



TAKEN BY THE
ALIEN
WARRIOR PIRATE
ZARA ZENIA

TAKEN BY THE ALIEN WARRIOR PIRATE

A SCI-FI ALIEN WARRIOR ROMANCE

ALIEN WARRIOR SPACE PIRATES

BOOK TWO

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CHAPTER
ONE

CARMELA

A thundering of footsteps echoed through my eardrums. Arms and legs whirled around in front of my vision like the contents of a pot of soup being stirred.

The wailing of shrill, alarm sirens harshly rang through my ears and pounded between my temples.

Hasty breath was quick in my lungs. A rushing sound of Cyburn breathing beside me provided a loaded concoction of comfort and terror.

Yes, he was here beside me, but were we going to make it back to his hover flyers, the machines that were critical to our safe return to his main ship— *The Blade*?

Time was ruthless. It didn't care who it fucked over in the process. It just kept on ticking by— as a thief of sorts.

Overhead, the buzz and crackle of the spaceship's intercom system intermittently interrupted the siren's cry. Flashing red light bulbs that were connected to the wall and ceilings pulsed and blinked across the canvas of my vision.

A knot in my throat dangerously threaded together with the knot in my heart and stomach, creating a burn of agony and a monumental pain of fright.

I had never experienced a panic as severe as this.

Then again, I was pretty inexperienced with life or death situations.

Everything was at stake. Whether I lived or died? Well... that was still up in the air.

“Come on,” Cyburn urged.

His thick fingers coiled around my wrist as he swiftly pulled me forward to keep me up to speed with his and Nix’s wider strides.

I glanced downward. My mouth opened. A tiny gasp slipped between the cracks of my lips as they parted, but nothing more. I had lost my breath, too stunned to react.

“Don’t look.” Cyburn adamantly shook his head. “Don’t look at them.”

I couldn’t help myself.

Curiosity got the better of me.

Against Cyburn’s compelling insistence, my eyes trailed down to the grated, metal floor of the harvester ship—a ship where I’d been intended to die.

A ship where I might *still* die.

“*Carmela*.” My name was like a vital prayer as it slipped from Cyburn’s tongue and rolled out into the air.

I gazed up, my facial expression frozen with paranoia and fear.

“I told you not to *look* at them, sweetheart.”

I frantically licked my lips. My hand felt clammy roped around his. I had to readjust it to keep it from sliding out of his grasp.

“I’m... sorry.”

“They can’t hurt you anymore anyway,” Nix said, jogging along beside me, fully decked out in his Alesian body armor and life support equipment that worked for both fighting purposes and exposure to the outside of space.

Cyburn was dressed in the same attire as his counterpart, Nix. His white-blond hair looked almost silvery under the fluorescent lights overhead in the harvester ship’s corridor.

“We’re almost there,” he promised, beckoning me further.

What other choice did I have than to just believe him and surrender my unfiltered trust to him?

An uneasy sensation churned in my stomach, but as Cyburn held onto my hand and squeezed it a little tighter, the discomfort quelled quite a bit.

“The hangar,” Nix exclaimed, pointing with fully-disclosed excitement. His deep emerald cheeks rounded as he smiled, and his almond-shaped black eyes glimmered with relief.

Cyburn picked up his pace, taking me with him. My legs got a second wind, encouraged by the fact that we were in the home stretch.

“Just a little bit further and we can leave this wretched ship behind before it blows to bits,” Cyburn declared with a booming voice and a hint of insistence.

I nodded, locking eyes with him briefly before he turned his leaf green back to me and charged on ahead.

We weaved our way through several heaps of collapsed robots, some piled up on top of each other. Severed robot arms and limbs were raked across the corridor floors, littering the chambers of the ship with robot-body-parts rubble.

It was like a war zone.

Along the way, Nix and Cyburn had tallied up a few of their Alesian soldiers who had been on the ship the entire time with us — in separate locations of course — to assist in the widespread wiping out of the Belic robots. The mission hadn't been easy for them but had been exceedingly successful.

Aside from the fact that the main harvester on the ship, an Alesian-hybrid robot named Jun, had fled the scene with his giant killbots and enacted the Operator of the ship to explode on command. We were desperate to flee the ship before that happened.

Some of Cyburn's soldiers were more injured than others. Some of them were bleeding pretty badly as they struggled to make it to their own hover flyers. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. I knew they needed our help. I hated looking into their frantic eyes knowing that they were just as worried about making it off this ship as we were.

“Here,” Cyburn said, skirting across the hangar with me in tow. “Put these on,” he said as he hastily shoved a life support suit at me.

I fumbled with it for a few sloppy seconds, my hands shaking and flustered.

“This is the one that belongs to my wife, remember?” Nix asked, his eyes skimming me quickly.

“Right.” I nodded my understanding as I began to climb into the complicated ensemble — with Cyburn’s assistance. Nix and I made eye contact again just as I was slipping into the finishing touches of the suit. “Thank you for letting me borrow it.”

“Of course.” Nix nodded diplomatically. “There is no other way to get you off the ship without it. You’ll need the oxygen as soon as we break away from the ship.”

Nix was right. The suit was a little big for me, but it would get the job done. It was all about survival. It wasn’t like I could just ride out into the open vacuum of deep space without the protective gear.

We hurriedly jumped into the hovercrafts. They were compact, tight spaces that were dark with windows on each boxy side of the vessel.

There were switches and buttons on the control panel that lit up — each of which I couldn’t even *begin* to understand what they did.

Riding along-side Cyburn, he pressed the button functions and switched the gears, grimacing, gritting his teeth and tightening his sexy, chiseled jawline as we flew like a missile through the empty void of black space.

The Blade came into view after only a lapse of mere minutes.

“It’s there, waiting for us,” I exclaimed.

Cyburn tossed me a confused glance. His temple twitched. “You sound surprised.”

“I don’t know what to feel,” I answered honestly.

However, nervous anticipation for the future was at the top of my list of emotions.

Cyburn flew under the *Blade*, a giant black ship, boxy and rectangular, thick, and protective. It was larger than I'd been expecting. I didn't even want to breathe until we'd made it into the hangar in one piece.

The under compartment hatch opened, and a soft yellow glow of light began to illuminate underneath the ship.

Cyburn concentrated and began to maneuver the hovercraft upward into the hangar one carefully calculated slide at a time.

Once we were on the landing strip and Cyburn shut off the engines, I finally allowed myself to relax and inhale a deep breath. My body unstiffened, and Cyburn helped me climb out of the hover vessel.

The moment we had our feet on solid ground again, a woman hurriedly strode up to us, her expression maddened and frantic.

"Amada..." Cyburn's face fell. He looked jolted to see this woman.

Her eyes roamed over him before they icily cut to me with seething disapproval. I braced myself for an inevitable confrontation with this strange and hostile woman who seemed like she was chomping at the bit to tear me apart.

She looked slightly younger than me but was probably not far behind if I had to guess. She was slimmer and more petite in stature than Nix and Cyburn.

I didn't know why I had been expecting to see much larger women, but maybe it was just Nix's wife who was on the larger side. I wasn't judging, just making an assumption based on the suit I was wearing. Nix was huge himself, so it made sense. I supposed I'd soon find out, if I ever got a chance to get past this watch dog of a woman who seemed eager to protect her ship at all costs.

Amada wore heavy-looking, golden, and flashy beaded necklaces, earrings, and bracelets adorned with colorful stones and gems attached.

Here I was thinking that *Cyburn* wore an elaborate display of wrist and neck decorations, but this woman had taken the art of jewelry wearing to a whole new level.

The jewelry was stacked on so thick to her body that it actually looked weighted and uncomfortable in my opinion.

Something gave me the sneaking suspicion that she probably wouldn't be bothered with what my opinion might be of her.

“Who is *this*?” Amada challenged, not bothering to wait for the rest of Cyburn's explanation. She pointed an incriminating finger at me.

Cyburn held his hands up defensively by his sides. “This is Carmela. I'm sure Silver told you about—”

“What is she *doing* here?” Amada demanded, her eyes cutting between us. “You brought her onto our *ship*?”

She spoke the words as if Cyburn had committed a heinous crime against her, personally.

“Calm down, Amada,” Cyburn said, attempting to pacify the nearly hysterical woman. “She is going to be working for us —”

“She is *what*?” Amada roared, looking beside herself with bewilderment.

“We desperately need a robot programmer, and she has the experience,” Cyburn advised calmly.

“I'm sure she was willing to tell you *anything* to get you to take her with you,” Amada berated, folding her arms across her chest as she cut me another cold look.

“I wasn't going to leave her on the ship to die,” Cyburn said flatly.

Amada opened her mouth to debate, but Cyburn cut her off.

“If you aren't going to be helpful right now, then I need you to get back to your post,” he strongly advised.

“But—” Amada's bottom lip jutted out as she attempted to form another bratty protest.

“This is a direct order from your captain,” Cyburn said, his eyes narrowing surprisingly darkly at her.

She seemed to recoil slightly at his shift in demeanor — but contention still flickered in her black eyes.

I didn’t have a *clue* what the history was between them, but their dynamic was laced with tension that made me severely uncomfortable.

Amada spun on a heel and began aggressively stalking from the hangar.

“These are dire circumstances right now,” Cyburn called out from behind as if he suddenly had a change of heart and wished to appease the disgruntled woman. “We all need to work together.”

Amada didn’t respond, nor did she bother to give either of us a second glance as she stomped off.

Cyburn placed his hands on the top of his head and released an exasperated sigh.

“Come on,” he said. “We need to get to the control room and strap in. We’re going to have to go full steam ahead to get as far away from the harvester ship before it’s reactors go critical.”



HOW DID WE EVEN *GET* TO THIS POINT?

It was a complicated question with even more complicated answers that didn’t make sense.

I was a thirty-two year old roboticist graduate of MIT. I lived in Boston before I was obscurely abducted in plain sight and in broad daylight by a pack of ruthless Belic Imperial Harvesters. The Belic were a race of aliens and Alesian and human-hybrid robots whose only diabolical plan in the world was to do just that — harvest humans.

The Belic’s thrived off of the humans they abducted and dissected. Their ultimate plan was to steal the internal organs,

neural tissue, and organic brain matter of Earthly people. The purpose? Implantation of these critical parts — as if they were missing pieces to a puzzle. They used the human parts to place into their own humanoid-constructed warrior robots. The Belic thrived on this augmentation process because it gave their warrior robots an enhanced processing power. They wanted them to have the superior intelligence of a human, while still holding the strength of a robot.

Unlucky for them, but miraculously for me, I had been rescued by the brave and noble Cyburn of the planet Alesis.

Mind you, I'd never even *heard* of the planet Alesis before Cyburn had swept in to save the day.

I was quickly learning that Cyburn had a notorious reputation. He had been deemed a 'space pirate' of sorts, infiltrating Belic ships in the space lanes and taking out as many of their badgering robots in the process.

Cyburn was on a dangerous quest for vengeance after the Belic empire had wiped out most of his home planet.

For the time being, his race was roguishly traveling through space on several generation ships. This had been a back-up survival tactic that had originally been enacted by Cyburn's now deceased father named Tarsis who had been the king of Alesis.

Currently, Cyburn was desperately trying to fulfill his father's legacy to take back his home planet and regain a quality of life for those in his race who relied on him the most. It was a huge responsibility. Cyburn explained to me that he had big shoes to fill, but he also had the heart and the drive to pull it off.

Cyburn had a fiery spirit. He was a revolutionary fighter, and I was starting to respect him more and more every moment. It made the superficial problems on Earth seem so trivial in comparison to what Cyburn and his race were dealing with.

I was really starting to admire him, and I couldn't deny that fact that the pair of us had established an unmistakable bond.

He'd asked me to join forces with him and his team as a programmer, and I'd been happy to accept his recruitment

because I believed in the freedom fighting work he was doing, and I had compassion for him and his overall cause.

I knew how displaced he felt in the grand scheme of things. He wanted to do more for his own kind. He didn't want to disappoint them. He wanted to provide them with a voice, a life, and the safety and freedom they all deserved.

That's why I felt like it was imperative for me to provide them with as much assistance as I could.

I needed to fetch out my confidence from deep inside me. It was time for me to realize that I had a lot of things stacked in my favor.

I had the education, the training, and the expertise to offer. I just hoped I wouldn't screw it all up in the end. If they needed me, I was determined to show up, especially since my relationship with Cyburn was heating up so excitingly.

CHAPTER
TWO

CYBURN

Tensions were mounting. I pretended not to notice Amada's scathing leer across the room, but when I glanced out of the corner of my eye and saw her standing there with that smoldering look on her face and her arms folded tightly across her chest, I knew I wasn't going to be able to ignore her or her demands forever.

