive. Irritation replaced it. "Did you learn how to be soldiers? Or did that come naturally?" she demanded testily.

Kiel looked thoughtful for a moment. "Some we learned."

"Well, there you go! Now that you're used to it, you do it without having to think about it so, in a sense, it becomes natural. The same is true of everything all of us have learned from birth. We aren't born with social skills either. We're taught them as we grow up-some people, anyway. But I have to tell you that the people that don't learn social skills have problems in society, even if they're born into that society. Social inadequacy is a turn off to women. They want their children to be able to fit comfortably into society and that means that the men have to have social skills they can teach their young, too. They don't want a man who will undermine their attempts to provide their children with a good role model."

She wasn't convinced that she'd actually made her point, but she decided it was enough for the moment. Maybe if she took baby steps, she wouldn't fuck everything up for them?

Not that she saw that they had a lot to learn as far as their behavior in 'polite' company. They were already neat, polite, and courteous and well mannered-except for the tendency to punch one another-but then she had to consider the fact that they had an all male society. Even with military discipline, they still had the natural male aggression and territorialism issues to deal with, to say nothing of 'pecking' order.

She couldn't honestly say that she'd seen any of the Danu behave the way she expected a beta male to behave-they ALL seemed like alphas-but there were still stronger alpha and weaker alpha males. And that just meant more fighting, whereas a beta male might be more inclined to accept his position in the scheme of things.

She considered addressing that issue but discarded it for the moment, deciding they had enough to digest. Besides, they would immediately demand to know how they were supposed to prove superior strength if it was not acceptable to fight in public and she needed to think about that.

She supposed, when they'd left, that she should have addressed the actual issue-mating. She felt like she needed to understand what it was they had as a goal before she could give them pointers about how to succeed. She had the uneasy feeling that they were more interested in practicing than discussing, though, and that once that gate was opened there would be no directing their mind elsewhere.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Did you run the scan?" Kiel asked as soon as he was certain that Jalen and Baen were occupied in the hold and Danielle was in her cabin.

"Affirmative," Gertrude responded.

Kiel waited impatiently for the computer to give him the report. When it did not, he narrowed his eyes at the optical sensor. "Report?" he finally prompted.

"Captain Dubois' birth control device has been neutralized and she is ovulating."

Surprise flickered through Kiel, triumph, and a vague sense of disappointment. "What is a birth control device?" he asked sharply.

"A device designed to prevent pregnancy in women and to prevent male sperm from achieving fertilization in men. It is standard practice to implant the devices in all males and females of reproductive age within the human community."

Kiel searched his mind, but he could not recall that Danielle had mentioned such a thing. It angered him that she had not. He felt betrayed that she had not told any of them that she had such a thing when she knew that all of them were hoping, expecting, to impregnate her. "But this device has been neutralized?"

"Affirmative. Reason unknown."

He frowned. "Speculate."

"I'm not programmed to speculate."

"Given the data you collected when you scanned her during her sleeping period, what is the probable cause?"

Gertrude was silent for several moments. "The nanos. My data indicates that the nanos may also be responsible for the irregularities in her cycle. Minor fluctuations are possible due to stress or hormonal imbalance due to illness or injury. However, my records indicate that Captain's Dubois' cycle has been interrupted and reset and her fertility boosted well beyond the norm."

He was about to ask for specifics as to what was 'norm' for Danielle when he heard sounds indicating that Jalen and Baen were returning. Shrugging it off with the



reflection that he had gotten the information he had wanted, he pulled up the star chart once more to study it.

“Any data from the probes yet?” Baen asked as soon as he noticed that Kiel was studying their course.

“The second has also malfunctioned,” Kiel said tightly. “I could understand one. I do not understand that two would malfunction.”

“Do we have another probe?”

“Negative.”

“Then we will know nothing until we arrive,” Jalen put in disgustedly. “I would have felt more easy in my mind if we could establish communications before we arrived. They are liable to see us as a threat and try to shoot us from the sky.”

“The ship has very good shields and excellent responses. There is little danger that they could succeed even if they try,” Kiel muttered, although he was dissatisfied, as well. The probes should have at least given them some data so that they knew what to expect. He did not care to go into this blind anymore than the others did.

“We are not much more than a week out,” Baen added. “When we are closer, we can attempt to communicate without the assistance of probes.”

“We could slow the ship more,” Jalen suggested tentatively. “Danielle does not know the full speed capabilities.”

“She will begin to be suspicious that we are deliberately delaying,” Kiel growled.

“You do not think she suspects now?” Baen asked drily.

Kiel shrugged. “Mayhap, but we have kept her occupied enough to keep her from dwelling on it, I believe.”

Jalen snorted. “Not as I would like to occupy her time,” he muttered. “What I would like to know is when we will get to the fucking!”

Kiel was wondering the same thing. He was uneasy enough about what had transpired between them the first time to want to be more cautious the second, but he was rapidly running out of patience and it did not help to know that she was ‘ready’ whether she admitted it or not! “She is explaining social skills,” he responded neutrally.

“Still,” Baen growled. “After two days! I believe I have grasped it, gods damn it!”

“Well, that is more than I can say!” Jalen complained. “It seems to me that everything she says contradicts what she said the time before! We are to convince her that we are stronger and more capable of protecting her and our off-spring than anyone else, and yet we are not to fight? Or to simply claim that since it would be considered bragging and that is unappealing? We must always be on guard to put forth the best impression and yet we must ‘be ourselves’ and not deceive? Women require absolute honesty, and yet we should take care not to allow the human females to know that we are able to change form? Or that we have nanos, when it is important that we convince them that we are healthy?”

“I am not at all sure that I want to spend a great deal of time in the company of females when there is so broad a margin for error, gods damn it! It seems to me from what she has said that a male cannot move or breathe heavy without giving the ‘wrong’ impression! It is not even acceptable to say nothing at all, because then they

will believe you have no social skills, or you lack intelligence, or that you are angry, even when you are not, or that you do not truly like them!”

“You cannot have a mate if you are not willing to spend time in their company!” Baen snapped irritably. “That is very important to them-companionship!”

“I do not see why not!” Jalen returned hotly. “Why can they not be happy doing whatever it is that females do while we are doing what we do? Is it not being deceptive to do things we do not want to do and pretend we do only to make them happy? I will be honest, I believe that I am better suited for the seeding alone.”

Kiel and Baen exchanged a look.

Kiel studied his nails, considering what Jalen had said. He was inclined, he discovered, to encourage that train of thought, and yet, try though he might, he could not think of another that he would find nearly as acceptable as a quad-mate. He had seized the moment to count coup and establish himself as prime-first-mate. There was no doubt in his mind that Baen was determined upon being second if he could not assert dominance and become first. If Jalen bowed out and Danielle took it into her head to choose another as third, they might well spend more time battling for dominance than mating, and although, ordinarily, he would not have minded that, he was ready to settle and enjoy the benefits of belonging to a quad. Some fighting was to be expected until they had firmly established their places, but they were already well on their way to doing that. He did not especially like the idea of starting over when he was beginning to get comfortable with the situation he had.

There would be enough tension between him and Baen, for they were fairly evenly matched. He did not see that it would be in his best interest to discourage Jalen and perhaps end up with a third that was not at all content to remain third.

“You expressed a determination, before, to have Danielle. You have decided that she does not suit you as bond-mate?”

Jalen stared at him blankly a moment and expelled an explosive breath. He seemed to wrestle with himself for several moments. “I do not think she has any interest in accepting me,” he growled finally. “She does not look at me the way she does either of you.”

Kiel and Baen exchanged another look, but this time it was filled with both speculation and territorialism.

Kiel struggled with the urge to instantly challenge Baen, but he knew if he did so he would in effect be admitting his lack of certainty that he was first. He could see the same thought running through Baen’s mind and also when Baen decided to ignore the challenge based on his mistaken certainty that he was first!

It thoroughly pissed him off, but he very deliberately ignored the challenge and turned his attention to Jalen again. “Then you acknowledge that you are third?”

Jalen looked for several moments as if he would take exception to that but finally subsided. “I am not ready to concede that ... yet,” he muttered.

Except he had and they all knew it. That didn’t mean he was ready to completely concede the point. Clearly he meant to try for a better position until he was forced to admit defeat, but Kiel did not see that as a problem. Eventually he would. Jalen knew as well as he did that he was and always had been his superior. He had not simply

been named captain, after all. He had won the position above the others-just as Baen had established himself as leader of his own platoon of men.

He was leader of first platoon, however, and whether Baen was ready to admit that that also made him his superior or not, they all knew it did. In effect, he was the overall leader of the combined forces of Marchet since he was captain of first platoon of Manu, the first colony city.

He supposed that he should have demanded acknowledgement of that fact, but he had not been particularly interested in doing so when Danielle was the issue and the others had conceded his right to her without argument. It was an unofficial acknowledgement that he had expressed his intention of leading the first mission and the others had conceded his right to do so.

Mating, as Danielle had pointed out, was complicated, however ... because Danielle was complicated. The men might accept him as leader, but unless she accepted him as her first, he would still not be first in the quad and that was far more important to him than being colony leader.

Truthfully, he found Danielle's instructions as contradictory and confusing as Jalen did, but he was not about to admit that he did or to admit defeat as Jalen had. He felt certain, in fact, that he was moving closer to understanding both her and the mating process her people practiced and that everything would fall into place once he was sure he had claimed first seed.

It made him uneasy that Gertrude had suggested that her cycle was not normal for her, or perhaps even for her species. It did not seem right, somehow, even though he was relieved that Manuta had been correct in assuming that the nanos would make her compatible to them.

He dismissed it after a few moments. In her own time, Danielle would get around to explaining, he was sure. In the meanwhile, he had the insurance that she was prepared to breed and that the nanos he had given her were performing as they should.

All he had to do now was watch her closely for an opportunity, try to avoid breeching any of the established mating protocols of her species, and hope that his seed would breach her damned birth control, he thought irritably.

He would have been more easy in his mind on the last if he understood how it was that their devices prevented conception and if it was permanently disabled or only temporary, and if temporary, how long he might expect it to remain so.

He also had misgivings about her fertility and his window of opportunity in that respect.

\* \* \* \*

Danielle's nerves were taut as she settled in the pilot's seat and opened the communications channel. It hadn't taken her long to arrive at the conclusion that she needed to make initial contact and prepare the way for negotiations if there was any hope of achieving an alliance. The problem was, she had to think long and hard over just how much to tell them and find a way to get around Kiel, Baen, and Jalen-no easy task! No matter when she decided to take her duty periods, it seemed one or more were also awake and watching her every move! She'd finally decided there would be no time when they were all asleep. They didn't appear to need much sleep.

Currently, the three of them were in the hold sparring, or exercising-the latter, she thought, from the noise. She didn't understand why they thought it necessary to work out so much-two or three times a day seemed excessive!-but she was glad for it at the moment since they were occupied elsewhere.

"Gertrude, see if you can establish a communications link with High Command."

"Attempting," Gertrude responded.

Danielle waited, impatiently drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair and listening to the noise from the hold.

"I have been unable to establish a link with High Command," Gertrude responded after an unnervingly long interval.

"Try again. This time, if you can't reach High Command, try all channels. Maybe we could reach somebody that could relay a message."

"Attempting."

The delay was longer that time. "No response to my hails."

Danielle muttered a string of curses under her breath. She supposed it was no great surprise that Gertrude hadn't been able to link up, but it was damned inconvenient!

"OK, change of plan. I want you to record a message and transmit it. Hopefully someone will pick it up and relay it to High Command."

"It could be intercepted by the enemy," Gertrude said pointedly.

"Good point. We won't give out any coordinates. I just want to establish a starting point for negotiating an alliance so they won't shoot us down before we can open them." She paused, composing her thoughts. "This is Captain Danielle Dubois, serial number 245812, Firebird 013, attempting contact with High Command. I have encountered friendlies. I crashed on their world and have been extended every courtesy. They are open to discussing an alliance with the Federation to aid us in the conflict." She paused again, considering what she'd said and finally decided that that was about all she could safely transmit without giving away anything that might be dangerous.

"I should point out that a continuous transmission would allow any enemies within hearing range to triangulate our position. We are on a direct course with the planet Chab."

Irritation flickered through Danielle. "I know it's a risk. Just send it-just the once. I might need to change the message anyway after we've met with the Danu on Chab."

"What message?" Kiel growled.

Danielle nearly jumped out of her skin. She could still hear thumping from below and it hadn't occurred to her that all three of the men might not be involved. Whirling, she stared at him in stunned dismay, trying to bring order to her thoughts. The color had rushed from her face. She could feel it flowing back into her cheeks with a vengeance. "I was just trying to establish communications with High Command," she said defensively.

His eyes narrowed. "If it was only that, why wait until you were alone on the bridge?"

Her lips tightened. "Because I figured you'd be nasty about it, since you have a nasty, suspicious mind! Play it back for him, Gertrude!"

Gertrude complied but she could see he was still deeply suspicious. “If that was all you meant to convey, you had no reason to believe I would prevent it. You need only have asked.”

“If we actually were allies, I wouldn’t have had to ask your damned permission at all! This is my ship, you know!” Danielle snapped angrily. Getting abruptly to her feet, she stalked past him and headed to her quarters.

Her first inkling that he was following her came when she heard his heavy tread behind her. Trying to convince herself that he was simply heading to his own cabin, she gritted her teeth and maintained the speed of her retreat. The skin on her back prickled, however, and it took sheer determination to keep from running when she knew he’d passed the door to his cabin.

Passing through the door of her own cabin, she turned to look at him at last as she closed the door ... virtually in his face. The door opened again before she could breathe a breath of relief and Kiel looked a lot more pissed off when it opened to reveal him filling her doorway. He stepped inside. “We are not allies,” he said tightly. “We are mates.”

It was the last thing she’d expected to hear and she felt her jaw go slack with surprise. She was too shocked to move or think as he advanced on her. All she could do was tip her head back and stare at him and that was all instinct, not conscious thought.

It flickered through her mind that she hadn’t told him she had no intentions in that direction. She’d known she needed to talk to him after they’d had sex and explain ... what?

That she’d responded without any thought on the matter at all? That she had been guided purely by instinct and need? That she’d not only completely forgotten that she needed to establish boundaries but she’d also completely forgotten that she’d only considered it at all as a bargaining chip.

She licked her dry lips. “We need to talk about that,” she said faintly.

He captured the base of her skull in the palm of his hand, dragging her up to meet his descent. “I believe we have discussed it enough.”

Prickling waves of warmth went through her even before he settled his mouth on hers and she felt herself tense all over with expectation. The thrill that went through her when she felt the warmth and pressure of his mouth against her lips totally annihilated all thoughts of any sort of negotiation or discussion. Heat cascaded through her in a tidal wave of sensation. She clutched at him as he deepened the kiss, gliding his tongue across her lips and thrusting it past the weak barrier. A dizzying, completely disorienting darkness cloaked her mind as his taste and scent filled her mouth with the first brush of his tongue along hers and then her lungs and then seemed to send fiery tendrils curling along her nerve endings.

She heard the tearing sound of the closures of her suit as he tugged them apart, felt brushes of cool air and then warm skin against her own with his movements as he worked to rid her of the impediment. A shiver of anticipation washed through her, no thought of protesting, but her coordination had fled with her equilibrium. It was all she could manage to pull in counter to his tugging at her suit.

It worked, regardless. He stripped the suit from her shoulders and pushed it from her hips. It was still tangled around her ankles when he began waltzing her backwards, but he caught her even as she lost her balance.

Lifting his lips from hers, Kiel picked her up, carrying her to the bed. He followed even as he settled her there, allowing little more than a breath of cool air to caress her skin before she felt the brush of his. His weight felt good. Impatience fluttered through her but so, too, did the sudden, burning desire to explore him, to draw out the pleasure.

The exploration with her hands made her more conscious of his size than ever before and in an entirely different way than before. Even when she'd first encountered him and realized how unnervingly big he was, she hadn't been aware of him as she was now; when she had to spread her arms wide to cup the rounded ball of his shoulders with her hands, when she had splay her fingers fully even to feel the size and curvature of the muscles of his upper arms. They felt like steel wrapped in silk.

It made her want to feel more of him, to feel the flesh of his chest directly against her breasts. She broke from his lips to explore his throat and neck, released her grip on his upper arms and pushed her hands between them. He lifted away slightly, allowing her the room she needed to pull her undershirt up. Delightful tingles went through her breasts as her distended nipples brushed his male breasts. She undulated beneath him, enjoying the light brushing of skin to heated skin.

The desire to feel his mouth on her breasts filled her. She struggled for a few moments with the urge to demand it and the reluctance to vocalize her needs when it might break the spell.

Deciding finally that she didn't actually need the stimulation, even though she wanted it, she opted to simply explore him with her lips and see if he would return the favor.

Discovering fairly quickly that he was reluctant to move off of her even when she pushed at him, she decided on a new tact and slipped her hands along his sides and then wedged them between the two of them to massage his cock. Disappointed when she discovered his torso was too long for her to reach him like she wanted to, she contented herself for a few moments with rubbing the head.

A shudder went through him. He lifted away slightly and shifted upward to allow her better access. Smiling inwardly, she pushed one hand beneath his loincloth and gripped his cock more firmly, stroking up and down along his length.

Dragging in a sharp breath after only a moment, he rolled away long enough to tear the loincloth off and flung it toward the wall. She used the distance between them to lift up to kiss his chest, but she didn't have more than a moment. As soon as he'd discarded his loincloth, he grasped her panties and yanked them down. They joined her flight suit around her ankles. She was still trying to dislodge the binding when he grasped the lower edge of her undershirt and yanked it over her head.

Despite the roughness, maybe even because of the impatience in conveyed, she felt her own anticipation leap upward several notches. Discarding the notion of exploring more, she grasped his arms the moment he'd freed hers and tried to pull him back. It was like trying to move a wall. Instead of yielding to her silent demand, he rolled over her and pressed his face between her breasts, nuzzling them. It drove her up the wall. She twisted, trying to present him with a breast to suckle. At first it seemed he was completely oblivious. Just as disappointment began to flood her, though, he found the

nugget and latched on to it with so much enthusiasm that it knocked the breath from her lungs.

She was still trying to decide whether it felt excruciatingly wonderful or if she was more inclined to try to detach him when he ceased to tease the first nipple and caught the second in his mouth. She thought she would blackout for several moments. She'd barely managed to catch her breath when he sought her lips again.

She'd had enough foreplay, however. She was climbing so fast toward climax the anxiety began to take hold that he wouldn't be inside her when she came. Thankfully, she'd managed to free one leg from the tangle of her clothing. Wiggling it free of his weight, she curled it around him, bumping her pubic bone against his belly in silent demand.

He got that signal quickly. Breaking the kiss, he sucked in a harsh breath, shoved her legs wide and plowed his cock along her cleft in a blind search for the sweet spot. They connected briefly, just long enough to get her hopes up, and then he slipped away. Gritting her teeth, she wedged her hand between them, grasped his cock, shoved it back down her cleft until she felt the head of his cock against her opening, and pulled, trying to wiggle down over it at the same time.

She'd forgotten the trials of plugging his member into her channel. As wet she was, as desperate as she was to achieve full penetration, they were both slick with sweat and panting for breath with the shoving match that ensued before they managed to overcome resistance. A moan of both relief and pleasure escaped her when she finally felt him sliding home, plunging deeply. Her channel convulsed with pleasure as he filled her.

Kiel uttered a choked sound when her muscles tightened around him, paused as if trying to gather himself, and then began to move rhythmically. It felt divine! For a few moments the determination to simply enjoy the feel of his flesh gliding in and out of her gripped her. Deliberately focusing her mind away from the ripples of pleasure that cascaded along her channel with each caress of his flesh, she expanded her senses to encompass all of him.

His sheer massiveness should have worried her, or made her too uncomfortable to enjoy the feeling of being beneath him. Instead, the sense of being surrounded by him added to her pleasurable excitement. The fine tremors she could feel running through him, either from his own excitement or the effort of supporting most of his weight off of her, or maybe both, thrilled her. The sound of his labored breaths made her heart surge.

