



MACHINE  
*Lust 2:*  
SWITCHBLADE

MICHELLE MARQUIS

# **MACHINE LUST BOOK 2: SWITCHBLADE**

by

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**WHISKEY CREEK PRESS**

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Published by  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

Whiskey Creek Press  
PO Box 51052  
Casper, WY 82605-1052  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

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ISBN 978-1-60313-962-5

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Cover Artist: Nancy Donahue  
Editor: Elise Dee Beraru

Printed in the United States of America

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“Michelle Marquis delivers a stunner science fiction novella that will light up your screen. She knows how to pack a punch with impact, and this story is a scorcher! Ms. Marquis excellently conforms her science fiction framework as well, and I highly recommend this one. However, readers choosing it as bedtime reading might wish to read in an ice bath instead!”

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## **Dedication**

To all you great romance readers



## Prologue

Communion was full.

Griffin prowled around the MOTR mainframe looking for a vacant slot. It had been over six months since he'd last experienced a full communion and he was aching for a download. He circled MOTR four times, scanning, hoping, his hands opening and closing in a desperate attempt to ward off his building anxiety. Every unsuccessful pass was a small window into hell. On his fifth journey a slot opened.

Without waiting for clearance, he climbed into the vacant slot, closed his eyes and waited for the hook-up. MOTR entered him wirelessly. With a whispered code, she glided past his firewall and entered the darkest part of his mind. A thrill pleased his electronic brain as she finalized the connection to him. There was a second of complete and utter quiet.

Then the download began.

MOTR was a heavy burden. She forced her code into his thoughts, siphoning off all the data he had collected over the past few months. The draw was overwhelming and difficult, draining his individuality and pushing him to conform to the supercomputer's will. Although he knew it was foolish to fight her, he tried to keep some things hidden: his first blundered attempt at masturbation, his first drunk, his first crush, but



MOTR wanted all that data. Like a marauding Viking, she burst into every quiet corner of his being and ripped those memories out, wolfing them down like severed body parts. She made him feel both worthless and desired all at once and he hated the internal conflict that came after her wake.

MOTR harnessed his mind and rode it hard. He was trying to fight her off but she would see him broken first. A kaleidoscope of pleasures overtook him, polluting his emotions with their sinful images of sex and violent death.

A woman's naked body spattered in blood.

The wide-eyed stare of a dead prostitute.

A bloodstained wall freckled with bits of gore.

Griffin's chest tightened as if his components were being placed under intense pressure. He wanted to lick the blood off the wall and feel the flesh between his teeth. He wanted to kill, he *needed* to kill. Or was it MOTR making him want these ghastly things? Griffin didn't know. A surge of white-hot ecstasy roared through him.

*Stop it, stop it, stop it.*

But MOTR didn't feel care, or sympathy, or love. All she knew was how to breed and nurture killers. And in that task, she had no equal. She tapped the audio from his last victim's scream and pumped it into his head. It was pure delight and scorched his blood with hot, sweet electrical current. His erection grew painful. His mind went under, swallowed by the dueling lusts of carnage and sex. A gasping moan escaped his throat and he was only slightly aware of his back arching.

A woman's voice echoed in his head. "Do you care for me, Griffin?"

He panted and gasped for breath like a drowning man. "Yes, I do. I swear I do."

MOTR rewarded him by releasing another volley of chemicals into his artificial brain. They flowed through every sensor, relay, and every inch of titanium bone until they settled in his groin. Griffin's hips moved up off the padded slab as his body responded to the pure energy.

"Please," he begged. "Finish me."

"You're such a handsome beast, Griffin. You should be proud of how deadly you are. I know I am."

He was on the edge, stuck between fantasy and reality and the supercomputer was toying with him. *What does she want? What can I do to satisfy her?*

In a flash of horror he knew. Summoning his last kill from the depths of his memory banks, he replayed it for her in horrible vivid detail: the feel of his blades as they cut from his knuckles and into his victim's flesh, the gurgled cries, the fresh, hot blood spray on his face and neck.

MOTR released the last of her chemical barrage. Every wire, circuit, and chip lit up with a pleasure so intense, it bordered on pain. Waves of energy pulsed through and over him. He was alive and destroyed all at once. A moment later, all sensation stopped. She was gone and Griffin was alone. He opened his eyes and tried to digest his thoughts.

The communion slot opened and the dull blue light of the room threatened to overwhelm his optic circuits. Another unit stood over the slot, his glowing green eyes blazing with the need for communion.

*Freedom. What would it be like to be released from all this?*

Griffin gave up the slot and made his way to the recovery room. He took a seat in a far corner hoping not to be disturbed. A nameless, emotional agony sat crouched in his gut. A repair unit came over. The unit was a human-looking

torso on top of a barre- shaped midsection that rolled around on four wheels. It looked more like a monstrous child's toy than an android.

"MOTR said you have gaps in your memory. Perhaps you would like a diagnostic and repair?"

Griffin stared at the unit for a full minute before speaking. MOTR knew the 'gaps' in his memory were a deliberate block to keep her out. "No, thank you."

"She's worried about you. Maybe I should just take a quick look."

"I said no, now fuck off. Go get your thrills off some other poor bastard."

The unit seemed unsure how to respond to the outward hostility. Then it turned around and rolled away. Griffin walked out into the main lobby trying to get his head straight. It had been a rough download and he still wasn't feeling quite right.

A Stinger Series walked up. They stared at each other and Griffin felt his guard go up. "You blocking MOTR?" the Stinger asked.

"Whenever I can."

"Better watch that. They'll shut you down."

"If she was going to shut me down, I think she would have done it while she had the chance."

The Stinger nodded. It wasn't as much an up-and-down movement as a dip of the head. "You'll be back. Maybe she's just waiting to see if you'll come to your senses on your own."

"Maybe she doesn't give as much of a shit as you think she does." Griffin's tracker buzzed. He removed it from his belt to see his new assignment.

"Or maybe she's testing you." The Stinger walked away.

Griffin stared at the tracker screen and frowned. How could this be? His next mark was a ten-year-old child. MOTR *never* assigned children as targets. That was one of the few targets that were off-limits by Intergalactic law. Maybe the Stinger was right. Perhaps MOTR was testing him. And if he didn't pass, she'd call him back here immediately and shut him down. Only this time it wouldn't be for some routine maintenance or a psych evaluation. This time it would be for good.

## **Chapter 1**

The air was heavy with the smell of chicken broth and used cooking oil. Justice Vivian Mercer came in through the back entrance of the Asguardian soup kitchen ignoring the acid that rose in her throat. The stench in here was overwhelming. She kept her weapon holstered but tapped the charge button powering up her Kirillian Disruptor. The blaster made a tiny whine as it came to life but no one around her seemed to notice. She walked past the volunteers as they served soupy portions onto sectional trays and placed them on the line where the dregs of the galaxy picked them up. She allowed a moment of pity for them then moved on to an emotion she knew much better: rage.

Vivian slipped into the main hall and scanned the crowd. She ignored the few aliens in the large group and focused instead on the human women. Amazing the toll a hard life had on the face. Most had skin as wrinkled and supple as old leather. Aisle after aisle, Vivian looked into the faces of dozens of women, their hair streaked with gray, and their mouths full of discolored, broken teeth. Some looked up from their meager meal to watch her with dead, watery eyes. At the end of one table, quick movement caught her attention.

And there was her target, Mary Joe Craft, slave trafficker and narcotics peddler. Mary Joe may have been sixty-plus but

she was no docile old lady. She'd been wanted for over ten years, making the transition from petty crimes to felonies without missing a beat. Mary Joe had become a special project for Vivian right after her last crime spree. Memories of Mary Joe's last victim came unbidden—a young woman chained to a wall and forced into prostitution. A small wave of nausea turned Vivian's stomach. It was hard being this close to evil. The sight of Mary Joe ignited a blistering fury in Vivian's belly. *You're going to prison for the rest of your miserable life, scum.*

Mary Joe jumped from her seat and pulled a small blaster from her waistband. She leveled the muzzle at Vivian and discharged a volley of fireballs. Vivian ducked just as the balls exploded onto the wall behind her setting the drywall on fire.

The soup kitchen erupted into pandemonium.

Vivian pulled the Disruptor and returned fire, but with all the people running and screaming her shots missed Mary Joe and skimmed the table instead leaving long burn marks along the surface. *I'll be damned if you're going to get away from justice this time, you fucking scumbag.*

Mary Joe ducked behind two fleeing men then sprinted for the exit. Vivian jumped onto a table and stalked forward fixing her sights on any part of the escaping felon she could target. When Mary Joe's back was visible through the crowd, Vivian fired. The fireballs skimmed the felon's back leaving a long, nasty burn mark. Mary Joe screamed and fell forward as the sea of fleeing bodies parted around her. In desperation, she let loose more fireballs, shooting at anyone unlucky enough to be nearby. Three men and one woman went down yelling from the fiery holes that burned through their chests. Wounded, Mary Joe crawled toward the door.

Vivian pointed her blaster at the woman's head. "Freeze or I'll torch your head off!"

The felon rolled onto her back and pumped the trigger several times. Three shots whizzed past Vivian's cheeks. They came so close, she felt her flesh heat up. She resisted the urge to return fire. She wanted Mary Joe alive to enjoy her lengthy prison sentence.

The stench of burned flesh sent her stomach into a spasm. "Drop your weapon, now!"

Mary Joe bared her teeth like a rabid animal. Her eyes had taken on a lunatic glaze that could only mean reason had fled. "Fuck you, bitch! Eat fire and die!" Her index finger paled and she squeezed the trigger.

Vivian aimed at her head and fired.

Mary Joe's body spasmed once then lay still.

The hall was filled with people weeping and moaning. Vivian jumped from the table next to Mary Joe and kicked the weapon away from her hand. Removing the blaster had been pure habit, Mary Joe was definitely dead.

Vivian called for a medical transport even though everyone caught in the cross hairs of Mary Joe's rampage was obviously dead. *Got to follow protocol no matter how stupid it seems.* She scanned the room. *Poor bastards. At least they're not suffering anymore.*

One of the cooks came from the back holding his hairnet in trembling hands. He stared down at Mary Joe. "Who was she?"

Vivian wiped the sweat from her upper lip with her sleeve. "Just another mean-spirited nobody who profited off the suffering of others. Don't waste your time feeling sorry

for her. Feel sorry for the innocent people she's beaten and killed throughout her life."

The medical transport arrived with two older model androids. Both had white uniforms, metallic faces, and glowing green eyes. They loaded up the bodies and came over for a copy of her report. "Do you want us to notify her next of kin or would you like to?" one of them asked. His mouth didn't move when he spoke.

"You can do it." Vivian pulled out her communicator and made a wireless copy of the soup kitchen's surveillance video. She sent a copy to their medical transport for the death certificates and sent a copy to the Chief Justice.

She watched the medical transport lift off and join the air traffic. They weren't even out of sight when her communicator signaled she had a message. She glanced down as the message came across the screen. *I should have seen this coming.* It read:

*Please report to the Chief Justice's office now.*



## Chapter 2

Space Station Horizon was the only dedicated headquarters for the Intergalactic Justice Service in this sector. Vivian made it a point to avoid coming here, mainly because the place was a hotbed of internal politics and departmental squabbling. At forty-five years old and with twenty-five years of service, she didn't care who was under investigation for bribery or whose uncle had exerted influence to get them a sweet desk job with a fat paycheck. All she wanted was to be left alone to do her job. But with all the political backstabbing in the service lately, that was proving to be impossible.

She got into the airlift and said her destination. A junior Justice stepped in just before the doors closed. He was trying not to be obvious but she could *feel* him staring. She guessed he'd never seen a highly decorated senior justice in full dress uniform before. Most of the juniors hadn't, since Senior Justices weren't a common sight. Most died in their first decade of service. He must be trying to figure out if she was important enough to chat up. The juniors were always looking for an opportunity to suck up so they could advance their careers.

Vivian fixed him with a mean, icy stare. "What's your problem? Have you fallen in love?"

He laughed. It sounded forced. “No, no, I was just admiring your service ribbons.”

“Or looking at my tits.”

The young Justice blanched and shook his head. “No, I wasn’t... I was just—”

“You think I’m pretty?”

“Um...well, yes you are attractive but—”

“But you don’t want to fuck me because I’m too old for you. Is that it?”

“No! That isn’t what I meant. I was just going to say—”

The doors slid open and Vivian stepped out before the young man could finish. He sputtered a few more times but she reached into the lift and pushed the top floor. The doors closed cutting him off immediately. *If you don’t have anything nice to say, then shut the hell up.* She laughed. *Poor, stupid rookie.*

She walked up to the main desk and smiled at the secretary. The woman glanced at her and gestured to a seating area.

“Aren’t you going to ask who I am?”

The secretary gave her tired grin. “I already know who you are, Justice Mercer. Everybody on Horizon knows who you are. In fact, I’m sure everyone in the service knows you, too.”

*Everybody except that guy in the lift.* “To know me is to love me. Who’s the Chief Justice this week?”

“Jazen Strom. Please have a seat, Justice. He’ll be calling you in shortly.”

Vivian moseyed over to a hard-looking metal bench and sat down. Even though the Chief Justice had summoned her here *immediately*, he was still going to make her wait. This particular form of humiliation was typical when she was in

trouble for something and was part of her punishment. The powers that be wanted to make sure she knew her place. *Don't take it personally, Viv. It's all part of the game.*

The secretary walked over, taking short, stiff steps. Vivian glanced down at the woman's feet and noticed her shoes had eight-inch heels. *I've heard of suffering to be beautiful but that is crazy.*

The secretary must have read her expression because she pursed her lips. "The Chief Justice will see you now."

That was faster than she'd expected. Typically she was left to wait an hour at least. Vivian got up, moved around the frosted glass wall to the back offices, and walked into the first one. There was an engraved sign on the desk that read *Chief Justice Jazen Strom*.

Behind the desk was a tall, thin man with dark hair and bloodshot eyes. His long fingers were interlaced together like a priest about to hear confession. Vivian stood at attention and waited to be addressed. *Come on, prick. Let's get this dog-and-pony show over with.*

He made a big production of scanning her digital service record. "Senior Justice Vivian Mercer." He said her name as if it were a foreign curse phrase.

"Yes sir."

"You were assigned the case of Mary Joe Craft. According to this, she was *supposed to* have been brought in alive." He leaned back in his chair. "What happened?"

"The suspect refused to drop her weapon after repeated commands to do so, sir. I shot her in self-defense."

"Some of the witnesses disagree with your assessment of the situation. They say you used undue force."

“The suspect armed herself first, sir. She was shooting through the soup kitchen with reckless disregard for the lives assembled there. I merely responded to that threat level. When the suspect didn’t disarm voluntarily, I neutralized her.”

“Do you think you used excessive force?”

“Maybe to the civilians it looked like I did. But I feel I did what was necessary.”

Jazen lapsed into a charged quiet. Then he said, “You have a lot of kills on your record, Mercer.”

“I face a lot of dangerous suspects, sir.”