However, I had more pressing matters to attend to, and a business operation to run. I was the captain of this ship and the prince of our people, and I wouldn't soon let anyone forget it.

The energy in the mess hall of *The Blade* was buzzing with a mixture of excitement and worry. It was up to me to rally the troops and inform everyone about what was going on. Everyone deserved a current update on the situation regarding our continual fight against the Belic.

I stood in the front of the room. "Everybody listen up," I exclaimed, my voice bellowing with reverberation through the room. "We have a lot of ground to cover and a few kinks to iron out."

The hum of chatter began to die down as I slowly gained everyone's attention.

"Obviously, we made it back from the Belic Harvester ship. I am also proud to inform everyone that this was done so without any resulting deaths on our part."

A series of clapping and cheers rolled through the room, and then silence followed as all eyes curiously cut back to me.

“However,” I continued, “we are dealing with some injuries. Although we all made it out of there alive, we have to see to healing the wounded. They have been brought to the medical bays for the necessary treatment. Some might require a lengthier healing process than others. We will just have to be patient and take it one step... and one day at a time.”

“What about the Harvester ship?” Amada asked, her voice loud over the crowd of people clustered together in the room.

I paused. We were in a better place as far as that was concerned, but it was still a problem. The ship was going to blow soon, and we needed to get as far away from it as possible.

“We managed to take the Harvester ship down from the Belic Empire,” I began. “Meaning, we disabled most of their robots.” As more chatter of approval began to float through the air, I quickly went on to explain exactly what that meant.

“However, we barely escaped with our lives as the ship is about to explode and we are rapidly attempting to get away from the blast as we speak. It is a critical time, and we aren’t out of the woods yet. We need to lick our wounds and assess the damage.”

“What about Jun?” Silver asked. “I know when we were talking through the radio — he managed to escape?”

A flood of gasps and shocked voices breezed amongst the others. Eyes went wide. Mouths gaped open. A new onset of fear was unlocked aboard the ship at this revelation. Jun was notorious, and not in a good way. He was well known as a ruthless commander who thrived on dissecting human body parts for the gain of his own robot following.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” I explained, aiming to restore calm. “Jun was badly injured in the fight. Dare I say, without knowing for sure, but his injuries could prove fatal in the end. It’s just a waiting game for now.”

“We don’t have *time* for a waiting game,” Amada scathed.

I glanced briefly in her direction. Carmela was sitting in a chair near me, peering up at me with a look mixed with

admiration and confusion.

She *had* to have been wondering what was going on between me and Amada. All this was new to Carmela. It was probably overwhelming for her to be here at all on this ship, much less be met with such aggressive antagonism from Amada the moment we docked and stepped foot into the hangar.

I made a mental note to talk privately with Amada about this later and give her a lecture on how to treat our new guest. Carmela had just as much to offer us as Amada did. There was always room for two — as long as it wasn't both on a romantic level.

I knew I was going to have to explain to Carmela about the severed relationship I had with Amada, and how that on a routine basis — it was most insufferable for me.

However, I had to find a way to tolerate it, especially in dire times like this. As begrudging as it was for me to admit, Amada was our chief engineer and we desperately needed her. She knew this of course, and sometimes took advantage of it to get what she wanted.

“What happens now, you might ask?” I began again.

All eyes were on me, looking for a way out of this. They wanted good news. They wanted the reassurance that they were going to survive. It was like playing a cat and mouse game with the Belic. As soon as we took one step forward, we had to take two more back.

It seemed like the Belic were always ahead of the game, and this was somewhat maddening. It was a frustrating process, but we'd managed to survive this long.

I was living in a constant state of reminder about my father's legacy, and how I would stop at nothing to fulfill it and get our planet of Alesis back from the crippling grasp of the Belic Empire.

I had a lot riding on this. It was often disconcerting to think about just how many people relied on me for their own survival. If I thought about it too much, it became a mind-boggling concept that was difficult to grasp.

“As I said, Jun *did* escape with his killbot soldiers.” The killbots were like bodyguards to Jun and the other higher ranking Belic members. “Unfortunately, we believe at this time that he survived long enough to give our last known coordinates to the Empire.”

I paused and glanced between a somber Silver, our resident A.I. whom I’d been talking to through the radios while we were on the Harvester ship, and Amada, who looked more than displeased at this new development.

“I know it’s a lot of information to process,” I said, raising my voice to get it above the buzz of fear and disappointment now filtering through the mess hall. “But we can’t be burdened with any inkling of defeat. We *must* persevere, and in the meantime, we need to get out of the area — fast for two reasons. One because of the impending explosion of the harvester ship, and two, if we don’t, other Belic ships might be sent in our direction.”

I’d planted the seeds of aggression and protection against our enemies, and now that everyone had been informed of the current situation, we could start the process of acting on things.

Our survival instinct was what kept us going. We were oppressed, but we were retaliating against the Belic with every ounce of fight we had within ourselves.

I tried to keep my hopes held high. After all, we were in better shape than when we started. We had an experienced roboticist on our side now — and she was super cute and sexy to boot.

My eyes locked with hers. Carmela’s cheeks blushed pink. She swiftly moved her gaze to her lap. She pushed a strand of her unruly brown hair off her face. I saw underneath her smile that she got just as hot and flustered when she looked at me as I felt when I looked at her — which, if you asked me, was a thrill that kept me going.

CHAPTER
THREE

CARMELA

I thought it was important in the beginning, that I tried to stay out of the way as much as possible. Not that I didn't want to offer my assistance and support, but I thought it was important that I observe the dynamic between Cyburn and his crew mates first before I tried to dip my expertise into the pot.

Most of them seemed keen on working together to map out the escape route. We all had one common interest — survival.

I found Silver, their self-aware A.I. to be particularly interesting. Sometimes she got a little defensive and quipped back about something, and other times she seemed genuinely invested in the entire crew's wellbeing and safety. She had a dry sense of humor, which made it more amusing when she attempted to be snarky with the others. It was entertaining to see an A.I. with such a flavorful personality.

She had a long, slender frame and her body was mainly a metallic shiny color. If I had to guess, I'd say this was probably the origination of where her name came from.

She sat perched at her station on the bridge, shoulders squared and straight, poised as she attempted to calmly and rationally iron out the wrinkly edges amongst the others and their tensions and temperaments.

Nix was there as well, holding his newborn son and swaddling him in his giant arms as he rocked him back and forth. He bounced him around while the little tot adoringly blinked up at his father with a stargazed smile.

Nix continuously planted affectionate kisses on the green-faced baby's chubby cheeks. Every now and then the baby would swat his adorable, dimpled fists and pump them through the air with excitement and animation.

Eventually, Nix's wife entered the room. She was a tall woman in stature who wore long flowing dresses and had a gypsy quality about her. She adorned herself with heavy golden and silver chained jewelry too, although not nearly the same amount as Amada and Cyburn wore.

Even as a bigger woman, she had this feminine grace about her that was almost ethereal. As she floated into the bridge to quickly gather up her cooing and cackling infant, I could see how much she loved her husband.

They obviously adored each other, and their behavior made me yearn for that same kind of intimacy and fondness for someone else.

I thought about my blossoming relationship with Cyburn and wondered where things would lead for us as far as an intimate relationship was concerned.

Up until I'd met Cyburn, I'd never actually put much thought into relationships. Perhaps it was because the 'right guy' had never come along and wowed me the way Cyburn seemed to do.

Speaking of which, Cyburn approached me from behind, cutting through my thoughts.

His almond shaped black eyes roamed over me with concern. "How are you doing?" he asked.

I gave him a warm smile, grateful that he took my feelings into consideration.

"I'm just trying to learn the ropes by watching you all work," I admitted.

Cyburn's jaw clenched slightly, and he cast me somewhat of an apologetic glance. "Sorry... it can be a bit of a stressful situation."

"No, I understand. There is a lot on the line."

“Like our lives.” Cyburn’s dark eyes twinkled.

I adjusted myself in my seat and chuckled lightly. “Yes, that’s kind of important.”

His smile radiated affection. I wanted him to kiss me, but I was too shy to admit it or ask for it.

Maybe I could work up the nerve to do it myself, although I wouldn’t hold my breath on that one.

Not to mention, every time Cyburn gave me even the most *remote* amount of attention, I could feel Amada’s scathing leer over my shoulder without even looking at her.

It made me somewhat uncomfortable, but I did my best to try and ignore it. Cyburn had yet to offer up any details on his involvement with her, although I could tell by the tension between them that there must have been something going on between them in the past that probably fizzled out. Then again, how could I really be sure? I was just running off conjecture here.

Perhaps she had feelings for Cyburn and harbored some resentment that he didn’t feel the same way. He didn’t admit it either way, but I could tell that her mere presence got under his skin.

They continuously barked at each other. Armada was the one who was causing the most trouble. She seemed to have a problem with everybody. It wasn’t just Cyburn that received the brunt end of her anger and frustration, but he seemed to be getting the heaviest dose of it for sure.

“We don’t need *outsiders* on the *bridge* with us,” Amada whispered through clenched teeth, jabbing me with a pair of dagger eyes.

Cyburn sighed as if he was trying to draw in patience from deep inside himself.

“Amada, Carmela is going to be our resident roboticist. We can’t afford to burn bridges right now. It’s important that we all try to get along.”

Part of me was annoyed that he was trying so hard to appease her. She seemed like the type who needed constant attention and wanted everyone to adore her.

I tried my best to stay out of her way for this very reason.

Amada huffed as she began to aggressively punch a series of green and yellow buttons on the edge of the bridge's control panel.

Cyburn stood up and walked away, profoundly rolling his eyes as if he was ready to throw in the towel and just give up on trying to reasonably talk to her at all.

“How are we moving on the coordinates, Captain?” one of the crew mates asked, approaching Cyburn as he left Amada's post — almost as if he had been stalking him in order to talk to Cyburn alone but was waiting until Cyburn was out of Amada's earshot to do so.

Cyburn planted his hands on his hips and heaved a heavy sigh. “Well...”

“Is trouble still brewing out there?” the crew mate asked.

I remembered seeing him when we initially returned to *The Blade*. He had been one of the lucky ones who hadn't gotten badly injured on Jun's Harvester ship. He'd managed to escape with only a few relatively minor cuts and bruises.

Then again, I counted myself among the lucky as well, along with Cyburn and Nix. Even though tensions were mounting and there was a lot of unsettled fear in the air, we had to count our blessings that we were still breathing.

Cyburn placed a hand on the crew mate's shoulder. The alien was a lot lankier than most of the others. He didn't exactly have a muscular physique, either, but I tried not to judge a book by its cover.

I was sure that if Cyburn deemed him worthy enough to be on his crew, then there had to be an important reason for it.

“We're trying to turn the ship around right now,” Cyburn explained. “It's proving to be more challenging than we initially thought because there is an issue with one of the

mainframe engines. I have a crew down there right now working on it. Silver is down there as well, reporting the status back to me through the radio.”

The crew mate’s eyes widened but he otherwise nodded solemnly and didn’t voice his fears aloud.

Now if only we could find a way to get Amada to comply like that. She obviously had beef with Cyburn, but if I didn’t know for *sure* what it was, I couldn’t identify the exact cause of her disgruntled behavior. I could only be left wondering what the hell her problem was.

“Cyburn?” Silver asked through the crackly radio attached to his armor vest.

“Yes?” he returned with a hint of optimism.

“Are you still on the bridge?”

“I am.”

“I have good news.”

Cyburn exhaled slow relief. “Wonderful. I’ve been waiting to hear someone say this to me.”

“The engine issue was just a minor glitch,” Silver explained. “It’s been restored, and we should be good to go.”

Cyburn cut a glance at Amada over his shoulder.

“Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, I heard it,” Amada barked sharply. “I’m trying to readjust the route now.”

“She’s under a lot of pressure,” Cyburn said, turning to look at me as if he thought he should be personally responsible for apologizing for Amada’s indignant behavior.

“It’s fine,” I said and offered him a wan smile.

Maybe it was none of my business what her problem was, as long as she wasn’t reckless enough to get us all killed.

Cyburn raced back to the control boards on the bridge. I tried to ignore the little jab of angst I felt that he was being slightly

dismissive, but I knew he had a lot on his mind and as the captain of this ship, a lot of responsibility to distract him too.

“I’m getting us out of range,” Amada cut sharply. “I’m not incompetent, you know.”

“No one said you *were*, Amada,” Cyburn said with a morsel of irritation in his voice.