Abruptly, her focus leapt of its own accord to their deep connection, closed off everything else, and she felt herself soar off the top into sheer rapture. Her entire body tensed with the convulsion. She groaned, gripped him more tightly, and rode the waves of bliss that began at her core and flowed through her entire body.

He shuddered when her muscles began to milk his cock, sucked in a choked breath and began to pump harder and faster as his seed erupted. She felt the heat of it as it bathed her channel and womb and a profound sense of rightness swept through her, a pleasure entirely different than her climax but perhaps even more intense.

He shifted to curl tightly around her as his own body ceased to convulse with pleasure. A smile seemed to fill her, utter contentment. She shivered as the air cooled

the dampness on her skin, snuggling closer, satisfied to allow her mind to wander aimlessly ... until it settled on the argument.

Well, it hadn't been an argument! He'd informed her that she was his mate and then proceeded to prove it to her while she turned into putty and encouraged him!

Honestly, she thought in disgust!

He nuzzled his face against her hair and she felt warmth, an almost instant mellowing of her resolve. "You are mine," he murmured in a husky whisper. "Whether you have accepted in your mind or not, your body responds as it would not if there was a question."

The instant mellowing vanished as quickly as it had stolen over her. Men! They were such egotistical assholes! So she'd enjoyed it, thoroughly! It wasn't as if they couldn't thoroughly enjoy themselves and feel no commitment whatsoever!

On the other hand, she felt too good at the moment to feel up to fighting with him about it. "We'll talk about it later."

"We will not," he said, his voice abruptly as steely as the arms around her. "You welcomed me. I planted my seed. That cannot be undone."

Danielle's heart skipped several beats. He sounded so sure of himself that it aroused a flicker of doubt in her mind, but she was on birth control! Nanny, nanny, boo, boo! "You might have tried to plant your seed, but I've got news for you! I'm on birth control!"

The 'discussion' might have escalated to a real argument at that point if Baen hadn't made his presence known. "Then you are done and it is my turn!" he growled.

Danielle struggled to sit up and discovered Kiel wasn't merely 'cuddling'. He had her firmly pinned both to him and the bed. She turned her head to glare at him. He narrowed his eyes back at her and she discovered he was a lot more intimidating when he did that than she was, obviously.

"Not until I am certain that mine has claimed its mark," he said grimly.

Danielle gaped at him. "Now, wait just a damned ...!" She stopped abruptly, feeling the beginnings of relief filter through her anger as it occurred to her that he hadn't even argued with Baen wanting to screw her. Some damned mating! It was just as she'd thought all along, and wasn't that a hell of a relief?

Marginally. She actually didn't feel a great deal of relief after she considered it. She was more pissed off.

This is good, she told herself grimly. So they weren't on the same page and she'd gotten the idea that he really meant it? She was relieved that it wasn't going to be a problem, right?

"Who the fuck said that you were next, gods damn it?" Jalen demanded, making it clear that they'd had the entire available audience ... quite possibly an audience back on Marchet if they managed to get a vid feed.

They would, she realized, once they could get a feed even if they hadn't already.

She discovered she couldn't really focus on how she felt about that at the moment, however. She had enough to deal with. Despite the fact that she was 'done' as far as she was concerned and didn't feel any particular interest at the moment in 'playing'



with the others, she didn't want to get caught up in a dangerous, possibly physical, dispute over who was 'next'! "If you start fighting about it, I'm not going to 'do' either one of you," she threatened, not with a lot of hope that it would hold much weight, then added a little hopefully, "We can do a threesome."

Not that she was especially keen on the idea, but she also wasn't thrilled with the idea of them having a brawl on the damned ship! Especially when she was way too close to the action and couldn't really escape it. The ship was larger than it had been before they'd redesigned it, but it wasn't that damned much bigger!

"What is a threesome?" all three men asked in chorus.

"Exactly what it sounds like," she retorted tartly before it occurred to her that she might ought to put some effort into at least pretending she was interested. She added brightly, "The three of us have sex together, at the same time, and everybody's happy."

Kiel released her and rolled off the bunk. The three of them, she discovered, were looking her over skeptically.

"Look, three holes," she said, pointing them out. "Your cock won't know the difference ... believe me."

"You cannot swallow the seed and become pregnant," Kiel said firmly, but with just enough doubt threading his voice that she realized they really weren't certain about any of it.

"Ok, so two," she said with determination, more because she didn't want Jalen and Baen to settle who went next than because she really wanted to make like a sandwich-particularly considering the poles they were carrying.

"It will work with either of those?" Jalen asked, beginning to look glassy eyed.

Danielle considered all of two seconds. "One will work as well as the other," she lied without guilt, particularly since it was true in this case. She didn't think it was a good idea to bring up the fact, at the moment, that it was true because neither would work. They could cross that bridge later.

Baen still didn't look completely happy with the suggestion but the moment Jalen discarded his loincloth and dove for the bed, he ripped his own off and followed.

"No warm up?" Danielle complained unwisely as the two of them began wrestling to get into position, or more accurately, her into a position that would work for them.

Both men paused in their battle over which direction she should be facing, staring at her in confusion.

"Never mind. I'm sure I'm already well lubricated."

?

## Chapter Sixteen

“It arouses her to passion to be kissed and touched,” Kiel said. “She particularly likes to have her breasts suckled.”

At the sound of his voice, Danielle discovered that Kiel had positioned himself to observe with the air of a spectator invited to watch a scientific experiment. Discomfort wafted through her, but she wasn't sure if it was because Kiel was sharing intimate details about her, because he seemed damned detached about the entire thing, or merely because he'd apparently decided to stay to direct. It was disconcerting to say the very least, disturbing on too many levels to count. She was tempted to inform him that she was going to have a hard time focusing if he intended to stay to watch. Even as she opened her mouth to protest, though, Baen swooped in to capture her mouth beneath his. For a few moments she wavered between enjoying the kiss and her awareness of Kiel. As Baen's essence invaded her, though, he stirred up the embers from her spent passion, and she felt herself sinking into a heated morass of sensation, enhanced exponentially by the glide of two large, rough hands over her.

Right up until the moment that the hand on her right applied enough pressure to encourage her to roll onto her back, she'd thought both hands belonged to Baen. Confusion flickered through her, adding to the dizziness already making her mind reel. She flinched in surprise as she felt the heated moistness of a mouth closing on her nipple, but the nipple reacted instantaneously to the stimulus. Blood surged into it to make it stand erect even as he sucked on it lightly. Jalen?

Her belly clenched. For several moments, she struggled to assimilate two points of extreme stimulation at once and then she simply abandoned herself to the sensations pelting her from every direction. The rise from warm interest to desperation was a swift one. She'd begun to feel like she was covered in stinging ants before Baen decided he'd explored her mouth long enough and dove for her other breast. It knocked the breath from her as his mouth closed over the pulsing bud. For several moments, Jalen and Baen both teased her breasts, pouring liquid lava through her and then Jalen abandoned her breast for her lips and she was torn between the desire to simply luxuriate in the feel of their hands and mouths forever and an equal need to feel them penetrating her.

She hadn't actually considered the logistics of it when she'd suggested a three way. She was well aware that it was practiced. She'd had both male and female friends eager to share their experiences. She'd never tried dual penetration herself before, though and she'd had a dim idea that she would allow one to penetrate her and give the other her mouth. Yet the moment she considered which she most wanted inside of her, she discovered she was eager to have both.

Could she handle it, though, when both were well above the 'average' she was accustomed to?

She discovered that she was not only not currently in any condition to figure it out, she was in a condition to want ignore potential problems and try it.

The moment Jalen broke the kiss, she twisted her hips to give him access and reached to grasp his cock to guide him. He shifted eagerly to accommodate her. He felt bigger

than she'd expected and yet she was so eager there was little discomfort when he penetrated her rectum and drove deep. She gasped as she felt him fill her, felt a heated, dizzying wave of pleasure. For a few moments, she allowed her body to adjust while he pumped in and out of her and then she reached blindly for Baen and guided his cock to the mouth of her sex.

They shifted into an awkward tangle of bodies, struggled briefly to find a position that allowed them to fit together as a threesome and then Baen and Jalen began to drive into her with the same desperation she was feeling. She came within moments, a brief convulsing that almost disappointed her until she felt the rise to a higher level, realized her body was gathering itself to explode again.

The second climax wasn't as unexpected save for the fact that it was harder than the first. She'd hardly touched down when she felt her body tensing again, climbing toward a third. Both anticipation and a touch of uneasiness filled her then. Just as she felt herself quivering on the brink of the third climax, she felt Jalen stiffen suddenly. Almost at the same moment, Baen's cock jerked inside of her.

She teetered, hovering on the edge and then, as both of them began to thrust more vigorously to pump their seed into her, she hit her peak. It was like the grandfather of earthquakes, tearing through her in such hard convulsions it snatched her breath away. She caught it in sharp, keening cries as her mind and body exploded with such force that she descended when it finally stopped rocking her into a state near comatose.

She was barely aware of the moment when they withdrew, only vaguely conscious of the sense that they were watching her.

"Danielle?"

Baen's voice, she realized, hoarse, sounding strained. "Mmm?"

"Are you alright?"

The question confused her. Why the hell wouldn't she be? Actually, she was much, much better than alright. She struggled to tell him as much and finally settled for , "Mmmhmm."

"Get up."

That was Kiel, she thought dimly, wondering if he was talking to her. Well, if he was, he could go fuck himself! She wasn't able to move at the moment. To her consternation, however, she felt both Jalen and Baen move away. She struggled to lift her hands to grab them and make them stay and keep her warm, but discovered she didn't have the strength. A shiver traveled through her, though, when they'd left and the cool air washed over her. The bed dipped again and somebody pried one of her eyelids up. She struggled to focus and Kiel's face swam into view. His expression was hard. "What?" she demanded irritably.

"Danielle?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you alright?"

She managed a drunken smile. "Go 'way. I'm s'eeepy." She snickered at the way that came out. She was squishy. "Bathe later." She frowned. "Cold."

She'd been demanding covers, but when he merely pulled her against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, she discovered that was even better.

God, she felt great! A year-two?-of famine and then, just about the time she'd decided they were too damned dense to figure out she was waiting for them to make the first move-supernova!

\* \* \* \*

It was hard to ignore the fact that the guys had been looking at her strangely since their orgy. Lord knew, Danielle had tried. She'd felt like she'd died and gone to heaven at first-the died part right away and the heaven when she came out of her coma enough to actually enjoy the bliss-but she'd caught them too many times to completely dismiss it.

Truthfully, it wasn't until it dawned on her that they didn't seem all that anxious to repeat the experience that she really noticed. Before that, she'd just thought they were as blissful as she was and still 'glowing'. When it did finally penetrate that they seemed almost more tense than they had before, it brought her crashing back to reality and the furtive glances she kept catching began to seem a lot more like uneasiness than shyness.

Once that had been brought her attention, her immediate reaction was uneasiness. Had something gone wrong that she hadn't noticed?

Thinking back, though, she distinctly remembered that she'd noticed they'd all come. Even if she hadn't been nigh dead with bliss, she couldn't have missed the mess they left!

So if they weren't dissatisfied, what was the problem?

She finally remembered she'd been pissed off at Kiel when she'd discovered that not only had Baen and Jalen come to watch, but he'd invited them to partake, which had made it abundantly clear what mating meant to him-to them-screwing.

She wasn't especially happy when she remembered that, but reality had fully sunk in and she knew it was for the best. Soon, she hoped, they would complete the first part of their mission and then take her home, at which time she would have to be debriefed about her accident and then would be reassigned. There was no telling, really, what sort of negotiations would ensue before things were fully settled, but it didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out that she would be going her way and they would go theirs.

It was amazing how depressing that was when she'd not only always known it would be that way, but that it had to be that way.

There was no dismissing the fact that she'd grown a lot more fond of them than she should have allowed-especially Kiel and Baen, although she thought Jalen was sweet, too-but in the scheme of things, she'd faced a lot worse with people she was more than a little fond of. At least she had the consolation of knowing they were alright-and would be even if they joined the fight.

They would probably be alright. They weren't indestructible. The battle with Manuta had deprived her of that illusion, but they were tough and smart and exceedingly well trained as soldiers. Their chances of coming through the conflict intact were a lot better than hers. She'd already exceeded the life expectancy of pilots by six months. She was expecting to get blown away any time now. The next engagement or the one after that and-oblivion, lights out, the end.

It took a full day after she'd finally noticed that nobody seemed nearly as damned cheerful about their romp as they ought to be to decide how to handle it. When she'd turned it over and over in her mind and realized she couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer on her own, though, she decided to simply face it head on and ask them straight out.

"Is there a problem I should know about?" she asked tentatively when they all settled around the table in the galley to eat.

All three men paused in their eating. Baen and Jalen looked at Kiel. Kiel frowned, looking more irritated than thoughtful. "We do not have a problem," he said finally.

That was a satisfactory answer! Irritation flickered through Danielle. "Ok-nobody has a problem we should talk about?"

Both Jalen and Baen looked as if they wanted to say something but apparently they decided against it. They returned their attention to their food.

Maybe she'd gotten her signals crossed and it didn't have anything to do with her at all? "When do you think we'll get to ... uh ... Chab?"

The men all looked at each other again. This was getting to be so annoying!

"We are nearing the edge of the solar system now," Kiel responded finally. "We have not been able to communicate, however."

"Is that what's bugging you guys?" Danielle asked, relieved. "Gertrude checked everything?"

"Yes."

Danielle frowned, thinking it over. "Well, they either aren't receiving or they aren't responding because they're suspicious. Maybe they're at war with somebody and think it's a trick? I mean, they haven't heard from you guys since they sent Manuta out. It's bound to be a surprise to them."

Kiel nodded. "Yes. We will be on high alert until we reach the planet."

As relieved as she was to discover the reason for their tension, she realized she was still a little outdone about it. It made sense that they'd be worried when they couldn't communicate and didn't know what they were going in to, but she was still a little ticked off that the circumstances had prevented any glorying in their intimacy. Unreasonable or not, it had been fabulous and she felt like she should've gotten some kudos or, at the very least, smoldering looks as they recalled it. As it was, she was the only damned person on board that had been floating around as if something wonderful had happened! It took a lot of the thrill away that they didn't seem to feel the same way about it.

She tried to take it philosophically. Such was life, and all that! It was life on the edge, anyway. Nobody really had a lot of time to devote to enjoying life or fond recollections when they had to worry about getting their ass shot off.

She didn't see any sense in wasting what little time they had to enjoy it, though, damn it!

Dismissing her pique with an effort, she followed them back to the bridge when they'd finished eating and studied the solar system Baen had pulled up on his display. "Which one is Chab?"

"It is fourth-here," he said, pointing.

“I guess we’re still too far out to get an actual look at it?”

“We cannot detect much from here beyond the chemical readings,” Kiel answered before Baen could.

“Well ... we should see it soon. I guess you guys are excited?”

They turned to stare at her blankly.

“Ok, well maybe not.”

“I am more uneasy than anything else,” Jalen said after a moment.

Danielle sent him a commiserating look. “I guess that’s understandable-especially ....” She broke off and shrugged. There were a number of possibilities to explain why they hadn’t been able to communicate with Chab-none of them good. She should’ve just kept her mouth shut, she reflected.

She was uneasy herself, she realized as she settled in the jump seat to watch the view from the viewing ports. Not that that was an excuse for being insensitive to their feelings! They probably felt the same way she had when she’d first gone to Meredie after she’d been gone a while-worried that it might not even be there anymore.

Of course Chab had to be. They had the chart of the system from Manuta. If there’d been any radical changes-like a missing planet-Gertrude would already have detected it.

It was still dismaying that they hadn’t responded to any hails. Ghost town, popped into her mind, she supposed because she’d seen quite a few of them since the conflict had begun. Once a colony world came under attack by the Nubiens, the people who could fled to the nearest military fortifications for protection-if they got the chance.

Maybe that was it? Something had happened and they’d had to seek shelter and whatever it was had disrupted communications? That certainly wasn’t good, but it was a scenario that wasn’t all bad either if it meant there were survivors.

“If there’s one thing we’ve learned from our own troubles, there are always survivors,” she offered.

She felt the looks they all cast her way, but Kiel caught her gaze and held it. “You know something we do not?”

Danielle blinked. “No! I’m just saying even if the reason they aren’t communicating is because something bad happened, there are always survivors. God knows the Nubiens do everything they can-short of destroying the planet itself-and we’ve always found survivors.”

She was making things worse. She could see that. Clamping her lips together, she broke eye contact with him and stared at the viewing screen. In the distance, she could see their home star, a red, an older star. Closer, she spotted a gas giant-fortunately not too close-and flicked a glance at the map of the solar system. It displayed only one gas giant, which was the fifth of the six planets this particular solar system boasted.

Kiel had said that Chab was the fourth and she focused on the forward display once more. It would still be small with distance from here, she knew. Too close to the gas giant and the chances were it would’ve gotten too much radiation for life to develop on their home world. Wondering idly if there had once been a planet between the gas giant and Chab, she didn’t at first realize she’d caught sight of Chab. Even when she

finally realized she was staring at a planetary body, she thought it must be a rogue asteroid, or perhaps a moon that had escaped the pull of the gas giant.

As they drew closer, however, she spotted two more specks that were smaller still and clearly orbiting the white ball she'd first noticed. Her belly clenched. Try as she might, though, she discovered she couldn't dismiss the fact that they were drawing closer and closer to a barren rock of ice.

Swallowing a little convulsively, she glanced at the others for confirmation and had it in their grim expressions. It didn't seem to her from looking at them that it was anything they'd expected. Of course, all they had was the information from Manuta and who knew how much that was?

She struggled for a moment with the desire to say something uplifting, debated whether she should even try or not, and finally decided to take the plunge. "I expect they were aware Chab was entering an ice age and that's why they decided to colonize other worlds."

Baen flicked a glance at her, but some of the hardness left his expression. "That seems a logical conclusion."

She was pleased to see that Kiel and Jalen looked a little less grim, as well. "Well, they were obviously very advanced to build something like Manuta. They would've known Chab was undergoing a climate change."

"Unless it was caused by something unexpected," Kiel pointed out grimly.

"Well, I suppose that's possible," Danielle agreed. "But they still sent out colony ships. And if they were prepared, then they would've made provisions for those who chose to stay, don't you think?"

"We will see," Kiel said grimly.

"Mayhap there is something there to tell us where the other colonies were located?" Jalen suggested.

Danielle felt pity swell inside her at the hopeful note in his voice. It must feel just awful to finally make it back to the home world and discover everyone was gone! "It stands to reason they would, right?" she agreed. "I mean, they'd want to try to keep in touch."

"Except Manuta was not given any such information."

Mr. Doom and Gloom! "Yes, Kiel, but you said yourself that it was the furthest and the least desirable-at least somebody told me that. They probably figured it would take too long to bring it to readiness and just used the ones that were easiest. Even if they didn't leave any directions, you could figure it out. All we'd have to do is use Chab as the starting point, figure out when they sent out the robots to terra-form, and use that as your starting date to determine which of the closest planets would have seemed desirable to them at that time."

"We?"

Danielle blinked at him, dismayed at the sense of hurt that flickered through her at being excluded from the 'we, wondering at the same time when she'd begun to relate to them in such a way that 'we' had come automatically to mind. "Right. I mean you, but it isn't an impossible task. It might take a little longer than you expected, but it

could be done. Anyway, we won't know until we land if you'd even need to that, will we? The entire planet might not all be iced over. We can only see the side facing us."

She was relieved to discover that observation wasn't pure optimism. Once they'd drawn near enough to get a better view of the surface, they could see that the area near the equator wasn't one continuous ice sheet. It was bitter cold. According to Gertrude's sensors, the temperature was well below zero on the daylight side-midday. Once they'd circled the globe, they found that that temperature dipped to -180 degrees at night.

"Well, that isn't good, but its survivable if they had time to prepare. What about the site Manuta was launched from?"

"It is under thirty feet of ice," Kiel responded.

Danielle cringed inwardly. "Well, they would've moved, of course. Even if they had facilities underground, they'd want the best climate. I guess we'll try the closest point to Manuta's launch?"