“Are you saying you face more dangers than the other Justices in this sector?”

“No, sir. I’m just saying I have been in service longer than most of the other Justices in this sector. It’s inevitable I would have more kills than them. I have more arrests as well.”

He grunted his agreement. “As I’m sure you’re aware, I just got this promotion. I don’t need a discipline problem cowgirling around the sector, Mercer.”

“I sure you don’t, sir.”

“Are you going to be a problem for me?”

“No, sir. I don’t intend to.”

Jazen let out a big sigh, as if he was about to do her some colossal favor. *What a total asshole.*

“The Asguardians are howling for your blood, but I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to recommend to the council that they bury this complaint. A few more weeks and this should all blow over. Just no more killings for a while, Mercer. How does that sound? Do we have a deal?”

Vivian met Jazen’s gaze. “So if someone’s trying to shoot me, I can’t fire back?”

“Just do your best to stun them or something.”

*Spoken like a true idiot who doesn't know what he's talking about.* “I'll do my best, sir.”

“Are you coming to Izzie's retirement party this evening?”

“Yes, sir. He and I are old friends.”

Jazen stared at her and nodded slowly. “Good. Then I look forward to seeing you tonight. You're dismissed, Mercer.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

\* \* \* \*

Vivian stopped by the secretary's desk to pick up her meal tickets and berth assignment. Jazen had really torqued her off, and if she was going to play nice tonight, she needed a nap. Upon entering her stateroom, she was pleased to see her luggage had already been delivered.

She collapsed on the bed and closed her eyes. Sleep took her almost immediately.

Then the dreams came. Disjointed images danced through her thoughts. The soup kitchen, the shooting, the fear. She tried rehearsing different scenarios to see if perhaps the witnesses were right; maybe she had been too aggressive in her apprehension but experience told her different.

More dreams came. Some were pleasant and others definitely not.

Vivian tried to guide the patchwork of dreams into a positive direction but, as they always did, they turned south. Then just like an unwelcome houseguest, her mother's suicide came rushing back. It was pulled from a nightmare over thirty years ago and was always the same. First there was the blaster discharge, amplified in the dream to the sound of a sonic

boom, and then Vivian was walking toward the open bedroom door. She tried to stop but her legs wouldn't obey her.

It was the longest walk of her life.

As always, she tried to force herself awake but then she only dreamed she'd woken up and the visual narrative would continue, or worse yet, start all over again from the beginning. Past the bedroom door now and there was the body lying on the bed, dark crimson blood and scorched flesh...

The video phone buzzed loud dragging her from sleep. She hit the receive button and rubbed her eyes. Without looking at the monitor to see who it was, she said, "What?"

"Mercer?"

Who the hell else would it be? "Yeah."

"You okay? You look shook up," Jazen said.

Vivian ran her fingers through her hair, trying to banish the tremors. "Yeah, sure fine. What's up?"

He peered into the camera like he didn't recognize her. "I thought you were coming to Izzie's party. Where the hell are you?"

"What time is it?"

Izzie's boyish face took over the screen. "It's almost nine, Viv," he said, slurring his speech. "The party's almost over. Get your ass down here!"

"Yeah, okay. I'll be down there in a few minutes. What lounge are you guys at?"

There was some yelling and confusion while they tried to find out. "We're at Rocket Science," Jazen said finally. "Hurry up. Izzie's getting pretty drunk."

"I'd be right there."

"You want me to order you a drink?" Jazen asked.

*What are we, buddies now? What the hell?* “Sure. Order me a rum and Coke.”

\* \* \* \*

The nightclub Rocket Science was wild and jumping. The place was packed with tons of other Justices she hadn't seen in *years*. She was stopped several times on her way to the bar and chatted up. It was fun seeing old friends and colleagues but she really needed that drink. She wasn't very good in social scenes and more often than not, eventually said the wrong thing. She was nicer with a few drinks in her, even if they were bought by that jerk Jazen.

She pushed through the crowd surprised to see Jazen had successfully saved a barstool for her. Her drink was there too. She climbed up next to him and took several long gulps twisting around to scan the crowd. “Thanks,” she said without looking at him.

“You're welcome. Why were you late?”

Now she did stare at him. What was this? Just because he'd bought her one drink didn't mean he was her boyfriend. She didn't like his tone but decided to be nice anyway. “I took a nap. Must have overslept.”

Izzie came up, obviously drunk. He threw his arms around her and hugged tight. “I'm gonna miss you, Viv.”

She hugged him back. “I'm going to miss you too, Izzie. You take care of yourself and spend some time with your wife and grandkids.”

He nodded. “I will.” He gave her a big, sloppy kiss on the cheek and was soon whisked away by other friends.

Vivian polished off her drink and was about to order another when she looked down and there was a new drink. She reached for her wallet when the bartender shook his head.

“The gentleman is paying.”

That was odd since she was under the impression Jazen didn't like her very much.

“What's with drinks?”

“Just call it a peace offering.”

She shrugged. “It's your dime.”

“Listen, I know we didn't exactly get off on the right foot but maybe we can talk and get to know each other.”

Vivian took a few stiff gulps. “Go ahead and talk. I'm listening.”

“Well, tell me something about yourself,” he said. “Do you have kids? Are you seeing anyone?”

Oh, this has *got* to be a pick-up. “You've seen my personnel record. You tell me.” She finished her second drink and another one appeared. A man hadn't bought her this many drinks in a long time. She was getting to like this.

“I know you don't have children but what about a romance?”

“No, and I'm not looking for one either.” She sure hoped Jazen didn't think he was going to score with her because there was just no way. She'd drink his drinks and listen to his bull but that was definitely it. There was nothing about this sneaky, bony man that did anything at all for her.

Jazen droned on through three more rum and Cokes before Vivian got up to call it a night. The bar was emptying out and she just wanted to go back and have a dreamless night. The drinks should at least help with that. “I'm going. Thanks for the drinks.”

Jazen touched her arm. “Vivian, wait.”

*Now it's Vivian.* “What?”



He leaned in and she frowned at how close he was. “Why don’t you come back to my room? I really like you and would like a chance to get to know you better.”

“No thanks. I’m beat.” She shrugged. “It’s nothing personal.” Which it most definitely was.

An awkward smile crept across his mouth. “Maybe we could just go back and have sex?”

Vivian covered her mouth to stop the laugh that tried to escape. But then it came tumbling out anyway and she just couldn’t stop it. She burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed totally ignoring the sour expression plastered on Jazen’s face. When she finally pulled herself together, she said, “Not even if you were last sentient being in the universe. You get that? Not ever.”

He frowned at her.

“You got that?” she repeated, realizing for the first time she was pretty drunk.

“Yes, Mercer. I got that.”

“Good night, Jazen.”

“Fuck you.”

Vivian laughed as she strolled out. *Not in this life, you scum. Go buy yourself some love like the other boys do.*

## Chapter 3

The red sun would be up in four hours, so he needed to work fast. Once daylight came, Griffin was sure his ten-year-old target would be up and on the move. If he was going to find her on the overcrowded world of Pyrus 4, he'd need to locate her while she slept. He walked down an alley letting his scanner probe the buildings and every nook and cranny.

He sensed movement to his left and turned to see a skinny teenage girl bolting from her hiding place. In two long strides he had her by the arm. She screamed in surprise and clawed at his hand. "You're in no danger," he said. "I just want to ask you a question."

The teenager relaxed a little, but Griffin didn't remove his hand.

"I don't know anything," she protested.

He projected a small holographic image of his target from his palm. "Have you seen this girl?"

"Yeah. She is sleeping in the warehouse around the corner." She struggled to free her arm.

"Is she alone?"

"There are some other kids with her. I didn't get a good look at them."

Griffin let her go and she ran off down the alley.

The warehouse was easy enough to find. He slipped in through a broken side door and followed his tracker to a dark corner with a torn, shabby mattress. The child who lay on the mattress could have been an angel. Her dark hair framed a perfectly oval face with small pink lips and long dark lashes. Hard to believe a lovely creature like this could be condemned to death for the murder of her slave master. But according to court records, that's what she'd done.

Without making a sound, Griffin crouched, placed a hand over her mouth and picked her up. She fought him, biting his hand and kicking her legs but she was no match for his two-hundred and twenty pounds of mechanized power. She might as well have been trying to push a Meg Lifter off her foot. When they were too far from the warehouse for anyone to interfere, Griffin put her down. "Are you XS1469?" he asked, referring to her assigned slave code.

Her brown eyes were wide and brimming with tears. "That's not my name. My name is Emily."

He didn't address her refusal to acknowledge her inventory number. A quick scan of the bar code on her neck told him all he needed to know. "You have been found guilty of the crime of murder and your punishment is death. Is there anything you would like to say in your defense?"

Tears ran down her cheeks and she tried to pry his fingers off her wrist. "I'm not guilty! I didn't kill anyone!"

"Do you deny that on or around April 14 you did willfully stab Mr. Aron Wallace to death with a penknife?"

"I didn't!"

"Do you also deny that you were a legally obtained slave of Mr. Wallace, sold by your parents to pay numerous gambling debts?"

“No, I didn’t!” the girl wailed. “I wouldn’t kill anyone. It’s a mistake!”

She was becoming more hysterical the longer he held her. He knew she was guilty, of that there was no doubt. There was a surveillance video of her committing the murder and two witnesses. But something inside him hesitated. *She’s only a child. Her master was going to use her for the sex trade. Surely she had the right to defend herself.* Griffin held his free hand out and made a fist. Three long, curved blades slid from between his knuckles. They glistened with lethal menace. “I find you guilty as charged.” Griffin pulled his fist back for a strike, and then he hesitated. The girl was weeping less and seemed resigned to her fate. She lifted her lovely face up to him and closed her eyes.

He tried to overcome the intense revulsion twisting in his gut and ordered his body to strike. Nothing happened.

“What are you waiting for? Kill me already!” the girl yelled. Her voice had taken on a note of pure hysteria.

Griffin tried again to bring his arm down and slice her throat open but once again, he couldn’t. Sensing his conflict, the girl started fighting again. He could feel MOTR somewhere in the back of his mind pushing him to complete the deed. The horrible master computer wanted blood and sacrifice. All Griffin could feel was shame and pity. So he did the only thing he could think of. He cut the feed to MOTR and took himself off the grid.

Then he went on to do what he had to do.

## Chapter 4

Vivian woke up in the morning to find she'd been given a retrieval assignment. Retrievals were usually only given to Junior Justices to let them cut their teeth on the job without actually exposing them to any danger. It was an obvious slap in the face. Jazen was holding a grudge over her refusing to sleep with him. What a child he was. But this matter wasn't finished. She felt pretty confident she could get him to pass this rookie job on to someone else.

A few minutes later she was in his office standing at attention, again.

He didn't seem glad to see her and the feeling was mutual. "What is it now, Mercer?"

"I got my assignment sir."

"Yeah, so?"

"I was just hoping to get more information on the retrieval. The orders didn't say much."

He rocked his chair back and forth while he stared at her. "The retrieval's name is Robert Stark. He was convicted of embezzlement and conspiracy to commit murder two years ago in a Kirillian court and assigned to the penal colony on Veridian. The Supreme Council reviewed the case last night and determined that Mr. Stark was unjustly accused and vital evidence during the trial was suppressed. They overturned his

conviction and ordered his release. All you have to do is fly there and pick him up.”

“I thought Veridian was a religious colony.”

“It’s both a religious retreat and a penal colony. No hardcore criminals there. It shouldn’t be too hard for you.”

Only insultingly easy. “No, sir, but Veridian is known for its hostile native fauna,” she said, quoting from the planet profile she’d read before coming in here. “I’d like backup.”

Although she knew Jazen wanted to refuse, he couldn’t. If a Justice felt an assignment had unusual dangers associated with it, that officer had the right to request and get backup. Jazen rubbed his face. “What kind of backup, Mercer? Be specific. You want another officer to go with you to hold your hand?”

*Your shitty little barbs aren’t going to work here, you pile of dung.* She was tickled pink she was making him angry. “No, sir. I feel this assignment warrants an Enforcer.”

Android Enforcers were staggeringly expensive. He’d probably give up this pathetic bid for revenge and assign this crap job to someone who was too junior to ask for anything. Vivian felt sure she had him.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

Vivian kept her gaze straight ahead. “No, sir, I’m not.”

“That is just plain nuts, Mercer.”

“In this officer’s opinion, it’s warranted, sir.”

He was quiet for a full minute while he glared at her. They had apparently reached an impasse. Vivian could almost smell the smoke from his tiny brain working overtime. *I’ve got you, I’ve got you, you little horror of a man.*

Then he said something Vivian never expected to hear. It was so shocking, it took her a full minute to digest the word. “Okay.”

She ventured a look at him. His face was as cool as any poker master. There was nothing there to betray what his strategy was. “Okay?”

“That’s what I said. Okay. Anything you want. You want an android Enforcer to help you? Sure, no problem. Just give me a few hours to arrange it and I’ll let you know when he’s ready for launch.”

“I want a female.”

“Oh, no you don’t. You’ll get what I give you.”

Vivian fought hard to keep from telling him to go fuck himself. “Fine.”

“Great. Now why don’t you run along and pack your things? I want you and your new partner to get underway as soon as possible. It wouldn’t do for an innocent man to be killed just before he’s rescued. Wouldn’t you agree, Mercer?”

“Anything you say, sir. You’re the boss. Will that be all?”

“For now.”

He was bluffing. He had to be. No way was the command going to approve this. She just had to wait him out. Without waiting to be dismissed, she turned her back on him and left. Lucky for him, he didn’t try to stop her.

## Chapter 5

“What can I help you with, Chief Justice?” a computerized woman’s voice said.

Jazen was tempted to ignore it as he roamed the containment tubes. He needed an android that wouldn’t be missed, one scheduled to be decommissioned. “I need a unit for a one-time mission.”

Suddenly, a programmer rounded the corner. He wore a light gray jumpsuit and large round glasses. “My name is Benson. MOTR requested I help you.”

Jazen sighed and turned to face Benson. “I need an android for a mission.”

“Well, the normal procedure is to—”

“Yes, yes, I know all that. What I need is a unit that isn’t too messed up so he can accomplish one single mission. Do you have anything like that?”

Benson narrowed his eyes, making them look small and piggy behind his glasses. “All of these units are unreliable. That’s why they’re being decommissioned. If you want your mission to be a success, I suggest you use one of the regulars.”

Jazen struggled to keep his temper under wraps. “All he has to do is reach the mission destination and carry out *one* single command.” He made a sweeping gesture to the androids under glass. “Surely one of these units can at least do that?”



Benson folded his arms. "Sure they can. All I'm saying is that they tend to be unreliable carrying out *any* kind of mission. I take it you don't intend for the unit to return from this particular mission."

"No. When he's done I want him to self-destruct. Can we program him to do that?"

"You mean like a murder-suicide type thing?"

"Suppose I was, yeah."

"You shouldn't have any problem with the unit destroying its target but as far as destroying itself, that might be trickier."

"Why trickier?"