“It’s still dicey out there,” Amada groaned, furiously working the controls.

“Just do the best you can to change course,” Cyburn advised.

“You don’t think that’s what I’m already trying to do?” Amada practically roared. “The alignment takes a minute to adjust.”

Cyburn stood up and stalked off, his green cheeks stained red with frustration.

I wanted to be able to help him or offer him support, but instead I clammed up and sat stiffly in my seat, still baffled at Amada’s brooding temper that seemed more than exaggerated for the situation.

CHAPTER
FOUR

CARMELA

The first time I realized there were other humans on board *The Blade*, it took me by quite a surprise.

Honestly, I became a little irritated that Cyburn hadn't mentioned this to me before. The first chance I got to talk to him alone, it was the first thing I mentioned.

"Why haven't you told me about the other human people on board?" I asked, trying not to let the hurt show in my voice.

"I'm sorry, I really didn't do it on purpose," Cyburn said, looking genuinely apologetic. "It's just..." he trailed off to web his fingers with mine. Then he gazed so devoutly into my eyes that I would have believed anything he said to me in the heat of that precise moment. "There was so much going on and—"

"Yeah." I nodded, realizing he really hadn't had a chance to tell me anything. I gave him a warm smile in return. "I mean I totally get it. We were out there fighting for our lives against the evil killer robots. Literally." I wasn't being sarcastic, I honestly understood.

Cyburn's shoulders relaxed with a bit of ease, and his lips finally curled into a smile of relief. "Yes — exactly."

"What is going to happen to them?" I asked. "The other people like me?"

"Well, now that we are free from that danger zone sector, we are on course to drop them off at our closest planetary embassy. Right now, we have them resting comfortably and relaxing in another wing of the ship that is meant strictly for

the humans. It's a low stress environment. They are fed and assured that they will be taken to a place where they can get the necessary help to getting them eventually flown back to Earth."

I exhaled slowly, feeling the tension releasing from my tightened chest. "Thank goodness. The extra work you do to help me, and my fellow humans is not lost on me." I stroked his hand, giving him a shy smile. "You are wonderful."

"Wait... *what?* That's the first I am hearing about making any unexpected stops."

The bedazzled Amada emerged from the hallway and stepped into the room with me and Cyburn. She was wearing a long flowing black dress and had an etherealness about her. Her petiteness was unusual for her race from what I'd seen, and I was still trying to get used to it. She was still larger than a human, but significantly smaller than Cyburn and the others.

"I was going to discuss it with you," Cyburn said, looking particularly crestfallen at her entrance to the room.

"When? I'm the chief engineer, Cyburn. Don't you think it's wise to run these things by me?" The accusatory tone of Amada's voice was undeniable.

The line in Cyburn's structured jawline twitched. His eyes narrowed and he gave Amada a dark gaze — furthering my confusion about what the hell was going on between the pair. The tension was so thick in the room that it practically choked me.

"I was getting to it," Cyburn said, his voice altered by the stiffness in his jaw.

Amada's gaze was even more glacial. She folded her arms curtly across her chest and pursed her lips into a pencil-thin line.

"But you thought it was better to tell the *human* about it *first?*" There was a thin slice of betrayal in Amada's voice.

Cyburn sighed with exasperation.

I contemplated silently slipping out of the room to let the two of them duke it out with each other, but something told me that Cyburn would be insistent that I stay. It didn't matter. I was so uncomfortable I felt rooted to where I stood, anyway.

Amada shifted her weight and huffed loudly, enough to get her point across with the simplicity of the annoying noise in itself.

“Well, what about *her*?” Amada nudged her chin in my direction. “Will *she* be dropped off at the local embassy as well?”

“You know we've already discussed this.” Cyburn talked methodically and patiently as if he were trying to reason with a stubborn toddler and not the ship's chief engineer. “Carmela will be staying with us for—”

“*Indefinitely*?” Amada shrieked as if that would be her worst nightmare of a situation for her.

Cyburn's mouth opened and then he quickly clamped it shut again. His eyes skidded to me for a moment before reverting back to Amada.

He looked like he was at a loss for words.

I was seriously starting to get irked that she was speaking about me so viciously as if I wasn't in the room and couldn't hear every venomous word that dripped from her tongue.

“Even if we weren't at liberty to use her skill and experience against these Belic robots, it wouldn't be possible to just ‘drop off’ Carmela,” Cyburn said. “But I didn't say indefinitely. You're putting words in my mouth. Sometimes I like to live in the present and solve one *present* problem at a time, Amada.”

“Why can't she go back with the others?” Amada hitched a skeptical eyebrow and cut Cyburn a disheartened scowl.

Cyburn's gaze reached mine for a second time before he looked back to Amada, looking somewhat on edge as if he was ready to explode like an unstable stick of dynamite.

My heart pounded. My stomach twisted into knots. Every time Amada came around, she brought with her a path of emotional destruction simply by opening her mouth and speaking.

More importantly, it made me severely uncomfortable to be the obvious source of their arguments.

Cyburn didn't answer right away. He still looked like he didn't know how to answer her.

"Can't we just weave around and drop her back at Earth where she belongs?" Amada asked. "That seems safely far away enough from here. The Belic want her. It's like we have live *bait* on our ship with us!"

My blood pressure was steaming — on the brink of screaming to the surface like a boiling kettle of water on the stove.

The audacity of this cruel woman was unbelievable. I couldn't believe she was in charge of the logistics of where this ship went, with her irate, irrational behavior.

It baffled my mind. She seemed insane — or at the very least, a person with a borderline explosive temper. Should someone with a hot head *really* be in charge of steering this ship along course through the vacuum of space?

Cyburn slowly released a breath and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger.

"It's complicated," Cyburn mentioned.

"Well explain it to me then!" Amada demanded. "I'm not *stupid*."

"No one said you were." Cyburn had a hazy look in his black eyes as if Amada was causing him to keep losing his train of thought. "Earth is a pre-first contact world. It has no embassies. We aren't taking the others to an Earth embassy. They have already been cleared for a local one, as I just explained to you. Their names are already on the register, and they've got clearance to leave the ship. Carmela isn't one of them. This puts her at an exponential risk, Amada. We have to think ahead, of the consequences. Everyone on this ship deserves the same level of safety and protection, regardless of their race."

"Don't play the race card—"

“I’m not playing anything,” Cyburn cut Amada off with a lecturing tone. “Without access to a Belic trans-warp drive like the Harvester had, I can’t do anything about getting Carmela registered to be taken to an embassy at this current time.”

“Besides, I’ve already agreed to stay and help,” I said, feeling the need to add my two cents, not to mention defend myself.

I had no idea what Cyburn was talking about. He was right when he said in the beginning of his explanation that it was complicated.

“Well, why can’t we just toss the dead weight out of the airlock,” Amada hissed with a nasty snarl on her green-complexioned face. “That will save us all a lot of trouble in the end, *believe me.*”

I snapped to a standing position, unable to contain my anger or handle any more of this snarky bullshit from this stranger.

“How dare you talk to me that way,” I said, my fists curled into balls, on the brink of losing control of my own temper. “Who the hell do you think you are? Who shoved a knife up your ass, anyway?”

Amada turned to me, her cheeks red hot, her black eyes flashing with rage.

I knew I was probably in even *deeper* hot water with her now, but I had zero regrets about sticking up for myself against somebody who was so steadfast about trying to callously tear me down and rip me to shreds. I wasn’t going to let her win under *any* circumstances.

CHAPTER
FIVE

CYBURN

“**Y**ou’re going to have to get involved, you know,” Nix muttered to me out of the corner of his mouth.

He and a few of my other brigade of soldiers had just walked inside the room only moments before.

It didn’t take them long to realize they were entering a snake pit where two flurried women were only one wrong move above ripping each other’s hair out and wrestling each other to the ground in a bitter cat fight — all claws out.

“I know,” I whispered back, although I continued to hesitate.

I didn’t want this to escalate into a brawl between them, but I couldn’t exactly assume that they would take my advice to shake hands and make up, either.

Now, my crew was standing there looking baffled and suspiciously waiting to see the drama unfold between Amada and Carmela.

Drama — mind you, that had been one hundred percent started by Amada. No one would argue that. We were used to Amada’s bad attitude around here, but poor Carmela looked so hurt and confused after Amada had so cruelly suggested we throw the ‘dead weight,’ meaning Carmela herself, off the ship. She had stood up, looking ready to start throwing punches in order to defend herself.

Now both females were standing only a couple inches apart from each other, their eyes locked in a vicious death stare against the other.

Both their chests rose and fell with angry defiance against the other. They looked like they were ready to dig each other's throats out.

Meanwhile my heart pounded with unease. What was I going to do if this situation took a wrong turn? It was one thing to have them start screaming at each other, but if things got physical, I'd be in hot water.

I didn't want to test that theory, so I cautiously stepped up beside them. I couldn't inch my way *between* the seething pair, but when they both flicked their eyes in my direction, they both eased up on each other somewhat. Each slackened their shoulders, but their scowls remained fully engrained into their facial features.

Carmela's brief glance toward me was one of soft apology. Amada's, on the other hand, was exactly what I expected. Scathing and contemptuous. If steam could have been billowing out of her ears and nose at that point, I'm sure it would have been.

"Just stay out of it," Amada barked.

Her black eyes narrowed into distrusting slits aimed at Carmela.

"I can hardly stay out of an issue that's taking place on *my* ship," I reminded her. "*I'm* the captain."

"Then act like it, and get rid of the extra *cargo*," Amada said snidely, still staring daggers at Carmela — who stared right back with an aggressive leer of her own.

Carmela stiffened. Her jaw tightened and she pursed her lips together while glaring at Amada. Her eyes were red rimmed, but she didn't cry. She was holding her own. I marveled at her adorable, feisty beauty. She was sweet and good natured, unlike the fiery ball of wrath that made up Amada's body and soul.

"You can't talk to her like that, Amada," I said, my voice booming in a warning through the room.

Amada blinked up at me. The emotional wounds shone deep in her eyes. She looked at me like I was the scorned lover who

had betrayed her to a point where it warped her entire mindset.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice dripping with animosity. “I didn’t realize my emotions fell under the umbrella of your authority.”

“Your emotions don’t,” I said flatly. “But your actions on this ship absolutely do.”

Amada inhaled sharply. Her green cheeks were getting red again. In fact, she looked like she was ready to cry too, but no tears spilled over. She was too hardened inside to let them out in front of anyone else. What she did behind closed doors was a different story.

I should know. I was her ex-lover.

It came at a price, and I was monumentally paying for it now. Amada was deep in my pockets so to speak, cleaning me out as far as that was concerned.

I was trying to stay calm inside, especially for Carmela’s sake and the sake of my crew. I had to lead by example, but I was bottling it up inside and ready to explode. My blood was boiling. It was taking every ounce of sanity and control I had not to lose my temper with Amada.

Amada shot me a curt glance. “I know how to do my job properly.”

“Your behavior is distracting,” I told her. “It demonstrates otherwise.”

“Take it up with the chief of the intergalactic police, then,” Amada remarked sarcastically.

My jaw tightened. “Maybe you should just go and get back to your post before things get out of hand.”

“You have been saying that to me a lot lately,” Amada droned in a voice that sounded almost like a whine. She could act like such a spoiled brat sometimes.

“Well, maybe you should take the advice to heart, then,” I said. “We’d have far less problems.”

Amada glanced around the room as it was just now dawning on her that she had an audience. Amada was usually the type to do whatever she could to draw attention to herself, but now her cheeks were stained red, and she acted like the attention was uninvited.

Amada gave me a self-conscious glance before looking away, her eyes and head skirting downcast.

I took my opportunity while before her shred of vulnerability faded out completely.

“Go, Amada. Back to your post. We have work to do, and I need you steering my ship and not wasting time on arguing with people you have no business arguing with in the first place.”

Amada turned a healthy shade of crimson before her bottom lip jutted out into an enormous pout of defiance. She glanced between me and Carmela as if she somehow thought Carmela would agree with me and she was waiting to contest us both, but Carmela looked incredibly uncomfortable and just steered her gaze to the floor instead.

“You know... I’m not some piece of garbage you can just toss in the trash,” Amada said, the hurt in her voice undeniably exposed.

“I don’t view you as trash to throw away,” I groaned impatiently. “I’m acknowledging the fact that I need my perfectly capable chief engineer to return to her post and do her job efficiently.”

“Fine, I’ll go,” Amada hissed through a clenched jaw, giving Carmela a break to focus her glare of death upon me instead.