Kiel glanced at Baen. Baen shrugged. "We have come. We cannot leave without checking to be certain that Chab is abandoned."

"It is on the dark side. We will wait until the temperature has risen before we land."

"How long before sunrise?" Danielle asked.

"If Chab's rotation has not changed, one hour."

"I think we might as well drop through the atmosphere and take a closer look," Danielle suggested.

None of them seemed particularly enthusiastic, but Kiel dropped below their orbital path and punctured the atmosphere. Almost as soon as they did, they began to encounter turbulence and Danielle was sorry she'd suggested it when Gertrude announced that the winds were gusting at nearly 100 mph near the surface.

"Storm?" Danielle asked shakily.

"Unable to determine without more data. Possibly, but there is very little to slow the winds," Gertrude responded. "It is also possible that this is mild conditions, comparatively speaking."

To Danielle's relief, Kiel took the ship beyond the atmosphere once more where they waited in orbit for the site they'd chosen to warm up. The surface temperature was still below zero as they descended, but the wind had dropped off to a more comfortable 57 mph. It still buffeted the hell out of the ship and Danielle didn't think she was alone in being tremendously relieved when they finally landed and Gertrude announced that it had detected structures approximately a hundred yards from their landing site. The computer didn't detect any life forms, but was unable to penetrate the material the structures were composed of and could not verify whether any were present or not.

"Ok, we have a problem," Danielle said as everyone took off their harnesses and stood. "You guys can't go out like that. You'd freeze to death inside of ten minutes!"

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all looked down at themselves.

"We have manufactured suits much like yours," Kiel said finally.

It was news to Danielle! It occurred to her, though, that she'd told them they needed to try to fit in and not to announce the fact that they were shifters. She supposed



they'd thought that would be the best way to do it. "Well, even if it's just like my suit, we'll need head gear and gloves."

"We have those, as well. We reproduced everything that was on the original ship since there seemed a purpose for it."

Danielle was still uneasy. They came from Marchet! The temperatures there were mild enough for them to be comfortable running around mostly naked. "Boots?"

"Yes," Kiel threw over his shoulder as he followed Baen and Jalen from the bridge.

Still unconvinced, Danielle followed them-or more specifically Kiel. She discovered when she'd followed him into his cabin that it was barely big enough for the tiny bunk-and him. After debating whether to leave again to get out of his way or stay and try to talk to him, she finally plopped down on his bunk to give him room to dress.

He opened a locker and removed an entire flight suit-exactly like hers except for the fact that it was a different color.

"My suits are made out of a very special material," she said. "It protects from this sort of temperatures."

"We deduced that. That is why we reproduced the same material."

She was still doubtful, but somewhat relieved. "We still won't be able to stay out long without freezing. We'll have to make short searches," she cautioned.

Kiel flicked a glance at her. "You will remain here."

Danielle gaped at him. "You aren't serious?"

"I am very serious. We do not know what to expect. It will be better if you remain in the ship."

Anger surged through her. "You aren't afraid I'll take off and abandon you here?" she asked tightly.

"Would you?" he asked almost absently.

"Of course I wouldn't!" Danielle snapped. "But you don't know that and you don't believe that."

"No. This is why Gertrude has been ordered to remain on the surface unless there is a threat to you and the ship."

Danielle gaped at him in furious disbelief. "You ... you reprogrammed my damned computer?" she demanded indignantly.

"It seemed ... wise," he said dryly.

Danielle abruptly felt more like crying than screaming curses at him. "Bastard!" she ground out, jolting to her feet and stalking to the door.

He caught her before she reached it and she whirled to face him. His gaze flickered over her face. "Why is water in your eyes?"

Danielle felt her chin wobble. She sniffed. "Because I'm pissed off!" It hadn't been an intentional lie. She was furious. She was angry because she was hurt, though, not because she felt insulted-although she was certainly insulted!

A reluctant smile trembled at the corners of his hard mouth. "You want to spar with me about it?"

“I’d like to punch you in the nose!” Danielle growled. “But I’m not stupid! You’re twice my size-at least!”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I would never touch you in anger.”

Danielle felt her throat close. “Why are you leaving me here?”

He frowned. “Because it is my honor and my duty as your mate to protect you.”

Danielle thought for several moments that she would burst into noisy sobs. “What if you don’t come back?” It came out as a childish whine rather than the demand she’d intended.

“Then you will go back to your people.”

Danielle did burst into tears then. She couldn’t help it. As far as she knew, there was no real threat to them. It didn’t seem to her that there could be a living thing still on the planet, but that was beside the point. She hated the thought of being left alone and she hated it worse that he’d suggested that it wouldn’t matter to her if he didn’t come back.

Impulsively, she launched herself against his chest and threw her arms tightly around his waist. He felt so reassuringly massive, strong, solid! It was ridiculous to think anything could happen to him, right?

He looped his arms around her as she had him after a moment-except he wasn’t holding her as if he was afraid she would vanish.

She hated being alone! Hated it, she thought angrily. She hadn’t realized it because she’d refused to acknowledge it before, right after she’d lost everyone knew. She hadn’t even acknowledged, before, how much she’d come to depend on having Kiel and Baen and Jalen around, how hungry she’d been just to be around another living soul. It wasn’t something she’d wanted to think about when there was no way to change it.

But it had changed! She’d crashed on Marchet and she hadn’t been able to close herself off from them to keep from growing accustomed.

She struggled to regain her composure as it occurred to her that crying like a baby wasn’t likely to convince him that she would be an asset to their exploration party. She sniffed. “I’d be a lot safer if I was with you guys ... and I won’t get in the way! I swear!”

Kiel seemed to wrestle with something. “Jalen will stay with you. Baen and I will scout. If I see nothing to give me cause for concern we will return and the four of us will see what we can discover.”

Danielle relaxed her tight hold on him and looked up at his face, more surprised that he’d yielded than anything else. “Really?”

“Yes. If there is trouble, none of us will linger.”

She frowned, thinking that over. “I don’t need for Jalen to stay. I’ll be safe here and you’ll be safer with three than two-the more the better.”

He looked puzzled and mildly irritated. Shaking his head, he disentangled himself from her and grabbed his suit, skimming into it and smoothing the closure together. Mopping her damp face, Danielle debated whether to leave as she’d intended or stay to watch. It was a short debate. She discovered she was too intrigued by the transformation to leave, fascinated in a way that made her belly shimmy with interest.

“You look so handsome in that,” she gasped a little breathlessly when he’d pulled the matching boots on and straightened, surprised, pleased, and uneasy at the same time for some unaccountable reason.

He flushed, flicking a puzzled look at her as he picked up the gauntlets, studied them for a moment, and then pulled them on. He looked down at himself when he’d finished and then glanced at her again, his expression quizzical. “I look better covered up?”

Danielle bit her lip, trying to keep from smiling. “You look gorgeous in nothing but your skin,” she said a little shyly, feeling her own cheeks heat. “I’m just saying you make that flight suit look yummy.”

A frown of puzzlement appeared between his dark brows. “Yummy? I do not know this word.”

Danielle chuckled. “Good enough to nibble all over.”

His face darkened, but he grinned at her a little uncomfortably. The smile made her belly shimmy again and this time she had no trouble figuring out exactly what the effect on her was—desire and possessiveness. It disconcerted her, troubled her deeply.

Unnerved, she turned and beat a retreat. She met up with Baen and Jalen in the corridor and halted to study them with a similar mixture of pleasure and jealousy. It would never have occurred to her that they could be so transformed by anything as simple and utilitarian as a flight suit into such stunningly appealing males. It wasn’t that she hadn’t thought so before, but the loincloths they usually wore gave them an entirely different appeal—an earthy, savage look that had been more unnerving than anything else when she’d first encountered them.

The familiar suits made them seem far less alien to her, but there would’ve been no danger of overlooking any of the three as simply another three pilots of the Federation even if not for their long, dark hair. They looked unaccountably taller and more massive and at the same time more approachable.

The women of the Federation were going to go catatonic with admiration when they got a look at them, she thought with a mixture of amusement and dismay. “I don’t think you guys will have any problems finding mates among the Federation women looking like that,” she muttered with a mixture of appreciation and irritation. “You might have to fight them off.”

Baen and Jalen both looked surprised, undecided of whether to be pleased or not, and confused. They both looked at Kiel questioningly.

Kiel, Danielle discovered, didn’t look particularly pleased by the compliment. “Jalen, you will stay here to guard Danielle while Baen and I do a preliminary survey for any signs of threat.”

Jalen looked a little startled, but he merely stiffened and nodded. Danielle wasn’t certain if it was their rendition of a military salute or not, but Kiel nodded at him in the same manner and he and Baen moved past them toward the airlock. Pausing to take weapons from a rack beside it, they stepped inside the small airlock and the door closed behind them.

Danielle felt her nerves tauten as she heard the gangplank being lowered. She glanced at Jalen and found him studying her. “You aren’t pissed off that they left you to babysit?” she asked dryly.

Confusion flickered in his eyes. “Babysit?”

Danielle uttered a snort that lacked amusement. “Baby-infant-small off-spring?”

He looked more confused instead of less. “You are not a child,” he said slowly as if he was in some doubt.

“No, I’m not,” Danielle said forthrightly. “I’m not only a grown woman, I’m a trained soldier, and it’s insulting to be left under guard as if I can’t take care of myself!”

Pushing past him, she stalked to the bridge and opened the viewers all the way around. It was even more enjoying that Jalen was virtually on her heels.

“I am honored to be designated to guard you,” he said tentatively. “It is a sign of Kiel’s confidence in my abilities.”

“And lack thereof in mine!” Danielle said, sniffing.

“It is not a lack of confidence,” Jalen disagreed. “It is a measure of your value to us.”

Danielle frowned, turning that over and trying to decide whether she found that as insulting as the vote of ‘no confidence’ in her ability to defend herself. She supposed, after a moment’s thought, that he was right. She certainly wouldn’t be of any use to them dead. In any case, it didn’t seem right to take it out on Jalen when it had been Kiel who’d ordered him to stay with her.

She shook her head. “Don’t mind me. I’m just feeling crabby about being left out. I’m used to being considered an equal and fighting beside the men-not cowering behind them.”

“You are not as valuable to them?”

Danielle gaped at him in outrage. “I most certainly am! I wouldn’t be a pilot if they didn’t think I could do the job as well as anybody else!”

He looked taken aback. “But ... you are a tiny creature.”

Danielle glared at him. “Size has nothing to do with it! Actually, my reflexes are faster than a lot of the ‘big men’ and its reaction time that counts in the war we’re fighting! There are plenty of women out fighting. It’s our fight, too, our homes that are at stake!”

He studied her uneasily. “I meant no insult. This is not your war, however, not your battle. This is our home world and your enemy is not here.” He shrugged. “It does not appear that even our people are here any longer. You are vastly appealing to me even if you are so tiny that I also find it ... unnerving at times and amazing that you are as strong as you are and willing to fight against a much greater force. That is admirable even while it is also foolhardy.”

As appeasing as part of the speech was, the last comment set her back up all over again. Alright, so she supposed he had a point! They knew they were way the hell stronger than she was and there would be no real contest between them. It wasn’t as if she was too stupid to know that! Women just weren’t as physically strong as men, but they had other strengths, damn it! And, when it came right down to it, strength didn’t always win! When it came down to a battle of wits, women were every bit the equal of any man and often superior since they’d been forced by their physical limitations to rely upon their wits from the dawn of man!

Well! There was no sense in pointing that out! In fact, it was usually better to save the 'big' guns for when they were needed!

"It isn't stupid to fight when you feel threatened," she said mildly, "even if you're facing an enemy of superior force. It's instinct. Anyway, it beats the hell out of simply giving up."

Jalen nodded. "You are a very brave woman. This is another thing that I admire."

Danielle blushed, but amusement surfaced, as well. "You aren't trying to butter me up?"

He looked confused.

Their English was so good she kept forgetting they had severe limitations in their vocabulary. "Complimenting me to ... uh ... flirt? Saying nice things to make points?"

He frowned, clearly turning it over in his mind.

"Trying to please me so that I'll please you?"

He blinked at her. "This works?" he asked a little doubtfully. "Females like this?"

Danielle couldn't help but chuckle. "Everybody likes compliments. It makes them feel good and if you make them feel good when you're around them, they like to be around you. Just don't get too carried away. It has to be believable. It's better if it's true and they can tell it's true."

He looked unconvinced. She realized he thought she was teasing him. "Does it make you feel good if I say that I think you're handsome?"

He reddened. "Do you think so?"

"I'm not blind," she said wryly. "You are handsome. Can't you tell I think so when I look at you?"

He looked torn between wanting to believe her and doubt. "I have not seen you look at me. I have seen you look at Kiel as if you admire him and also Baen."

Danielle's amusement vanished. On impulse, she moved closer to him, sliding her arms around his waist and looking up at him. "I think you're handsome, too," she said gently. "You just didn't notice."

She heard him swallow, but he looked almost more alarmed at her proximity than pleased about it. She'd just decided it had been a mistake to approach him when he settled his hands on her upper arms. She waited a little breathlessly, wondering if he would set her away from him or pull her closer. She didn't get the chance to find out. Even as his hands tightened almost convulsively on her arms, the sound of feet pounding up the gangplank reached them. Alarm instantly went through Danielle and she whipped her head in that direction, pulling away from Jalen in the same moment.

?

## Chapter Seventeen

“We will need tools to get inside,” Kiel announced the moment the airlock opened, clearly preoccupied as he strode past Jalen and Danielle, who’d rushed to meet them.

Danielle was a little disconcerted, but relieved, as well, to discover it wasn’t anything threatening that had brought them back so soon. Guilt also flickered through her that after being so upset and worried about them going out she’d allowed herself to be so distracted first by her argument with Jalen and then a flirtation that she hadn’t been ‘watching over them’ as she’d intended when she’d gone to the bridge.

“What did you find?” Danielle asked anxiously as she followed him.

He flicked a glance at her. Baen answered. “This is an ancient place. It appears to have been abandoned long ago.”

“It looks to be stable enough, however,” Kiel added. “You may come with us to explore it, but you must stay close to Jalen.”

Danielle’s irritation of before instantly resurrected itself. He was damned bossy! If he’d been her commanding officer, she wouldn’t have had a problem with taking orders from him, but he wasn’t!

She decided to argue her point later, though. She could see he had every intention of grabbing tools and leaving again and there was no doubt in her mind that he’d leave her if she wasn’t ready to go. Whirling on her heel, she rushed back to her own cabin to collect her gauntlets and her helm. Baen and Kiel had already stepped into the airlock when she returned. Jalen, she saw, was waiting for her.

She hurried to join him and saw that Baen and Kiel had already reached the bottom of the gangplank. They paused there, turning to watch as she and Jalen exited through the airlock. Appeased that they hadn’t simply set off without them, Danielle damned near skidded down the gangplank on her ass in her rush to join them. The first she realized that it had iced over was when her feet shot out from under her. Jalen caught her, skidded and wobbled jerkily but managed to maintain his footing, carrying her the remainder of the way before he set her down.

Embarrassed at her near mishap, Danielle studiously ignored the looks Baen and Kiel bent on her, peering through the wind driven snow toward the tall structure in the distance. Shaking his head, Kiel turned away. “Watch your footing,” he advised.

Danielle’s lips tightened with annoyance. “I’m used to walking in snow and ice,” she muttered. “I just hadn’t expected the gangplank to ice over so quickly.”

His response was a non-committal grunt through her earphones, but he didn’t make any other comment.

She quickly discovered that the wind was hard enough to blow her down. Even sandwiched between the men, who cut off a lot of the wind, she had to concentrate to keep from falling. It seemed to take hours to reach the structure they were approaching when she knew it couldn’t have taken more than a few minutes. She was winded with the effort by the time they arrived and could feel the cold penetrating her suit and turning her fingers and toes to ice.

Baen and Kiel set to work immediately, thawing the ice that encrusted what appeared to be a giant set of double doors made of rock. There were symbols of some sort carved into the doors and Danielle studied them curiously. They looked strangely familiar, though she couldn't figure out why. She finally decided that it was just the fact that they looked similar to symbols she'd seen on Marchet. She wasn't completely satisfied with that explanation, however. She didn't know why, but something niggled at the back of her mind just beyond her grasp that almost seemed to contradict that simple explanation.

After a few moments, she widened her visual examination to the uprights on either side of the door and finally moved back a short distance to tilt her head up and study the structure. The architectural design, she saw at once, was nothing at all like the structures the Danu had built on Marchet even if the symbols did look vaguely familiar. This structure was roughly triangular in shape, whereas those on Marchet were flowing in design, very similar to the habitats on her own home world, and probably for the same reason. They'd not only been designed to blend with the natural setting for the sake of aesthetics and protection from detection, but also as protection from the elements.

She was still trying to figure out what it was about the place that had set off a sense of familiarity when she knew damned well she'd never seen anything like it when she saw a flash of light above the ice encrusted peak of the structure.

"Kiel?" she said uneasily, trying to decide whether it was a meteor or something else entirely. Even as she voiced the tentative warning, though, she saw several other bright lights blink into view.

Caught by the note of uncertainty in her voice, Kiel stopped abruptly and moved back to look up.

"Ships! Get back to the ship!" he bellowed, grabbing Danielle around the waist and snatching her off her feet.

As close as they were to the ship, they hadn't covered much more than half the distance when Danielle heard the roar of engines that meant the crafts were landing. Struggling frantically in Kiel's hold to search for the source, Danielle felt her heart stop when she finally did spot the oncoming crafts. "Nubien!" she gasped in disbelief. "It's a squadron of Nubien ships!"

Kiel skidded to halt as a laser blast hit the ground in front of them followed in quick succession by a dozen more. Whirling abruptly, he raced back toward the door they'd been trying to pry open.

"We need to get to the ship!" Danielle screamed at him. "They'll blow us to bits!"

"They would blow up the ship before we could take off!" Kiel growled.

As if they'd be worse off if the damned ship was blown to bits stranding them on the ball of ice! Granted, the Nubiens seemed much more intent on shooting them than the ship at the moment but that sure as hell didn't mean they wouldn't blow it up!

Kiel dropped her to her feet unceremoniously as they reached the doors again. By the time Danielle had recovered her equilibrium, she discovered that all three men had thrown their shoulders against the huge doors. For a few moments, it seemed it would be a wasted effort. Danielle glanced frantically back to see where their attackers were

and discovered the Nubien crafts were landing. Nubiens leapt out the moment the first settled, racing toward them and firing as they ran.

Someone grabbed her arm and snatched her forward so fast it almost gave her whiplash and then blackness descended over her. She thought for a split second that she'd lost consciousness. There was nothing dulled about her other senses, however. She felt the arm that clutched her around the waist tightly enough to cut off her air and the jarring as he took off with her at a run.

It dawned on her that they'd entered the structure, but she couldn't see a damned thing! She didn't know how they could possibly see well enough to walk, let alone run! She was near the point of passing out by the time they finally stopped running and she was set on her feet. Rubbing her ribs, struggling to catch her breath and find her equilibrium when she couldn't even tell which end was up, Danielle froze where she was planted on her feet.

"Stay put and don't move!" Kiel growled in a low voice.

Fear shot adrenaline through her with realization that he-they-meant to leave her. She tried frantically to grab hold of one of them. It sent her terror through the roof when she encountered nothing but empty space. Struggling with her fear, she tried to gather her wits and assess her situation.

She could still hear their breathing, she thought, trying to reassure herself. Almost the moment she realized that that only meant she could hear them through their speakers, not that they were still close by, the speakers in her helmet went dead. She clamped her lips tightly together, fighting the urge to call out to them for reassurance, struggling with the urge to give in to hysterics.

She was tensed all over with the desperate need to follow her instincts and run. It was only the realization that she didn't know where to run that kept her where she was. Finally, she sank slowly toward the floor, hardly conscious of the instinct to make herself as small a target as she could since she didn't dare run. She felt much better once she was crouched near the floor, though, a little more clear headed, at least able to assimilate the next most desirable tactic for survival-to hide if neither fight or flight was an option.

She wasn't hidden, though. As far as she could determine she was in the center of a huge room and right out in plain sight if anything could penetrate the darkness. The memory abruptly surfaced with that thought that she had lights on her helm but she realized immediately that she didn't dare use them. It might only make her a target rather than helping her find her way.