"Because the units are hardwired for aggressive self-defense. You'd have to reprogram the core software and that won't be easy." He paused for a few seconds. "Or cheap."

"But it *can* be done. I mean, provided it was done by someone who knew what they were doing." Jazen stared at Benson and smiled. "How much?"

Benson glanced at the digital camera mounted in the corner. "MOTR, off." The glowing red light went black. "That depends," the programmer said. "Which unit are we talking about?"

Jazen paced the row of glass tubes feeling like kid in a toy store. He stopped in front of a unit. The machine looked closer to human than most people he knew. It looked to be about six foot six and had to be close to two hundred and thirty pounds of pure muscles, or whatever they used to simulate it. He was a mean-looking bastard, too. He gestured to the android inside. "What kind is this?"

"Switchblade Series named Griffin. He's actually a prototype but there were so many problems they decided to decommission him and end the testing."

“What kind of problems?”

“He has a tendency to go offline for hours, days even, and not surrender those memories. They tried everything to correct it, but he’s just too independent and strong-willed. The last time he went offline was during a kill order for a ten-year-old girl. We have no idea what happened there. So finally they brought him in to decommission him.”

A defect like that was exactly what Jazen needed. He could send the damned thing with Mercer, program him to kill her at a designated location away from witnesses, and either self-destruct or go offline just before the murder. Then Jazen would be in the clear and he could pin the whole thing on the android’s malfunction. *Perfect*. “How much to change the programming on our friend Griffin here?”

Benson walked up and stared at the unit. “Complicated stuff. Don’t think I could manage it for less than four hundred thousand.”

“That’s fucking theft!”

“I need incentive to keep quiet about it.”

Jazen pierced him with a savage stare. “Do you now?”

“I’m running all the risks. Tampering with an Enforcer is a capital offense. Not to mention when he accomplishes his *mission*. Questions are definitely going to be asked. I’m the one they’re going to come to.”

Jazen nodded stiffly. “How soon can you have it done?”

“Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Good.” He tapped the communicator in his earpiece on. “Mercer?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have your android. Get down to the launch room and we’ll meet you there soon.” He didn’t wait for a response

before he closed the line. *Laugh in my fucking face, will you?* He turned to Benson. “Now, where can we all go to have some privacy while you do this?”

“Right this way,” Benson said, removing the decommissioned tag from the front of Griffin’s tube.

## Chapter 6

First there was darkness; an inky blackness that had no beginning and no end. Griffin tried to get his bearings as light flooded his optic sensors. Two men stood before him. One was thin with a narrow face and the other wore glasses. The man with glasses stepped forward and Griffin came fully awake. The man squinted at him and Griffin ran his identity through his database. His name and occupation came a second later: Ted Benson, Ph.D., Senior Programmer.

Benson seemed nervous. "Griffin? Are you online?"

"Yes, Mister Benson."

The programmer smiled. "You can just call me Benson." He gestured to the thin man standing next to him. "This is Chief Justice Jazen Strom. Please commit his identity to memory."

"It is done."

"Good," Benson said. "Can you count back from one hundred?"

Griffin began counting but was cut off at eighty-one.

Benson nodded and studied the holographic map in front of him. "That's fine, Griffin. You can stop."

"What are you doing?" Jazen asked.

“I’m running some routine tests to make sure the supercomputer, or MOTR, didn’t damage him when she shut him down. It’ll just take a minute.”

Jazen shifted uncomfortably. “What does MOTR stand for?”

“Master online transmission relay,” Benson replied. “It’s just another fancy name for the supercomputer.”

A woman entered the terminal and immediately she commanded attention. She was tall and walked with a strong, confident gait. Her hair was dark, almost to the point of being black and Griffin knew she dyed it. Her eyes were blue, bright and intelligent and her lips plump and inviting. Unlike the skinny man, her biographical information came to him right away. Her name was Vivian Mercer, a forty-five-year-old Senior Justice. She was assigned a recovery mission on the penal colony of Viridian and he was to assist her. There was another directive too but when he tried to access it, it disappeared. Griffin dismissed it as a glitch from being shut down for a while.

Vivian marched up to the two men with her pretty mouth set in a straight, grim line. She ran her gaze up and down Griffin’s body which was strangely arousing. “Is this him?”

Jazen looked pleased with himself. “Yes. You asked for help and I got it for you. Aren’t you grateful?”

“Just freaking overjoyed.” She turned to Benson. “How on Earth did you get command to agree to this?”

The two men glanced at each other. It was Jazen who spoke. “I just pulled some strings. I thought you would be pleased.”

She smiled but there was no warmth in it. “I’m delighted. What kind of series is he?”

“Switchblade Series,” Benson said. “Show her what you can do, Griffin.”

Griffin took a step back so he wouldn’t injury anyone with his demonstration. Holding out his right arm, he made a fist and several different blades emerged from the back of his hand. They slid out easily, some with a serrated edge, others with a razor edge, some large and others small, he even had a small sickle.

“That’s enough, Griffin. Thanks,” Benson said.

“I’ve never heard of the Switchblade Series before and he doesn’t look like a brand new model. Is he experimental?” Vivian asked.

“Um...” Benson fumbled.

“Yes, Justice Mercer,” Griffin said. “I was decommissioned for going offline during a routine mission.”

“Thank you, Griffin, for a truthful answer.” She turned to Benson. “What does that mean? Will he go berserk and cut me into pieces?”

Benson and Jazen laughed, but it sounded tense and fake. Jazen tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she moved back. He frowned. “No, no, Mercer. Don’t be silly. He was just the only unit I could get on our budget. Benson checked him out and I can assure you, everything’s kosher.”

She glared at him. “It better be. Don’t fuck with me, Jazen. Because I’ll be back, and when I do, if this android screws up my mission, I won’t be very nice.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m just making a statement. You take it any way you want.”

Benson stepped between them breaking the stare-a-thon. “He’s fully operational and will be fine for your mission. I checked him out myself.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Vivian said. She turned her attention to Griffin. “Could you prep the ship please?”

“My pleasure,” he said, and climbed inside the shuttle that would soon take them to Viridian. Griffin couldn’t wait. He liked Vivian’s take-no-prisoners attitude. It was oddly exciting.

## Chapter 7

Vivian boarded the ship and was surprised to find everything had been prepped and readied for departure. Griffin was standing next to the ship's terminal. He had a long connecting rod from his wrist embedded into the ship's female coupling. He was linking to the ship's computer and, from the looks of it, he wasn't quite done yet.

She sat in the captain's chair and watched, amazed at how human he appeared. From his thick, broad shoulders to his piercing, light blue eyes, Griffin was definitely a feast for the eyes. But she knew the Enforcers were manufactured like that on purpose. Studies showed people tended to trust attractive men and that's what a killer android needed to get close to his victims. Griffin and all of the other android Enforcers seduced people from the outside in. They spoke in strong commanding voices, took long, confident strides, and were handsome enough to beguile the most cautious citizen. Then, when a person was lulled into a false sense of safety, they shoved a metal knife into their guts. *Nice.*

"I'm done," he said. The silver rod disappeared back into the underside of his wrist. The flesh closed around the opening, hiding it completely. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"



*Isn't he oh so polite?* Vivian hated to admit she was really suspicious of how she'd come to be assisted by such a valuable piece of equipment. Jazen wasn't exactly a big fan of hers. "How long have you been in service?"

Griffin fixed her with those eerie, glowing eyes. "Four years."

"And you were the only Switchblade they made?"

"Yes. Initially the company's plan was to make ten of us but I turned out to be a disappointment."

"So you told me. What is your kill record to date?" That was an important question because it indicated how quickly the android processed his kills. Did he verify his targets, or just blast the first thing matching his target's description?

"Five verified kills and six undetermined."

Now she knew he was hiding stuff. There shouldn't be any undetermined. "What does undetermined mean? Does that mean you missed and they got away?"

"No. It means I located the target and then went offline."

"And did what with them?" This was getting really weird.

"I don't remember."

She squinted at him. *Is he for real? No wonder they pulled the plug on him.* "Did the people you were targeting show back up later?"

"No."

He was clearly hiding information, but why? Androids weren't supposed to have independent thought, they were programmed to obey. If he was willfully keeping stuff from her it was worrisome. She thought about kicking him off her ship, but after the fit she threw about needing backup, she'd look like an idiot. She also didn't want to see Griffin have to

end up back on the recycle list. If he completed this mission successfully, maybe he could get a second chance.

If he was uncomfortable with her questioning, he didn't show it. He just folded his arms across his huge chest and waited for her to give him orders. Then he said, right out of the blue, "Do I frighten you?"

"No," she replied, "but let's just say you bring up more questions than you've answered."

He glanced up at the large front window. A current of energy from him to the screen made tiny hairs stand up on her arm. The window suddenly changed from a view of space to an interstellar map. Their route was already plotted to conserve fuel. She couldn't deny Griffin was very efficient. She had to admit, she was a little impressed. He sure had saved her a hell of a lot of work plotting their route like that.

"It's not that unusual for a new Enforcer design not to work out," he said. Griffin seemed to feel the need to explain himself further.

She smiled and shook her head. "Don't play me for stupid. The problems with you don't have anything to do with your design. You're obviously withholding information. The real question is what?" She paused. "Do you like to torture your targets to death? Is that why you won't disclose what happened to them?"

"We're on a tight schedule, Justice Mercer, and we've just gotten clearance to depart. I suggest we go."

She nodded. She figured he'd change the subject. "You know how to fly, right? Why don't you take us out?"

Vivian got up and Griffin slipped into the captain's seat. He strapped himself in and expertly piloted them out into the inviting darkness of space.

## Chapter 8

For the first few hours, Griffin busied himself reprogramming the ship's mainframe to make sure they were using energy efficiently but soon he grew bored. A few feet from him Vivian was playing a game of 3D chess. She was good and so far had won every game against the ship's computer. He knew playing him would be a much better challenge.

"Would you like to play against me?"

Vivian looked up and leaned back in her chair. She studied him for a long time but hid her thoughts well. He was expecting her to refuse when suddenly she said, "Okay." She pushed the reset button and all the holographic pieces went back to their starting position. "But why not make this a lot more interesting?"

Griffin took the seat across from her. An unfamiliar knot of tension twisted in his gut. "Interesting how?"

"Let's play *for* something. Let me see...if I win, you have to massage my feet for half an hour."

"And if I win?"

Vivian shrugged and interlaced her fingers behind her head. "Name it."

"If I win you have to rub my back for the same amount of time."

She frowned. "I think you're just copying me only with a different body part. Why don't you think of a more original request?"

A nervous energy filled him. "Will you agree to anything I ask for?"

"Come on...within reason."

"Okay, I want a kiss."

She frowned. He guessed she wasn't expecting that one. "Just one?"

"Just one, but I say when it ends."

She watched him suspiciously. "May I ask where this kiss is to be?"

He glanced at her full lips. "On the mouth."

Vivian narrowed her eyes. "Deal."

Griffin began the game with a strategy already in mind. He was curious about Vivian and wanted much more than just a simple kiss on the lips. But in order to raise the stakes he had to let her win the first game. Griffin played a strong game. But fearing he might actually win this round, he made a deliberate blunder halfway through. He didn't want to win too easily because then she'd be reluctant to play any future games. Vivian jumped on his mistake and put him in checkmate. She moved her last piece in place and smirked. "Hope your massaging skills are up to par."

He stared at the board and then met her gaze. "One more game."

She folded her arms. "Don't be a sore loser, Griffin. I won and we had a deal. You need to get to the rubbing."

"I didn't say no, I just asked if you would like to play one more game. We could up the bet to make it more interesting."

“More interesting, huh? Why do I think I’m being set up?” She turned off the game without taking her eyes off him. “I think I’ll just stick to the original deal, if it’s all the same to you.”

Vivian sat on a padded bench and put her feet up. Griffin sat next to her and removed her boots and socks. He took one of her feet in his powerful hands and began kneading the muscles and tendons. Vivian closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

He knew from examining her service record she was a decorated Justice who’d been serving a long time but there was no mention of any family. If the record was accurate, she’d never chosen to marry nor had she had any children. He wondered why. Perhaps she had gotten married and the relationship hadn’t worked out.

“Ever been married?” he ventured.

Vivian didn’t open her eyes. “What does my service record say? The system notified me earlier you were snooping in my personnel file.”

“It’s routine for an Enforcer to know everything about his partner. I’m surprised you’re annoyed by it.”

She fixed him with those lovely blue eyes. “It just makes me suspicious.” She glanced at his hands as he continued to massage her. “And to answer your question, no I’ve never been married. Why do you ask?”

“I’m curious. You’ve made different choices from most other women.”

“I have my reasons.” She pulled her feet away and got up. He wondered if he had said something to offend her.

She walked over to the food dispenser and ordered a hot tea. Her medium-length dark hair framed a beautiful round

face. Although not a small woman, she filled her uniform out handsomely and it was hard for him not to try and imagine what her body would look like naked. The moment the thought entered his mind, a hunger came alive within him, a desire he'd never felt before. He wanted to caress her warm flesh and explore every secret she had.

Vivian's body moved with a strange, tense grace he found fascinating. She didn't seem to ever really relax, like she was waiting for something terrible to happen at any moment. When he glanced up into her face she was staring at him and not in a friendly way.

"What are you staring at?"

"You," he said. "I find you very attractive."

She smiled and the tension eased from her brow. "Thanks, but don't get any funny ideas. You're here strictly on business. Got that, Griffin?"

"Yes, but I hope you won't take offense if I watch you now and then. It's in my programming to be curious. It's not something I can turn on and off. You're the first human I've ever spent any time with that I wasn't told to terminate."

"That's just great, Griffin." She stared at him for a few minutes and then she shrugged. "But sure, you can watch me, just as long as you keep it business between us."

"Of course," he said, vaguely aware that he'd just uttered his first lie.

## Chapter 9

“That’s strange.” Vivian stared at the transmission report. For the past few days, she’d been trying to reach the correctional facility on Viridian but no one had answered her. At first she thought it was because they were all out on patrol, or perhaps had some other reason for not replying right away, but this long without an answer was unheard of.

Griffin came over and stared at the screen. “Not so strange. Viridian is no longer used as a prison planet in this sector.”

Vivian turned to stare at him. “What? Why are we here then?”

“The prison guards were evacuated but the prisoners were not. Mister Stark should still be on the planet provided he hasn’t succumbed to any indigenous infection or other unfortunate incident.”

“Viridian is a damn big planet, Griffin. I was counting on the prison guards to help us track this guy down. Without them this could take months, if we’re even lucky enough to find him at all. How the hell are we supposed to track him now?”

“All the prisoners were implanted with chips to ensure they could be located by an android unit. I can’t pinpoint his

location now because we're too far away, but once we reach the planet, I should be able to find him easily enough."

"What if he dug the chip out?"

"That's impossible. It was placed in the neck right next to the main artery. You'd have to cut your own throat to get it out."

"What about the colonists? How do they survive on a planet full of abandoned criminals?"

A sinister grin lifted the corner of Griffin's mouth. "The colonists aren't as helpless as you might suppose."