She began to stomp off, while a few snickers and quiet chortles came from the crew members in the room with us. Amada didn’t turn around or pay them any consideration otherwise. I knew she was too mortified to do so.

Once Amada had made her thunderous departure, I quickly turned toward Carmela to repair some of the damage left in Amada’s wake.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I will make sure she doesn’t bother you anymore.”

“What’s wrong with her, anyway?” Carmela asked with a cocked eyebrow.

I shook my head somberly and glanced at my crew mates who were eyeing me curiously.

I placed an empathetic hand on her arm and turned my back to the crew, hoping that they couldn’t overhear us.

“Do you mind if we talk about this privately a little later?”

Carmela didn’t hesitate. “Of course. Whatever you need to do.”

There wasn’t a single ounce of suspicion or judgement in her expression. She looked at me with such an innocent trust that it melted my heart. She was so pure. I vowed to always protect her and do my best *never* to hurt her.

“Thank you.” I began slowly walking her toward the door. “I’ll meet up with you later. Maybe we can have dinner alone?”

Carmela’s wide green eyes lit up. “I’d really like that.”

“Okay, great,” I said as I escorted her to the door. “Thank you for understanding. I promise that I’ll explain everything to you as soon as I can.”

“I believe you.” Carmela gave me a buoyant smile.

She was the polar opposite of Amada. I could never take her for granted. She was a lucky pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. I wanted to dedicate myself to her, but I knew it started with honesty — and *I* was the one who wasn’t exactly being forthcoming. Carmela deserved better and I intended to give it to her.

I felt guilty about the confusion Carmela must have been feeling considering Amada, but I promised myself that I would make it up to her the first chance I got. I needed to blow off some steam first and let my sizzling temper dial down a bit. Not to mention, I didn’t want to talk to her in front of my crew of Alesian warriors.

As soon as Carmela was gone, the questions started coming at me left and right.

“What are you going to do about the love triangle?” Nix asked with a teasing smirk.

I closed the door and gave him an irked eye roll. “It’s not a love triangle.”

“It sure seems like it to me.”

“There is nothing going on between me and Amada.”

Nix’s eyebrows formed into little arches. “But there is between you and Carmela—”

I rubbed my throbbing temples. “Yes. But that has no bearing on what is going on.”

“Really? You think not? Then what *is* going on?”

None of your damn business.

I sighed loudly. “You know that Amada is still bitter about our breakup. Whenever a new girl shows up in the picture and I show her even the most *remote* amount of interest, Amada goes ballistic about it. She doesn’t like it one bit, regardless of the fact that we aren’t together anymore and I don’t ever plan to get back together with her.”

“That much is obvious,” Nix said with a chuckle, in agreement with me.

“I feel like I’ve unintentionally made Carmela a target of Amada’s now,” I said, collapsing into a chair. My shoulders wilted. I felt so defeated when it came to women sometimes. They were frustratingly difficult to figure out.

“What are you going to do about it?” Nix asked, his expression empathetic now.

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging glumly and feeling unnecessarily sorry for myself. “I guess I’m going to have to talk to Carmela privately about it later. I’ll explain everything to her, even though I know it might be unpleasant.”

“She’ll probably understand,” Nix said. “She seems like a nice enough girl.”

“She does,” I agreed with a nod. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to enjoy the conversation at all.”

CHAPTER
SIX

CARMELA

Later that evening, Cyburn and I were in his private quarters eating dinner alone together, just as we'd planned.

I was a little nervous because I wasn't really sure what to expect, but I *did* expect to get to the bottom of what Amada's beef was with me.

Cyburn and I were dining on a mixture of vegetables and meats... none of which I understood what they were, but Cyburn assured me they were safely prepared by the on-board chef in the kitchen and that the ingredients were made organically and perfectly safe for humans.

Whatever it was, it tasted good, and it filled me up. The texture didn't bother me, and it was an overall pleasant meal.

I had been starving ever since getting on board *The Blade* and I was just happy to be eating *anything* of sustenance.

At first, we stuck to the basics. We talked about banal things, just making chit-chat kind of conversation. The conversation flowed smoothly between us, something that made me feel more comfortable around him.

"You have amazing living quarters here," I admitted, glancing around. "I would never want to leave if this was my personal space."

We were sitting at a table in the corner of the room. On the other side was a relatively large sized bed, along with night-stands and lamps on each side.

Cyburn also had his own private en suite bathroom attached to his room, along with a little eating area which was where we were.

“I could take it or leave it,” Cyburn said, pausing to chew as his gaze roamed humbly around the room. “I don’t spend a lot of time in here.”

I grinned at him. “You have a tight ship to run. Literally.”

He laughed and nodded along. “Yes, that’s true.”

I watched his structured jaw line as he took another bite of food from his plate. He was perfect in every way. If someone had told me a month ago that I would be on an alien ship — having it bad for the alien captain as well — I would have told them they were crazy.

We were seated at a table near the windows. There was nothing but blackness out there. It was incredibly beautiful and incredibly terrifying at the same time.

To look outside made you feel like you were so small, not even *dust* in comparison to the vastness of space. We were living in an infinite universe that stretched out across an unfathomably endless horizon.

An ever expanding universe, sending the galaxies further and further apart to unimaginable distances. It just made a person wonder sometimes. What was the purpose? What was it all for? What were we here to do? Create, protect? The possibilities seemed as endless as the density of space itself.

“What are you thinking about?” Cyburn asked, taking another bite of his vegetable medley.

I took a deep breath, still staring outside the windows.

“That everything that exists on the other side of these windows could kill us in an instant if we were exposed and not wearing life support equipment. It’s hard to think about it. At home you can just open a window or step outside. Here, you can’t do any of that unless you’re fully prepared beforehand. There is no room for critical error when you’re riding on a spaceship.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Cyburn nodded, taking a moment to gaze outside the window himself. “It is quite humbling.”

“A little scary, too,” I admitted.

“Are you feeling scared right now?” Cyburn focused on me, his features etched with concern.

I contemplated. “Not *right* now. Not if I don’t let myself think too hard about it.”

Cyburn reached across the table and cupped his hand over mine. He gave me an endearing smile. “I told you before, you don’t need to worry too much about anything. You are safe here.”

I slowly inched my hand away from his grasp and placed it down in my lap.

Cyburn frowned. “Is everything alright?”

I supposed *I* was going to have to be the one who was going to have to bring up the sensitive topic that we’d tiptoed around earlier.

“You... told me we were going to talk privately about the whole...” I trailed off a moment while Cyburn continued to give me an expectant stare. I scratched the side of my cheek and shifted my weight awkwardly in the seat. “You know, the whole Amada situation.”

Her name felt sour on my tongue, like a bad aftertaste of a food you didn’t enjoy.

Cyburn placed his fork down on the plate and released a heavy sigh. He leaned back in his chair and suddenly looked pensive.

I experienced a prickly sensation throughout my body, like a wave of needles being gently poked into my flesh from all over.

“Right.”

He looked like he’d rather get a root canal than discuss Amada with me, but he had promised, and I needed to know what was going on between them, if anything.

“She makes me feel like I don’t belong here,” I admitted with some grief resounding in my voice.

Cyburn’s eyes met mine. They were dark and full of sorrow and apology.

“You *do* belong. You don’t need to worry about Amada and her insensitive comments. Her opinion doesn’t matter in the least.”

I highly doubted that. Amada was the boastful type who did as she pleased and spoke her mind freely without consequence, even in front of her captain, Cyburn.

That was probably why she was able to get away with it so often. If no one was going to stop her or reprimand her for her behavior, then why *would* she be inclined to ever want to correct it?

I glanced down at my plate. My appetite vanished and was replaced with sickening knots. Maybe Cyburn had a change of heart and wasn’t going to give me the scoop on Amada after all.

I was getting ready to excuse myself back to my own nighttime quarters when Cyburn spoke again, and what he said was a bombshell that immediately imploded on impact.

It was something that I never would have expected him to say, yet at the same time, I was somehow waiting for him to admit it.

“Amada and I... have a history.” As soon as Cyburn admitted this, he cringed and looked away as if he couldn’t handle looking me in the eye. He seemed... embarrassed.

I sat up straight and leaned forward. I forgot all about returning to my side of the ship. I wasn’t going *anywhere* now.

“What kind of history?”

I stared at him for so long that he had no choice but to return my gaze.

“We were... together.” He licked his lips anxiously.

“Together as in a couple? Lovers? Intimate relationship?” I fired question after question at him, even though I didn’t mean to sound so invasive.

Cyburn nodded. He didn’t seem too perturbed. “Yes. All of the above.” His voice was really low, as if he felt guilty about revealing the truth to me about something that happened before we’d even met.

I slunk back in my seat and leaned my back into it.

“Wow.”

Cyburn’s eyes were all over the place before they finally landed on me. He had a lot of regret on his face.

“I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

I decided to cut him some slack.

“It’s okay. I mean... I suppose it’s not really any of my business.”

“It is when she treats you like you aren’t important,” Cyburn said.

He was right. “Yeah.”

“I am not going to let her get away with this.”

I had a lot of doubt about that, especially because I could hear the traces of doubt in his voice.

“How much of a problem is Amada going to be?” The million dollar question escaped from my lips before I had time to stop it.

I didn’t care if he used to be in a relationship with her. I didn’t want to know the details. I certainly didn’t want to picture it in my head.

“What do you mean?” Cyburn looked at me quizzically.

I let my shoulders shrug. “If she is still in love with you and threatened by me, then that might become a real issue. If she gets too obsessively focused on *me* and not doing her *job*, she could put your entire crew in danger.”

Cyburn's black eyes widened with shock as if this theory had never dawned on him until now.

He hesitated before answering. He looked me in the eye and made a promise — a promise that I desperately wanted to believe.

“She is not going to be a problem. Trust me on that.”

“I *want* to trust you.”

“I haven't let you down yet.”

I smiled at him across the table. “I can't argue with that.”

We held each other's gaze for an extended period of time before Cyburn broke the silence. “I assure you that as soon as we get the other refugees settled and situated at the local embassy, I'll give Amada a stern talking to.”

It didn't seem like enough to me, and it seemed like an issue that needed to be dealt with right away instead of being placed on the back burner.

I had a feeling that Cyburn was just buying time and hoping that I would forget about it by the time all that other stuff happened. My level of frustration began to increase, involving the subject.

Unfortunately, I didn't know how to properly *voice* my frustrations. They were just running rampant inside my brain and building up to a dangerous level.

I actually felt the stain of heat on my face. I was getting too worked up and needed to find a way to internally calm myself down. Was I *really* insisting that my new 'lover'...if I could even *call* him that, reprimand his *ex-lover*?

Then again, why not? She wasn't going to leave me alone until something was done about it. Should I just let him off the hook and take care of the problem myself? I was perfectly capable of defending myself. I'd done it all my life.

Cyburn must have noticed my unrest because he took my hand again and squeezed it softly. This time I let him hold onto it.

“She is not going to bother you anymore. I won't let her.”

“Okay,” I whispered, my voice cracking, although this surprised me because I didn’t feel like I was going to cry.

What else could I do but take his word for it?

He was still dodging the root of the problem, however. He wasn’t really satiating my worries for the future. Simply telling me he would ‘take care of it’ or, ‘talk to her,’ didn’t seem like the most productive solution.

“You still seem upset,” Cyburn said, gazing into my eyes skeptically. He had enough empathy in his eyes to turn my perspective in the right direction, however.

“It’s a little tough,” I admitted. “I can’t trust her, but if *you* want to vouch for her—”

“I vouch for her as an engineer,” Cyburn said somewhat vaguely.

I wished he would elaborate but he didn’t. Oh well.

“Why don’t we take a walk?” he suggested.

“A walk?” I looked at him. “To where?”

“I can take you to the bridge and introduce you to the rest of the crew,” he suggested. “Perhaps meeting some of the others will give you a better idea of how things actually run around here. Then you’ll see that the hostility comes only from Amada. I can assure you that everyone else will be friendly to you.”

He had a point.

“Everyone else has been welcoming so far,” I agreed.

Cyburn looked relieved to hear that. “Good.”

“Sure, I’ll take a walk with you.” My spirits lifted when I realized that he wanted to introduce me to the rest of his crew.

It proved to me that on some level, maybe he really *did* care about smoothing out my feelings and showing me around the place to get me to feel more comfortable.

He didn’t want to just ‘hide me away.’ In fact, it was the exact opposite. He seemed eager to show me off. I had to give him

the benefit of the doubt — another chance.

Besides, I was *really* falling hard for him. I mean I *really* had it *bad* for him. I didn't want to just give up on that. He made me feel good. My crush on him wasn't just going to disappear overnight on its own.