Truthfully, she was scared to move in any direction when she was completely blind. She had no idea what obstacles might be around her-deep, bottomless pits came to mind. Trying to move as quietly as possible, she began to crawl slowly away from the spot where Kiel, or whoever, had left her. It took her a few moments to decide which direction to go, but she finally decided opposite the way they'd come was the best idea-further away from the Nubiens chasing them definitely seemed better.

It occurred to her after a moment of crawling that the objective was probably to capture them if possible, rather than kill them. They could've simply blown them and their ship to bits with a photon cannon if eliminating them was their objective. Instead, they'd landed their crafts.



A shiver went through her. Dying seemed a lot better than becoming a captive if any of the things she'd heard about them was true.

She was so intent on her thoughts and carefully searching the floor in front of her for pits that she damned near slammed her head into the wall when she reached it. As it was, the light tap of her helmet encountering solid rock seemed to echo through the chamber. She froze, holding her breath, listening. Hearing a faint sound behind her, she whipped her head around in search of the source and saw two glowing red eyes in the darkness.

She nearly passed out before it dawned on her that it must be one of the men. When she scanned the darkness, she found two more pairs and relaxed fractionally.

A blue glow appeared between the three sets of eyes before relief could ease much of her tension. She swallowed convulsively, realizing even before she heard the faint accompanying scrape of boots on stone what it was.

They were trapped, she thought in dismay! And she was in a direct line of sight with the corridor she realized the Nubiens were following! Struggling to keep from whimpering in pure terror, she placed her shoulder against the wall she'd found and began to crawl a little frantically in search of a place to hide or another opening that would give her a chance to run.

She didn't even have a weapon! She couldn't remember whether Jalen had armed himself or not, but even if he had there was only three against god only knew how many!

In a handful of seconds the bluish lights filled the chamber. Danielle had a split second to realize the chamber was every bit as vast as she'd thought and then the cavernous room erupted in deafening gunfire as the Nubiens in the lead fell into the trap Kiel and the others had set.

Whirling to look, Danielle discovered the men had stripped their suits off and transformed themselves into beasts. That took the Nubiens by surprise far more than anything else they might have thought of. The first four that entered the chamber actually screamed in terror before they died. Horror washed over Danielle when she saw the beast-men literally rip them to pieces, flinging body parts in every direction as they waded into the Nubiens behind them. She couldn't look away or close her eyes. Frozen, she watched as they waded through the Nubiens and turned them into bloody mush.

She wasn't sure how long she remained frozen in place, unable to move or think, but her brain began to function slowly once more when she realized the battle had moved well away from her. It flickered through her mind that Kiel had ordered her to stay where she was, but the moment thaw set in so, too, did the urge to run.

A wave of nausea swept over her when she'd looked around and discovered there was no exit except the corridor they'd followed into the chamber-none that she could see. In any case, all she could think about was getting out. It took an effort to get to her feet and she was so weak and shaky when she had she wasn't sure she could walk. Stiffly, feeling revulsion clawing at her throat, she approached the bloody mess at the mouth of the corridor and stepped over the first body pieces. She skidded on the blood pooling on the floor and almost threw up.

Dragging in a deep breath, she held it until the wave of nausea passed and picked her way slowly and carefully over the bodies. The bluish glow of the lights on their helms

lit her way, allowed her to see far more than she wanted to. After glancing at a few that seemed relatively intact, she decided she didn't need to check to make sure they were dead and began to move a little faster. She wanted to run full out, but she didn't dare. Every incautious step she took was nearly her undoing when the floor beneath her feet was liberally coated with blood.

She almost smacked into one of the beast-men coming back. He caught her to steady her, leaving bloody marks on the sleeves of her suit that made her stomach heave. "Stay here," he growled.

Danielle nodded a little jerkily, but he released her and brushed past her and she wasn't even sure he'd noticed her automatic response. She frowned when he vanished down the corridor, wondering what he was going back for.

It occurred to her that he might be checking to make certain they were dead, but she didn't see a lot of point in that exercise when they had to know that they'd made mince-meat out of them. He returned a few moments later, no longer beast, but as Jalen, their discarded suits bundled under one arm.

"They are taking care of the rest," he said when he reached her. "Kiel will give us the signal when it is safe to leave."

Danielle gaped at him, nodding a little jerkily, but it didn't occur to her to suggest that he might be overconfident about Kiel and Baen taking care the other Nubiens. She didn't hear any 'signal' either, but after a few minutes, Jalen grasped her arm and began leading her along the corridor. She heard the sound of sporadic gunfire as they neared the entrance and then silence.

"I will carry you," Jalen announced, grabbing her around the waist as he said it and jogging out of the door before she could protest.

She wasn't sure she would've protested. Once outside, she saw the aftermath of the slaughter-she didn't think it could actually be classified as a battle-in the full light of day and passed out. The next awareness she had was of jolting up the gangplank and into the airlock.

She stirred, trying to suck in a decent breath past the grip Jalen had on her and began to struggle to free herself from him. He set her on her feet, but he didn't release her. Instead, he dropped the bundle he was carrying under his other arm as soon as they stepped through the airlock into the interior of the ship and scooped her up, carrying her to her cabin.

"You are injured?" he demanded, his voice harsh.

"No," Danielle protested faintly, feeling the beginnings of embarrassment. "I'm alright. I don't need to lie down! We need to get out of here before more come!"

"There is a harness here. You can lie down and still be secure for takeoff," he said tightly, clearly trying to reason with her.

"Well I don't need to lie down!" she snapped.

"What is this?" Baen demanded from the door of her cabin.

"She was unconscious!" Jalen responded. "She may be injured."

Baen frowned at her. "You must lie down then and allow Gertrude to scan you for injury."

Danielle ground her teeth in frustration but she realized that arguing with them was not only pointless, it was delaying takeoff and they couldn't afford to do that. "Fine!" she snarled at him. "Let's just go, damn it!"

They looked reluctant to leave her but once Jalen had helped her into the emergency harness both men turned and left. Danielle closed her eyes as she heard the engines roaring to life, trying to banish the images that kept playing through her mind. It would've been easier, she thought, if it hadn't reminded her so strongly of what her village had looked like after the Nubiens had bombarded it-except then it had been the broken bodies of her sister and parents ... of everyone she'd grown up with.

She was still struggling with the urge to vomit when she felt a prick in her thigh. She had just enough time to realize Gertrude had decided to sedate her before nothingness claimed her. She woke sometime later feeling as if she'd been run over. Her ribs, she discovered the moment she tried to sit up, were bruised and when she did manage to unfasten her harness and sit up her head swam and throbbed painfully. She debated whether to lie down again but the sound of voices clenched the matter.

Struggling to her feet, she left the cabin. The voices were immediately distinguishable as Kiel, Baen, Jalen, and Gertrude's-speaking in Danu. Irritation flickered through her, but relief, too. They must be alright, she decided, if they were all sitting in the galley talking.

They still bore the marks of battle, she discovered. Thankfully, they'd bathed the gore off, but she could see angry red marks all over them and knew it was fresh wounds when their skin had been flawless before the battle. Her throat closed as it sank in that they hadn't come through the fight unscathed as she'd believed. It wasn't even reasonable that she'd thought they had, that all of the blood she'd seen belonged to the Nubiens, not when they'd been fighting for their lives.

It was almost as inconceivable that they'd taken on what must have been at least a full company of Nubiens and triumphed with no more evidence of the battle than the angry red marks on them.

Because they had nanos and the nanos had closed the wounds, she realized abruptly, thankful for it and at the same time distressed to see just how many wounds they had.

"You are alright?" Kiel asked abruptly when he saw her hovering in the door of the galley.

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively. "I think I should be asking you that. I didn't actually take part in the battle, you know."

"Gertrude found several cracked ribs in the scan," Baen said neutrally.

Danielle flicked a glance at Jalen before she could prevent it. "Oh, well, the heat of battle. They feel alright."

Surprise flickered through her. Her ribs really did feel alright and that was weird if it was true that she'd cracked several.

Jalen flushed, but it occurred to Danielle that it was just as possible Kiel had cracked her ribs as it was that Jalen had. They'd both been too intent on getting her to safety to consider her ribs might not be up to the pressure. "Gertrude has determined that the babies are fine," he said a little stiffly.

Danielle blinked at him as if he'd suddenly begun speaking Danu. "What?"

“Our off-spring,” Baen clarified, glaring at Jalen. “That is a relief, but I do not like that they were endangered at all.”

Danielle threw up her hands. “Wait! Whoa there! You mean to say you think ...?”

“Know,” Kiel said grimly. “We are mated.”

“We fucked!” Danielle snapped. “There’s mating and then there’s fucking, damn it!”

“And we mated,” Kiel retorted.

Danielle narrowed her eyes at him. “Gertrude! Tell them what the scan detected!”

“Three healthy embryos,” Gertrude responded promptly.

Danielle felt like she’d taken a blow to the head-completely disoriented. “Embry ...,” she gasped faintly. She recovered quickly. “I have birth control, damn it!”

“Had,” Gertrude corrected. “The nanos appear to have disabled it ... possibly they ingested it, using it to create more or have introduced it into the embryos to make them more like their fathers. It is too early to determine.”

Danielle’s knees seemed to lose starch and turn to water. She wobbled to a seat and flopped down on it. “Their fathers?” she asked faintly.

“Affirmative. They carry the DNA of each.”

Danielle shook her head, trying to make sense of what Gertrude was saying. “You’re saying each of them carry the DNA of all? How is that even possible?”

“Each carries the DNA of one,” Gertrude clarified. “Each member of your quad has reproduced, as is apparently typical of their reproduction process. It is certainly not typical of humans, as you well know. Possible, but astronomically unlikely.”

“I think I need to lie down,” Danielle mumbled, struggling to get up again.

“The fainting is very likely a side-effect of the pregnancy,” Gertrude offered. “Your system is still adjusting.”

“Shut up!” Danielle gasped faintly, feeling herself descending into oblivion in spite of all she could do to try to fight it off.

When she regained consciousness, she found herself lying on her bunk and staring up at three grim faced ... tryants! “You bastards!” she snarled accusingly. “You knew you were going to get me pregnant!”

Baen and Jalen glanced uneasily at Kiel.

“Yes,” Kiel responded. “That was the objective in mating.”

If she’d had something to throw at him, she would’ve clobbered him!

Apparently they decided retreat was the better part of valor. Kiel turned on his heel as soon as he’d announced that stupid piece of reasoning and left, and Baen and Jalen tried to beat him to the door.

“Assholes!” she bellowed after them, but she discovered calling them names didn’t make her feel any better. Subsiding, she stared at the ceiling, trying to come to grips with what Gertrude-the fucking bitch!-had told her. Not only had the damned computer not warned her that her damned birth control device had been disabled-gone missing!-it had sounded downright cheerful about announcing her predicament!

The anger didn’t last. She supposed it had been more of a gut reaction to the shocking announcement than anything else, but she began to feel curiously detached, more numb than anything she could actually define. Her mind couldn’t seem to assimilate

it. Although it scrambled madly to sort everything for a while, she kept returning to a sense of disbelief.

When it finally occurred to her that she'd been broadsided by the information and hadn't learned what their situation was as far as the Nubiens, she got up. The men had returned to the bridge. She debated, feeling discomfort waft through her, but she needed to know if there was a threat.

Kiel turned and caught her gaze as she entered but she couldn't tell what might be running through his mind from his expression. Dragging her gaze from his after a moment, she glanced at Baen and Jalen. Jalen was focused on his console, but she had the sense that he was tensed as if expecting an attack. Baen looked angry.

Ignoring them, she moved to the jump seat and, since she could see they were wearing their harnesses, pulled her own on and fastened it. "What's our status?"

"We are being pursued by the Nubiens," Gertrude responded. "There are thirty two ships."

A fresh shock went through her. She'd known there was a chance there were others around when they were attacked, but she also knew that none of the ships that had landed on Chab had taken off again. That meant there'd been a fleet of three dozen ships in their vicinity? Here? Even in her current state of shock, that seemed excessive for a scouting mission from what she knew about the Nubiens.

A cold wave washed over her as it suddenly occurred to her that it might have been her transmission that had put them all in jeopardy. "They found us because of the transmission I sent to High Command?"

"Negative. These ships launched from the third planet in this system."

"You're certain?"

"Affirmative."

Danielle glanced at Kiel wide-eyed, trying to assimilate what that might mean. His expression hardened.

"It seems logical to assume that we have found the home world of the Nubiens."

"But that's ... just ... crazy! I don't understand. We were sure they were from our own galaxy. Nobody could figure out why we hadn't managed to find their home base, but they're claiming first rights of our galaxy!"

"As they claimed ours before," Baen retorted angrily. "That is why we did not find our people!"

Danielle glanced at him, instantly aroused to empathy for their distress. "You don't know that! You people began colonization years ago. For all you know they all abandoned the home world because of the climate change long before the Nubiens arrived!"

"And for all we know they were still here when the Nubiens came, weakened in numbers and from battling the climate change!" Jalen said tightly.

It seemed pointless to argue. They had more immediate problems, in any case. "What are we going to do? Try to outrun them? Can we? I mean, I know you modified the ship, but we don't have the firepower to take on that many battle ships!"

"Not alone," Kiel agreed. "I have summoned the ships of our fleet that have been completed. They will meet us."

It wasn't very comforting. They were still going to be outnumbered as far as she could see, pretty badly. Even as quickly as they worked, she couldn't believe they'd managed to complete more than the two she'd seen in progress when they'd left Marchet. They'd proven to her that the Nubiens didn't stand a chance if it came to hand-to-hand combat, but the Nubiens were conquerors bent on proving their claims of all they surveyed and then some. Clearly, they'd had a lot of experience in conquest. The Danu of Marchet hadn't even experienced space travel before, let alone learned how to fight space battles!

And it was debatable whether they'd even gotten the call for help! She hadn't been able to hail High Command from this side of the wormhole, after all!

"I should try to contact High Command again!"

To her relief, Kiel studied her for a long moment and finally nodded. Jalen removed his harness and changed places with her at the communications console. She glanced at Kiel again for guidance once she'd settled. "Where should I ask them to meet us? I'll need coordinates."

"Zeta, zeta quadrant, vector east 169 west 5541."

Danielle nodded and repeated it. Even as she mentally composed her message, however, it hit her that the coordinates he'd given her were the same, or at least roughly the same, as those she'd followed to the wormhole that had taken her to their galaxy. She glanced at him sharply. "But ... it took us nearly two weeks to get to Chab from the second black hole we went through. We'll never be able to maintain our lead that long!"

"We will rendezvous with them at that point at 24:00 EST."

Danielle blinked at him, glanced at the Earth Standard Time clock, and then looked at him again. "You're saying ...." Anger flickered to life. She knew she'd been unconscious when they'd taken off, but she also knew she couldn't possibly have been unconscious more than a day at the very most! She sure as hell hadn't been out for a week! "Are you telling me that we took nearly two damned weeks to get there when this damned ship is fully capable of making it in two days? Never mind!"

She presented him with her back, fuming for several moments before it occurred to her that she should just count her blessings that the ship had the capability! Otherwise, they would've been toast long before help could arrive. If they lived through this, though, she was going to give him a piece of her mind! She was going to let him know what she thought about the three of them ... high-jacking her ovaries while she was at it!

"Mayday! Mayday! This is Captain Danielle Dubois, serial number 245812, aboard the modified Federation fighter Firebird 013 with Captains Kiel, Baen, and Jalen of the Danu! We believe we have located the Nubien home world. Currently, we are being pursued by a fleet of thirty two Nubien warships. We need back up! Rendezvous quadrant zeta, zeta, vector east 169 degrees west 5541 degrees. Mayday! Mayday!"

She waited, hoping for a response. When thirty minutes passed without one, she repeated the message, instructed Gertrude to replay it hourly and left the bridge to pace in the small gathering area near the center of the ship and try to think.

She did think. She thought until her head hurt-about everything. She couldn't seem to bring any order to her thought processes, though, arrive at any conclusions that gave her any peace. She couldn't formulate a plan that would magically save them if help didn't come. She couldn't make herself accept that there was any possibility that she was pregnant at all let alone the circumstances. She couldn't think what she should do if it transpired that it wasn't some elaborate hoax her defective computer, Gertrude, had come up with-maybe to confuse the enemy?

She couldn't think of Kiel, Baen, or Jalen as enemies, though-any of the Danu. She couldn't believe that Gertrude had assessed them as a threat and decided to plant dis-information! It occurred to her that the computer might have, but in order for her to be capable of lying it would have to see them as a threat and that lying was necessary.

She didn't know what to think of the fact that they'd deceived her in their trip to Chab, deliberately set the ship to a slow cruise when it was capable of going five times that fast!

She realized after a moment that she did know what she thought of it, she wasn't certain if she should trust it or if it was a good thing or a bad thing for that matter. It had certainly given them time to impregnate her! Was that the only goal? To mate? Or did it mean something to them beyond sowing their seed in fertile ground?

She didn't know how long Kiel had been watching her, but it sent a jolt through her when she turned in her pacing and discovered that he'd followed her. She met his gaze and the moment she did she realized that the heart of her distress was the fear that it was over-her life, the babies she might have conceived-everything.

She didn't want to fight with them! Not now, anyway! Maybe if they made it, she'd still feel the need to vent over the things they'd done, but not now.

She didn't want to waste the little time they might have left fighting when she could be finding heaven in his arms. Her throat closed at the thought. She didn't want to die! She didn't want Kiel, or Baen, or Jalen to die! And she didn't want her babies to die!

Uncertain of whether he would welcome such a distraction given the situation, she approached him slowly, stopping when she was less than an arm's length away, waiting, hoping he would understand what she needed and offer it.

He lifted his hands after a long moment and settled them on either side of her head, smoothing her hair lightly, and then coasting his hands over her shoulders and down her upper arms. Her throat closed with want when she felt his hands curl around her arms. She surged toward him, curling her arms around his neck and pulling herself to him. "Make love to me, Kiel," she whispered. "Make me feel loved, like I matter to you."

"You cannot believe you do not," he said, his voice rough.

She swallowed with an effort. "I need you to show me."

He tensed, but after a moment, he pulled away and leaned down to scoop her up and lift her against his chest. Relieved that he'd understood, she nuzzled her face against his neck.

## Chapter Eighteen

Danielle thought Kiel's goal was the bunk, but she demanded to be put down before he reached it and stripped off her flight suit and undies. When she looked up at him, she saw he'd watched the entire process. He met her gaze and reached for the tie of his loincloth. He truly was a magnificent creature, she thought, watching the play of his muscles as he removed his clothing, feeling her body stir to life, and then stepping closer and lightly exploring his skin and muscle from hip to chest. She leaned closer when she'd examined the hard muscles of his belly and chest, rubbing her cheek against his skin and inhaling deeply the clean, wonderful scent of him. He reached for her, digging his fingers into the flesh at her waist. She grasped his hands and turned away, tugging him toward the bunk in invitation and then releasing her hold to climb onto the soft surface and lie down. He followed her, settling on his side beside her and propping his head on one hand. For a long moment, he met her gaze and then he blazed a path downward, lightly examining her flesh with his fingers. Goosebumps rose along her skin in the wake of his touch and increased sensation sprang to life with them. He settled his palm at last when he reached her belly, spreading his fingers wide as if measuring the space between her hip bones and then cupping the soft flesh. She caught his wrist before he could trace a return path, guiding his hand down between her legs to explore her cleft. He sent a sharp glance at her face, as if surprised by the invitation, and then rolled onto his knees and caught her legs. Amusement flickered through her and then discomfort, but she allowed him to part her thighs and examine her with his gaze and his fingertips. He seemed content to explore a while, shifting lower on the bed and lightly caressing the petals of flesh that surrounded her sex. It was disconcerting, but it also reminded her of the first



time she'd met him and both warmth and amusement flickered through her at the memory.

It was a lot more disconcerting when he moved closer. "You don't have to be that close

to look," she murmured with an uncomfortable chuckle.

He frowned and flicked a look at her. "I want to taste."