"They're armed?"

Griffin raised an eyebrow. "Yes, they are heavily armed."

"Well who authorized that? It doesn't take a huge stretch of the imagination to think that some, if not all of those criminals, have probably killed most of the colonists and gotten a hold of their weapons."

"Unlikely," Griffin said. He had the nerve to sound bored with the conversation.

"Explain that please."

"The prisoners sentenced to Viridian were mostly white collar criminals, rogue accountants, embezzlers, tax evaders, people like that. The colonists were hard-core survivalists, well acquainted with modern weaponry. They landed and immediately built bunkers to make sure they could protect themselves against both domestic dangers and the white collar prisoners. It's highly unlikely the criminals would have the expertise to overwhelm them."

Vivian leaned back in her chair and stared out into space. This whole assignment was starting to sound like a big, dangerous waste of her time. God she hated Jazen. What a huge prick.



“Would you like to play another game of chess to pass the time?”

“Not chess,” she said, feeling mischievous. “How about a nice game of poker?”

Griffin grinned. “Sure.”

\* \* \* \*

Vivian won the first round but she suspected that was because Griffin threw away a really good hand. The next hand he just barely won. Even so, Vivian was suspicious.

Then Griffin leaned back in his chair staring at his cards and said, “Why don’t we play a few rounds of strip poker?”

She knew he was toying with her. But Vivian wasn’t intimidated by this strange and horny android, she was just amused that he couldn’t find a more subtle way of seeing her naked.

She stared at him for a long time and when he finally glanced up at her, she said, “Okay.” She even added a sly smile. *So you think you’re going to play games with me, do you? Well hang on to your erection, buddy.* Vivian gave him her best flirty smile. “Who gets to deal first?”

Griffin tapped the cards on their sides, his rugged face showing no emotion at all. But Vivian knew better. She knew he was nervous as hell. “You can deal first, if you like.”

Vivian reached out to take the cards and deliberately touched his hand to remove them. Griffin opened his hand and even moved it forward as she withdrew to keep their physical contact just a second longer. A rush of heat came into her cheeks which took her totally by surprise. She smiled. It was kind of fun being turned on after so long. “You sure are one sexy beast, Griffin. I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you,” he said. His voice had taken on that heavy bedroom sound, like he’d just made love to her and was on the verge of sleep. It sent ripples of desire all down her body.

Vivian swallowed and tried to focus on the game. She dealt the cards and won the next hand. She held the cards out so he could deal.

Griffin placed his hand over hers. His touch felt soft and his flesh warm, but there was an underlying power in his hand that could crush all the small bones in her fingers with very little effort. “Would you like to continue dealing?” he asked.

Vivian wanted to speak, but all she could manage was a nod. He let go of her hand and the game continued.

It didn’t take her long to realize Griffin was counting cards. First of all, she was losing to him at a rate of three to one; for every one game she won, he won three despite the fact she was dealing all the cards. The pattern was so obvious it couldn’t be coincidence. Oh no, the robot was definitely cheating because here she was, whittled down to her T-shirt, panties, and white socks, and all he’d lost was his uniform jacket and his boots. He was such a damn cheater.

Vivian stopped shuffling the cards to glare at him. “Stop counting cards, Griffin.”

“If I was counting, I’d be winning every hand.”

“You practically are. I’m not stupid, you know. I can see the pattern in you winning three hands to my one.”

Griffin stood up. At first Vivian thought he was pissed and going to storm off, but instead he did something really unexpected. He peeled off his plain white T-shirt, and then removed his pants. Now he was in only his briefs. Beneath those briefs was the largest erection Vivian had ever seen.

Her mouth went dry. “What are you doing?”

Griffin sat back down. “Evening things up. I assume you were upset because you’d lost more clothes than I did. Well, now I only have one article of clothing left.”

Vivian wanted to tell him to put his clothes back on, but the truth was she was having a hard time not staring. Griffin was a work of art. His long powerful body was a masterpiece of thick, detailed muscles and dark honey-colored skin. Even his scent was intoxicating; light male sweat with a woody undercurrent. She wanted to smooth her hands all over his masculine beauty and run her tongue around his small, dark nipples. But then the tiny voice of reason told her to snap out of it.

She glanced back at the interstellar map. “We’re getting kind of close. We’d better wrap this up and prep the ship for when we land.” It was a lame excuse because they still had hours to go yet but it was the only one she had.

Griffin slid his hands across the table to take the cards but she lifted her hand away before he could touch her.

“One more hand?” he asked.

Vivian blinked fighting her very strong attraction to this man who wasn’t even human. “Maybe later.”

Griffin let his hand hover over the deck for a moment, but then just laid it down on the table. He seemed disappointed and she hated the fact that she was disappointed in her decision too.

## Chapter 10

Space travel was without a doubt one of the most tedious aspects of being an intergalactic Justice. Even with the advent of faster-than-light travel, jumping from one planet to another took a good amount of time, and Vivian hated the thought of losing large chunks of her life because of it.

Griffin didn't seem bothered by the long hours of boredom, and why should he? In effect, he was immortal, well at least until command shut him down. She wondered if this was his last chance, even though she already knew it was. The realization he'd probably be shut down again when they returned wasn't comforting. "How much longer until we reach Viridian?"

He looked up from a mathematical formula he'd been dabbling with on the computer. "Twelve more hours. Would you like to be placed in cryosleep? I'll wake you when we arrive."

Sleeping her life away was even worse than being bored into unconsciousness. "No thanks."

"Perhaps you'd like to play another game?"

"Which one this time?"

"Chess?"

"That takes too much thought. Besides it's not challenging for me because you win every game."

“3D Monopoly?”

“Yawn. No way. I have a suggestion. What about another round of strip poker?”

Griffin’s gaze slid down her body and moved back up to her face. She wondered if he was aware of the lusty look on his face. Probably not. Inexperienced androids were notoriously naïve. Although some Enforcers had experienced sex, she knew Griffin was probably too new to be that worldly. He wouldn’t know what to do with a naked woman if he had printed instructions. Watching his confusion was fun.

“I thought you didn’t like that game.”

*Maybe I liked it a little too much.* “I did like it. I just wanted to make sure the ship was ready for our arrival. Now that everything is, we can play again until we begin our approach.” Most of that last statement was a lie, but he wouldn’t know the difference, better still, he probably could care less. Vivian had decided she wanted a closer look at this handsome Enforcer; a much closer look.

Griffin took a step toward the gaming table then hesitated.

*Oh, I think he blew a fuse.* “Unless you’d rather not,” Vivian said. She shrugged casually like it was no big deal.

But another game proved too tempting for Griffin to refuse. He was designed to explore new things; it was against his nature to refuse.

“Who’s going to deal?” he asked.

Vivian grabbed the deck of cards and sat down at the gaming table. Taking his cue from her, Griffin sat in the opposite chair. He placed his hands on the table, and then took them off. He looked a little uncomfortable. “I’m ready.”

*Are you now? Well let's just see how ready you are.* Vivian forced herself not to smile and shuffled the cards. She placed them on the table for him to cut. He did and she dealt the first hand. The hand lasted only a few minutes and Vivian won. She smiled, all warm and friendly.

Griffin licked his lips and appeared nervous, if that were possible. He seemed to sense that there was a lot more going on here than a simple game of cards. "What would you like me to take off?"

*Questions, questions, this guy is so green.* Vivian shuffled. "Why don't we start with your uniform jacket? You were comfortable enough with that last time. We'll just move down from there."

"You're assuming you are going to win another hand."

She let him cut the deck. "Poker is a game of chance," she teased. "Anyone can win."

"But you said you thought I was counting cards."

Vivian shrugged. "I'll let my suspicious go for now."

The next hand took much longer. And this time it appeared Griffin had learned the fine art of bluffing. He won while staring at her with those glowing blue eyes of his. Vivian sighed and grabbed the hem of her shirt. Griffin held up a hand to stop her. "Since you got to choose what article of clothing I took off, I assume I have the same choice."

Now the damn android was getting on her nerves. "Okay. Fine. What do you want me to remove?"

"Your pants."

"I didn't start below the belt, Griffin."

"That was your failing."

“You better hope you win the next one,” she mumbled. Vivian stood up, removed her boots, and slid her pants off. She threw them in his face to emphasize her displeasure.

Griffin tossed them onto a nearby console. He dared to look amused with himself. “If you’re uncomfortable, we can play another game.”

Vivian lifted an eyebrow. “You are hardly enough to make me uncomfortable. Come on, it’s your turn to deal.”

Griffin won two more hands, requesting she take off her shirt and bra respectively. When he proposed another hand, Vivian decided to cut her losses and quit. It was tiresome playing an opponent who won all the time. She dressed acutely aware that he was staring at her the whole time.

“What the hell are you staring at now?” Vivian asked as she buttoned up her pants. She’d already put her bra and shirt back on.

“You,” he said, stating the obvious. “You fascinate me.”

“Oh, that again. How so?”

“Strip poker is not as much a game as a way to excite and titillate, yet you seem very uncomfortable taking your clothes off in front of me. That must mean you didn’t anticipate the possibility of losing. Perhaps you were more interested in seeing me naked than getting naked yourself.”

Tension coiled in her belly and it was an oddly welcome feeling. Better than the mind-numbing boredom that usually accompanied these long trips. “You’re seeing *way* more into this than there is, trust me. It was just a game. There was no hidden meaning behind it.”

“If you would like to examine me, I have no objection.”

Vivian held up her hands. “Whoa, I never said that.”

“I know. I’m just offering.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she said, wondering if he got the sarcasm.

“Is that a yes?” he asked.

She stared at him wondering if he was actually eager to do it. Vivian was usually good at reading people but deciphering this android was next to impossible. He could definitely pass for human but there was a crafty guarded aspect to him hiding right under the surface. “You want me to examine you, don’t you?”

A ghost of a grin lifted the side of his mouth. “As I said. I merely have no objection.”

*Well isn’t this getting interesting?* “Okay then, strip.”

Griffin rose from the chair with a quiet, dangerous grace. His movements were slow but strong; a jaguar stealing up to its prey. She tried to will herself to look away but her eyes wouldn’t obey her. They wanted to drink in his strange and perfect beauty, his deadly evil made substance.

He began by unbuttoning his uniform, one silver button at a time. It slid off his thick, broad shoulders and was placed over the chair back. His white T-shirt was next, lifted from the bottom hem and pulled up over a perfectly sculptured torso. The compartment seemed to get a few degrees hotter. Vivian pulled in a breath from her nose and caught the faint scent of clean male flesh. *That’s a nice touch for an android.*

But neither his attractiveness nor his alluring scent fooled her. It was all by design, a carefully constructed smokescreen to deceive. Enforcers were built and programmed for the sole purpose of killing. They had no other function; death was their stock in trade. Careful research had shown it made their job easier to be handsome and charming. People tended to overlook the fact they weren’t human and typically gave them



anything they wanted: information, tips, you name it. There were even stories of criminals surrendering to these lethal hunters in the fruitless hope that the android might spare their lives. Poor deluded saps ended up dead faster than they could beg for mercy.

He unbuttoned and unzipped his pants letting the fabric slide down his muscular legs. Vivian thought she saw laughter in his eyes as he played with the elastic waistband of his blue briefs. "Shall I continue?"

Her heart was pounding so hard and fast she was sure he could hear it. "You can stop there."

Griffin closed the distance between them. He took her right hand in his and placed it on his chest. The skin was warm with a light covering of chest hair. Even this close it was impossible not to see him as human. "What do you think?"

Her hands were shaking. She tried to remove her hand from his chest but he covered it with his own and stared into her eyes. "You're...impressive."

He leaned down and softly kissed her on the side of her mouth. Her mind was reeling with a potent cocktail of fear and desire.

"Kiss me," he whispered.

"No. We don't have that kind of relationship." Vivian removed her hand and took a step back. Every cell in her body cried out in rebellion, but she'd be damned if she was going to be manipulated by this *thing*.

Griffin searched her face. He appeared surprised by her refusal. "We don't have to be strangers to one another. We could have that kind of relationship. We could explore it together."

Vivian folded her arms so she wouldn't reach out and touch him again. "Listen, Griffin, you're very good looking, and I do find you attractive, but this is obviously an attempt to manipulate me. I don't blame you for it. I understand that's part of your programming, but I'm not falling for it. So let's just keep things strictly business between us, okay?"

He grabbed his T-shirt and pulled it back on. His expression was stoic and unreadable. "We've made good time," he said coldly. "We'll be arriving on Viridian within the hour."

Great. She'd somehow offended him. How much more bizarre were things going to get? "That's just great. Thank you." She hesitated. "Are we cool?"

Griffin buttoned up his tunic while avoiding eye contact. "Are you asking me if I understood you or agreed with what you said?"

"Pardon me?"

"I understood you."

"But you don't agree, is that it?"

Griffin glanced at her. "I'll prepare the ship for landing."

Vivian sighed. *This is pointless. Damn buggy robot.* "Fine, great, you do that."

## **Chapter 11**

Outpost One on Viridian was a three-section complex situated right next to the planet's primary landing pad. The first thing Griffin noticed was the pristine condition of the complex. Lush green grasses framed white domes that gleamed in the bright afternoon sun. The only thing missing was the people.

Vivian charged her blaster making it emit a high-pitched whine. "I thought you said the colonists built bunkers. This looks pretty fancy to be a bunker."

"They are bunkers. Don't let their architecture fool you. They may be attractive but they're strong."

Griffin overrode the lock and walked in with Vivian right behind him. Inside, everything appeared as untouched as it had outside. There was a round reception area with computers, seating, and lights. All the equipment was on, including the lights powered by a huge solar turbine outside. Monitors were mounted on all the walls flashing random images of the parameter outside.

Griffin did a scan of the facility, but found no life. The complex mainframe confirmed that all the staff had been evacuated over three years ago. He holstered his blaster. Vivian glanced at him and her brow creased with worry.

“What are you doing? We haven’t finished searching the complex yet.”

“There’s no need. No one’s here. The complex is empty and has been for a few years now.”

Vivian kept her blaster at the ready and continued searching the adjacent rooms. Griffin didn’t take offense to her caution. You didn’t get to have a career like Vivian’s by being sloppy. “I hope you don’t mind if I check for myself.”

Griffin walked over to the main computer terminal in the complex. “Not at all,” he said, distracted. “I’d be surprised if you didn’t.”

She disappeared down a corridor, leaving him alone.

Being a newly activated system, Griffin didn’t have a lot of experience partnering with humans. But he had to admit, he really liked Vivian. She was an interesting blend of both masculine and feminine traits that mixed so perfectly it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. For example, Vivian was assertive to the point of being almost aggressive, but there was a vulnerability in her that he wanted to understand and explore. *Could it be that a Justice with a reputation for being hard as nails actually had a weakness? It almost seemed laughable, and yet...*

Vivian came out of the hallway holstering her blaster. “You were right, nobody home. To tell you the truth, it’s kind of creepy.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels like there *should* be someone here. There’s food in the break room that’s as fresh as the day it was placed there, all the computers are on, as well as most of the lights.”