“Are you finished eating?” Cyburn asked, nudging his chin in the direction of my half empty plate.

“Oh... yeah.” I gave him a chagrined smile. “Sorry. It was really good. I just got full halfway through—”

“You don't have to explain yourself to me,” Cyburn said. “You eat when you're hungry, and you don't have to eat when you aren't.”

I smiled, trying to relax. “Simple enough, right?”

“It should be.”

His charming grin was back, giving me the hots for him all over again.

“We managed to escape the Harvester ship,” he reminded me. “Let's celebrate the fact that we averted that crisis. Let's worry about one thing at a time, but for tonight, let's try not to worry at all.”

I took a deep breath, allowing his words to sink into my soul.

“Yes,” I said with a wholehearted smile. “You're right. Let's celebrate the victories, no matter what falls in the way.”

CHAPTER
SEVEN

CARMELA

Later that night, I was alone with Cyburn in his living quarters. The door was closed and locked. We had total privacy. We could be as uninhibited as we wanted. It was quiet throughout the ship. Everyone was leaving us alone, *finally*.

We took advantage of the quality alone time. I embraced his attention. I wanted him all to myself, even if it was just for tonight. Cyburn seemed to feel the same way. He was possessive over me, but in a good way. He was a total gentleman.

He laid me down on the bed, naked, and began giving me tender kisses. He stroked my hair and caressed me. He gently traced every curve I had.

I gazed deep into his black, almond shaped eyes. I raked my fingernails through his white-blond hair and dragged them down his back.

I felt a rush when his hands explored me. He cupped my bare breasts in his hands and tenderly sucked on my nipples. He laced my body with kisses and delicate caresses.

His fingers fanned out and moved like silk across my body, inching ever downward. My heart pounded with desire and excitement. I wanted him to take all of me. It wasn't just about wanting him to rearrange my insides, either.

I mean... I loved the primal sex part. I didn't mind it if he was a little rough and tossed me around a bit. I loved how much bigger he was than me. It was also about our connection, the

intimacy. We shared a bond, and every time we kissed and touched, made love, it helped establish that bond and made it grow even stronger than it was before.

I wanted the whole experience while we had the private time. I wanted to sexually wrestle and play with him in the bed until the next morning, thrashing and screwing in the sheets until they were twisted into knots. I didn't want to come up for air until we were both exhausted and couldn't keep it up a second more.

Cyburn's fingertips lightly brushed up against my inner thighs. He grinned and paused, right before he got to the delicious, gooey center where all the magic happened. He was deliberately pausing just to drive me crazy, but I loved every second of it.

When I looked into his eyes, the stars collided. My breath rushed out of my lungs and burst through my mouth as soon as he slipped his fingers through the folds of my most secret places. He touched me where it was warm inside, where all life began, where paradise lived forever.

It was glorious. I couldn't believe I'd been missing out on this my entire life. I was addicted to the way he caressed my clit. He had big fingers, but he used them gracefully. I tried not to think about how his hands had probably been on Amada's same places. I wanted to live in the moment. For now, it was only us.

My breath caught in my throat when he pushed his index finger inside me, burying it as deep as he could get it. He groaned with satisfaction. His eyelids fluttered and an enormous grin spread out across his lips.

"You're so wet," he said proudly.

"It feels so good." I nibbled on my bottom lip, instinctively spreading my legs wider apart to give Cyburn all the access he wanted to send me to the stars.

He stroked my clit with his thumb while he fucked me with his finger. I arched my back and bucked my hips, pushing them closer to him, moaning.

The world started melting around me. Everything got blurry. I felt fuzzy on the inside. A tingle started in my clit and spread this sensational warmth across my entire body. The moan that escaped my lips was a cry of ecstasy.

Cyburn continued fucking me with his finger and rubbing my clit, but he didn't do it hard and fast. He did it slow and gently, making the orgasm feel even more incredible. I stiffened as I climaxed, pressing my hands to my temples as the world disappeared for a few seconds.

When I finally finished, I was gasping for air and dizzy, consumed by rippling aftershocks of pleasure.

Cyburn kissed me and hugged me close to his body.

"Good girl," he whispered, kissing my neck. "How was it?"

"Amazing," I panted, staring at the ceiling, unable to move and spread out like a starfish across his bed.

"I'm not finished with you yet," he said and grabbed me by the hips.

I knew he was going to destroy me. I couldn't wait for it. He gave me another passionate kiss. I glanced down, wanting to steal a glimpse of his massive green cock before he buried it inside me.

It was so stiff and swollen. I couldn't wait for it to fill my insides. Cyburn pushed my legs apart. There was an untamed gleam in his eyes. He looked like he couldn't wait to rip into me until we both screamed with ecstasy.

He groaned with satisfaction as the tip of his cock pushed apart my engorged pussy lips. He helped himself to me, going deeper, thrusting to get it all the way in.

The sensations were incredible and took me to a different place in mind, body and spirit.

I weaved my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer.

"Cyburn..." I whispered.

"Do you want me to fuck you hard?" he whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered back breathlessly. It sounded like an urgent plea escaping from my lips.

“I love it when you beg for it,” Cyburn murmured.

“Yes,” I whimpered. “It’s so good.”

Cyburn ground his hips against mine. I squirmed underneath him, unable to control the heavenly sensations. He kissed me possessively, then cuffed his hands around my wrists and pinned me to the bed, thrusting harder, but not faster. It was the perfect ratio. He was hitting all the right spots.

I was on the brink of succumbing to paradise once again. I was flying high, soaring through the roof. I felt like I was spiraling as we flew through the galaxy. I could have never dreamed of a more mind-blowing experience.

Beads of sweat popped up like little silver, glistening spheres across Cyburn’s green skin. My heart raced. I was ready to explode. His swollen shaft rubbed up against my clit, threatening to send me over the edge in a split second without warning.

“Cyburn,” I pleaded. “Let me come.”

“Wait for me,” he groaned. “I’m so close, darling.”

I squeezed my legs against his torso, coiling my legs around him like a snake.

Cyburn pressed his lips to mine. He took my breasts and squeezed them gently as he ground into me.

His hands brushed across my torso. His eyes roamed everywhere, all over my naked body. My hands canvased his back as I raked my nails against his hard, green skin.

Cyburn groaned and stiffened. The sweet release was coming for both of us. As the orgasm hit me, I started to blackout from the pleasure for several moments. I stiffened too, and pressed my palms to my eyes, squeezing them shut tight. I arched my back and tried not to scream but the moan I released was long and loud.

Cyburn pulled out of me just as he started to climax himself. I felt the flood of his hot cum splash across my belly and

breasts. Satisfaction burrowed into my bones and endorphins rushed through my veins. The world was blurry, and I was saturated in complete heaven.

Cyburn rested his massive cock on my thigh. It was still hard as steel. He was shaking slightly. My muscles trembled in the aftermath of that glorious orgasm.

He laid down beside me momentarily before reaching for a towel beside the bed. He started to wipe away the milky colored liquid that was splashed across my frame. He gave me a sheepish grin.

“Sorry about the mess.” He chuckled.

I reached up and brushed my fingers through his hair and smiled. “I don’t mind the mess, sweetheart. It was *so* much fun to make it.”

Cyburn leaned in and softly kissed my cheek. “It sure was, darling.”

He laid beside me and stroked my back. Even after sex he was such a giver. He really paid attention on how to care for me and how to satisfy my needs. That was important, especially since he was my first and only lover. He made sex feel like such an enjoyable bonding time for me.

A little while later, we were still laying, sprawled out across Cyburn’s bed in a naked, sweaty bliss together. I was laying on my side with my right leg draped over his torso. I was hugging my body close to him and stroking his bare, muscular chest with the tips of the fingers of my right hand.

I noticed his eyes on me, just watching me with an affectionate smile. I met his gaze, returning the smile.

“Hi,” he whispered.

“Hi,” I whispered back, unable to suppress an enormous grin.

I just felt so relaxed and satisfied. I still felt like I was running on an adrenaline high, fueled by incredible sex and orgasms.

“How are you feeling?” Cyburn asked.

“Amazing,” I said with a long, contented sigh. I rested my head in the nook of his arm, feeling safe and protected.

“Me too.” He stroked my back and kissed the top of my head.

“Can I admit something to you?” I asked.

“Of course.” His voice sounded curious.

“You are the first...” I trailed off.

“I knew I was your first,” Cyburn mentioned gently, with no judgement whatsoever. “You told me before, remember?”

I propped myself up on one elbow. “No, it’s not that. I mean... you are my first... the first man I’ve ever been attracted to, *too*.”

Cyburn arched an eyebrow with a naughty gleam in his eyes. “Does that mean—”

“No.” I shook my head and laughed. “I know where you are going with this. I was never attracted to *anyone* until you came along.”

I wanted to explain it as love at first sight, but I wasn’t sure if that was the appropriate thing to say. I wasn’t even really *sure* if that was *truly* what I was experiencing. I was still confused emotionally, but in an exciting way.

“Well, I have to admit that gives me a little ego boost,” Cyburn joked.

“Yeah, I know,” I agreed and sighed again, placing my head back in his arm nook. “Before, well, I was too focused on robotics and things that I didn’t even notice men. Then, after school I just never really had *time* to even give romance much of a thought. I was too focused on building up my career.”

“Lucky for me then.” Cyburn laughed. “I’m glad you weren’t already attached to someone.”

I smiled. “I suppose I could say the same thing about *you*.”

We were both quiet for a moment. I knew we were both probably thinking about the Amada situation, but neither one of us wanted to bring her up while we were still bonding and feeling a hazy laziness from our lovemaking session.

“Lucky me also that you *did* spend so much time focusing on your career.”

I gazed up at him and gave him a teasing grin. “Why is that? So, you can use my skills to your advantage?”

Cyburn laughed and roped his arms around me, squeezing me in a loveable hug that gave me all the warm and fuzzy feels. “Hey you said it, not me.”

“I know, I’m just kidding.” Nothing in the world could wipe this smile off my face right now.

I wished we could lay here together forever. I wished there wasn’t a cruel world out there focused deliberately on ending our lives one by one.

“I want you to be happy.” Cyburn sounded so sincere that it was heartwarming to me.

I gazed up at him affectionately. “I am. I’m enjoying my time with you.”

“Which leads me to my next question.”

“Uh-oh.”

Cyburn reached around my body and held me a little closer. I liked his possessive nature. It made me feel secure.

“Are you *really* considering staying on board with my crew for good? Staying...” he trailed off and paused. I knew what was coming, but he said the words anyway. “Staying with me?”

Regardless of what my heart wanted; I didn’t see what choice I *had* other than staying with Cyburn. Not that I wanted to tell that to *him*. It seemed unnecessarily insensitive. It wasn’t like I could just book a flight back to Earth and be home at my apartment by breakfast tomorrow morning. On the other hand, I really *did* want to be with him.

“I like the idea of...” I almost said ‘us’, but I stopped myself.

“What is it?” Cyburn softly stroked my hair.

I started again. “Like I said, I’m having fun with you.”

“For now.” His voice had a disappointed drawl.

“For the foreseeable future,” I offered instead to give him more hope.

He breathed in slowly and let it out even slower. His heart thumped against my eardrum as I pressed my head against the hardness of his chest. I felt so comfortable with him. Subconsciously I knew I wanted to stay with him no matter what.

We lay together in silence for a while. I didn't know what was on his mind, but as the mess of kinks inside my head started to knot even *more*, I knew I had an even bigger mess to deal with in my waking world.

Amada.

The reminder of Cyburn's bitter ex came screaming back to the front of my brain. Staying with Cyburn instead of trying to get myself to the nearest intergalactic embassy was going to come with its fair share of problems.

This gave me doubts. I didn't know what to do, but I was rapidly approaching a fork in the road. I would have to make a decision soon.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

CYBURN

I was the first to wake the next morning. I took a few moments to watch a peaceful Carmela as she slept soundly in the corner of my bed. Her legs were tucked up tight to her chest. She was sleeping in a little ball. She was already tiny and cute, and with the scrunched up way she was sleeping, it made her look even more adorable.

Her wavy brown hair was fanned out haphazardly across the pillow. It was soft and plush. I reached out and gently brushed my fingertips across the locks, unable to resist the temptation to feel how soft it was, and I wasn't disappointed.

Upon my movement, Carmela's eyelids fluttered, and she released a soft, contented sigh. She let out a quiet, sexy moan and stretched, rolling over, her body now facing me. She was still naked. She didn't seem too bothered to conceal it, which pleased me. Her bare tummy was flat and so appealing. I wanted to kiss and lick the toned features of her abdominal muscles.