Her throat closed and her belly clenched. "You sure about that?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes," he said huskily, flicking his tongue out and licking a path from her sex to her clit

before she'd even had the chance to brace herself.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the heat of his mouth, the faint roughness of his tongue,

clutching his shoulders and digging her fingers into his hard flesh. He lifted his head to study

her face.

"This feels ... good?"

She wasn't sure she wanted him to kiss her there. It did feel good, but did she really want

him to know her *that* well? It was far more intimate to her mind than penetration. "I don't want

to come like that," she said finally.

He looked surprised, but he clearly saw it for what it was—capitulation to whatever he

wanted to do. Settling more comfortably, he began to explore her more thoroughly with his

tongue, almost tentatively at first but with rapidly growing enthusiasm that was hard to ignore.

She stared at the ceiling, trying to focus her mind away from what he was doing. She thought, at

first, that it was going to work, that she could close her mind to the quivering muscles in her

belly, the warmth inside her that grew to heat, the prickling of her skin that increased her

sensitivity all over so that her nipples stood erect and then began to pound in concert to her

escalating pulse.

A fever claimed her, mind and body, so that she couldn't hold still, lost focus of everything except the feel of his tongue as it teased her swollen flesh. She gasped, panted for

breath, gripping his head mindlessly. She wanted to escape the torment and have more at the

same time. Her legs seemed to spread wider of their own accord, her hips rise to meet the

strokes of his tongue. He caught her swollen clit with his lips, sucking on it, and she lost control

completely, gave it up gladly, groaning with the convulsion that pelted her and then crying out

hoarsely when he continued and the spasms grew harder.

She went limp when he lifted his head at last and ceased to torment her, feeling as if she'd melted. She could feel his gaze on her, sensed that he was watching her, but she couldn't

find the energy to lift her head. Her belly quivered spasmodically when he nibbled at it with his

lips. She stroked his head gratefully when he nuzzled her belly, struggling with the mild sense of

disappointment that he'd made her come when she'd wanted him inside of her.

He stirred after a moment, nibbling and sucking tiny kisses across her belly and then upward. She gritted her teeth. Her skin was so sensitive the kisses were almost more torture

than pleasure, but fair play was fair play. He'd pleased her. He hadn't gotten his release as

she had.

It was harder to keep that in mind when he reached her breasts and began to suckle them

with the same enthusiasm that he'd tugged at her clit. She gritted her teeth and groaned with a

mixture of anticipation and reluctance when he moved from one breast to the other.

Relief flooded her when he finally ceased to torment her breasts and traced a path up her

throat. He lifted his head to study her face. Compelled by his focus, she opened her eyes with

an effort and met his heated gaze. Her belly clenched.

He lowered his lips to hers as he slipped between her thighs. She lifted to meet him eagerly, curled her hips in invitation, parted her lips for his. Her own scent mingled with his.

Briefly disconcerted, relieved that her scent wasn't unpleasant, she pushed it from her mind and

kissed him back in demand that he take what he'd so generously given. To her surprise, she felt

the heat rising inside her again, felt her kegels clapping together in demand.

He broke the kiss after only a moment, shifting upward abruptly to impale her on his hard

flesh. She sucked in a sharp breath, arching upward to help him, trying to engulf the silky slick

rod of steel. He slipped his hands beneath her, cupping her buttocks to hold her tightly for his

initial foray, pumping shallowly until her moisture coated his cock and allowed him to delve

deeper.

Her sense of anticipation grew as she felt her flesh straining to engulf his, felt him stroking her inner flesh nearer and nearer her g-spot. He paused, shifting his grip from her hips

to her shoulders. Impatience had begun to get the upper hand. She planted her feet on the

mattress and lifted to meet his next thrust, feeling her heart pound a little harder as he finally lay

claim to her entirely.

The slow rhythm he set brought impatience to the surface again, but each stroke of his flesh along her channel sent out ripples of pleasure and quickly drew her focus. Feeling herself

climbing toward climax again, she began to urge him to move faster, tugging at him, surging

against him eagerly each time he withdrew instead of waiting for his next thrust. He caught her

impatience and began to pump into her faster. She gasped, clutched at him mindlessly, straining

to reach her goal with a sense of growing desperation when it seemed as if it would elude her.

Her climax burst upon her unexpectedly, rapture exploding through her in a hot, white flash of

intense sensation that sucked the breath from her lungs. Her mind reeled with it so that she

almost missed his culmination. She clutched at him more tightly, though, when she felt him

shuddering with his release, stroking his back soothingly when he finally went still, relishing

their deep connection almost as much as she'd enjoyed the climax.

She tightened her grip on him when she felt him gathering himself to move. He hesitated

and finally rolled to his side, carrying her with him. Smiling inwardly, she curled one leg around

his hips and snuggled closer to his warmth, drifting lazily, rubbing her cheek against his chest

from time to time in gratitude.  
He stroked a hand lightly along her back. "I do not think I will ever understand you,"  
he  
finally said, his voice still husky.  
Questions flickered through her mind, but they were too disjointed to grasp and she  
dismissed them. "Probably not," she murmured sleepily.  
"I must go back to the bridge," he said after a few minutes had passed.  
Danielle frowned at the intrusion of the real world, reluctant to let go of the moment,  
but  
finally eased her grip on him in capitulation. Dragging in a ragged breath, he pulled  
out of her  
and then climbed over her.  
Cold the moment he left her, she debated whether to cover up and snuggle into the  
warmth of the bed to doze or get up and dress. Kiel flicked a glance over her when  
she turned to  
watch him dress. "Stay."  
She frowned. A mixture of irritation, amusement, and hopefulness went through her,  
though, and she decided to let the command slide. Dragging the covers from beneath  
her, she  
covered up and rolled over to put her back to him—just to let him know that, even  
though she  
was willing to wait for him to come back, she wasn't particularly pleased about the  
way he'd  
said it.  
She was drifting toward sleep when she heard the door open again and the light tread  
of  
his feet toward the bunk. Still vaguely miffed, she decided against turning to welcome  
him.  
It was well she did. When he settled behind her and caught her shoulder to press her  
onto  
her back, she discovered it was Baen—not Kiel.  
An unpleasant jolt went through her. Before it had time to fully settle inside her that  
Kiel  
had told her to wait for Baen—not for his return—Baen settled his mouth over hers  
and kissed  
her with a hunger that drove everything else from her mind.  
Except the fact that she was thoroughly satisfied and reluctant to be aroused again.  
She discovered she couldn't hold on to her reluctance. His fervor was enough to stoke  
the ashes of spent passion and then some, and it was still a near miss. Almost the  
moment Baen  
drove into her, he began to race to reach completion and she had to run to catch up.

It was a wild, frantic ride to the top of the mountain. As Baen drove deeply and began to

jerk with the strength of his body's convulsions, though, it sent her flying over the edge. She felt

like she'd slammed into the next peak over. Her own climax seemed to knock the breath from

her and it was a struggle to regain it.

He tightened his arms around her briefly when he'd caught his breath. "I cannot linger,"

he muttered a little drunkenly.

"Umm?" she managed to get out as he levered himself off of her and bounded from the bunk.

She struggled to lift her head to watch him but gave up the effort. She was trying to decide whether she felt well fucked or just plain fucked when Jalen popped into her room. She

watched him drop his loincloth and bound toward the bed like an exuberant puppy with a

mixture of resentment and as much reluctance as she could muster.

Instead of zeroing in for a preliminary kiss, though, he caught her waist and burrowed his

face against her belly.

"Not there," she groaned drunkenly. "It's a mess."

He lifted his head and looked up at her quizzically but apparently the complaint went over his head. He nuzzled her belly again—and began talking to it in Danu.

Well! There was no doubt in her mind where his affection lay, she thought irritably!

"What?"

He lifted his head and she saw his face darken. "It is I ... your ...." He broke off the translation, thinking. "Father."

Danielle stared at him blankly. Grinning sheepishly, he cupped her belly. A dizzying wave of disorientation swept over her abruptly as the significance of his actions and his words

finally sank in. Hard on the heels of that was the realization that he couldn't possibly have

fathered any baby. He'd fucked her in the ass!

Abruptly, she recalled what Gertrude had said. She hadn't fully assimilated it at the time—any of it. Gertrude had said that each of the three had its father's DNA!

That was just plain insane, though! She must have heard her wrong!

Granted, it was hard to digest that something had happened to her birth control device at

all. They were specifically designed so that the body *couldn't* absorb them! Even if she could

concede the possibility that it had failed, though, and Kiel's and Baen's determined little

squiggles had made it past and she'd beaten astronomical odds and produced two eggs—it just

stretched the limits of belief that Jalen's little puppies had made it from her rectum to her

damned ovaries! Sure they were designed to find the goal, but they shouldn't even have been

able to catch the scent of her eggs from that point or origin!

Despite her disbelief, or maybe because of it and because he seemed so ... ecstatic to think he'd fathered a child, she discovered she couldn't bring herself to disappoint him—not

now!

If the Nubiens caught up with them, and that seemed almost a foregone conclusion, he would never have to know.

Her throat closed at the thought. Impulsively, she reached down to stroke his dark hair.

He lifted his head and smiled at her and she felt her heart trip over itself. Shifting upward, he

nuzzled his face against her breasts. "How long do you think it will take?"

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively. Probably a lot longer than they had. "I don't know. I've never had a baby before—months." She'd never even *thought* of having a baby

before and she felt an odd sense of loss swallow her at the realization that she might not get the

chance. Was that how they felt, she wondered abruptly? Had they thought for years and years

about having the chance to have a baby and then begun to realize that they wouldn't have that

chance after all? Was that the desperation she'd sensed in them when she'd thought it was only

lust?

She was inclined to dismiss it. That was a woman's thing—the desire to reproduce, certainly thoughts of nurturing and cuddling a baby. Men didn't think like that, did they?

Some did, she realized abruptly. She remembered the look of anticipation in her brother's eyes when he would watch some woman playing with her baby, remembered him

chuckling and telling her that he was going to have a half a dozen one day. She'd laughed, too,

certain he was joking. He'd always been willing, even eager, to scoop up any child that came up

to him, though, bouncing it, making faces to make it laugh, or tickling it.

That had been before the Nubiens had come to wipe out their colony, though. The light

in his eyes had died that day and hate had taken its place.

What about Kiel and Baen, she wondered abruptly? Were they as filled with hope and expectation as Jalen was? Did it mean the same to them as it appeared to mean to him?

She realized she couldn't doubt Jalen's sincerity when he lifted his head and smiled down

at her. "We thought you might be angry." He frowned. "You seemed angry."

She thought she still was, but she discovered she couldn't find the anger when she searched for it, just a growing sense of loss that she was struggling to keep at bay. She lifted her

head and lightly kissed his lips. He returned the favor, nibbling almost playfully at her lips.

"You want sex?" he asked a little doubtfully.

"You don't?"

He grinned wryly and reached down to grasp his hard cock and thump her thigh with it.

"He is always ready and eager," he said wryly. "I have been trying to convince him for years

that it is a waste of time to stand up and look around when there were no warm, dark holes for

him to explore, but he has a mind of his own."

Danielle chuckled. "I just happen to have a warm, dark hole. Isn't that convenient?"

He wagged his brows at her. "Do you?" he said in a purring murmur, settling his hand

on her belly and delving a finger between her legs. "Is it here?"

Danielle wiggled. "A little lower."

"Here?"

"That feels like the place alright."

"Can I look at it?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Not at the moment. Why don't you slide that big fellow in and

see how well he fits?"

He looked vaguely disappointed, but he obligingly moved between her thighs as she opened them for him, nudging the mouth of her sex. To her surprise, she discovered it was no

easy fit despite the sense that her 'cup overfloweth'. She watched his face as he pumped slowly

in and out, gaining a little ground each time until her flesh reluctantly admitted him fully. He

squeezed his eyes tightly, pausing, panting slightly. "Gods! This feels so good, Danielle. Does

it feel as good to you?"

Her belly clenched with the pleasure of feeling him deeply inside of her and his words of

praise. She didn't know, but it felt damned good to her. "It feels ... like you're part of me and

that feels wonderful."

His expression twisted. He let out a pained breath, shuddering all over. Abruptly, he began to move, long, slow strokes at first and then with faster, shallow pumps of his hips with

his cock deeply inside of her. Her body rose to the challenge, fire igniting at her core and

building to a blaze.

She forgot that she'd instigated sex simply to please him as she felt her own pleasure rising, climbing, felt her body gathering to take the leap. As bountiful as her bliss was when she

came, though, it was almost more pleasure to feel him come inside of her.

"You have a magical cock," she murmured with a mixture of pleasure and teasing praise.

He looked confused, but he chuckled dutifully. "This is good, yes?"

She managed a tired chuckle. "Yes. I guess you'll be dashing off now?"

He withdrew and settled beside her, grimacing. "Baen informed me that he had thoroughly pleased you and that you would have no need. He will come to see why I have

stayed so long."

He seemed in no great hurry to leave, though, and Danielle took the time to cuddle him

appreciatively. "Did he?" she murmured with a weary spark of irritation she found almost as

difficult to summon as it was to maintain.

"I thought Kiel would punch him in the face, but he merely scowled at him and told him

he would kick his ass when there was time for it."

Smiling inwardly, she kissed Jalen's chest lightly. "This is a strange thing to me," she murmured.

He tensed. "What is strange?"

She shook her head and yawned. "All of it. I haven't figured it out yet."

He almost seemed to shrug. "We have not figured out your ways either," he said after a



moment. “At least I have not. Mayhap Kiel grasps it better, but he is primary and I suppose that

is understandable.”

“Primary?”

“Leader of the quad.”

“Quad?”

He shifted away to look at her curiously. “The mating quad.”

He said it as if she ought to understand. She didn’t, but she didn’t particularly feel like examining it at the moment.

“I am not even certain how it is that Kiel understands it, but it feels ... right. I think, mayhap, it is something one only understands when it happens.”

That was more than she could say. “You mean ... like instincts kicking in?”

“Yes, that is it! All this time we had wondered and worried that we would not know because we had not been taught, and then we discovered that our instincts were there to guide us.”

“Well, as long as that’s settled,” she murmured with disinterest. “Stay and take a nap with me?”

He seemed to wrestle with something and finally relaxed against her. “I will stay until you sleep. I like this.”

“Cuddling? It’s almost my favorite part, too.”

He was as good as his word. He held her until oblivion claimed her. She stirred toward

consciousness, though, when she felt him move away. After debating briefly whether to get up

and follow him back to the bridge, she decided against it. She couldn’t prevent the Nubiens from

catching up by watching them and she was pretty convinced that Kiel was pushing the ship to its

limits in speed.

It flickered through her mind to wonder why they hadn’t exactly rushed to their home world if it was so important to them, but it didn’t take a lot of searching to figure that out—they

were stalling for time until they could convince her to have sex with them.

She frowned. Or waiting for the nanos to do their little trick?

That seemed more likely.

She tried to decide if she was still pissed off about it and discovered she couldn’t summon a lot of anger. Not that she wasn’t still angry! She just wasn’t *as* angry and ... well, it

wasn’t the time to dwell on it.

It was almost romantic she decided. Well, she didn’t suppose every woman would agree

with that, but it seemed romantic to her that they'd been so determined to claim her and there

was no doubt in her mind that they figured they'd made a conquest.

They'd conquered her ovaries, anyway, if she accepted what Gertrude had told her. She realized she hadn't adequately considered that there could be a lot she still didn't know or understand about the Danu. She supposed she should have expected the unexpected,

but the plain fact of the matter was that she'd decided she'd already discovered the full extent of

their 'strangeness'.

Given what she had discovered, was it possible Jalen actually *had* managed to nail one of

her eggs? With nanos involved, was there really any doubt? There didn't seem to be much they

couldn't do.

She didn't want to think about having nanos. She would've been pissed off about that, too, except apparently they'd been there a while and she hadn't noticed the difference. It still

made her uneasy. It was like having a ... disease of some kind floating around inside of her,

even if their job was to prevent disease.

Shaking the thoughts off, she got up and headed into her bath, only to discover that she'd

already used her quota. "Damn it!"

Releasing an angry huff, she considered it for a moment and finally stalked from her cabin to the bridge. "Who hasn't used their bath water quota yet?"

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all turned to stare at her blankly.

She made a sweeping gesture with one hand toward her sex. "My cup runneth over here,

damn it!"

"I have not," Baen said after a long, long moment.

"Thanks! I'll take yours. Which cabin?"

He got up and led the way. She knew she was in for it when he dropped his loincloth, but

she decided to pretend she had no idea what he had in mind. Maybe if she ignored him he'd go

away?

No such luck. The moment she stepped under the water to wet herself down, he joined her, planting a ham sized hand on either breast and spearing his cock between the cheeks of her

ass. She turned the water off, grabbed the soap and slathered it all over herself, focusing mostly

on the cleft between her legs.

Before she could turn the water on again to rinse off, he turned her, pressed her back against the wall and covered her mouth in a heated kiss. It actually felt very interesting to feel

his skin slipping along her soapy flesh.

She lost interest, though, when he grabbed her and pushed her up the wall to mount her

on his hood ornament. She was slippery enough he nearly dropped her. She flung her arms and

legs around him to keep from getting dumped on the floor, but she was so soapy she was having

problems 'sticking'. "My coochie is going to be sore," she muttered the moment he released her

mouth from captivity.

He jerked his head back to stare at her. Confusion flickered in his eyes and then disappointment as he apparently made the connection. He studied her face a moment and finally

released a heavy breath and loosened his grip.

Danielle sighed. Was it her fault he was disappointed? No! So why did she feel guilty about it? "It's ok."

He frowned. "It is not ok if it will hurt."

"I'll get over it."

He shook his head, but he offered her a reluctant grin as he settled her on her feet. "I will

help you bathe."

And she was sure she'd be really, really clean when he was done! More likely he'd give

her a fresh load of semen to squish between her legs the minute she washed off the previous

deposits!

He surprised her. He did pay special attention to her breasts and her sex, but he helped her get all of the soap off. "How do you clean here?" he asked with interest, shoving his finger

in the hole that they all found so fascinating.

"With great difficulty," she said wryly, then added hurriedly when he seemed determined

to 'help', "just water. Soap is *not* good for that particular area."

He looked surprised, but, thankfully, he didn't try to fill it with soap and he was gentle in

using his finger. She doubted it helped a lot, but it seemed to pacify him so she didn't complain.

"May I look at it?" he asked when he shut off the water and turned on the blow dryer.

She felt her face heat. “No!”

He frowned. “You allowed Kiel to look,” he said a little petulantly. “You kicked me when I tried to look.”

She studied him suspiciously, wondering if his reference to Kiel looking was from that

first examination or the one just a short while before. Deciding finally that that was what he

must mean since he’d also pointed out that she kicked him, she relaxed fractionally. “Fine. I

don’t know why you want to,” she said testily.

He knelt down immediately and pushed her legs apart to study it. Rolling her eyes heavenward, Danielle let him examine her sex, resolutely closing her mind to the warmth that

flickered through her at his light touches. He was fully aroused when he straightened again.

The erection was a dead giveaway, of course, but his taut expression, the fevered look in his eyes

and his labored breaths had a far more profound effect on her own libido. He met her gaze.

“You should stay on the bridge with us. We are nearing the wormhole.”

Nothing could’ve more quickly doused her arousal. It didn’t seem to have much effect on his, but that was his problem. At least, she tried to tell herself that there was no reason at all

she should feel any guilt, any sense of loss, and certainly no uneasiness about leaving him in that

state.

## Chapter Nineteen

When she’d dressed and reached the bridge, Danielle discovered that she didn’t need to

see the blips on the radar to locate the Nubiens. They’d gained on their craft enough that she

could see the ships in the rear viewer. Even as she settled in the jump seat and fastened her

harness, she saw several bright flashes of light erupt from the lead craft.

“Shields!” she commanded Gertrude in automatic response.

Kiel flicked a glance at her. “They are still out of range. There is no sense in diverting power to the shields.”

Danielle wasn’t convinced. “Why are they firing then?”