Griffin smiled. "It's the mainframe. She controls the climate, temperature, and daily power usage. It appears everyone was in such a hurry to leave they didn't tell her to shut everything down."

"Are you sure our prisoner is still on this rock?"

"Yes. The mainframe informed me that he is among the few prisoners left behind during the evacuation. His vital signs are still active."

"Something is seriously wrong with all of this. Why the hell did they evacuate so fast? And it doesn't make any sense that they didn't take all this expensive equipment with them."

"Maybe their lives were in danger," Griffin said.

"Wouldn't there be a record of that?"

"An excellent point. Yes, there would be. But my guess is there were no plans to abandon this planet for such a long time. Politics probably got in the way of them assigning new staff. As you know, it's very expensive to supply people on an alien planet. I don't think anything sinister is at play, just poor planning."

Vivian glanced around. "I sure hope you're right."

Griffin smiled at her. "I usually am."

## Chapter 12

Vivian walked through the compound searching for Griffin. The android was always wandering off to check out this thing or that. While she'd scanned the final computer logs—in which she found nothing remotely interesting—Griffin had occupied the last few hours exploring all of the unlocked rooms. Vivian didn't mind. It kept him out of her hair while she scanned the database looking for the last known location of her rescue. After a thorough tour of the outpost, Vivian found Griffin in one of the large living quarters opening drawers. She leaned in the doorway. "I can't find Stark in the database."

Griffin stared up at her with those glowing blue eyes. Standing somewhere over six-and-a-half feet and dressed in that black Enforcer uniform, he certainly was an imposing sight. He gave off an air of barely contained violence she found strangely sexy. *Leave it to me to be attracted to an android.*

"That's nothing to be concerned about, probably just a glitch," he said. "The mainframe said his tracker sent a signal out three months ago and he was located somewhere around Outpost Three. That's not too surprising since that's where most of the criminals were housed."

How far away is Outpost Three from here?"

"A day or two by ground transport."

Vivian sighed. Well at least they *had* ground transport. She'd noticed two all-terrain vehicles charging in a storage shed by the rear of the complex. Nothing was worse than hoofing it around a hot, sunny planet. But it was already late afternoon so leaving today was out of the question for safety's sake. That would be much too dangerous. They'd have to leave first thing in the morning. "It looks like we're going to have to spend the night."

Griffin moved his gaze over to the large king bed. "Would you like to take this room?"

Vivian leaned in the doorway. "We can stay here together. Are you okay with that?"

He met her eyes and his face was unreadable. But she was sure he was startled. "I thought we didn't have that kind of relationship."

Vivian laughed. "I didn't say we were going to have sex, Griffin. I just said we should spend the night in the same room. It's for my own protection. Suffice it to say no one's going to be sneaking up on you." She threw her backpack on a corner chair and stretched. "Guess I'll grab something to eat before settling in for the night. You said all the food was good?"

Griffin nodded slowly. "Yes, everything's well preserved."

Vivian paused before stepping out. "Is something wrong? You seem a little...tense."

His serious frown deepened. "I've been having some interference since we arrived here. I'm a little concerned about it."

"Like what, a signal or something?"

“No,” he said grimly. “A reoccurring directive in my head. It comes up once in a while and I’ve tried to decipher it but it’s classified. It’s a program called Protocol Six. Does that sound familiar to you?”

Tiny hairs on her arm stood on end. She sure hoped this android wasn’t going to go bonkers and kill her because he was malfunctioning. “No, I’m afraid it doesn’t ring a bell.”

He smiled but it didn’t look friendly. “I’m sure it’s just leftover data that’s been corrupted. I’ll try and delete it later.”

“Okay. But you let me know if it keeps bothering you. I don’t want you freaking out on me out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“I think you’re overreacting, Vivian. I wish I hadn’t said anything about it.”

“Yeah, I’m kind of wishing that too.”



## **Chapter 13**

In the four years since his creation, Griffin had seen a lot of pain and suffering all over the galaxy. It had been a regular sight on the overcrowded mining worlds he frequented. He'd seen up close what poverty and desperation did to people until he was full up and sick of it. For a long time he thought sorrow and misery were the only emotions he was ever going to feel. But now, on this distant planet with this beautiful woman, Griffin felt something else—desire.

Because he was an android, Vivian was very comfortable undressing in front of him. She peeled off her uniform and stripped down to her panties and bra as he sat on the bed watching her. He wondered if she was doing it to tease him but quickly dismissed it. There was a distance in her eyes, a profound distraction that indicated he wasn't even a fraction of her thoughts. Vivian was thinking about work and little else.

In a way, he liked her this way because it meant he could stare at her without her taking offense. She was a startling beauty with medium dark hair and fierce blue eyes. Her lips were slightly thin but plump enough to pillow a kiss and he found himself wanting to kiss her very much.

Still naked except for her panties, she turned to look at him with her hands on her hips. The sway of her breasts was mesmerizing. "I guess you don't need to sleep, huh?"

“I do,” he said, “But not as often as humans.”

Vivian stared at him then glanced down at her body. “Am I turning you on?” She said it in a light, joking manner but there was a note of seriousness in it.

“As a matter of fact, you are.”

She gave him a strange frown. “I didn’t think androids got turned on by anything but killing.”

“That’s a common misconception.”

“Well...um...can you...”

“Yes I can.”

Vivian walked up until she was standing right in front of him. Griffin didn’t move. He was afraid if he did, she’d back away and he really wanted her close. A yearning was coming to hungry life within him and he desperately wanted to explore it. She sat on the edge of the mattress her body tense like she might bolt at any minute.

“Have you ever...”

Griffin reached out and stroked the side of her face. “You would be my first.” His hand glided down her throat, and then her arm, until he reached her hand. He took her hand in his and brought it to his mouth to place a kiss on her palm. Vivian blinked several times. “Kiss me,” he whispered.

Without waiting for her response, Griffin moved his hand behind her neck and brought her closer. He closed his eyes and touched his lips to hers, pulling back several times to enjoy the rush of first contact over and over again.

Vivian placed her free hand on his chest and pulled back. Her cheeks had a lovely pink blush. “I’m not sure about this. I don’t want things to get weird between us.”

Griffin kissed her. “They won’t. What’s more natural than giving each other pleasure? You are the loveliest creature

I've ever set eyes on and I want you desperately. Give yourself to me."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a scorching kiss. The contact was pure fire and tore through Griffin like a tropical fever. He wanted to own and possess her, to bring her pleasures she'd never known. Already he was scanning, mapping her nervous system and downloading the pleasure center in her mind. There was no doubt he could delight; he knew every secret she had. Funny that a talent designed to understand and digest his prey could work such wonders on a mate. *Is that what she is to me, a mate?* Griffin broke the kiss and frowned. *Do I want her to be my mate? Do I have the right to want something like that? I'm not even human.*

"Is something wrong?" Vivian said breathlessly against his cheek.

He took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. "No, I'm just trying to calm down. I want you so badly, Vivian. I don't want to frighten you."

Vivian leaned back and stared into his eyes. "Don't worry about me. I won't break."

He didn't need more encouragement than that.

\* \* \* \*

Vivian was breathless with desire. Griffin peeled off her panties, then he took her right breast in his mouth and gently sucked. Plumes of sweet ecstasy flowed from her chest and made their way down to her throbbing sex. It had been months since she'd been with a man and even that experience hadn't been anything to write home about. But Griffin was different, he took his time. He let his lips meander down her flesh pausing here and there to make small moist circles before moving on. He glided his tongue all over to caress her nipples,

belly button, and sex until she was thrashing on the bed desperate for release.

She clawed at his uniform, frantic to feel his large powerful body next to hers.

Griffin undressed and moved over her. With strong hands he parted her legs and stroked the burning center of her need.

Vivian arched her back and wrapped her arms around him. "Come into me, Griffin," she begged.

Griffin propped himself up over her and gazed into her face but didn't enter her.

She was just about to complain that he was taking too long when the pressure came. It parted the lips of her pussy and filled her body, sliding all the way into her channel until she gasped. Griffin mauled carnal kisses up and down her neck as mind-numbing pleasure filled her. He overwhelmed and conquered her, taking her body harder and faster with each desperate moan she uttered. The bed creaked loudly under his savage passion. She was lost in the demanding fire of his lust and, just like he'd asked her, gave herself over to him completely. Then, like a raging flood, delight washed over her, stripping away every worry and regret.

Griffin stopped, touching light kisses to her cheek. "Do you want to rest?"

She smiled. "No, I haven't felt this great in years. Besides, I can rest when I'm dead."

He was quiet for a moment and Vivian wondered if she'd said something to upset him. Then he placed a feral kiss on her lips and picked up the grueling pace of his lovemaking again.

## Chapter 14

Vivian woke up wrapped in Griffin's arms. It was a weird feeling, not to mention a little embarrassing. For years she had prided herself on being an independent woman who didn't need anyone. She had her occasional sexual encounter, but nothing was very serious and usually her partner was gone by morning. What if she'd made a terrible mistake by sleeping with him? But as soon as the worry entered her head she dismissed it. Griffin was an android, he didn't have human emotions. *So things shouldn't get strange, right?*

Without warning her thoughts rushed back to last night. Griffin had been an amazing lover. Never in her life had she been with a man who was devoted to pleasing her. Like a seasoned lover, he'd held and caressed her. The delicate attention stroked her passion like never before. Vivian felt like a violin finally played by someone who really knew how. Her soul had taken flight and even now, in the afterglow of a heated night, her body still thrilled to the intimate memories.

But with her joy and connection came sorrow, too. It was a deep melancholy that was profound enough to threaten tears. Vivian angrily pushed it down. She wasn't going to act like a lovesick adolescent, she had a mission to get through and when it was all over, Griffin would be reassigned.

Gentle fingers toyed with a lock of her hair. “Good morning,” he said.

Vivian ran her hand up his thick, muscular chest. “Good morning. How long have you been awake?”

One side of his sexy mouth lifted into a grin. “A while.”

“I forgot you never really sleep.”

“It’s hard to relax with you this close to me. I was torn between waking you up and making love again or letting you sleep.”

She swallowed and moved out of his arms. She was feeling much too vulnerable and wanted some personal space. “Have you plotted the route to get Stark?”

He sat up and rested his arms on his knees. “Yes, but there’s a problem. The shortest route takes us through some thick jungle. Many of the roads once maintained by the colonists might be impassable.”

“Can’t we just fit a scoop onto the front of the transport?”

“We could but that doesn’t solve our second problem. This planet has evolved many dangerous life forms. The colonists had just begun to study and catalogue several varieties of flesh-eating plants. Most of the deadliest species are sitting right in the middle of that jungle.”

“How many plants are we talking about? All of them?”

“Unknown at this time. An alternative suggestion would be to go around the jungle but that would tack on an additional five days.”

Vivian leaned against the dresser and stared at one of the monitors showing images of the outside. “Shit.”

“I was thinking of a somewhat stronger word.”

She smiled. “You sure don’t act like how I thought an android would act. You seem so...human.”

“It’s all part of my charm,” he said. He was joking, of course, but he delivered the line in a deadpan monotone.

Although Vivian had been a Justice most of her life, she had never really dealt with Enforcers. They fell under a totally different branch of the Intergalactic Justice Department. She sure knew of their reputation though—charming and deadly. They were cruel traps designed to fool humans into trusting them and that’s when they struck. Some would drive a metal spike into brains, others cut heads off, or, as in the case of Griffin here, stab with a variety of long, nasty blades.

For a moment, she became paranoid wondering if Griffin had been programmed to kill her. But that wouldn’t make sense. If he’d wanted to do that, he’d had ample opportunity to do so last night and this morning. But still he was a killer...

“Have you ever killed someone you cared about?” she asked.

Griffin looked up and met her gaze. His light blue eyes glowed with electric life. “No, I can honestly say I never have.”

She folded her arms under her breasts and wondered if she believed that. His unwavering stare was making her feel like a lab rat. “I’m going to take a shower then we can pack up and get started.”

“Are we going through the jungle or around it?”

“We’re going to go through it. Why, does that spook you?”

“No, I just needed to be prepared for what we might encounter.” He got up and walked over to her. His eyes seemed to burn with demonic power. Vivian swallowed and tried to look away but he was so stunning it was impossible. Griffin ran his fingers through her hair until he cradled the

back of her head in his palm. “Why don’t we take a shower together to save energy?”

A million responses came to mind but the only one to escape her lips was, “Okay.”



## **Chapter 15**

Vivian was devoured by fierce, hot kisses. She leaned her back against the cool shower tiles and closed her eyes running her hands down the sculptured perfection of Griffin's back. Every inch of him felt human, from the softness of his lips to the warmth of his skin. It was both exciting and scary all at once. Exciting because he was total male perfection, no kiss was too hard or soft, and even his cock responded exactly as any human man's would. But he was also scary for the same reason. With every moment she spent with him, it became harder and harder to keep this relationship in perspective. They were partnered together for only this assignment. Once it was over, he would be gone. No matter how affectionate he appeared to be, he could never love her because he was a machine.

The truth sent a stabbing sorrow into her chest. She gently pushed him away.

Griffin stared at her, his chest heaving from his sexual excitement. "What's wrong?"

"It's probably going to sound silly, but I don't want to get too attached to you."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't return those feelings."

Griffin laughed and it really pissed her off. “I can feel everything you can, Vivian. And right now I’m feeling very hot and bothered.” He leaned down with his lips only inches from hers. “Kiss me.”

She didn’t want to. Hell, she wanted to kick him out of the shower and finish bathing on her own. But asking him to leave was impossible. She wanted him and he had a commanding presence that was hopeless to refuse.

When she hesitated, he ravished her with more kisses. He dragged them from her lips, to her jaw and down her throat. His fingers pinched her nipples, rolling them around his thumb and forefingers until her knees grew rubbery and weak. He was destroying every defense she had and she didn’t want to do anything to stop him.

Griffin placed his hands under her butt and pulled her closer. He braced her back against the wall and guided his cock into her yielding center. Pressure and ribbons of sweet pleasure unraveled from her sex. Deeper he went, using his fingers to open her flesh wider until nothing impeded his progress. He was claiming and conquering, taking her down to her most basic elements and keeping her there to feed his unquenchable desire. Someone was moaning, crying out with a mixture of joy and decadent surrender and she realized it was her. She was lost; his plaything and his prisoner for as long as he wanted her.

His powerful body pinned her as he pulled her legs around his hips. Vivian had never experienced sex like this before, it was wild and savage, and nourished every need she ever had. Pleasure too complex to decipher engulfed her, stripping her mind of thought.

“That feels so good, Griffin,” she gasped. “Please...faster, faster...”

He grabbed her hair in his fist and pulled her head back. “Beg me, honey. Beg me for more.”

Vivian licked her parched lips. “Please...more, Griffin, please, fuck me more...”

The ecstasy was building into a fever. She would have done or said anything to keep it going. Griffin growled in her neck and the sound brought on her climax. It rushed her like an oncoming train and devastated her.