I stared between her legs, looking at the pink flesh that brought us both enormous amounts of pleasure.

Her eyes lazily opened, one at a time, and she peered up at me with a groggy blink. Her pale pink lips parted, and her restful expression was affectionate and adorable.

"Good morning," I whispered to her and tenderly brushed my lips against hers.

"Good morning." Her voice was low and silky with sleep.

"I didn't mean to wake you," I apologized.

Carmela moaned again and stretched out her coiled legs. She reached her slender arms over her head in a big stretch and yawned. I was happy that she felt so relaxed in my bed with me.

“That’s okay. I want to wake up if you’re up so we can spend some time together.” Her smile was genuine, not clingy.

“Are you hungry? We can go downstairs and get some breakfast from the mess hall soon,” I suggested.

Carmela frowned, clearly contemplating the offer. “I’m not terribly starving right now, but that sounds nice. Perhaps I can work up an appetite.”

Anything we could do to extend the time we got to spend together.

“I wanted to talk to you about something before we got dressed and went down there,” I admitted.

Carmela grinned. Her wide green eyes flashed with amusement. “Do you mind if I um...” she trailed off, pointing to my private en suite quarters, “use the bathroom first?”

I stood up and gestured for her to help herself. “Of course. Be my guest. What’s mine is yours.”

She was more than a guest. She was turning into my lover, and I embraced every glorious moment of it. Each time we were intimate, it solidified our bond even more, but it also made me crave her in a more intense way. I was really setting myself up for trouble with how much I was starting to care for her.

Carmela wrapped the sheets around her naked body and gave me a sheepish smile as she awkwardly sauntered toward the bathroom and closed the door behind her, behaving as if she were suddenly shy to show off her beautiful body that I’d already seen in all its magnificent flesh. She was a masterpiece, a true work of art.

I let her have her privacy and looked through the morning briefing on my tablet. Carmela emerged from the bathroom a couple of minutes later looking more refreshed and rosy-cheeked. She was also wearing her normal clothes, a black shirt, and black pants that hugged to her petite frame. Her hair

was also a little tidier than when she first went in. She looked well put together and was naturally stunning.

“Okay,” she said and clapped her hands together with a bright smile. “I’m ready to take on the day. What’s the first thing on the agenda?”

I appreciated her enthusiasm. I sat down on the bed and patted the empty spot next to me.

“That’s what I was going to talk to you about,” I mentioned.

Carmela sat down beside me. Her thigh inadvertently brushed up against mine. She was so petite and wonderful. I got a little tingle in my cock, and my instant hard-on began to throb with desire.

It was too bad she wasn’t still naked. If she *were*, then I would have most definitely tried to jump her bones again for a quick and passionate morning fuck. I hoped there would be more time for that later today, or even later this morning if I allowed myself to think ambitiously.

“I wanted to let you in on the plans I have for my squadron from this point forward,” I began.

“Of course.” Carmela stared at me with one-hundred percent invested interest.

I respected her devotion to the cause. It made me even more attracted to her. She calmed my agitated nerves without even trying.

I wished I could explain to her in words how much I cared for her in the brief amount of time that we’d been in a relationship — a relationship that was quickly moving from casual to more serious the more time we spent together.

“My squadron and I haven’t worked this hard for nothing,” I began.

“I don’t doubt it.” Carmela nodded agreeably.

I cupped my hand over hers. “That’s why it’s so important to retake our solar system piece by piece and give it back to our own Alesians. We have been rogueing out here in space for so long. They are getting stir crazy and desperate for action.”

“How are you going to put it all together?” Carmela’s eyes grew wide, not with doubt, but with curiosity on how I planned to accomplish the vigorous task.

“It’s not going to be easy,” I admitted. “The next planet in my freedom path is my native home world.”

“Alesis?”

“Yes.”

Carmela’s hand reached up and tenderly stroked my forearm. “I’m here for you, whatever it takes.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I paused and glanced at my lap. “Right now, the planet is heavily secured by a robot army. They are guarding it with every ounce of programmed juice in their bodies.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Carmela admitted and knitted her eyebrows.

“It gets worse,” I explained. “They are being continuously watched by an Operator... I’m talking around the clock surveillance. That’s what makes it so difficult to get around them, let alone kill off the enormous fleet they have. It’s going to be an epic fight when it happens.”

I feared that many would die, but I kept that part to myself.

“Is the ratio of your armada to the robots not balanced?” Carmela’s eyebrows were still knitted with worry.

I hesitated before answering. In reality that was an understatement. “We can make the ambush happen.”

I tried to sound as confident as possible so that some of that anxiousness on Carmela’s face would disappear.

Inside, I was weighing the odds about whether we should move in for the attack, judging by the fact that we had an emotionally compromised engineer to deal with— Amada, and a crabby AI— Silver, as our only hackers on board. Their unpredictability was more than troublesome.

What made it even worse was the fact that Amada and Silver were constantly at odds, and I was always having to be the

middleman peacemaker trying to get them to stop butting heads and doing their jobs properly. They got so easily distracted in their animosity toward each other. I was already dealing with enough without that added stress to frustrate me further.

“What are you thinking about?” Carmela peered up at me with such innocence that it made my stomach tingle.

My heart swelled a million times over for her.

I squeezed her hand and offered her the sincerest smile. “Nothing. Just that I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Her eyes brightened. “Me too. I had so much fun last night.” She tossed me a flirtatious smile and lightly bumped her shoulder against mine while gently nibbling on her lower lip. She was sexy without trying too hard, or at all, which made it even more appealing to be with her.

I hoped she meant what she said. She looked sincere, too, so I had no reason *not* to believe her.

I met her gaze and clamped my hand on her thigh. “I really need you.”

Her features shifted to worry again. “You mean to help with disabling the robot army?”

I nodded. “You might be the key to blowing this whole operation open.”

Carmela’s cheeks flushed a rosy-pink shade. Her smile was shy but resilient. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I don’t mean to put it on you, but I need to be honest.”

Carmela nodded. “I understand.” Her eyes flickered with perseverance.

“I just mean... with you... we have a much better chance of succeeding.”

Carmela’s eyes continued twinkling. “You’re going to give me a swelled head.”

“Maybe you need one.” I smiled.

“I am never going to say no to somebody wanting to help give me more confidence in myself,” Carmela said with a modest smile.

I roped my arm around her waist and hugged her close. “You killed it on that Harvester ship. I was so impressed with your incredible skill.”

“I did what I had to do.” Another humble smile from her, then her expression turned more serious as she met my gaze and held it. “I’ll do it again — as many times as I need to. I’m on board, and I want to be there to watch your pride shine through when you take your native planet back from those robot monsters who stole it.”

It was a perfect moment to kiss her. I was beyond overjoyed when she reaffirmed her commitment to not only me, but to my crew as well when we desperately needed her.

CHAPTER
NINE

CARMELA

I was in high spirits the next day, ready to set to work helping to be a new hacker on board with Cyburn and his crew — but my happy bubble didn't last — and quickly burst.

My balloon of enthusiasm began to deflate when I overheard a rather unpleasant conversation taking place about me on the bridge of the ship. Cyburn wasn't present, but as soon as I heard the mention of my name, I stopped in my tracks and hid behind the wall to listen in and eavesdrop on what was being said about me.

Marver, one of the engineers working under Amada had the floor. "Can we really *trust* this *human* that Cyburn has enlisted to be on our crew?"

"I agree," an unknown male voice said. It sounded like Ravis, one of the gunners working under Nix, but I couldn't be sure without actually looking. "Don't get me wrong. I don't have anything *against* the humans, and I understand what he's trying to do as far as rescuing them goes. I agree that we shouldn't just leave them to be harvested by the Belic — but that should be as far as it goes. We bring them to the closest intergalactic embassy, and that's it. We cut ties from there, and it is no longer our problem. Having them *work* for us, it's a totally different story."

"A *troublesome* story," Marver added.

"Maybe we should just trust that Cyburn knows what he's doing," Silver added her two cents. She sounded irritated with

how the conversation was going.

I was pleased that she was sticking up for Cyburn, even if it was in a roundabout way.

“Oh *please*,” Amada scoffed. “You’re even more in love with him than *I* was.”

Even the *sound* of her smarmy voice made my blood boil. I immediately wanted to march into the room and start arguing with her to defend myself, but I practiced restraint.

Besides, she wasn’t the *only* one on the bridge who apparently had a problem with me. To say that I was devastated to hear the crew members discussing me like this was an understatement, but I was also extremely angry about it. They didn’t know me. Who were *they* to discuss my validity without any proof either way?

“You still *are* in love with him,” Silver cut dryly.

There was a pause, and no one said anything. My heart did a giant leap like an Olympic diver plunging into a pool.

“I’m *not* in love with him. It’s *disgusting* to watch him fawn all over that *human*.” The words dripped from her mouth as if they felt like poison on her tongue.

“I won’t argue with you there,” Silver said. “However, I still think it’s important for us to give her a chance.”

“Who? The *human*?” Amada asked.

“She has a name,” Silver said flatly as if she, even as an AI, was just as sick and tired of Amada’s bellyaching about everything as everyone else was.

“I don’t care what her name is,” Amada declared dismissively.

Hot tears stung in my eyes, but they were more from being furious than anything else. Don’t get me wrong. I still felt hurt and betrayed. I debated whether to mention any of this to Cyburn. He had so much on his plate to deal with already. Maybe it was better to just keep it to myself and try to deal with it on my own. I’d been dealing with pressures by myself for my entire life. Why should this be any different? It just went to show that it didn’t matter *where* you were. The drama

would always follow you around. There were always going to be others who couldn't wait to see you fail.

"Well, I have *other* reasons to be skeptical," Marver mentioned. "And it has nothing to do with any love triangle drama."

"Spill it then," Amada said begrudgingly. "It's not like you don't want to, anyway. You always tell your opinion whether others care or not."

"And so do *you*," Marver barked back and began again. "Well for starters, how can we even *know* that she has *any* ability whatsoever to deal with these Imperial robots?"

"Cyburn vouches for her," Silver mentioned. "He told me that she has experience working on and constructing robots back on Earth."

"How convenient," Amada said snidely. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe she was *lying* to get in his good graces and stay with him so she wouldn't have to be carted off and dropped off at the local embassy?"

"I haven't wagered either way to be honest," Silver said in her cool, robotic tone. "It sounds like you are jealous of her, at any rate."

"Well, your opinion doesn't hold much weight anyway," Amada said. "Especially not to me."

"I don't have time for this bickering," Silver fired back sharply. "I actually have a lot of work to do, and I take my job seriously."

"That's what you are programmed to do," Amada declared in a condescending voice and began heckling the A.I.

I stiffened when it dawned on me that Silver was on her way to exiting the bridge. In a flustered attempt to scurry away before she caught me, I ended up inadvertently bumping into her as soon as she shuffled out the door.

Mortified, I pressed my finger to my lips and shook my head in a silent plea to keep her discretion.

Silver narrowed her steely eyes on me and glanced over her shoulder, back in the direction of the bridge.

“Please,” I whispered. “Don’t tell them I was here. I didn’t mean to listen. I just inadvertently walked through here at the same time. I stopped when I heard them mention me.”

Silver paused to reflect while staring at me and making me feel extremely uncomfortable. I stiffened and held my breath, waiting to see what she would do. I was at her mercy. When she opened her mouth, I flinched.

“Fine, but you owe me,” she hissed begrudgingly.

I exhaled slowly and my shoulders relaxed. “Thank you,” I breathed out. “I promise you won’t regret it.”

Silver narrowed her eyes again, clearly contemplating. “Then maybe you can prove it by helping me with something.”

“Sure,” I said eagerly as we began to walk away to ensure that the rest of the crew on the bridge especially Amada didn’t hear us talking. “Anything. What did you have in mind?”

“Will you calm down?” Silver asked, cutting me an impatient scowl.

“Oh.” I literally felt the blood draining from my face. “Yes, sorry.”

“And stop apologizing so much,” she added. “It makes you appear weak and vulnerable. You’re too needy to please everyone.”

“Right.” I nodded and swallowed hard, feeling slightly stilted but trying not to show it. Clearly my efforts weren’t working either way.

Silver’s expression softened and she eased up on me a bit as we cut a corner and began walking down another corridor.

“I’m only telling you these things because I’m trying to *help* you.”

“Okay.”

I wasn’t sure exactly how she was trying to do that, but I took her word for it, until she started explaining what she meant.