Kiel shrugged. “Desperation? It seems logical to assume from their behavior that you were correct and we stumbled upon their home world—or at least a base they consider critical to

them. They will have been monitoring our transmissions and no doubt believe if they can

destroy the ship before we enter the wormhole that they can still preserve their secret location.”

Danielle barely registered what he’d said. She was too focused on the photon missiles coming toward them. It wasn’t until they exploded a short distance from the ship that she could

focus on anything else. “How soon before they’ll be in range, Gertrude?”

“Calculate twenty four minutes nine seconds at the current rate of speed of both crafts following the current course.”

“Can they go faster?”

“Capabilities unknown,” Gertrude responded.

“Unlikely,” Kiel answered. “If they could have, they would have caught up with us before now, or at least closed the distance enough to bring us within range.”

Danielle swallowed a little convulsively. “Can we go faster?”

“We cannot,” Baen answered.

“We have already pushed the ship beyond estimated capabilities,” Kiel said. “We cannot

maintain this speed much longer without risk.”

Danielle’s heart lurched and adrenaline shot through her in a dizzying wave. “What are

we going to do?”

Kiel flicked a questioning glance at Baen.

“We will reach the wormhole in nineteen minutes 30 seconds.”

Danielle stared at Baen. “We’ve only got a couple of minutes lead time?” she asked faintly, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Despite the danger she’d

known they were in, she realized she’d managed to convince herself that they could rendezvous

with Federation ships before the Nubiens caught up to them. She didn’t know whether they’d

received any of the transmissions she’d had Gertrude send out, though. Even if they had, what

were the odds that there would be any ships close enough to get to them in time?

“Two minutes seventeen seconds,” Jalen corrected her in a soothing voice.

She glanced at him sharply, but she didn’t find it the least bit comforting that they had a

whole seventeen seconds more than she’d thought!

He shrugged. “Unless they gain on us before we enter the wormhole.”

They wouldn’t be able to close that gap once they were both inside the wormhole, but that wasn’t much comfort either. If they could maintain their speed, they would leave the

wormhole far enough ahead of the Nubiens that they might be able to gain a little distance, but

even if they did, it wouldn't be by much.  
The chances were slim that they could keep out of range long enough for anyone at all  
to  
arrive even if they were coming.  
As insane as it seemed in some respects, she was abruptly fiercely glad that she'd  
spent  
what might well come to be some of her last moments of life making love with Kiel  
and Baen  
and Jalen. She'd been seeking comfort and distraction more than anything else. Pure  
animal lust  
would have been sufficient, but she realized it hadn't felt like that. They had made her  
feel  
important to them, not merely a vessel for their lust.  
Her throat closed at the thought. The urge to tell them how she felt about it surged  
through her, but she was still struggling for words when she felt the ship abruptly  
begin to spin.  
Gripping the arms of her chair, she clenched her eyes tightly shut and focused on  
trying to  
stabilize her internal equilibrium. After a few moments, the dizziness gave way to a  
vague sense  
of nausea despite her struggle. Before it reached a point of true distress, however, the  
swirling  
sensation began to slow.  
A burst of static from the speakers made her eyelids pop open reflexively, banishing  
the  
last of the sense of disorientation.  
“... Dubois! This is Captain Etienne Dubois, serial number 500922, aboard the  
Federation fighter Sunbird Foxtrot 6 niner, niner! We're at the rendezvous. Where the  
hell are  
you, Danny?”  
Danielle felt her chest swell with an explosive sense of excitement. Tearing off her  
harness, she raced to Jalen's communications console. “Etienne! We've got a pack of  
Nubiens  
on our tail! Thirty two warships. Please tell me you aren't alone!”  
“I brought a few friends,” he responded. “What's your ETA the rendezvous? We'll  
get a  
reception party ready.”  
Danielle glanced at Jalen questioning. “One minute ....”  
“I have you on my scope!” Etienne interrupted before he could finish. “Coming to  
you,  
baby sister!”  
Danielle felt her throat close. How long since she'd heard him call her that?

“Shields!” Kiel bellowed abruptly. “Get in your seat and get your harnesses on, Danielle!”

Danielle lifted her head to gape at him for a split second before her mind registered the urgency in his voice. Her body responded, however, before her mind caught up, and she scrambled toward her seat. She nearly missed it. A concussion wave struck the ship even as she turned to seat herself. Her tailbone came into painful contact with the arm instead of seat and then she tipped into it. “Leave the channels open!” she gasped, struggling to fasten the harness with the ship bucking from the blast.

“They have our range now. Laser! Short blasts!”

Danielle scanned the viewers for their attackers and discovered Kiel had executed a 180 degree and their ship was now facing the oncoming Nubiens. As she finally pinpointed them, a bright blast of light shot from their own ship. It blew up a missile coming straight toward them from the lead Nubien vessel and then impacted with the hull of the Nubien vessel. Their shields lit up, changed colors and then, abruptly, the Nubien ship disintegrated. Danielle gaped at the ball of smoke and fire and the burning debris that scattered like fireflies from the center of the mass.

“Holy shit!”

She heard Etienne’s voice over the speakers echoing her sentiment. “Fuck! What the hell was that?”

Whipping her gaze from the oncoming enemy, she searched for the Federation vessels.

Her heart nearly failed her when she saw there was only a half dozen fighters ranged on their side—not a squadron and not a single warship in sight.

Had they not picked up the transmissions after all? Why were so few fighters waiting? She couldn’t make any sense of it. She’d sent intel suggesting they’d found the home base of the Nubiens. Every ship the Federation could muster should’ve been waiting! Had they simply dismissed her report? They might never have the answer to that. They might not live that long, she thought fearfully, gasping in pure terror when she saw one of the fighters darting around them abruptly explode as a photon penetrated their defenses.

“Fuck!” Etienne exclaimed. “Marcos! Did he eject? Did anybody see?”

“Negative on that.”

“Negative you didn’t see or negative he didn’t have time to eject?”

Danielle didn’t stay to hear. Relieved that it hadn’t been Etienne, her mind leapt away almost instantly to the fact that none of them were suited up. If they took a hit, they didn’t have

a chance in hell of surviving. It was doubtful they would anyway, but she didn’t see taking

unnecessary risks. Throwing off her harness, she bounded out of her seat and raced down the

corridor to collect full suits for the men and grab her own gauntlets and helm.

“Get in your suits!” she bellowed when she returned. “We may need them!”

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all flicked frowning glances at her but none of them moved.

“Stay in your seat, gods damn it!” Kiel growled.

“Put on the damned suits!” Danielle yelled back at him. “It’s the only chance you have if

the ship takes a hit!”

“Sit down and strap in!” Baen bellowed at her.

“Not until you put on the damned suits!” Danielle growled at him.

“Sit down and we will put them on,” Jalen said angrily, throwing his harness off and grabbing up one of the suits.

Relieved, Danielle complied. That time she didn’t make it to the seat, however. The ship

took another hit that made it buck wildly, throwing her to the floor. Jalen snatched her off the

floor and plunked her in her seat, grabbing the harness and securing it jerkily.

“Jesus!” Etienne exclaimed. “Where the fuck did *they* come from?”

Terror closed her throat even as Danielle whipped a look around to see the new threat. She stared at the ships flying up behind the fighters at an incredible rate, too stunned for several

moments to recognize them.

“It’s the Danu!” she exclaimed abruptly. “Etienne! They’re friendlies!”

She might as well have saved her breath. By the time she managed to recognize them, they’d passed the fighters almost as if they were standing still and began firing on the Nubiens.

She heard a ragged cheer go up from the men in the fighters as the two in the lead took out four

of the Nubien ships in a matter of moments. In the space of a few heart beats, the Federation

fighters and the dozen Danu ships that had joined them were engaged in a fierce space dogfight.

To her dismay, Kiel turned the ship they were in and drew back behind the lines.

“What are you doing?” she demanded in disbelief.

Kiel’s face tightened. “Removing our mate from harm’s way.”

Danielle gaped at him, blankly, unable to assimilate his reasoning. “Your ...? But we’re

still outnumbered!”



He didn't respond. Instead, he pulled their vessel beyond range of the fight and turned to watch the battle.

"Kiel!" Danielle exclaimed.

"I will not risk your life unnecessarily," Kiel said in a steely voice.

Anger washed over her. "But ... everybody's life is at risk, damn it! Mine isn't any more important than theirs is!"

"It is to us," Baen said tightly.

Danielle felt a flutter in her belly. It brought her mind abruptly to the babies Gertrude had told her were there—the babies she hadn't consciously acknowledged could possibly be

there. How safe were they, though, when the Nubiens were a threat to all human life—and

evidently the Danu, as well?

A voice broke in to her thoughts. "I have more incoming on my scan!"

"Friend or foe?" Etienne asked sharply.

"Unknown .... It's a Federation fleet!"

"Hallelujah!" Danielle exclaimed. "Better late than never!"

"Woohoo!"

"Take that you reptilian bastards!"

"You can run but you can't hide anymore, motherfuckers!"

Danielle found herself grinning like an idiot as she listened to the men with Etienne. Her

heart swelled with pride when she saw the Federation vessels coming toward them. A half

dozen of the Nubien ships, she discovered, had broken off the battle and were racing back toward

the wormhole as fast they could. The combined forces of Federation fighters with Etienne and

the Danu who'd joined the battle, finished off the ships they were fighting and took off after

them. They'd already disappeared from her sight with the Federation fleet trailing before the

Nubiens reached the wormhole and vanished. Watching the screen in front of Baen, she saw the

chase ships blink off the scanner one by one as they, too, disappeared into the wormhole.

"You and I are going to have a heart-to-heart when I get back, Danny!" Etienne growled.

Dismay flickered through Danielle at the 'promise'. Obviously, it wasn't going to be a pleasant reunion! She shook the thought off. "What do you mean 'when you get back?' We're

coming, too!"

“You are not,” Kiel said grimly. “We will take you to Marchet and then we will join the fight.”

“Now wait just a damned minute!” Danielle snapped. “I’m a soldier, too! And this is my fight!”

“It is our fight,” Kiel growled. “They threatened our mate!”

Danielle gaped at him with a mixture of disbelief and outrage.

“Listen to the man!” Etienne said tightly. “Mind your mate!”

“Mind my ... Mind your own damned business, Etienne! You’re my big brother, not my father!”

She didn’t know if he heard her or not. He didn’t respond and the last light on the scanner blinked out. Fuming when she realized that Kiel had accelerated the ship toward the

wormhole that led to Marchet, Danielle barely had time to brace herself for the trip through

before they were in the grips of it.

They met up with a half dozen more Danu ships as they emerged, but Danielle was too

furiously to stay to listen to the communications between them even if she’d understood the Danu

language. In any case, she didn’t need to. She had a fair idea of what the discussion entailed—

battle communications and she was excluded from the fight!

Throwing off her harness, she stalked to her cabin to sulk. She didn’t realize she’d been

hoping at least one of them would follow her so that she could have a rousing good fight and

vent until she felt the damned ship landing and realized they weren’t going to give her a fight.

Baen appeared in her door while the sound of the engines was still loud in her ears. She didn’t

realize they’d landed until he’d escorted her to the airlock and lowered the gangplank.

It hit her abruptly that she hadn’t even told them goodbye! “Wait!” she exclaimed. “I have to tell Kiel and Jalen goodbye!”

Baen hauled her up and headed down the gangplank without a word.

“Damn it, Baen! I wanted to talk to them!”

“You may speak with them when they return.”

That caught her attention. She stopped struggling and reared up to look at him. “When they get back?” she echoed blankly.

“It is my honor and duty as your mate to stay and protect you.”

“Oh, well shit! Don’t stay on my account! There’s no sense in you missing the battle, too!”

"Your safety is more important."

"Damn it, Baen! We're on Marchet! I think I'll be safe enough!"

His lips twisted in a wry smile. "My name is not 'damn it Baen'."

Danielle gaped at him and then scowled. "This no time for humor, damn it! We've got a

chance to defeat the damned Nubiens once and for all! Everybody needs to be there!"

"We will defeat the Nubiens," Baen responded, all signs of humor vanishing.

"But *we* won't know it until it's all over with!" Danielle wailed, watching forlornly as the

ship that had brought them to Marchet lifted off and quickly vanished from sight. "I want to be

there! I want to help defeat them!"

"I would not want you at the midst of the battle if you were not carrying my seed, Danny," Baen said almost gently.

It was more than his tone that finally penetrated Danielle's distress, more than what he'd

said. It was the fact that he'd used the affectionate name her brother called her by that caught her

attention. "I won't know if they're safe! I'll go out of my mind worrying."

"They will be far safer if they are easy in their minds that you are safe."

The fight went out of her then. When she ceased to struggle, Baen lifted her and cradled

her in his arms, against his chest. She released a heavy sigh. "I can walk, you know."

"Yes, but that would not give me the pleasure of carrying you."

She looped her arms around his neck and settled her head against his shoulder. "I must

say this is a lot more comfortable."

"I will remember that the next time I must remove you from a place," he murmured, his

expression lightening. "I will not promise that I can manage it if you insist upon wiggling and

struggling, but I will try."

Danielle released an irritated huff. "As if it does any good at all to struggle!"

"Does that mean that you will acknowledge there is no point in fighting?"

"No."

"I did not think so. I believe I would be disappointed if you did not."

Danielle lifted her head from his shoulder and frowned at him. "Why?"

He shrugged. "You are rarely logical or reasonable, but I admire your ... tenacity."

Danielle considered whether that was an insult or not and finally decided it was a compliment. She was still trying to think of a response when they entered the city and she

realized Baen hadn't headed toward the habitat where she'd stayed before. "Where are we

going?"

"We are a quad now. We will take one of the habitats that was designed for a quad."

"What *is* a quad anyway?"

He sent her a startled look. "A mating group."

Her belly went weightless. Despite the fact that they'd been pretty damned vocal about

their so called claims, *she* didn't recall agreeing to any pact. Bring it up now? Or wait until all

parties were present?

She actually didn't care for the thought of waiting when it meant she was going to be outnumbered. On the other hand, it didn't really appeal to her to fight three battles.

Truthfully, she didn't feel up to *any* battle at the moment! She'd been thrilled almost speechless to discover Etienne had rushed to her rescue ... until it had been brought home that he

had thrown his life into the breach! She knew she shouldn't consider him more valuable than the

lives of any of her fellow soldiers, but the fact remained that he was far more important to her.

It didn't bear thinking on that he was out there, fighting for his life! Or that Kiel and Jalen were rushing to join the fight even now!

It was completely absurd to feel like they would be safer if she was there to protect them,

but she couldn't help that she felt that way either.

The habitat Baen took her to was a welcome distraction—not much of one, but something

to focus on to help her try to control her emotions. It was a good deal bigger than the one she'd

lived in before but beyond that it wasn't very different. The layout of the ground floor was a

mirror on the first, just larger. Upstairs, she discovered the main difference. It was divided into

two huge rooms and had two full baths.

"Well, there's lots of room," she said, trying to infuse some enthusiasm into her voice for

Baen's sake.

He frowned, looking the place over. "The nursery is here ... for privacy."

Danielle gulped, but merely nodded.

His frowned deepened. "It does not please you?"

"I didn't say that!"

Something flickered in his eyes. "I see no pleasure in your eyes, no ... enthusiasm.

You

are 'out of your mind' with worry? Or the place does not suit?"

Danielle managed a faint smile. “They won’t have had time to catch up with the fleet yet. I’ll worry more when they *have* had time.” She hesitated. Why say anything at all when

she wasn’t planning on staying?

The thought made her belly execute an odd little cramp. It spread to her chest, made it tight. A sense of loss followed it that was hard to ignore. *Was* she planning on staying?

“It doesn’t really look like a home,” she said finally.

Confusion flickered in his eyes. “This is a habitat.”

Danielle sighed. “A home is different.”

“How is it different?”

Danielle stared at him for a long moment and finally looked around again. “It’s hard to

explain. It’s filled with ....” She stopped, frowning, trying to pin down exactly what was

missing ... besides Kiel and Jalen. Abruptly, she felt like crying. She wasn’t even sure why she

felt like crying until it coalesced in her mind that the only thing missing *was* Kiel and Jalen.

“Sounds.”

He looked thoroughly puzzled.

Her heart seemed to turn over in her chest. Impulsively, she moved to him and cupped his face in her hands. “Never mind. I can make it into a home.”

\* \* \* \*

“I believe that she is ... nesting,” Baen responded a little doubtfully in response to Kaydn’s questioning look.

“They are evolved from bird-like creatures?” Kaydn asked, more confused instead of less. “She does remind me of one, now that you mention it—very small but very quick.”

Baen frowned, trying to decide if that was insulting to his mate or not and finally decided

it was not, particularly when he had suggested it to begin with. “I do not know. Mayhap. I only

meant that she is bent upon preparing for our young.”

Kaydn looked envious but pleased. “How long do you think it will be before we will have our first off-spring?”

Baen definitely did not care for the note of possessiveness but he could not fight the entire Danu colony and they had decided that his quad’s off-spring was more than merely a

triumph for the Danu in general. They *belonged* to all. Shrugging it off with the reflection that

they were bound to feel less possessive once they had found mates of their own and procreated,

he focused on the question. “Manuta did not have that data. Logically, since they are complex

organisms, we must assume that it will take many months of gestation. She does not know for

she has not borne young before and, in any case, it is not likely that it will be the same as it

would be if we were the same as she.”

Kaydn nodded. “This is true. I am not certain that it would even help to know what is typical of the Danu when we are only half Danu.”

Baen scowled at him. “We are *all* Danu!” he said pointedly. “It is immaterial that we are

also cyborg. That part has nothing to do with the natural process of procreation.”

Kaydn frowned at him for a moment and finally shrugged. “In a sense, you are correct,

but we have nanos and natural born Danu do not.”

“They will not interfere with the natural process,” Baen said a little doubtfully.

Kaydn looked skeptical. “They have already interfered with the natural process in making your mate compatible so that you might each reproduce. I must say that this is a relief to

know. I had planned to take a human female, as well. There would be no peace within the quad

if only one might procreate at the time!”

Uneasiness slithered through Baen. He had been at pains to block it from his thoughts, and he could not say that it had disturbed him before that his human mate was so tiny. In truth,

he had found her apparent delicacy very appealing, particularly when he had decided that it was

merely her appearance. She was surprisingly strong and resilient for her size, he thought, unless

of course it was her ferocity that made her seem so.

It was the niggling doubt that he was wrong and size did matter in this instance that worried

him. He had found it so disturbing trying to imagine their three babes growing in her little belly,

in fact, that he had worked hard to put it from his mind altogether.

She did not seem to be anxious and that comforted him some, but she had admitted that

she had not borne a babe before—as if it was typical for them to bear only one! And he was not

certain that he should feel comforted when it seemed obvious that it was only ignorance that

gave her confidence.

Shaking it off when he saw that Danielle had decided that she was too impatient to wait

for the server bots to carry her paint to the habitat, he surged forward to meet her and took the

heavy container she was trying to carry. "I've got it!"

"I will carry it," he said tightly. She smiled at him and the suspicion washed over him that she had fully expected him to do just as he had. "What color is this?"

"Pink. I've decided to paint the nursery pink."

Baen frowned. "You already painted it yellow."

Danielle waved her hands in the air. "Yes, but that's just ... undecided, you know? It might be girls."

Baen puzzled over that, trying to decide what the color had to do with it, but he could not

find any logic in her reasoning. "Girls?"

"Females?" Danielle said a little impatiently.

Baen felt perfectly blank for a moment. Abruptly a sense of headiness swept over him.

"They will be women?"

Danielle chuckled. "Not until they grow up."

"We are having females?"

Danielle shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know yet. You know that."

He frowned. "I am lost."

Danielle grinned up at him. He felt his belly tighten—actually, his cock, as well, but that

stayed hard most of the time. He was growing accustomed to it.

"When they finally get Manuta going again, I'll get scanned and then we'll know for sure

... If I'm far enough along by then to tell, anyway."

Bemused, Baen merely stared at her for a long moment, trying to collect his thoughts.

They had almost reached their habitat—home—when a sound above them caught their attention.

Baen looked up as a ship pierced the clouds above them and then another until he could see a

dozen. When he glanced around for Danielle, he discovered she'd taken off at a run toward the

gate of the city.