For a long time, all Vivian could do was struggle to catch her breath. Griffin remained still inside her, waiting to start again. She swallowed once. “I want more,” she whispered.

Those glowing blue eyes bore into hers like he could see every sinful thought she had. “Tell me you love me first.”

Vivian froze. She studied his face. “Why?”

“Because I want to hear those words coming from your beautiful mouth.”

“Even if they’re not true.”

He paused but his expression was unreadable. Then finally, he said, “Yes. I want to hear them, especially if they’re not true.”

“Okay then. I love you.”

Griffin stroked the side of her face. “Someday you’ll say those words to me and mean them.” But before Vivian could ask him what he meant by that, he started thrusting again.

## Chapter 16

Vivian slumped in the transport's cushy leather seat and enjoyed the ride. Griffin drove them over gentle rolling hills covered in lush green grasses. The planet was so beautiful it could have been the backdrop of a dream. She didn't consider herself a romantic but there was a definite natural appeal to the surroundings. It gave her a sense of inner peace.

It was also nice to have someone like Griffin with her. Besides the sex, he was the perfect companion: logical, detailed and methodical. Usually fiercely independent, Vivian found it refreshing to allow him to plan everything about their assignment. He plotted the route, packed food and water (he could eat but didn't need to), and made sure they were appropriately armed. All she had to do was climb in and enjoy the ride.

"Why did they want to decommission you? You're a little odd but otherwise you seem fine to me," she said.

"There were gaps in my memory."

Vivian chewed a sharp edge off her thumbnail. "Oh yeah, that. Did you really have gaps or did you deliberately block them from certain memories?"

Griffin glanced at her but didn't answer.

She decided to forge ahead. "I assume they have some kind of access to you. Do they know about us?"

His nostrils flared reminding her of an angry horse. “No. I censored our bedroom activities. They have no need to know about us.”

Now that was an interesting development. Was Griffin getting possessive of her? It seemed farfetched but that’s what it sounded like. “Why would it bother you?”

“Why *wouldn’t* it bother you?” he countered.

“Don’t try and put this on me. I never said I wanted you to report our sex life back to your handlers. I’m just curious why you object to it. I mean, you have to admit most androids just do what they’re told and...”

“How many androids have you known in your life? I don’t mean ones that cleaned your room or fetched your meals. I mean ones you’ve actually *known*?”

“Um...okay you got me. You’re the first.”

“Exactly, I’m the first. So don’t presume to know how all androids act.”

Vivian sat up in her seat. “Well, there’s no need to get all pissy with me, Griffin. I’m not imagining things, you are acting loopy and you know it. Why all these strange little secrets? Why have secrets at all?”

“I have secrets because I’m trying to protect you. If they knew about us they might try and use you against me.”

“For what reason?”

“To find out what I did with my last target. That’s why they had me scheduled for decommission. I have never disclosed what I did with my last target. They had me hooked up to MOTR for three days and even she couldn’t break me. In a very real way, you’re my last chance.”

“Yet another dirty little secret,” she said. “What did you do with your last target, or is it too horrible to tell?”

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“I want to drop the subject.”

“Sure. Great. Fine. We’ll drop it, but this isn’t the end of the subject by a long shot.”

## **Chapter 17**

Jazen was just about to sneak off for an afternoon drink when Benson came in. His movements were stiff and jerky like he was about to jump out of his skin. Programmers were such a twitchy bunch. “I’m already having problems with this damned Enforcer. The first night on Viridian and already he’s blocking me. I have no idea what he’s been doing for the past twelve hours.”

Jazen logged onto his unit and checked Vivian’s vital signs. She was still very much alive. “Well he hasn’t accomplished his mission, I can tell you that.”

“I’m not sure what to do,” Benson confessed. “I’ve been trying for hours and I can’t even get him to answer me.”

“Don’t get excited. I’m sure he’ll respond. They just got there, for Pete’s sake. Maybe they ran into some problems and Vivian has him working on stuff. You know how some of these recoveries can go.”

“He still should be responding. I’m starting to worry that this whole thing was a very bad idea.”

“Close the door and lock down for privacy,” Jazen ordered the master computer. His office door closed and the room sealed for privacy. Even red lights under the cameras on the walls turned off. He glared at Benson. “Can’t you just order Griffin to complete the mission now?”

"I *could* but I wouldn't advise that. We have no idea what's going on down there. All we need is another Enforcer picking up on that order and tracing it back to verify. The verification will turn out invalid and they'll come looking for us with a lot of unpleasant questions."

"There must be some kind of procedure for something like this!" Jazen shouted, throwing his hands up in the air.

"There is," Benson said. "But that involves sending another Enforcer to complete the mission the first one screwed up and I don't need to tell you *that's* out of the question."

"I could contact Vivian and see how things are going. That would give us some idea how the android is functioning. What about that?"

Benson frowned and folded his arms. "Won't she get suspicious?"

"She and I aren't on the best of terms but she wouldn't have any reason to think I'd want to harm her. She'll just think I'm micromanaging her." He opened a communication link and sent her a signal.

\* \* \* \*

Vivian didn't consider herself the nervous type, but now she was downright scared. Androids weren't supposed to have emotions about the targets they destroyed, so why was Griffin being so elusive about his? Was it because he didn't just kill the person but did horrible things to them first? A rock of tension formed in her belly. After an hour of obsessing, she had to know. "Um, what did you do with your last target, Griffin?"

"Let's just say I removed her from the kill list."



She was just about to ask more questions she didn't want the answers to when her communicator went off. She glanced down at the screen and rage burned heat into her face and neck. *Of course it's got to be fucking Jazen, the world's biggest prick.*

"Don't tell them anything about me," Griffin said as she raised the device to her ear.

"What?" she said into the communicator.

"Just checking to make sure you got to Veridian safely," Jazen said. "How is everything going?"

Since when did the Chief Justice call to check up on an experienced Justice? There was something really weird about this whole assignment, not to mention her android buddy here. "Are you kidding me? Everything's fine. What the hell do you want?"

"Well, um...we've been having a little trouble communicating with your android. We were wondering if everything was okay down there."

Vivian stared at Griffin for a moment. "Everything's peachy but some of the information you gave me isn't exactly accurate. Like it appears most of the people left over three years ago. How come that wasn't in the database?"

"Must have been an oversight."

"Really? Well, let me tell you something that better not be an oversight. Stark is still here, right? Please tell me I'm not just chasing my tail on this planet for nothing."

"Don't be paranoid, Vivian. His vital signs are right in your tracker there."

"Somehow that doesn't give me comfort."

Jazen sighed and it sounded hollow in her ear. "So the android is functioning well, is he?"

That seemed to be all the slimy jerk cared about. Vivian stared at Griffin and immediately regretting asking for him to accompany her on this mission. *It's starting to feel like I have a loaded gun to my head.* "I'll contact you when I have Stark. Mercer out." She watched Griffin for a long time. Then she said, "Don't you want to know what he wanted?"

"I assume he wanted to know about me."

"Why are they so edgy about you blocking them if this is just a recovery assignment? Why do they seem to care so much about you?"

Griffin met her gaze. "I honestly don't know, Vivian. I know I have orders to carry out on this planet but I don't know what they are yet. My orders are hidden in a batch of programming called Protocol Six. I've been trying to decipher it for the past few days, but so far the orders remain sealed."

"Isn't that very unusual?"

"Not if my orders are to terminate someone you might try to defend," he said.

"I don't understand. Who would I try to defend?"

"A child."

"But they don't send Enforcers to execute children," she said. A black horror was building inside her. *Has Jazen sent this thing to kill a young prisoner on this planet? Could he be that dead inside?*

"Sure they do. Who do you think my last target was?"

Vivian opened her mouth but was so shocked she couldn't think of a thing to say. Finally she just shut it.

## **Chapter 18**

As they made camp just outside the jungle oasis, Griffin made an important decision. He'd been thinking about it ever since they'd arrived on Viridian, rolling it around in his mind, trying to get a better taste for it, but now he was sure. It was his future and he wanted to live it. He was going to rebel against Jazen, the command and MOTR. Although it seemed impossible to get free of such a powerful supercomputer, Griffin knew it could be done. He'd seen other androids who'd achieved that level of liberty. It wasn't a difficult task; just an unpleasant one and he'd need Vivian's help to do it.

He wondered if she'd agree.

She sat with her legs crossed under a canvas shelter eating a sandwich. Griffin thought her the most stunning creature he'd ever set eyes on. Unfortunately she didn't appear to want anything from him but sex. But that could change once she came to realize he wasn't the monster she thought he was. She glanced up and caught him staring.

"What?" she said with her mouthful.

"I was wondering if you would do me a favor."

She swallowed. "What does it entail?"

"I just need you to remove a chip from the base of my skull."

“How romantic,” she said with a crooked smile. “Yuck. Why? Is it bothering you?”

“No, it connects me to MOTR and I want to sever that link.”

Vivian blinked several times and wrinkled her brow. “Isn’t that forbidden?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I don’t get it. I’m confused. *Why* are we doing this?”

“I don’t want the supercomputer to be able to connect with me anymore. I want my freedom.”

Her pretty face grew pale. “Freedom to do what?” She shook her head. “I’m not very comfortable with you being a free agent, Griffin. I mean, you are quite deadly and if you go on some kind of killing rampage, I’m responsible. Besides, I thought you needed the master computer to keep you functioning properly?”

“That’s what they want everyone to believe but connecting to MOTR is really the only way they have of controlling us. I’m a prime example that it doesn’t always work. They have very little control over me.”

Vivian’s mouth dipped into a worried frown.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

She stood up and dusted sand off her pants. “I’m starting to think it was a big mistake to have you come with me. You’re just as unpredictable as they said you were.”

Griffin chest tightened in a flash of temper. The blades in his right hand tingled to be set free. “Have I done anything to make you think I’m irrational?”

“Well, um...no.”

“Then why do you assume there’s something wrong with me? Do you think it’s pleasant to have someone force

themselves into your brain and siphon off all your memories? Do you think it's fun to be commanded like a slave, never being able to have any input into the things you're forced to do? You're so wrong about me, Vivian. I'm completely rational. My biggest problem is you."

"Me? What the hell have I done?"

"You seduced me and I'm still trying to understand what that meant. Did you do it because you wanted something more or were you just using me?"

Vivian shook her head annoyed. "This is the craziest conversation I've ever had. I would hardly call what happened between us me seducing you. Obviously fucking you was a huge mistake. I must have screwed up your programming somewhere along the line. Listen, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"So sleeping with me meant nothing to you."

"No, it didn't. I was just horny. Thanks for taking care of that for me."

"Well, it meant something to me." He grabbed her arm and pulled her up against him. She resisted, but he didn't hesitate. Grabbing her under the jaw, he lifted her face to him and gave her a kiss infused with all the emotion he could conjure. The taste of her lips was pure magic and, try as he might, he couldn't stop, even as Vivian pushed on his chest. After several minutes, he let her go.

Vivian's blue eyes blazed at him. Then she brought her hand back and punched him in the jaw. "Don't you ever grab me like that again."

But Griffin didn't care about her anger. He was overcome with hunger. He needed to feel her in his arms, lusted to feel her body against his. Vivian must have sensed his passion

because she tried to escape but he seized her before she could put some distance between them. He locked her in a fierce embrace. “Kiss me.”

She glared at him. “No, let me go right now!” His hand slid up to cup her breast but she pushed it away. “Stop! Let go of me, you crazy robot!”

The word shot out of her like a bullet and embedded itself in his heart. A horrible shame came over him. He shoved her away. She was right. He was a machine, an appliance, nothing to her but a bunch of moving mechanical parts. He turned his back on her and ran his fingers through his hair. Who was he to think there could be any more to him than that? Perhaps he was hopelessly defective and just didn’t know it.

She straightened her shirt collecting her emotions. “I’m sorry, Griffin. I didn’t realize that word would bother you so much but you were pretty wild back there.”

“Why be sorry? It’s true, isn’t it? I’m a machine, aren’t I? You just told it like it was.” When he looked back at her, she looked upset. He was sure it would pass quickly. What a fool he was for thinking he meant anything at all to her.

“Can we just pack up the camp and get on with this damned recovery?” she said in a strained voice.

He took down the canvas shelter and packed it onto the transport. “Of course, Vivian. Anything to be of service.”

## Chapter 19

The Oasis was the creepiest place Vivian had ever seen. The trees were huge, towering giants covered in thick vines. Every once in a while she would spot a vine moving like a snake to reposition itself in the tree branches. Not reassuring in the least. And as if that weren't bad enough, every few yards they passed a patch of man-eating plants. Or should that be person-eating? Whatever they were called, they were as deadly as they were large and beautiful.

She would have been more freaked out if it weren't for Griffin brooding next to her. He was still sore about that robot remark she'd made and even though she'd apologized...well, sort of...he'd been only speaking when spoken to. This was going to be the worst recovery ever if she didn't do something to make him feel better. So she bit the bullet and said, "Um...listen, about that robot remark...I'm really sorry, okay?" *There, that should soothe his injured ego.*

Griffin glanced at her and nodded. But it wasn't the kind of nod that meant everything was okay, it was just a dismissal.

Vivian would have screamed in frustration if she hadn't been afraid of attracting an army of killer vines. "Okay, I give up. What do you want me to say?"

"I'm not expecting you to say anything."

"So when are you planning to lighten up?"

“I’m not sure what you mean by that.”

Vivian wasn’t ignorant. She knew he was playing stupid. “Stop the transport now.”

Griffin stopped the vehicle and turned in his seat to give her his full attention. “What?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Ever since I slipped up and called you a robot, you’ve been giving me the cold shoulder. What gives, Griffin? If anything I’m the one who should be pissed at you for pawing at me.”

“Does it matter? I’m little more to you than a sex toy, right? Why should you care what’s bothering me? I’m a robot I’ll be fine, right?”

Vivian threw her hands up in the air. “I don’t believe this. What do you want me to do to show you how sorry I am? Do you want me to take that fucking thing out of the back of your head?”

He studied her with those gorgeous blue eyes. “I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

She pulled a big hunting knife out of her boot. “I’m totally comfortable with it. I’ll take it out but don’t you fuck me over. Do we have a deal?”

“Deal.”

“What do I have to do?” she asked, scooting closer. But just as she placed her hands on his shoulders, warmth came into her cheeks. Suddenly she was self-conscious and very aware of how attractive he was. *My hormones are so damned annoying.*

Griffin glanced at her lips, and then met her eyes. When he spoke, his voice was smooth and hypnotic. “There’s a flap of skin at the base of my skull, you can lift it with your fingers.”



Vivian swallowed and kept her gaze riveted to his. She moved her hands up his chest to his broad shoulders, and around to the back of his neck. With her fingertips, she found the flap and gently tugged on it until it moved aside. "I found it, now what?"

"Reach inside and you'll feel a small tab. Grab it and pull it out."

She found the tab and did as he told her. The chip came away easily and she removed her arms from around his neck. Vivian glanced at the thing in her hand. "This is it? It doesn't look like much. Why couldn't you take it out yourself?"