“If you show weakness in front of Amada, she will eat you alive. She will prey on you as if you’re a parasite. It’s not just you. She will do this to anyone. I’m just giving you fair warning. Heed my advice or not. It makes no difference to me.”

I offered her a meager smile while tucking a strand of unruly brown hair behind my ear. “Well, um... thanks.” I was going to prove to her that I was resourceful damnit, if it was the last thing I did.

“You are going to have to work under Amada whether you like it or not,” Silver explained.

“I was kind of afraid you’d say that, but at the same time I kind of expected it,” I responded.

“Amada is head of the ship maintenance crew, among other things. She is going to be unavoidable to you, so I suggest you try to get on good terms with her, or at the very least, not get under her skin.”

I scoffed, laughing lightly. “Yeah, well, she hasn’t said two words to me since I got here, unless it’s some kind of scathing remark so I doubt it will be hard to avoid her.”

“Just keep your head down and do your work and you’ll be fine,” Silver instructed.

“I understand I’m at the bottom rung of the ladder, here,” I said, “but a little mutual respect can go a long way.”

The A.I. released a bout of rich laughter. “Good luck trying to get that. Amada doesn’t respect anyone but herself.”

“You never know,” I said. “Maybe I’ll win her over.”

“If you win her over, then I’ll buy you dinner if we land on Earth,” Silver said.

I smiled, happy to finally be cracking through with her, but I still felt like I had a long way to go.

At least Silver would speak to me, which was far more than I could say for my apparent ‘boss,’ Amada.

CHAPTER
TEN

CYBURN

Carmela entered the hangar just as I was getting everything set up for the next drop at the next station. It had taken several weeks, but we were finally in the ending stages of getting most of the humans dropped off at the embassies or at the home-worlds where they were currently residing.

It was a carefully calculated procedure. It had begun with a random system to system jaunt. It took weeks at sublight to drop off each of the kidnapped people, but we were making progress.

I tried to stay on Amada's good side, given the fact that she was the chief engineer and we needed her more than ever. If she decided to form a mutiny against me or quit altogether, we would be royally screwed. If I stayed under her radar or at the very least, did little to piss her off, then I bettered the chances of survival and headway for all of us.

I knew Carmela was getting frustrated with the tension between her and Amada. It bothered me too, but I didn't have time to put a lot of focus on it because there was so much else more pressing going on.

Not to say that Carmela's mental health and wellbeing wasn't at the forefront of my priorities, but I was stressed out trying to keep Amada in line.

Amada was like a loaded stick of dynamite ready to blow. If you weren't careful with that one — she was bound to explode all over you.

“Hi,” Carmela said, casting me a meager wave and a melancholy smile.

I turned to face her all the way, providing her with an enthusiastic grin. “Hi there.”

“How is it going?” she asked.

I placed my hands on my hips and released a deep sigh. “So far, so good.”

Carmela sat on a crate next to me and planted her elbows on her thighs. She rested her chin in her hands.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

Carmela arched her shoulders into a half shrug and sighed again. She stared straight ahead with her eyes fixed to the wall. “Yes.” Her voice was flat.

I didn’t believe her, but I knew better than to demand an answer from a female. It was always safer to tread lightly. “Do you want to talk about anything?”

She straightened her posture and took another deep breath, finally looking my way again. “No, I’m okay.”

I sat down next to her, feeling like it was important to take a moment to just sit and be with her and let her vent if she wanted to. If she didn’t want to, that was fine also.

“I know this must be hard for you,” I mentioned, placing a soothing hand to her back. I began to softly stroke it up and down.

Carmela glimpsed my way. “What? Watching everyone get to go home but me?”

I tried not to look pained on the outside, but her words cut deep. I thought she was more eager to stay with me, but I guessed that seeing her fellow humans on their way to freedom was probably more of a tough pill to swallow than I’d initially realized.

“Everything is going to work out, I promise.”

Carmela’s jaw tightened and she looked away, saying nothing.

Apparently, I had said the wrong thing, or maybe it was just her not believing me this time.

I brushed my fingers through her soft, brown hair. “You have me.”

She turned my way and her eyes flickered with more brightness. “Yeah. You’re right.” She paused reflectively and then laughed. “Don’t worry. I won’t always be this depressed. I’m just having a moping moment. It won’t last long, I promise.”

She looked at me with an apologetic bat of her eyelashes. She looked cute and vulnerable. I wanted to protect her mindset and make her feel better at any cost.

Her attitude was way better than Amada’s ever was, and she was under a lot of pressure in a new environment. It just went to show how much more evolved Carmela’s character was as opposed to Amada’s, who threw a tantrum when even the slightest change of plan didn’t go her way.

“It’s okay to show your emotions and talk about them,” I said. “Sometimes venting helps.”

“How did you get so wise?” she teased, bumping her shoulder against mine.

“I’ve lived a long time.”

“Yeah,” she joked. “What was it? Sixty years or something?”

“Sixty-eight to be precise.”

“Well, you don’t look a day over thirty if you ask me.” Carmela chuckled, rolling her eyes. “That’s so ironic and typical for a male. You guys always age like fine wine while us women fret over plastic surgeries and makeup and creams to make our faces look ageless.” She paused and gave me an apprehensive glance. “Don’t worry... no plastic surgery for me. I’ll confess to wearing makeup and creams though.”

“Your natural beauty is stunning,” I admitted.

“You still look more ageless than I will at sixty-eight,” Carmela said with a hitch of her shoulders into a chagrined shrug.

“It has a lot to do with my species,” I confessed. “We aren’t *immortal* so to speak, but—”

“You have a longer life span than a human, obviously,” Carmela finished my sentence for me.

I nodded. “Correct.”

“It happens on Earth, too, though,” Carmela declared. “Only it’s on a much faster scale. I guess it’s just a guy thing.”

I grinned at her, and she grinned back. I was just happy to see her smiling at least. If I could successfully comfort her, even if it was just a little bit, then I was doing my job correctly as her new mate.

Of course, I had my selfish tendencies and I wanted her to stay with me forever, but the worst thing I could do, especially at a time like this, was put a lot of pressure on her when she was already feeling the weight of her worries.

“I was helping Silver in the maintenance room yesterday,” she mentioned. “We are sort of... getting along.” She glanced off into space with a soft smile. “I was helping her with some programming issues for our own robots. I fixed a few glitches for her in the system and rewired a few things. By the end of it, she seemed impressed. I’m not sure I’ve got her full respect yet, but we’re definitely getting there.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Silver has a tough exterior but she’s like jelly on the inside.” I paused and grinned. “Sometimes.”

“Well, she definitely doesn’t seem to hate me as much as Amada does,” Carmela admitted in a defeated voice.

“I wish I could say Amada will eventually come around,” I said with a slow exhale, glancing around the hangar, thankful that we had the alone time to talk, if only for a little while.

“What is wrong with her anyway?” Carmela gave me a pensive glance, studying me intently.

“She’s jealous of you,” I mentioned.

“That’s what Silver said, too.” Carmela frowned.

I laughed. “Silver loves to add her insight to things even though she’s an AI. She views herself as one of the sophisticated elite types of robots.”

“She’s very smart,” Carmela agreed. “We don’t have any AIs like her where I work.” She paused reflectively and glanced at her lap. “Sorry... *worked*.” She said the last word so softly it was barely audible.

“We programmed her that way and she’s evolved, growing in intelligence.” I tried to change the subject so that Carmela wouldn’t stay in a rut, fixated on thinking about her old job. I didn’t want to make her any promises I couldn’t keep.

“At least she isn’t made of human or Alesian matter,” Carmela said, wrinkling her nose.

“That’s a Belic specialty.”

“Is it?” Carmela looked horrified that I would have such a casual response to it, but that wasn’t my intention at all by saying it.

My heart dropped and I quickly backtracked. “That’s not what I meant exactly—”

“It’s okay.” Carmela’s features softened. “I know what you are trying to say.”

“They’re monsters, let’s just call it that.”

Carmela’s smile was dark. “Monsters of the worst kind.”

“I know that things are rough with Amada, but I’m trying not to press her buttons right now because I need her to cooperate,” I admitted. “You know... so we can eventually defeat those monsters.”

Carmela nodded. “I can understand that.” She glanced up at me. “How long were you two together?”

“A while.”

I could see the disappointment etched all over Carmela’s face. “I’m afraid to ask, but I want to know at the same time. Well maybe it’s none of my business and you don’t have to answer but... just how long is um... a while?”

I hesitated. “Ten years.”

Carmela’s jaw dropped open. “Ten... ten *years* you say?”

I tried to make her feel better. “Well, when you factor in our lifespan like we were discussing earlier, it’s really not *that* long.”

Carmela looked away, seemingly disturbed by the revelation. “It is a long time if you’re counting by Earth years.”

“There is *nothing* between us anymore,” I assured her. “What’s in the past is in the past, and I intend to keep it there where it belongs.”

I already knew that Carmela had never been in a serious relationship before, so I aimed to go easy on her feelings about the subject.

Carmela glanced my way, but it was brief. Her smile looked forced. “She is still in love with you.”

“What Amada wants and what Amada gets are two totally different things,” I said.

Carmela sighed and frowned. “That’s the scariest part of it all.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

CARMELA

“Is everything alright?” Cyburn’s deep voice asked.

“Huh?” I lifted my head and glanced over at Cyburn, blinking at him, suddenly feeling dazed and a little daunted by the information I just received from him.

“You’ve been quiet for several moments,” Cyburn mentioned, his features somewhat stilted. “What are you thinking about?”

I took a deep breath and smiled ironically. “I’m not sure you really want to know the answer to that.”

“Of course, I do.”

His expression was so innocent that it made me feel partially annoyed that he could really be that dense, and partially skeptical about telling him what was *really* on my mind because I didn’t want to upset him. He already had enough on his plate to deal with as it was without me adding more drama to the pot.

“I’m just... a little surprised, that’s all,” I mentioned, trying to keep my voice as gentle as possible.

Cyburn glanced over his shoulder as if he were suddenly paranoid that someone might be listening in on our conversation.

“Surprised about what?” he asked cautiously.

I tilted my head to the side and gave him a curious stare. The similarities of men on Earth to the Alesis alien men were somewhat frightening.

The male species in general, no matter *who* they were, typically just didn't understand how to deal with the complexities of a woman's emotions.

I reminded myself to be patient with Cyburn. He literally pulled me out of the trenches of impending death at the hands of the Belic. If it weren't for him, the razor sharp end of a scalpel held in a metal Belic fist would have been the last thing I ever saw.

I owed my life to Cyburn, plain and simple. I almost felt *guilty* for feeling so frustrated with him in the moment, but unlike him, I was human, after all.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I had no idea you had been with Amada for so long. No wonder she hates me."

"Amada hates everyone." Cyburn grinned, but I didn't return the smile because I wasn't feeling particularly amused in the moment.

I furrowed my eyebrows and sighed deeply, staring off with concentration into space.

"I mean... that's a whole *decade* that you were with her. Do you know how *long* that is in human terms?"

Cyburn acted like he wanted to be understanding with my rant and try to subside some of my misgivings about it. "I wish I did so I could make you feel better."

At least he tried.

I paused. "I mean... I appreciate you being honest with me, but—"

Cyburn planted his huge hand possessively on my inner thigh and squeezed it a little too hard. His behavior startled me, as did the intensity of the stare on his face.

"I hope this doesn't change things between us. What we have... I can't explain it. It was *never* like this with Amada. I feel so drawn to you. I'm desperately attracted to you. The chemistry... I can only speak for myself, but it feels just *right* on so many levels."

"Yes... I *do* agree," I said, still frowning thoughtfully.

“Then what’s the problem?” Cyburn asked.

I glanced his way, wishing I had an uncomplicated answer to give him.

“When did your relationship with her actually end?”

Cyburn pondered a moment. “About a year ago I’d say.”

It seemed like Amada should have gotten over the breakup by now, but she clearly hadn’t, which further perplexed me.

Maybe the breakup wasn’t mutual, and he was the only one who wanted to be done with her. If that were so, would the same thing inevitably happen to *me*? I couldn’t bear to think about a future with a broken heart, drifting off into the oblivion of deep space on an outlaw pirate spaceship, alone and struggling to survive.

I gave him an inquisitive stare. “Is that why her behavior is so erratic and toxic?”

“I think so.” He nodded, glancing guiltily at his lap so I must have been getting through to him, chipping away slowly. “I mean, she’s never really been the bubbly type, which is why we didn’t last longer, but she has certainly gotten worse since we broke up.”

“She still wants you back and to have you all to herself.” I declared it as a statement rather than a question, and I dared him to challenge me otherwise.