Setting the bucket he was carrying down abruptly, he launched himself into a run to catch

her. "Gods damn it, Danielle! Stop!"

She ignored him. Around them, everyone else had paused at their tasks to watch the approaching ships, as well. A man near the gate made a dive to catch her, however, and missed.

Baen leapt his prone form, landing almost on her heels. He managed to grab a fistful of

her suit before she could elude him. She whirled on him, trying to pry his grip loose. "Baen!

They're back! Let go!"

He did, intending to get a better grip. A wave of cold swept over him when she eluded him and took off at a run again. He managed to hook an arm around her waist and snatch her off

her feet the second time. He saw as he threw a glance at the ships settling toward the ground,

however, that Danielle had correctly assessed the situation. The closest ship was Danielle's

modified craft.

He gripped her indecisively, wondering whether it would be better to take her back to safety anyway until they were certain of who was aboard.

"Baen! It's them!"

"We do not know that!" Baen said tightly.

Danielle ceased struggling immediately and stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment before she glanced at the craft again. The gangplank was extended as she returned her

attention to the ship. The hatch opened and a man with hair much the same color as Danielle's

stepped out.

"Etienne!" Danielle gasped and then screamed his name, wrestling Baen to get loose.

Reluctantly, he released her, jogging behind her as she ran toward the man. The man she

had called Etienne opened his arms to her and she launched herself from the ground as she

neared him and slammed against him.

"Etienne!" Danielle grasped, clutching him frantically. "God! I never thought I'd see you again!" She drew back, grinned at him and then kissed him all over his face.

Etienne chuckled, squeezed her tightly and then swung her in an exuberant circle before

he set her on her feet. "Crazy! You nearly knocked me off my feet!"

Danielle laughed. "I think I might have broke something!" She noticed that Kiel and Jalen had come down the gangplank behind him just then, however, and pulled free of Etienne

and rushed them, flinging her arms tightly around Kiel's waist. "Kiel!"

He enveloped her in a tight embrace, lifting her up to nuzzle his face against her neck.



She savored the feel of being held in his arms when she'd begun to fear he wouldn't come back,

but it wasn't nearly enough. She turned her head against his in search of his mouth and felt a

tidal wave of pure bliss roll through her when he covered her mouth with his own and kissed her

deeply.

She would've been content to enjoy it longer if it hadn't abruptly occurred to her that she

hadn't welcomed Jalen. Breaking the kiss, she smiled at Kiel and wiggled until he set her on her

feet. Jalen, she discovered, was grinning at her a little shyly. "Come here, you!"

He chuckled, opening his arms to her as Etienne had and she hugged and kissed him as

she had Kiel.

Etienne was watching her with an expression of disapproval when she finally pulled away. She stared at him for a moment and finally lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes at him.

"I didn't realize things were quite this friendly," he said coolly.

Danielle's lips tightened. "Don't start, Etienne!"

"I feel like beating your ass!" he growled, surging toward her abruptly.

Kiel blocked him. "I will not allow that," he said in a low, threatening growl.

Uh oh! Man trouble! Despite her irritation with her brother, Danielle quickly moved around Kiel and stood between him and her brother. "We need to talk."

"You've got a lot of explaining to do, baby sister," Etienne said tightly, glaring up at Kiel.

"Don't be a pain in the ass, big brother!" Danielle snapped. "They're my quad, damn it!"

He sent her a shocked look ... as well he should! "Run that by me again?"

"Not here. When we get home," she said with determined patience when she realized that they not only had the audience of the Danu already on the ground, but those returning and a

number of humans who seemed to have accompanied them. She glanced up at Kiel and turned to

slip an arm around his waist. "You're going to love what I've done with the habitat."

His expression was bemused but after glaring at Etienne again, he allowed her to draw him toward the city. Danielle looked back at Jalen, and held out a hand. Looking pleased, he

hurried to catch up and grasped her hand in his.

"God! I've been going out of my mind with worry! You couldn't have sent a message

just to let me know you were alright?"

"She has been driving me out of my mind," Baen said dryly. "She lost hers a while back."

Danielle sent him a reproving look but chuckled.

Kiel glanced at Baen speculatively. "We sent many messages of assurance and also monitored your welfare."

Danielle glanced from one to the other in confusion. "I didn't get any messages."

Irritation flickered in Baen's eyes. "I told you that they were alright."

"Yes, but ... that isn't the same thing! I didn't get any messages!"

"You did not because you cannot communicate as we can," Kiel said gently. "You are human, not Danu, even if we are quad mates."

"What the hell is a damned quad?" Etienne demanded.

"A mating group," Danielle responded absently, leading the way inside their habitat as

they reached it, grateful for the possibility of a little privacy at last.

Etienne, Kiel, and Jalen all halted as abruptly as if they had hit an invisible wall when they stepped inside. Etienne seemed to recover fastest. "My god! This place is huge!"

"We are large," Baen said pointedly.

Etienne looked him up and down. "No shit? Not that I'd noticed," he said dryly.

"Who

are you, anyway?"

Baen nodded politely. "I am Baen." He hesitated. "Danielle's second."

"Second what?" Etienne demanded suspiciously.

"Etienne, please!" Danielle said irritably. "I know this is a shock, but ...."

"A shock?" Etienne said angrily. "Me and my buddies have been AWOL a solid month

looking for you! I tried to talk them out of following me. I knew there wasn't much chance that

you were still alive, but they were hell bent and determined to come along if I was determined to

go. I think I've got a right to be pissed off! And I think I've a right to know just what the fuck

you've gotten yourself into here!"

Danielle studied him for several moments and felt her anger wane. "You aren't glad that

I'm alive?"

Etienne looked like she'd hit him. "How can you ask me that?"

Danielle moved to him and embraced him. "Well, stop yelling at me, then, alright?"

He tensed for a moment and finally hugged her back. His eyes were glassy with unshed

tears when he finally pulled away and caught her face between his hands. "You're all I have

left! I thought I'd lost you!"

Danielle smiled up at him mistily. "I should've known you'd come running to rescue me."

He grimaced, flicking a look at the men around them. "Do you need to be rescued?"

It took Danielle a moment to grasp the underlying threat. "I don't," she said firmly. "If

you'd asked me that a month or so ago, I would probably have said yes, but I'm right where I

want to be." She grinned at him abruptly. "You're going to be an uncle."

He looked perfectly blank. A look of revulsion flickered across his features. "Danny ...."

"Don't! Don't say it! Don't even think it! I want these babies, Etienne. I ... I need you,

too. Don't make me choose between you and my ... family."

Anger suffused his cheeks with color. He sent a hard look at Kiel, Baen, and Jalen.

"You aren't just saying that ...?"

"I'm saying it because I care about them." She looked at Kiel. "I love them." She smiled at Baen and Jalen. "All of them."

"They're ... aliens," Etienne said in a harsh undertone. "Not that I don't appreciate what

they've done for the Federation! Or for me! I'd be dead now if it weren't for them. The god

damned Nubiens shot my ship out from under me and they pulled me in. Gratitude only goes so

far, though, Danny!"

"You're wrong if you think this is just gratitude! You think I can't tell the difference?"

"Can you? They rescued you ... kept you here. Captives have a way of indentifying with their captors when their life depends on it."

Danielle studied his face and finally moved away from him to settle on the closest couch.

She'd had a second made as well as several comfortable chairs. Etienne followed her, glancing

at Kiel, Baen, and Jalen as they settled on the opposite couch, and then planting his butt on the

low table between them, effectively blocking her view of them. "I think you need some time

away from here to think this over."

"It isn't going to change the way I feel, Etienne."

"So there's no harm in it, right?"

Kiel jolted to his feet. "She is breeding."

"Yeah? But what is she breeding?" Etienne growled.

Danielle punched him in the shoulder. "These are my babies, damn it! Don't you dare

say things like that about them!”

“Ouch!” Etienne rubbed his arm. “Damn it, Danny!”

“We aren’t going to get along at all if you won’t at least *try* to be reasonable about this!”

## Chapter Twenty

Danielle was more than a little horrified when she discovered she’d been so caught up in

her personal concerns that she didn’t find out that the general in command of the Federation

forces had accompanied the Danu that had returned until the following day. Not that the return

of the conquering heroes hadn’t been a mixed blessing all the way around. As thrilled as she’d

been to see all of them and examine them to be sure they were strong and healthy and hadn’t

come to any lasting harm from their adventures—she’d *really* given Kiel, Baen, and Jalen a

thorough examination and it had been just as delightful as she remembered!—Etienne’s less than

enthusiastic reception to her news had made her unhappy.

Even her personal problems paled beside the news about the general, though, and she was

quaking in her boots when she presented herself to him.

He’d been assigned to one of the soldier’s habitats, which should have made the meeting

seem more informal and less intimidating but didn’t. When she’d been admitted by his adjutant,

she discovered that the general himself was every bit as intimidating as his rank. An older man,

the hair near his temples was graying, but he was tall, broad shouldered, hard faced, and looked

about as yielding as a stone statue.

“At ease, soldier,” he commanded abruptly when she’d saluted.

She assumed the correct posture, feeling uneasiness slither through her under his piercing

gaze. “You’ll need to be debriefed, of course, Captain Dubois, but I’d like to hear the story

directly from you.”

Danielle didn’t actually like the fact that he’d referred to her experiences as her ‘story’.

It seemed to imply that he expected a pack of lies, but she composed her thoughts and gave him

as concise an account as she could.

He said nothing for several moments after she'd finished. "Was it your idea to ally the Danu with us? Or theirs?"

Danielle sent him a sharp glance, debated briefly and decided to be as honest as possible.

He didn't look like the sort of man who would have trouble detecting lies. "I suggested it, Sir."

"Purely out of curiosity—what prompted the idea?"

Danielle looked at him uncomfortably. "Initially it was prompted by a desire to get home, Sir. My ship was ... gone. They'd taken it apart to study it after I crashed. After living

among them for a time, I came to understand that they could be motivated to aid us in our cause

with the right incentive."

The general frowned. "It did not occur to you that it could seriously jeopardize the safety

of the Federation of planets?"

Danielle felt the blood leave her face. "It did, Sir."

"And yet you still decided to play politics?"

The blood surged back with a vengeance. "I'm only one person! I couldn't stop them from doing anything they set out to do, Sir! I thought it best to make friends, particularly when

Manuta ordered them to take me back to my people ... Sir!"

"You could have refused to lead them back!"

Danielle's lips tightened. "I didn't offer to lead them back to start with, Sir! As I said, they disassembled my craft. They had all the information they needed to reach the Federation

with or without my help."

"They would not have been able to retrieve classified information from your craft's computer, soldier, if you had not landed it in their midst!"

Danielle flinched. The truth was she'd done her best to land it, but she'd thought the place was inhabited by primitives! How was she to have guessed they were so advanced? "I

crashed, Sir. I had no reason to believe that they were advanced enough to breach my ship's

security, but that's beside the point. I crashed. Under any other circumstances the security

would have been protected by that alone."

"You may be certain that this matter will be thoroughly investigated, Soldier."

“Yes, Sir!” Despite the fact that the interview had been even worse than she’d expected,

Danielle relaxed fractionally, certain she would be dismissed.

“I understand that you have formed some sort of partnership with these aliens. You know

of course that this is also against regulations and grounds for discharge if not a court martial

given the fact that it took place while we were at war?”

Were? “We aren’t at war anymore?” she asked without thinking.

“That wasn’t the question.”

“No, Sir. Yes, Sir! I understand.” She hesitated. “I might as well admit, now, that I’m unfit for duty.”

He frowned. “Unfit?”

“Pregnant,” she said baldly.

He looked as appalled as Etienne had and she felt anger surge to life for the first time.

“By an alien?”

Her lips tightened. “My Danu partners ... Sir.”

He was silent for so long it took all she could do to maintain her posture and not shift with the uneasiness she felt.

“Were you raped?”

Danielle felt her face turn fiery red. “No, Sir.”

He mulled that over. “You were aware they had removed your birth control device and

you still ... indulged?”

“They didn’t remove the device,” Danielle corrected him, but she wasn’t about to tell him

what *had* happened. “It failed.”

“I’m going to be frank, I don’t want to air our dirty laundry here, in front of our new allies, but it’s very likely that both you and your brother will be facing charges once we return to

headquarters. At the very least, you will be discharged.”

Danielle felt the blood leave her face. “Yes, Sir!”

“Dismissed!”

Saluting, Danielle turned and left. She had reason to be grateful for her training. She wasn’t certain she could’ve maintained her dignity otherwise. She’d thought that she would

have time to compose herself before she reached the habitat again. She might have, but she

didn’t get the chance. Kiel, Baen, Jalen, and Etienne were all laying in wait when she emerged.

“That bad, huh?” Etienne said as soon he saw her face.

Danielle flicked a quick look at her quad. “We can discuss it back at the habitat.”

She thought for several unnerving minutes that they were going to charge inside and ....

She didn't want to think what they had in mind. The moment she struck off toward the habitat,

though, they fell into step around her.

"We are in so much trouble!" she exclaimed as soon as they'd entered the habitat.

"My

god, Etienne! I didn't know you were serious when you said you'd gone AWOL!

What were

you thinking?"

"I was thinking my little sister needed me and they refused to extend the damned search!"

She shook her head at him sadly. "He's talking court martial—for both of us."

"What is this court martial?" Kiel demanded immediately.

Danielle winced. The general had made it clear he didn't want to 'air their dirty laundry'.

Well, she decided, he could kiss her ass! It wasn't a military secret and they were her family!

"Jail time," Etienne said morosely. "Jesus! This is a fucking mess—not but what I expected it myself, but I'm damned if I can figure out what they mean to charge you with!"

Danielle sent him a significant look.

"You dumb ass! Don't tell me you told them about the triplets?"

Danielle's lips tightened. "He'd already heard it. I didn't deny it."

"Well, hell, Danny! Did you tell them about the buns, too?"

Danielle shrugged irritably. "It isn't like I could've kept it secret, damn it! Anyway, I was planning on using it to request a discharge."

"Except now they know and they might demand an abortion! You should've kept your

mouth shut until it was too late for them to consider that!"

Danielle suddenly felt faint. Apparently it was obvious. Kiel scooped her up and carried

her to the couch. "What is abortion?"

She winced. She didn't want to tell him, not when they were already so obsessed about

the babies. There was no telling what they might do!

"Remove them," Etienne said helpfully.

"Etienne!" Danielle gasped, horrified.

"Is this true?" Baen demanded.

Danielle stared at him unhappily. "I told you I couldn't consider finding a mate or having a baby!" she said crossly.

"You did not say that they would put you in jail or that they would remove the babies!"

Kiel growled angrily.

“Because I didn’t expect it to happen, damn it!” Danielle snapped and then burst into tears.

“I will kill him,” Jalen said, turning abruptly and stalking toward the door.

“I am primary!” Kiel informed him. “I will kill him.”

“Oh god!” Danielle exclaimed, leaping up from her seat and rushing to beat them to the

door and bar it. “You can’t do that! It would ruin the alliance!”

Kiel studied her a long moment. “We will kill all of them and say they died in battle,” he

said decisively.

“That’s not a solution!” Etienne shouted angrily. “He’s the head of the entire Federation

forces! That’ll just make a bigger mess than we’ve already got!”

Kiel, Baen, and Jalen turned to look at him.

“I am the leader of the Danu,” Kiel said coldly. “I will not make an alliance under these

circumstances. I will make war.”

“But .... I don’t want you warring with my people!” Danielle said plaintively. “That’s why I talked you in to making an alliance to start with!”

Kiel looked at her curiously. “I thought that you suggested it so that we would take you

to your home world.”

Danielle stared at him unhappily. “That was part of it,” she admitted. “But I care about

my people! I wouldn’t have joined the service if I hadn’t!”

“You know, he has a very good point,” Etienne said thoughtfully.

“What point?” Danielle demanded angrily.

“They’re powerful allies. The president will want to form an alliance. He could speak to

him about a pardon for us when he goes to the meeting.”

“What is a pardon?” Kiel demanded.

Etienne stared at him blankly.

“They haven’t learned anything about us except what they found in Gertrude’s data banks,” Danielle said a little defensively and then turned to Kiel. “What he’s saying is that, even

if we’re tried in a court and found guilty, the president can issue a pardon ... and they’d let us

go.”

Kiel frowned. “But they would put you in a jail until then?”

“Probably,” Danielle said glumly, then added hurriedly. “I’d be fine, though. They just

lock you up in a small cell and feed you awful food and make you wear ugly jumpsuits.”



“That’s putting it mildly,” Etienne said dryly. “It’s hell, but she can handle it. Me and my buddies will be there, too. We can take care of her—make sure she doesn’t get hurt.”

“We are her quad mates,” Baen said tightly. “It is our duty and honor to protect her.” Etienne gaped at him blankly for a moment before anger hardened his features. “Well, I’m her big brother, god damn it! And it’s *my* place to take care of my little sister!” “Don’t start that, Etienne!” Danielle snapped. “We’re mates and he’s right and you know

it! You wouldn’t appreciate it if some other man thought he could take better care of your

woman, would you?”

Etienne subsided, but he was still pissed off. “I’m not ‘some’ other man. I’m your brother—your blood,” he muttered.

“And I love you.” She smiled coaxingly. “You’re my favorite brother.”

A reluctant smile curled his lips. “I’m your only brother.”

“It’s a good plan,” Danielle offered.

Kiel nodded. “I will go and speak to your general.”

Relieved, Danielle hugged him tightly. “Just don’t set his back up!”

He looked blank.

“Make him angry.”

His lips curled but it looked more feral than friendly and it made Danielle uneasy.

\* \* \* \*

Kiel studied the man they referred to as the general when he was escorted into his presence and introduced. The man smiled with his lips, but not his eyes. His eyes were sharp

and assessing as he extended a hand. Kiel examined the hand held out to him. The palm was

broad, the hand strong, but the skin was soft. He was a man who had not used his hands in

combat for a long time even if his bearing and his build suggested that he was still a strong

soldier.

Realizing after a moment that the hand had been extended in some sort of gesture that was their custom, he extended his own and grasped the man’s hand. The hand that curled around

his was indeed strong, warm, and the general tightened it very deliberately to apply pressure.

A show of strength, Kiel deduced, tightening his own hand in return, just enough to convince the man that *he* had not grown soft, not enough to crush the bones. The man winced,

released his hand, and surveyed him speculatively.

“Kiel of Manu?” he murmured, as if to himself. “Captain Kiel?”

“Yes.”

The man frowned, as if turning the name over in his mind and finally sent him another look. “Curious that you don’t seem to have an echelon of military leaders—only captains and, I

suppose, privates. You’re the leader of the ... uh ... Danu?”

The question was meant to imply he was of lesser status than the general. His tone and

attitude made the anger Kiel was holding inside that much harder to control, but he had no

intention of giving away his feelings on the matter. He kept his expression carefully neutral. “I

am first captain of first platoon of the first colony.”

The general frowned. “So that’s a rank of sorts superior to the others?”

“To be first of the first of the first—yes—for many years now I have held that place. We

prove our place among our people by strength, agility, cunning, intelligence, and leadership.”

The general reddened slightly at the intentional insult, proving he wasn’t too vain and filled with self-importance to also be stupid. His lips tightened, but he nodded, keeping his own

expression as carefully neutral as Kiel had. “I haven’t had the chance before but, on behalf of

the Federation, I wish to extend our profound thanks for your aid in the late conflict with the

Nubiens. We are very grateful and hope that a friendship begun on such auspicious terms can

continue. You will come with us when we leave to discuss an alliance between your people and

ours with our leader, President Monroe?”

“That was my intention when I invited your people here as guests of the Danu.”

The general’s brows rose. He chose his words with great care. “I’m afraid that I’m no politician. I’m a military man and always have been. Our cultures are very different and it’s

almost inevitable that there will be minor misunderstandings. If any of the men have offended in

some way ...?”

“You spoke with my mate, Captain Danielle.”

Surprise flickered in his eyes and then his face reddened in anger. “Captain Dubois? She’s a citizen of the Federation and a soldier. I’m afraid discipline issues within our military

will have to remain under my purview. You do understand? You will expect to continue to

discipline your own people even with the alliance.”