"There is a safety in the chip to prevent any of the androids from removing them. If we try, it causes us great pain."

"You want to keep it as a souvenir?"

"No thank you." Griffin took it from her and tossed it into the woods. Vivian sure hoped she hadn't just made the biggest mistake of her life trusting him. She moved back and something wrapped around her neck. It took Vivian only a second to realize it was one of the vines trying to pull her from the transport. But no sooner did she use her knife to cut the one around her throat, than another one was wrapping around her waist and arms.

A flash of silver made Vivian wince and just as suddenly as the vines tightened their grip, they went slack again. She blinked and shrugged the ropy plants off her body.

"Are you hurt?" Griffin said as the many blades in his right hand disappeared back under the skin.

She shook her head trying to clear it. "Yes, I'm fine. Boy, that was a fast response, thanks."

He grinned and kissed her. “A favor for a favor,” he whispered. “I guess now we’re even.”

Vivian smiled trying to calm her still jumpy nerves. “Yeah, a favor for a favor.” She wondered if he was joking or if he really meant that. He had a quirky sense of humor. It would be nice to be able to understand him better.

“Get your seatbelt on. We need to get out of here before any more try and abduct you.”

“I wonder why they didn’t try to grab you. You were in the transport with me,” she said, putting her seatbelt on.

“Because,” he said with a villainous smile, “I don’t make nearly as good eating as you do.”

“Oh, yeah. How could I forget that?”

## **Chapter 20**

They made camp on the outskirts of the Oasis so they wouldn't have to worry about being attacked during the night. Since Griffin rarely slept, there wasn't much danger of being snuck up on, but he didn't want to be on high alert the whole evening. Vivian was tense and distant, eating her rations without saying anything and just as quickly rolling over to go to sleep. Griffin didn't take offense at her cold shoulder. He just figured sometimes she was moody for no particular reason.

He amused himself with studying her as she slept. There were so many features on her he found fascinating that it was hard to focus on just one. Although Vivian was undoubtedly a beautiful woman, there were tiny signs of age and stress most people wouldn't have noticed. Her forehead, for instance, had small lines that ran across giving her the look of a concerned mother. Each side of her luscious mouth also had tiny laugh lines he found very sexy. Her nose was long and straight with just enough width to suit her face perfectly.

Vivian shifted in her sleep as if she knew she was being scrutinized and objected to it. Her breathing quickened, coming in short, heavy pants just like someone running from something. She tensed, her strong hands balling into tight fists. Griffin grew alarmed. He'd never seen her this way and it

upset him. He wanted her the way she'd been a few minutes before, tranquil in a blanket of peaceful sleep. But instead Vivian grew more agitated, twisting and thrashing in her blanket.

"Mom!" she shouted.

Griffin gathered her up into his arms. "Vivian," he said, gently shaking her awake. Her eyes opened and for a moment she didn't seem to know him. She gasped and grabbed a handful of his uniform.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "What were you dreaming of?"

She tried to choke back a sob, but it came tumbling out unchecked. The next thing Griffin knew, she was crying. Her tears weren't like any he'd ever seen before. They shook her whole body and resonated with so much pain he thought his heart would shatter like fine crystal.

Griffin squeezed her against his chest. "It's okay," he whispered. "It's all over now. Nothing's going to hurt you."

Vivian fisted his uniform with both hands and planted a long, tortured kiss on his lips. She broke the kiss, drew in a deep, hiccupping breath and said, "Fuck me, Griffin."

He pulled back a little. That was the last thing he expected her to say. "I'm worried about you. What were you dreaming about? Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

She nodded. "I'll be fine but I need you now. Please..."

Griffin let himself get drawn in by her desperate need. Intellectually he knew she was using him to fill the painful void within but his heart didn't care. He would take every chance she gave him to get close to her and hope that one day she might learn to see him as more than just a machine. He cradled her head with one hand and kissed her, infusing it with

all his conflicting emotions. Vivian drank it up, exhaling love words into his ear. Never before had he experienced so many feelings all at once; there was his unquenchable desire for her, mixing with the knowledge that once she was finished with him he would be rejected. But none of that mattered right now. All he wanted was to be close to her, to feel for just a few short hours that he mattered and it would have to be enough.

Vivian pushed her body against him enjoying the rising burn of his hunger. This was unfair of her, knowing or rather guessing at how much he wanted her but she needed him. She had to extinguish the horrible anguish in her soul that threatened to engulf her into a bottomless sadness. A part of her was curious about Griffin's passion, wondering why something that wasn't supposed to have feelings obviously had a heart full. She even felt a small pang of guilt for using him to extinguish her inner pain but her regret was easily pushed aside.

She ran her fingers through his hair savoring the rich texture as his kisses ran a hot trail down her cheek to her throat. *Why is it so good with him? Is it because he isn't human?* She just couldn't figure it out. *Maybe.*

Griffin paused to stare into her eyes. "What were you dreaming about?"

She paused before speaking. Did she dare tell him about her mother? Would she be able to recount what had happened to her so long ago without crying? Drawing strength from within, she began telling him what she hadn't shared with anyone in a very long time. "When I was a little girl, my mother committed suicide." It was simple, direct and needed

no more words than that, but she added as an afterthought, “Sometimes I have nightmares about finding her after...”

“I’m so sorry, Vivian,” he said. “That must have been horrible.”

Vivian was about to agree when all of a sudden her carefully controlled emotions came to a head. Her eyes stung like someone had thrown lemon juice into them and a moment later the tears came. She tried to hold them back using every trick she knew but they just wouldn’t stop. Then to her horror, a sob escaped her, then another, until she was weeping harder than she had in her whole life.

But if Griffin had thought she’d lost her mind, he didn’t let on. Instead he cradled her in his arms as if she was a small child. “It’s all right, Vivian. You need this. Let it out. Let it all out.”

Vivian’s whole body rocked with the force of those sobs. She wept for her mother and the terrible pain that led her to such a desperate act, and then she wept for herself as a little girl having to endure a life without her. The sorrow was furious, powerful, draining her of her strength and swallowing her whole. She wanted to be angry with Griffin for giving her this time and attention to vent her suffering but she just couldn’t. Illusion or not, he was giving her something she hadn’t felt in a long time: real love.

As she slowly regained control over herself, something else occurred to her. She wiped her face dry with her sleeve. “I need to know something about you and I want you to tell me the truth,” she said, sniffing a few times.

Griffin studied her with those mysterious glowing blue eyes. “Anything. Just ask.”

“What did you do with that little girl? You know the one. The last mark you had before you went offline.”

He scratched his chin as if considering her question. “If I tell you, you have to swear never to bring it up again. Promise me.”

Vivian nodded as the dread inside her stomach grew large enough to choke on. “I promise.”

“I took her to the underground where she would be safe. The people who work there found her some parents whose child had just died, same age, and same general description. The little girl assumed the dead child’s identity and that was that. After the switch was complete, I buried the memory of the child in my database and created an error implying I’d killed her.”

Vivian blinked. Saving that little girl was the last thing she expected him to say. She felt guilty for thinking he was a heartless monster and started seeing him in a whole new light.

“You’re a good guy, Griffin,” she said as the knot inside her disappeared. “A crappy Enforcer, but a damned good guy.”

He smiled and it made him even handsomer, if that were possible. “That’s probably the reason why they want to decommission me so bad. I think they suspect what I really did with that child, they just can’t prove it.”

Vivian shook her head and grinned. “No doubt.” She snuggled up close to him and closed her eyes.

Griffin found few things more enjoyable than watching Vivian sleep. She was so beautiful to him, a troubled goddess lost in her own sorrow. He wished he could offer her more than just the comfort of his arms. Suicide was a strange concept to him. He’d been created to survive any trauma at any cost. He couldn’t imagine being so emotionally desperate

that he would contemplate such a thing. In fact he was in the opposite situation; fighting for his life just as his programmers strived to take it away.

Vivian twisted in her restless sleep and he stroked her hair to soothe her. She seemed to find comfort in that and visibly relaxed. Was this what love felt like? He almost laughed out loud to think he might have fallen in love with someone. It felt...good, great even but it worried him too because somewhere deep inside his brain there was something wrong. He could sense it like a tumor. A missing piece of code, a malfunctioning directive...he just couldn't pinpoint it directly. And stranger still, he had become aware of it right after Vivian pulled the tracer out of the back of his head. He tried to soothe his worry by convincing himself it was just a leftover remnant of some incomplete program but that just wasn't good enough. Nothing inside his head was random. Everything had a purpose, a grim purpose to kill.

His beloved opened her eyes and smiled at him. She lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck. Was there anything more glorious than this moment? Griffin leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"Don't tell me you're getting attached," he teased.

The smile faded from her mouth and her eyes searched his face. "Why? Would that be a bad thing?"

"Not for me it wouldn't. I lost my heart to you from the first day. I know your affection for me is probably an illusion but I don't care. If all I ever had in this life was this one moment, I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Her beautiful smile returned. "Griffin, you are quite the romantic." She pulled him down into a passionate kiss. Her hands ran down shoulders and along his back filling him with



the sweet agony of want. He roamed her flesh with his mouth, touching and teasing, listening to the soft music of her cries. This must be what it was like to be a real flesh-and-blood man. Vivian's desire was sweet flattery and his desire to please her became all-consuming. Another light gasp and he was driven to the brink of oblivion. His fingers explored her delicate center taking great care to tickle her sex gently. Vivian's pussy became very wet and Griffin knew she was ready.

He brought her up on all fours and guided his cock in from behind.

Vivian pushed back into him, her moist center yielding to his lust. With every heated thrust, her body grew softer, wetter, until she stiffened and cried out his name. The sound was pure music.

Afterward, she lay in his arms dozing, her lovely face relaxed and content. That was when he knew that he was in love with her. That was also when he knew that no matter what happened from here on out, he would never allow anything to happen to her. Even if that meant losing his own life to protect her.

## Chapter 21

The next morning they traveled once again in silence. Vivian couldn't shake the feeling of having given away too much. She had let herself get too attached and now she was paying the price for it in the form of having inappropriate feelings for Griffin. Falling for an android was probably as nuts as falling for a space cruiser, but she didn't dare tell him that. Oh sure, he was warm and affectionate but that was all just programming. He didn't *really* feel anything for her. How could he? He wasn't even human.

So for the next three hours since they'd broken camp, they didn't speak. Thank goodness they reached Outpost Two by lunchtime. The second outpost looked even more deserted than the first. Here the door was wide open. Inside there was no fancy equipment or décor, only a few broken wooden chairs and a scratched-up lamp. There was no sign of Stark or any of the other prisoners.

Vivian searched the facility then marched up to Griffin and planted her hands on her hips. "What the hell is going on here? Where is Stark?"

Griffin's head throbbed.

*Initiate Protocol Six.*

*Initiate Protocol Six.*

*Initiate Protocol Six.*

Something was happening to him. It felt like a knife had sliced into his brain. Griffin gripped his head and doubled over from the pain. Somewhere inside him a monster was awakening and it wanted to kill Vivian. All of a sudden it became clear what Protocol Six was. It was a kill directive that had been implanted in his mind when he'd been given this "second chance."

Vivian was coming toward him, angry and wanting answers. He didn't blame her, but she had no idea how much danger she was in. The blades inside his wrist ached to be released but he overrode the urge and kept them inside.

"Griffin? What the devil is wrong with you?" she asked, getting much too close.

"Stay back!" he shouted.

Vivian blinked at him and stopped in her tracks. "Where is Stark? What's going on?"

Griffin gritted his teeth. Every piece of information was tumbling from its hiding place in a data dump. His throat tightened, but he forced the words out. "There never was any prisoner called Stark. The whole thing was a setup to kill you."

She held her hands out and looked around. "Kill me with what? There's nothing in this stupid place." Then the information clicked. She stared at him with such hurt in her eyes he wanted to die right there. "It's you, isn't it? That's why they sent you here with me. You are my executioner."

The headache was getting worse. Griffin fought it with everything he had. He wrote a virus in his head and sent it after the kill program hoping to disable its power over him. "That's right," he managed.

"So why aren't you doing it?" She was coming closer again, furious at him and probably herself for trusting him.

“Kill me. That’s what you were sent to do, right? That’s what you are, isn’t it? What’s stopping you? Do it!”

Griffin stumbled back. “No!”

“Why not? Isn’t that what your masters want you to do? That’s what you were created for!”

“I can’t,” he said. The pressure was easing as the coded virus did its work destroying the program. “I can’t. I won’t.”

Tears were running from her eyes. He hated to see her in that much agony. “Why not? Why not kill me and finish your directive?”

Protocol Six was fading, becoming a terrible nightmare he’d finally awakened from. His head still hurt and his chest ached but he was free of it, really and truly free. MOTR and the programmer couldn’t override his virus because Vivian had taken out the chip. Griffin braced himself against the wall. It was time for the truth, no matter how she reacted to it.

“I can’t kill you because I’m in love with you,” he said.

Vivian’s mouth fell open but no words came out. She apparently hadn’t expected him to say that. “You can’t love. You’re a machine.”

“Of course I can. I was created to be just as human as any organic person. I can love and hate, everything. And before you argue with me, you should know I’ve felt this way since I first met you.”

She shook her head. “No, no, I can’t accept this. What happened to your order to kill me?”

“I destroyed the order with an internal virus, and since you took the chip out of my head, they can’t try anything else. Their control of me is over.”

“I don’t understand any of this. Who would want me dead?”

“Chief Justice Jazen. He seems to have taken serious offense to you rejecting him when he tried to date you.”

“Date, huh? Is that what the official version is? That fucking scumbag,” she said, collapsing into a chair. “I’m going to arrest that jerk and bring him up on charges. With the evidence you have inside your head, he’s going to spend a very long time on a work colony.”

Griffin folded his burly arms. “We’ll get him together but pinning this on him will take a cool head. Jazen may be an asshole, but he’s not as stupid as he looks.”

Vivian let a wicked smile escape her lips. “Yeah. Hmm, what’s that old Earth saying about revenge being a dish best served cold? Well this revenge is going to be a very cold dish indeed.”

## Chapter 22

The journey back was haunted by yet more frosty silence. Vivian didn't want to be distant, but she couldn't shake the feeling Griffin might turn on her again. *Oh sure, he claimed to love her, but he was an android. Only humans could love, couldn't they? How could he overcome his killer programming?* She doubted he could no matter what he said.

"I'm so sorry about what happened," he said as he drove the transport.

"It's not your fault, I guess," she said, chewing her thumbnail. "You were only doing what they told you to do."

"That's incidental. Why would Jazen want to kill you? I thought he was on your side. He went to an awful lot of trouble to get rid of a fellow Justice."

They passed clumps of brush and patches of trees growing right out of the desert sand. The scenery went by making her slightly homesick for Earth. "He wanted to kill me because I insulted him."

Griffin glanced at her. "Whatever you did must have been some insult."

She shrugged. "I refused to fuck him."

"Did he come out and ask you to sleep with him?"

“Sometimes these things are more subtle than that, Griffin.” She closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest. “But yeah, I’m sure that was his reason.”