“My people are disciplined. They require no punishment.”

That comment took the general completely off guard and for a split second Kiel saw his

true feelings—hate and fear and contempt. He forced a chuckle. “Well, that is unprecedented!

And most fortunate for the Danu! Unfortunately, as well trained as my soldiers are they tend to

step out of line from time to time. There are rules for a reason and they are well aware of it. It

isn’t as if Captain Dubois was unaware that she had breached protocol—not that that’s an

excuse. Ignorance of military policies only means a contempt for them and no attempt made to

memorize, or follow, the rules.”

“Captain Danielle is my mate. She is no longer a soldier of your militia or a citizen of your people. She is a citizen of Marchet of the Danu and she is carrying my off-spring. I will

take it as an insult to both me and my people if you persist in punishing her for becoming my

mate and the mother of my off-spring. I will also take it as an unfriendly act on your part if you

persist in punishing her brother and his buddies for searching for her as her protection is of the

utmost importance to me.”

The general looked enraged for several moments but to his credit he managed to contain

his temper. It made Kiel’s anger rise another notch as it occurred to him to wonder if the

general’s temper was not the reason Danielle had looked so shaken after she had spoken to him,

to wonder if it was more than the threat of punishment by jail. “That is plain speaking indeed!”

the general said, pacing away from him and turning once more to study him.

Kiel allowed his lips to curl slightly in a false smile. The man felt threatened and he wanted to put more distance between them. It was clear enough that the general had no idea he

had given that much away, but had reacted instinctively. “It is our way to speak plainly and

truthfully.”

And not the way of Danielle’s people. Everything the general had said, every gesture, was either empty or a lie. He was not friendly. He was not grateful. He was resentful that the

Danu had helped them to defeat the Nubiens when he had not managed it without their help. If

he was a representative of her race, then they could expect to be hated and feared but never

accepted by them, he realized.

Even Danielle’s brother .... But he realized that Etienne had been honest. He had not tried to hide his concern over his sister, his possessiveness, or his fear for her. When they had

pulled him in to their ship after his own had been destroyed, he had been grateful, wary, but open

to friendliness.

And Danielle—she could not hide the way she felt. It was not in her nature to be deceptive. Even when she tried, she failed, because everything that she thought and felt shown

through her expressions and in her eyes.

Mayhap he was wrong after all and they would find friends among the humans?

The general smiled abruptly, a toothy baring of teeth that was as false as the respect and

friendliness he had tried to convey. “This is irregular, but I will speak to the president about

your concerns. I’m sure something could be worked out.”

Distrust instantly rose within him, but Kiel relaxed fractionally and nodded. The general

did not want to make any concessions, but he would because he was afraid and he knew their

leader would not want the Danu as enemies. They would have an uneasy alliance, at best, with

the humans—at least those in power—but he thought, if Etienne and Danielle were anything to

go by, there was a very good chance that they would also find friends and mates. “Thank you.”

\* \* \* \*

As Kiel had guessed, the human president of the Federation, Monroe, had been no more

pleased at Kiel’s demands regarding Danielle, her brother, and his friends, who had helped

Etienne search for her, than the general had been. By the time they had settled to discuss an alliance, however, the war against the Nubiens was truly ended and they both knew that the victory was due to the help of Danu. Reluctant or not, Monroe had ordered all charges dropped and that all involved be issued a discharge from service.

Kiel had had mixed feelings about that, particularly when he realized that the discharge itself was apparently insulting to Danielle and the others, but no one, including him, had seen any point in belaboring the issue. They were released from both obligation and charges and it seemed the best any of them had hoped for even though Kiel felt that they deserved commendations for their part in helping to defeat the Nubiens in the last major battle.

Etienne and his friends had decided a 'vacation' was in order while they considered what they would do as civilians and had accompanied the delegation of Danu back to Marchet, which had pleased Danielle immensely and, therefore, had also pleased him.

He was watching Etienne and his human friends exhibition of hand-to-hand combat several months later when a strange feeling swept over him, almost like weakness. Fear and pain exploded through him behind it and he jerked his head up abruptly, meeting Baen's gaze. He saw the same fear in Baen's eyes. "Danielle!" he said abruptly, thrusting the men surrounding him out of his way and beginning to run from the practice field toward the city. Baen and Jalen raced to catch up with him.

"What is it?" Etienne bellowed, staring after them in puzzlement and growing alarm. "Danielle!" Jalen called back to him without pausing.

Etienne turned to look at the men around him blankly and then abruptly took off after them. As long as his legs were, he trailed them all the way without making any appreciable gain on them. It occurred to him to wonder how they knew something was wrong with Danielle, but he finally decided they must have heard something he hadn't. They seemed in a blind panic and there wasn't much that shook them—in fact, it was the first time he'd ever seen them fazed by anything.

That realization sent a sharp stab of fear and adrenaline through him that boosted his flagging strength. They'd disappeared when he raced through the city gates, but he didn't waste

time looking for them. He knew they'd headed straight for the habitat.

He skidded to a halt when he burst inside. Danielle was curled up on the floor and Kiel,

Baen, and Jalen were all frozen, looking as if someone had switched them off.

"What is it?"

There were tears on Danielle's face. "They're coming!"

A wave of cold washed over Etienne. "So soon?"

Danielle burst into tears as if he'd confirmed her worst fears. "It's too soon, isn't it?"

"Shit! Fuck! Damn!" Etienne exclaimed in a panicked, mindless litany, trying to recall

the term of gestation. "I don't know! Let's get you up!"

Even as he surged toward her, Kiel dropped to a crouch and very carefully placed one arm beneath her shoulders and one beneath her hips. She cried out when he lifted her from the

floor and he nearly dropped her. "Oh! It hurts! Oh god! It hurts!"

Kiel sent Etienne a look of horror as if he had no idea what to do with her once he'd picked her up.

"Upstairs. Let's get her into a bed where she'll be more comfortable," Etienne said, trying to gather his wits.

Kiel had already set one foot on the lowest stair before it occurred to him that taking her

upstairs might not be the best idea. "Wait!"

Kiel froze and turned to look at him. Etienne surveyed his white face and the blind panic

on Baen and Jalen's faces and realized he was on his own. "Doctor?"

Kiel blinked and looked at the others for an answer.

"Medic?"

Something flickered in their eyes. "Tech?"

Etienne gaped at Baen when he made the suggestion. "Are you out of your fucking mind? She needs medical attention, god damn it!"

"To bear the off-spring?" Jalen asked blankly, then added hesitantly. "Is it not ... natural?"

"They will come out when they are ready, yes?" Baen asked, hope threading his voice.

Etienne ground his teeth together but after one look at Danielle's face decided not to inform the fucking idiots that 'nature' usually required assistance and babies didn't always wait

until they were ready. "Never mind! Upstairs!"

Baen and Jalen nearly knocked him down as they stampeded up the stairs so closely on

Kiel's heels that they nearly tripped him up. Kiel whipped his head around and snarled at them

when he managed to regain his balance. Even in his own state of panic the growl unnerved him,

sounded more like a beast than a man. "Cut it out!" he snapped. "You'll scare the piss out of

her."

"She has already pissed," Jalen said.

"That's her water, stupid!" Etienne snapped. Didn't they know anything about babies?

"I said that it was her water," Jalen responded indignantly.

"The water the babies .... Never mind! Just get her on the bed."

He jolted to a halt when he saw the bed. "Good fucking god! What the hell? Never mind! Don't tell me! I don't want to know."

Kiel set Danielle gently on the bed, swiveled at the waist and punched Jalen in the face.

"It is the water the babies float in, stupid!" he snarled.

Danielle sat up. "Don't hit him!"

"Behave or get out!" Etienne snarled before he thought better of it. Kiel, Baen, and Jalen

instantly raced for the door and began to fight over who was leaving first. "Get back here, god

damn it! I'm not doing this by myself!"

The three men halted, turned to look at him and then at Danielle.

"It cannot take more than two. I will wait downstairs," Baen volunteered.

"Me also," Jalen seconded him.

"Cowards!" Kiel snarled.

Baen narrowed his eyes at him. "You are primary, motherfucker! It is your duty and honor ...."

Kiel punched him hard enough he flew backwards through the door. Etienne heard the dull thuds as he rolled down the first couple of stairs. Fully expecting him to charge back in as

soon as he picked himself up, he strode to the door, caught Jalen's arm, shoved him out, and

slammed the door. "It'll be quieter anyway," he muttered.

Danielle had curled into a fetal position holding her stomach and groaning when he reached the bed again and looked down at her helplessly. Feeling a little faint, he crouched

down and brushed her hair from her cheek. "How long has it been, baby?" he asked soothingly.

Danielle opened her eyes and looked at him fearfully. "Six months. That isn't long enough, is it?"

He didn't think so, but he didn't want to tell her. Kiel crouched beside him and settled

his hand on her belly, frowning. "They are ready," he said after a moment.

Danielle looked at him so hopefully and trustingly that Etienne didn't have the heart to

contradict him. "Obviously. They wouldn't be coming now if they weren't ready," he said

bracingly. He hoped to hell they were ready because as little as he knew about the process, it

seemed obvious that she couldn't carry them when her water had broken. That could only mean

that the protective sack that surrounded the babies had ruptured. He hoped it didn't mean

anything bad that there was blood mixed with the water.

He should've considered, before, that he hadn't seen a damned doctor or medic since he'd arrived, but it wasn't something he thought about until he needed one!

Glancing at Kiel, he jerked his head and then straightened and moved to the door. When

Kiel joined him he glared up at the man. "You stupid son-of-a-bitch! Why the fuck didn't you

tell me you didn't have any doctors? I would've sent for one or gone and got one! If she dies

...."

Kiel paled. He lifted his head and stared at Danielle for a long moment. "She will not die," he said tightly and moved away from Etienne.

To Etienne's consternation, he climbed onto the bed behind her and wrapped his arms around her. Slowly stroking her stomach with one hand, he lifted the other and placed his

splayed hand along the side of her head. It seemed to calm her or Etienne would have dragged

the bastard away from her.

"The pain stopped," Danielle said after a moment, surprise and anxiety mingling in her

voice. "At least—not entirely, but it isn't so bad now."

Etienne's heart nearly stopped. Lifting a shaking hand, he placed it on the huge mound

of her stomach. Relief went through him when he felt the muscles contract and her belly turn as

hard as stone. He flicked a look of surprise at Kiel. "You're an amazing man, Kiel of Manu,"

he said appreciatively. "How did you ...? Never mind!" He straightened. "You need to help

her get undressed. The bed's ... uh ... wet. Where I can I find more sheets?"



Relieved to have something to do that felt useful, he left Kiel to help her undress and bellowed down the stairs for sterile water. Jalen arrived with a glass of water just about the time

he finally found the sheets he was looking for. "What the fuck is that for?"

"You asked for water," Jalen said stiffly.

"*Sterile* water, god damn it! Not something to drink."

Jalen looked blank. "What do you need sterile water for?"

"How the fuck would I know? They always use it, though, to make sure everything is clean. We'll need something to cut the umbilical," he added abruptly as the thought dawned on

him. "And something to pinch the chord until we can tie a knot in it!"

Thankfully, Kiel had helped her undress and covered her with a blanket by the time he returned. She was shivering, her teeth chattering uncontrollably. It scared the hell out of him.

He was sweating himself, but he finally decided he was over-warm from nerves and running

around. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed when he leaned over her to slide the dry pad he'd made of the

sheet under her hips. "I see a head!"

Kiel sat up instantly, shoved him out of the way and put his head between her legs. "It is

mine!"

Etienne glared at him, but he could see it was a wasted effort. Kiel's expression made it

clear his mind was elsewhere. "Stop breathing on him!"

Kiel focused on his face and glared back at him. "He will know my scent!" he said indignantly. "It is to soothe him!"

"Ok, now that's just god damned weird! I think you're supposed to push or something,"

he instructed Danielle.

She held her breath, rising upward as she pushed and the baby slipped out of her and onto

the sheet. He stared at the tiny, wiggling, bloody thing struggling with a rising sense of panic.

"It isn't crying," Danielle gasped.

Kiel reached toward the baby, stroking his index finger along its chest and the infant sucked in a breath, coughed, and then its tiny nostrils quivered as if it was sniffing the air. It

sneezed and a reluctant smile curled his lips.

A jolt went through Etienne as it turned its head toward Kiel. It wasn't near the shock he

got, however, when the baby began wiggling and flailing its arms as if trying to roll onto its

belly.

Kiel chuckled. "He is eager to explore," he murmured, gently rolling the baby onto its back again. "Be still, little one."

"Is it alright?" Danielle gasped fearfully.

"Uh ... it seems to be," Etienne said doubtfully. It looked damned little to him. Granted,

he wasn't used to looking at newborns, but it looked really, really tiny, especially considering the

size of its father.

Fear clouded Danielle's eyes when he met her gaze.

"It is strong and healthy," Kiel murmured, stroking the baby's tiny head with his fingertips.

"It isn't crying," Danielle said doubtfully.

"Because he knows me," Kiel said in a rumbling voice. "He knows that he is safe."

Baen and Jalen poked their heads in through the door. "We have gathered the things you

asked for," Baen volunteered.

Spotting the baby, Jalen pushed Baen out of the way and moved to the foot of the bed.

Kiel lifted his hand in demand, studied the knife and clamp with annoyance for a moment and

finally used them to cut the baby's umbilical. Etienne felt a little queasy and more than a little

uneasy about Kiel's ministrations, but it either didn't bother the baby or he was too weak to cry.

He wasn't certain which.

When he'd knotted the umbilical close to the baby's belly, he scooped it up into his hands

and carried it to his chest. Danielle watched him worriedly, but Jalen brought them back to the

birthing process still in progress. "There is a head ... I think. It is hairy."

Etienne sent him a sour look. "Of course it's the head!"

It was smaller than the first but more agile. It began rotating its hips to roll over the moment it fully emerged. Lifting its bobbing head, it flared its nostrils. Jalen moved closer.

The tiny nose wrinkled and it began making the same coughing sound the first baby had.

Etienne frowned. It didn't actually sound entirely like a cough.

Baen surged forward, shoving Jalen out of the way and leaning close to the baby. A broad grin lit his features. "It is mine."

Dumbfounded, feeling a bizarre sense of unreality, Etienne gaped at him. "You are shit

...?"

As Kiel had, Baen waited until the afterbirth was delivered and tied its cord and then lifted it to his chest.

It was eerie and damned weird as far as Etienne was concerned, but he couldn't see that either of the babies looked as if it was in distress. Their color was good and they seemed damned lively for newborns.

"Mine is coming now!" Jalen said excitedly. His smile fell as he studied the top of the head. "It has no hair."

Etienne elbowed him in the ribs. "It's beautiful."

Jalen beamed at him. "It is? I cannot see the face," he added, frowning.

Etienne rolled his eyes and shot a significant look at Danielle.

Jalen stared at him blankly for several moments. "Oh! It is for her."

"Jesus! Sometimes you are dumb as dirt, Jay!"

Jalen glared at him but he was clearly too interested in watching his son delivered to take issue. As the other two had, this baby seemed to be sniffing and the moment Jalen touched it, it began to make the same coughing sound. "You are right! He is beautiful!" Jalen said with pride when he had tied his own son's umbilical.

Kiel and Baen lifted their doting faces from their sons and glared at him, but Kiel dismissed his claim first and moved around the bed to present his son to Danielle. She looked heavy eyed with exhaustion, but she reached for the baby eagerly and carried him to her breast, studying his face and then his hands and feet. She grinned. "He's so perfect!"

"And hungry," Etienne agreed wryly, watching the baby as he nuzzled his way across Danielle's neck and then down, searching frantically.

Chuckling, Danielle rolled onto her side as Baen brought his son to her, settling it on the bed. It rotated its hips immediately and rolled onto its belly.

Danielle gasped. "Did you see that?"

"I see it," Etienne said neutrally, watching the baby 'swim' toward her, scooting on its belly and using its hands and feet to push itself close enough to latch onto the nipple the other baby hadn't already laid claim to.

"I'll be damned."

Jalen carefully placed his infant next to the others. It immediately began to snuffle and search for a breast, reminding Etienne uneasily of newborn pups. He kept that to himself, however.

"They're so tiny," Danielle murmured worriedly, stroking the babies. "You sure they're alright?"

Kiel crouched beside the bed. "They are better than alright. They are perfect."

Danielle smiled back at him and then looked down at the babies again. "They need a bath ... and so do I."

"I'm going to leave that to the doting fathers," Etienne said hurriedly. Turning, he embraced each of the men, pounding their backs enthusiastically. "Congratulations! I don't

know how the fuck you did it, but I guess I'll take your word for it that you're all fathers."

Danielle hid a smile at the look on her quad's faces as Etienne hugged them. They all looked shocked, uncomfortable, and then vaguely pleased. They pounded his back as enthusiastically as he had theirs. Etienne winced, rolling his shoulders. "I think I'll just go

cough up blood now," he said jokingly.

Danielle chuckled. Kiel, Baen, and Jalen all looked puzzled, but it was clear their minds

were firmly on the newborns. Baen and Jalen beat him to the door and disappeared.

Danielle settled her head on the pillow, watching the babies fight over her breasts and smiling at them.

She looked up to see that Kiel was smiling at her. "What?"

He shook his head. "It feels ... strange. I do not know how I feel beyond .... I am ... happy."

Danielle lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. "I love you."

He sucked in a deep breath, expanding his broad chest. "Is that what I am feeling?"

Danielle chuckled. "I don't know. You have to tell me. What does it feel like?"

He shook his head, frowning. "Many things together—excitement, fear, gladness. My chest feels ... tight. My heart ... it cannot decide whether to beat very fast or slow and it does

both, kicking into my ribs painfully and then beating oddly."

"I feel the same way whenever you're around me."

He swallowed convulsively. "This is what love feels like?"

"It feels like that and more—like ... everything is wonderful and life is grand and ... I would move heaven and earth and fight to the death to keep you and protect you and my sons."

His eyes gleamed. "I loved you the very first moment that I found your phallus receptive."

Danielle stared at him blankly for a moment, trying to decide whether to clobber him or

kiss him. "You are such an ass!"

"But I love you," he said, chuckling.

Jalen and Baen returned with cloths and a basin of water in time to hear him.

"I love her more," Baen said, scowling at Kiel.

"I love her most!" Jalen snapped challengingly.

Kiel rolled his eyes. "Give me the water and take the fight outside."

“But ... I must bathe my son!” Jalen objected.

“Mine first,” Kiel growled, prying his son from Danielle’s breast. The baby instantly let out an indignant wail and then sucked in a sharp breath and complained in a high pitched scream when Kiel plunked him into the water.

“Careful!” Danielle exclaimed. “My goodness he’s strong! Good lungs, too!”

“Yes,” Kiel said proudly. “He will be prime one day!”

Jalen and Baen exchanged a speaking look. Apparently deciding to ignore the provocation, they knelt beside the bed to admire their own sons. “My son is not as big and he is stronger,” Baen said.

Jalen slanted a narrow look at him. “He has hair like a sousa,” he muttered under his breath.

“Watch it!” Danielle said militantly. “That’s *my* son you’re talking about!”

Jalen sent her a look that was a mixture of apology and resentment.

“They’re *all* beautiful.”

Jalen grinned at her. “But mine is the most beautiful.”

“I love you, Jalen,” Danielle said with a chuckle.

“And me also,” Baen reminded her.

She sat up and kissed the tip of Baen’s nose. “And you, also.” She sighed blissfully when she settled against the pillows again. “Just so you know, you aren’t going to plunk me into a basin of water. I want a shower.”

“I will carry you,” Kiel said as he returned to the bed, wrapped his son carefully in one of the cloths Baen had brought and placed in the center. When he’d built a wall of pillows around the infant, he carefully lifted her from the bed.

All three infants were wailing indignantly by that time, demanding the breasts!

Danielle sighed. “I guess we’ll have to repaint the nursery blue. Pink just doesn’t seem right.”

“They cannot see until their eyes are open,” Kiel informed her. “There is time. I do not see why we must paint it again, however. I like the color.”

The End