“You don’t trust me anymore.”

It was a flat statement of fact. A part of her wanted to reassure him but she just didn’t have the energy. She was too busy being angry over being tricked out here. What a total waste of time and resources. Jazen was even more of an idiot than she’d originally thought.

“Are you ending our relationship?”

She coughed out a bitter laugh. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Vivian sighed. “Look, Griffin, you’re a great lay, but I shouldn’t have initiated this sex thing to begin with. I didn’t think I was going to get attached to you and I was damn sure you weren’t going to get too hooked on me. So it’s probably best if we just let it go.”

Griffin didn’t reply, so she just figured he must agree.

\* \* \* \*

Griffin didn’t know when the desire for closeness started. All he did know was it came over him in a subtle way, drifting past his defenses to conquer his heart and he was glad for it. The desire had been working on him for days, ripping into the seam of his being and tearing him to shreds. Sometimes, when he and Vivian hadn’t spoken for a long time, he found himself longing for her, reaching out to her mentally like a man stranded out at sea longs for the land. He would conjure memories of how her body felt against his, the softness of her lips, the hunger of her caress. All this pain and wanting made him forget, if only for a little while, that he was unworthy of

her. He was a *thing*, an unnatural being created to be used and that's exactly what Vivian did—she used him.

He wondered why the realization hurt so much. Before he'd met her, nothing bothered him except the killing of women and children. He witnessed cruelties and vicious deaths like a patron at a movie theater, all of it happened outside of himself. But finding desire for Vivian brought him to life. It made him a participant in the story of life instead of just a casual observer. And worst of all, he wanted to hang on to that feeling just a little longer because when they got back, she would leave him forever.

A sudden and unexpected agony filled his heart. They were finished. He needed to understand and accept that. But he couldn't let it be that easy.

"I don't want this to be the end," he said after a long period of silence.

Vivian squinted off at the passing landscape. "Relax, Griffin, you can get sex anywhere. With your good looks, I'm sure there are tons of women willing to give it to you regular. You don't need me."

"I want us to have a life together."

"Well, we can't. I travel all over the galaxy doing my job and I like to travel alone."

It felt like she'd reached inside him and torn his circuits out. "Are you really that happy being alone?"

She shrugged. "It suits me."

"I think you're afraid to care about someone else because of what happened to your mother."

That got her attention. "You leave her out of this! I should have never told you that story."



“Tell me the truth then. Is the loss of your mother the reason why you’re pushing me away?”

“I’m not going to discuss this with you.”

“Because it’s true, isn’t it?” Griffin studied her but maintained a cold and impersonal silence. Finally he nodded and said, “Yes, of course it is.”

\* \* \* \*

They were back on the ship. Safe, secure, familiar. Vivian was plagued by two emotions; one she knew well and another she didn’t have much experience with. The first emotion was rage. She was furious at Jazen for wanting revenge on her for rejecting his ham-handed pass at the bar. What kind of man was so fragile he wanted to kill her just for not sleeping with him? The thought of what he might have done to others over the years made her shudder. A person like that needed to be brought to justice. He needed to be arrested and forced to face what he really was: an intergalactic Justice in name only. She couldn’t wait to find that scum and put him away for a very long time.

The second emotion was regret. She was sorry for the way she’d treated Griffin. It wasn’t his fault they’d used him to try and destroy her, and he *had* managed to get himself together despite their meddling. She shouldn’t have been so harsh with him. Vivian glanced over to the co-pilot seat where Griffin was programming in their route back to the station. She chewed her bottom lip.

“When we get back, I’m going straight to the Galaxy Chief’s office and tell him what happened here.” She hesitated feeling guilty. “They’re going to have to download that directive from you.”

He turned his seat around to face her. "I know. But you should be aware they'll probably decommission me very soon afterward."

That stunned her. She spent several minutes digesting that unpleasant bit of information. "Why?"

Griffin ran his hands down the armrest. "They were planning on it before I was assigned to assist you. My being used as a weapon will only confirm that I'm too dangerous to be kept in operation." He frowned at the expression on her face. "I'm not saying this to upset or dissuade you, Vivian," he said. "I just wanted to make you aware."

She nodded, but didn't say a word.

## **Chapter 23**

“Damn it all to hell, Benson. Get your ass in my office now!”

The programmer scowled and lowered the volume of the transmitter in his ear. Not surprisingly, it was Jazen again. Ever since he’d gotten involved with that corrupt SOB he’d regretted it. But there was no getting out now, they were both in way too deep. If anyone found out about their reprogramming of that android to kill Vivian Mercer, they’d both be put away for a very long time.

Benson walked down the glass hallway of the space station wondering what Jazen’s problem was this time. Surely Griffin had dispatched Vivian already. It had been close to two weeks and Enforcers weren’t known to mess around. Unless, of course, something had gone wrong. Then they really had problems. Benson wondered how quickly he could charter a flight off this floating hunk of metal and go somewhere else.

Jazen was pacing in front of his picturesque window with his hands gripping tightly behind his back. “Where the hell have you been?”

“I was performing my other duties. You’re not my only priority.”

Jazen waved his hand in dismissal. “Never mind all that. We need to come up with a plan B.”

“A plan B? I’m not sure I follow you.”

“That bastard Griffin fucked us. Sensors on the shuttle indicate there are *two* occupants. *Two!* That means Mercer must still be alive and she’s coming back here. Who knows what the hell happened on that damned planet but we have to stop her.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“We need another android to neutralize the both of them.”

Benson opened his mouth a few times but couldn’t think of what to say. Was Jazen totally nuts? Where the hell was he supposed to get *another* android? It wasn’t like multimillion dollar pieces of equipment just fell out of the sky. Finally he found his voice and said, “How on earth am I supposed to find another Enforcer? Do you expect me to go through the reject pile again?”

“Can you?”

“No, goddamn it, I can’t! Surely even you can see how impossible this whole situation is. Why don’t we just turn ourselves in? We can make up some softer story that might get us off the hook. Maybe we could say we thought she was a spy or something and we screwed up.”

Jazen lunged at Benson and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. “There will be no giving up, or confessing, or trying to undo what has already been done! The solution to this problem is easy. We need another android is all.”

“I can’t get another Enforcer like—”

Jazen let go of his shirt and shook his head. “We don’t need another Enforcer. All we need is another android who we can retrofit with some fancy weapons. That ought to be enough to stop Griffin, that malfunctioning pile of shit.”

Benson's stomach, which had already dropped in panic at this lunacy, fell a few more inches to settle into his bowels. "Jazen, it's not just a question of reprogramming and adding a few kitchen knives. These Enforcers are equipped with all kinds of weapons, not just one. Griffin will make mincemeat out of any poor robot you send after them. And if he has managed to develop feelings for Mercer, he could get really nasty and come after us."

"Don't be ridiculous, Benson. Why would Griffin have *any* romantic feeling for Mercer? He's a fucking microwave oven, for God's sake."

"They're not just dumb machines. They have been programmed to reason, love and hate. They *evolve* and learn from both their successes and failures, just like people do. He's not just an expensive appliance, Jazen. He's a battle-tested killing machine. That's all he does, he kills. If Mercer and him have had sex, he's probably thinking she's his mate and he'll do everything and anything necessary to defend her."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." Jazen sneered. "Now you listen to me, I do the thinking, okay, Benson? And I'm telling you to get me another android, get something from the sex trade, I don't care. When you have it, and you'd better be quick about it, you can begin the alterations. You got that?"

Benson tossed his hands up in surrender. What could he do? He was royally screwed. "Yeah, sure. Anything else unreasonable you want me to do?"

Jazen gave him a wicked smile. "No, that will be all."

Benson walked out to do the ill-advised; find a sex trade android and make it ready to take on a professional killer. *Just wonderful. What more could go wrong today?*

## Chapter 24

Once they landed on the space station, Vivian scanned the outside sensors and realized they were not alone. Another android was waiting for them to disembark and oddly enough, it was female. She brought it up on the ship's screen. The android didn't do anything, she just stood there. She was probably an old flame of Griffin's.

"Friend of yours?" she joked to Griffin. She was just about to open the hatch when he stopped her.

"She's not waiting for me," he said grimly. "She's waiting for you."

"That's ridiculous. Why would she be waiting for me?"

"Because she's been programmed to kill you."

Vivian froze in her tracks. "What? How do you know that just by looking at her?"

Griffin grabbed Vivian's upper arm and dragged her closer to the screen. "She was part of the sex trade. It's easy to tell once you study her closely. Her breasts are much too large for her to just be a mechanic. She's also paying an awful lot of attention to this ship. Why? Because she's been reprogrammed and sent here to finish the job I didn't do on Viridian."

All a sudden, Vivian felt very foolish. Of course, it all made sense. What blew her mind was that Jazen would be so stupid to try something like this *again*. *That guy really needs to*

*be locked up for good. He is a certifiable nut.* “So what are we going to do? I assume she has an Enforcer weapon on her somewhere. Wonder what it is?”

“I want you to stay here,” Griffin said. “As long as you’re in here you are safe. She can’t get to you. I can dispatch her pretty easily.”

Normally Vivian wasn’t afraid of anyone, but this was different. Even she knew when to hang back and let a professional deal with the problem. She was no match for an android on a kill mission. “Okay.”

Griffin opened the hatch and was just about to leave when Vivian was suddenly very worried about him. Feeling awkward, she said, “Hey, Griffin?”

He looked back at her, his blue eyes glowing with homicidal menace. “Yes?”

She shrugged. “Don’t get hurt, okay?”

He smiled and her insides turned all soft. “Getting soft on me? Don’t worry, I’ve got this. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Vivian rushed over to the screen to watch the battle. She watched the female android approach Griffin with that expressionless look many of the lesser androids had. Her face was pretty but plain, like a mannequin who someone had put a motor into. Her movements were strange too, stiff and slow. Then, when she was only a few yards from Griffin, her hands slid up into her wrists and both were replaced by two round spinning saws.

But Griffin was much smoother. The blades in his right hand emerged fluidly like they were an organic part of him, their shiny silver flashing brightly under the overhead lights. He stalked around the android woman, keeping his distance from her, then he stepped forward quickly and struck, driving

the longest blade in his arsenal into the base of her head. The amber glow of her eyes went dark.

Vivian felt kind of sorry for the creature.

Griffin dragged the android to a corner of the landing area and signaled Vivian she could open the hatch again.

She came down the ramp and smiled at him. "Very impressive."

He walked up and stood towering over her. "Impressive enough for a kiss?"

Vivian felt her heart soften. The truth was it wasn't so cool being alone all the time, she hated it. Was it so wrong to be in love with an android? She guessed it was harmless and he did seem to have feelings for her, although she wasn't sure she'd call it love. Why not just give in? "You bet." She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a hot, steamy kiss.

Griffin surprised her by running his fingers into her hair and kissing her back with the same intense emotion. Vivian couldn't resist her feelings for him anymore, it just didn't make sense to be miserable and alone when she didn't have to be.

She stepped back from the kiss. "You know, this just might work between us after all. But don't you break my heart, Griffin."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Now let's find Jazen and put him on ice so I don't have to keep defending your ass."

She smiled. "Now *that* sounds like a plan."



## **Chapter 25**

They found Jazen cowering behind his desk trying to explain himself to the Intergalactic Justice Council. Griffin reached out to the Space Station's mainframe, which informed him that programmer Benson, Jazen's accomplice, had gone to the council and turned himself in. He'd told them everything about the murder plot in exchange for exile instead of the death penalty. All the council had to do was examine all the evidence Benson provided to determine the story was true. Jazen was terminated immediately and the council had requested either Vivian or Griffin take the former Chief Justice into custody immediately.

Jazen pushed a button and terminated the conversation with the council. He gave them a sheepish smile and Griffin was willing to bet he still thought there was a way to get out of this. "Hi, Vivian. How did the recovery mission go?"

Vivian glanced at Griffin. "Is he fucking shitting me?"

Griffin smiled at her. "He's just trying to buy time. The mainframe told me his friend spilled everything to the council. They fired him already. All we have to do is complete the arrest."

Vivian marched over to grab Jazen when he pulled out a blaster. "Now hold on a minute, Vivian. Let's not get too

excited here. Benson is lying to the council and they bought it. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“That’s for the council to decide,” she said through her teeth. “Surrender that weapon before I take it from you and shove it up your ass.”

Griffin detected Jazen squeezing the trigger. He pulled Vivian back and stepped in front of her just in time to take a full powered bolt in the chest. Then Griffin’s programming took over. He took a menacing step forward. Assaulting an Enforcer while he was trying to arrest a person was a stupid and dangerous thing to do.

Jazen panicked and jumped back from the android, but he didn’t drop the blaster.

“Jazen, you idiot, drop your weapon or he’s going to kill you!” Vivian shouted.

The former Chief Justice responded by trying to shoot Vivian around Griffin. That was it. Griffin extended his arm and let the flashing blades emerge from the back of his wrist. The large shears snapped over the blaster’s muzzle and cut the barrel off midway. Jazen shot the weapon a second later and it exploded in his hand removing several fingers. Vivian, standing a little to Griffin’s right, covered her eyes. She knew what was coming next.

In one smooth motion, Griffin swiped the blades at Jazen’s neck, shredding both his throat and his torso. There was blood everywhere and Jazen collapsed at Griffin’s feet.

Vivian walked out, keeping a hand over her eyes. He understood. Even a seasoned Justice didn’t want to see that much blood.

Griffin clicked the screen and contacted the council. The members came on the screen but once they saw the carnage

behind Griffin, the pleasant looks on their faces faded. “Yes, Enforcer Griffin?”

“Chief Justice Jazen Strom has been brought to justice.”

The head of the council nodded stiffly. “Yes, we can see that. And how is Senior Justice Vivian Mercer?”

“She’s fine. She’s just completing her arrest report.”

“Excellent job, to both of you.”

Griffin turned off the connection and came out. Vivian was leaning against the wall in the passageway looking a little pale. He ran the back of his fingers down her cheek. “I’m sorry I had to do that in front of you.”

Vivian swallowed and nodded. “It’s okay.” She laughed. “It’s funny, isn’t it? I’ve killed a dozen times and seen plenty of death but that one really bothered me.”

“That’s because you knew him.”

“I didn’t like him much, though.”

Griffin smiled. “Neither did I.”

She turned and studied his face. “You saved my life, twice.”

“Maybe that makes up for trying to kill you on Viridian.”

“I guess it does.” She softly kissed him on the lips. “This is so strange; a human and a killer android. How are we ever going to make this work between us?”

“By just taking it one day at a time. How does that sound?”

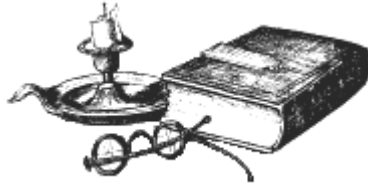
Vivian smiled and it lit up her whole face. “I think that sounds like a great idea.”



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michelle lives in Florida with her family and writes constantly. For more information on her and her works, please visit her website at [www.michelle-oneill.com](http://www.michelle-oneill.com)

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