Cyburn wouldn’t meet my gaze. He looked like a dog with its tail between its legs who had just gotten caught doing something promiscuous. “Yes.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” I asked, not meaning to sound demanding but that’s what it came out like.

Cyburn inhaled a long breath and waited a moment before releasing it.

“I have been avoiding any complications with her by not pursuing a relationship with anyone else. It’s been a long and lonely year, to be honest.”

I had trouble feeling sorry for him about that if that was his intentions. I was more irritated than anything else.

“Cyburn, she is still in *love* with you,” I said as if he needed to get that issue through his brain and accept it for how dangerous it could potentially end up being for all of us.

Cyburn finally looked at me. His eyes were darker than normal. “Like I said before, the feeling is not *mutual*.”

I knew I needed to reel back a bit and soften up my touch before I further damaged *my* budding relationship with him.

“It’s just... I’m sorry.” I blow out an exasperated breath.

Cyburn gave me a curious frown. “What are you sorry for?”

“I don’t mean to make you dig up your past like this, but your ‘*past*’ is constantly berating me and making my life a living *hell* on this ship.”

“Amada will always find something to be miserable about, no matter what,” Cyburn explained. “That’s just how she is.”

“No, it’s more than that,” I argued, shaking my head. “She is going to do anything in her power to win you back.”

Cyburn adamantly shook his head. “That’s never going to happen. *Trust* me on that one.”

I believed him. He looked disgusted even at the mere thought of getting back together with Amada, but I had quickly learned just how stubborn and short tempered Amada could be. She *thrived* on turning my life on this ship into a waking nightmare.

Cyburn just didn’t seem to understand that topic, which was becoming increasingly frustrating for me to deal with.

We were both pensively quiet for a moment. I was inwardly reflecting on my life choices. It was too late for me to be dropped off at an embassy, I feared. Not that I *wanted* to go home without Cyburn, but I wanted him to understand just how cruel and vicious Amada was behaving toward me. The cold shoulder spoke louder than words. So did actions. The age old saying was true on so many levels.

“I just don’t want to deal with the drama that is always involved and swirling around Amada. It’s like a cluster of negative energy that constantly encircles her,” Cyburn admitted, sounding defeated.

I instantly felt sorry for him and mad at myself for pushing him to his limits when it came to her. He looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes and slumped posture.

“It’s an uncomfortable situation, I get it,” I acknowledged tenderly. “But we have *got* to do *something* about it. We can’t just let her rule our lives like this.”

Cyburn chuckled sarcastically. “Speak for yourself. Amada already lives rent free in my head.”

“Well... that’s a problem,” I informed delicately.

Cyburn tightened his jaw and stared straight ahead. “I know it is.” He sighed. “I will do something about her,” he added benignly.

I didn’t put much weight onto it.

“I am just waiting for the right time,” he finished.

I was quiet. I didn’t know what kind of response to give him, or what he expected from me. I didn’t know how long I could wait around before I fought back at her, but then again, I didn’t want to royally screw everything up and sabotage everyone’s lives on the ship.

If Amada was as much of a loose cannon as Cyburn described her to be, then there was no telling what irreparable damage she might inflict on the crew or even herself, or worse... Cyburn and myself.

The whole thing completely unnerved me. I didn’t want to be caught in a love triangle. This was exactly why I had avoided intimate, physical relationships for my entire life. Now look at where I was.

The *one* time I let my heart open up to someone else even microscopically, I felt like I was already doomed to fail at it.

“I know you are upset about all the Amada business, but I promise she is harmless. She is all bark and no bite,” Cyburn

mentioned empathetically, giving me a gentle smile but it did little to satiate my growing apprehensions on the subject.

“I sure hope so.”

“She is just insanely jealous. She is in love with me, and her mentality on the matter is if *she* can’t have me, then no one can.”

“That’s a bit ridiculous,” I declared gloomily.

“I agree with you one-thousand percent,” Cyburn said gently. He tried to give me a charming smile, but I just wasn’t feeling it.

Maybe I was being territorial like Amada, but maybe I had better reason to be because Cyburn and I were *actually* dating, unlike her fantasy land where she actually fathomed a chance in her delusional head to get him back.

“I just wish I could get in everyone’s good graces,” I mentioned, feeling melancholy and a little emotional. “It’s been hard... adjusting and all. I feel like not everyone is taking kindly to me.”

Cyburn reached out and began rubbing my back. “That’s not true, I can promise you that.”

I contemplated mentioning to him how I had overheard his own subordinate crew members dishing out their apparent distaste about me, but I bit my tongue.

I didn’t want to find another reason to argue with him. I was already feeling exhausted enough about the Amada situation.

Cyburn must have taken my silence for agreement because he continued rubbing my back and softly kissed my cheek. His lips felt good on my skin, so I didn’t pull away. Perhaps I just needed to give him a chance to prove himself accurately about Amada. After all, he knew her better than I did.

I sighed deeply, feeling weathered emotionally.

“Like I said, she won’t confront you directly. She will gripe about you, sure, but it will always be behind your back.”

I scoffed and looked at Cyburn as if he had ultimately lost his mind. “How is *that* any better? Her talking behind my back? That’s still hurtful.”

“I know.” Cyburn looked confused at my response. There was certainly a gender and a species barrier between us when it came to communication. “She views you as a rival who is out to destroy her life.”

“Funny,” I said blandly, even though it wasn’t funny at all. “That’s exactly how I view her.”

“Just try to stay away from her,” Cyburn encouraged.

“It’s easier said than done when I have to work *for* her,” I mentioned.

“I can give you assignments from now on so that you won’t have to go directly through her,” Cyburn suggested.

“Then she’ll notice that we are pitting her against us,” I said. “If you get involved and become the middleman, I’m afraid that she’ll catch on and take it personally.”

Cyburn contemplated, his features turning into a frown. “Perhaps. She is inclined to take everything personally, however, as is her nature.”

I groaned. The whole situation seemed a little hopeless to me, but I still wanted to pursue a relationship with Cyburn regardless of the unpleasant hurtles inadvertently placed in our path by Amada.

“I just feel like I have to sleep with one eye open and one eye behind my back,” I mentioned glumly.

Cyburn roped his arm around my waist and hugged me close to him. “Well, I’ve got you covered on the sleep thing because you sleep with *me*, and I know for a fact that she won’t be bothering either one of us as long as we are in there together.”

“Cyburn, I appreciate what you’re trying to do,” I said with more frustration in my voice than I intended, “but I just can’t live my life this way.”

Cyburn’s face fell, and his green cheeks turned pale. “What are you suggesting?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, suddenly feeling at a loss for words. “If *you* aren’t willing to confront her, then maybe it’s time *somebody* should.”

Maybe that somebody should be me. After all, I wasn’t going to proceed with this problem in the same unconstructive way that Cyburn apparently wanted to handle it.

He pretty much refused to deal with the issue head on. He was in denial, but I was hellbent on making sure Amada didn’t crush my spirit and ruin my chances with a great guy just because she was too jealous to move on with her life.

Maybe it was time for someone to put her in her place. If I had to step up to the plate, then so be it.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

CARMELA

I was walking from the mess hall after having breakfast. I was lost in my own thoughts, headed to the maintenance room to help Silver do some routine checking up on a few of the robots we currently had in processing.

This was the time of day when we determined whatever modifications would need to be made to the robots that were almost ready to be synched to our system and turned on for active duty to the ship.

If everything looked good with any given robot, we would take the next steps in the completion of the construction process.

If there were problems or issues to work out, we would log those kinks into the system servers to be worked on and ironed out later. Everything we did was logged into the system for reference and proof that it was noted and was being taken care of, even if it was for a later date.

I was excited for this new beginning, both in the job aspect, and with Cyburn. Things were going so well with him.

He was being so sweet with me, a true gentleman. He was trying to make me feel welcome here aboard his ship, and often I overheard him talking to his crew subordinates, reinforcing to them that they should be kind to me because all of this was a culture shock to me. He often told them to be patient with me because I was human and needed time to adapt and adjust to the way things were run on the ship.

Cyburn successfully commanded those on board the ship, but he also commanded things in the bedroom — in the most sensational way. I was constantly lusting after him and having incredible flashbacks to the times where we had private romps in his private quarters.

I often found myself daydreaming during the day about how he had absolutely nailed me and rearranged my insides from the night before.

It was quite exquisite, and every time we had sex, I longed for a time where he would fuck the living daylights out of me again, making me forget who I was or what I was doing because the only thing I could focus on was how hot and steamy our sex was.

I *always* reached orgasm with Cyburn — often more than once during a single session. He had me bewildered and dazed with desire and longing. I was falling madly, deeply in love with him.

I was obsessed with our lovemaking, and each time we did it, it bumped up my craving for it even *more* intensely. It seemed to get better each time as we learned each other's bodies and rhythms. We were comfortable with each other. I was drawn to his masculinity and his protective possessiveness over me.

Whether it was inside or outside of the bedroom, I always appreciated him looking out for me and standing up for me when it was necessary.

Although I also felt like I could take care of myself. I wanted to prove to him that I had strength and could defend myself when I needed to.

It was vitally important for me to show him my independent side, because if I couldn't even stand up for *myself*, then how was I supposed to stand up for the others on this ship when it came to fighting off the Belic? I wanted to show my inner badass, strong woman side. I'd been perfecting it my entire life, up until I had been abducted on that fateful Boston evening.

I needed that independence to shine through, especially around those on the ship who weren't exactly friendly with me.

I had one foe in particular, Amada, who was so bitter toward my and Cyburn's blossoming relationship that it was starting to noticeably affect her job capabilities. It was like she had tunnel vision and the only responsibility she wanted to participate in was to make sure I was suffering.

Speaking of which, as I was lost in my own little world walking down the corridor, just thinking about the lovely breakfast and make-out session I'd just enjoyed with Cyburn directly outside the mess hall, I unfortunately encountered Amada.

Immediately, I knew it was going to be an uncomfortable confrontation. I wished I could just quickly spin on my heel and start briskly walking in the opposite direction, but I couldn't because she would notice. This was part of my whole 'stand up for myself' tactic.

I wasn't going to run away from Amada. I wasn't necessarily scared of her, and it was important that I showed her that. Silver had told me before that if I showed weakness around Amada, that she would prey on it — metaphorically she would chew me up and spit me out.

I wasn't a victim, and I most *certainly* wasn't going to become Amada's punching bag when she wanted to let out all her frustrations.

As soon as Amada and I made eye contact, her scowl became prominent. Her perfect jawline tightened, and she straightened her posture rigidly.

She lifted her chin as if to show she was better than me and believed it wholeheartedly to her core. Her eyes narrowed and her glare pierced through me. Her nostrils flared and she started walking faster in my direction.

I kept my same, reasonable pace, but stiffened. I too held my head high and proud and squared my shoulders defiantly, even if I didn't feel as confident about the situation as I hoped I looked.

As Amada began to pass me, she swooped into my ‘lane’ so to speak, and intentionally bumped her shoulder outwardly-aggressively into mine.

It hurt like hell, but I couldn’t show the pain. I sucked in a sharp breath and spun on my heel.

“Hey,” I shouted with animosity.

Amada kept on walking. She didn’t even toss a glance at me over her shoulder. Now that she had successfully hurt *my* shoulder — yes, it felt like it was jammed now and I rubbed the tender area while her back was turned, she pretended not to hear me.

She ignored me altogether as if I didn’t even exist and wasn’t adamantly trying to get her attention.

“Amada, stop,” I said assertively, but the woman kept on strutting along with a new zing in her step as if she’d won this subtle, non-verbal battle.

That was the way Amada was. She would sting you like a wasp when she had the opportunity, but she would do it in more of an indirect way, the *cowardly* way if you asked *me*. For someone who didn’t seem to be keen on confrontation, she sure tried her best to stir up a lot of trouble.

She was always leaving a trail of stress and tension in her wake, something that I knew was deliberate. Amada wouldn’t be happy unless all those around her were as miserable as her.

“I’m talking to you.” I raised my voice a forceful notch.

Amada continued to ignore me.

I couldn’t explain what caused me to do what I did next. Call it a rush of angry adrenaline. Call it the boiling pot spilling over.

Whatever it was, I’d had enough, and I wasn’t going to stand for her bullying any longer. Something snapped in me, and I was going to push Amada over the edge like I was. I was determined to get her to talk to me and tell me why she hated me so much.

I reached out and cupped my hand over her shoulder to make her stop walking. It worked. She halted in her tracks and slowly turned around. Her face was furiously twisted. My heart pounded so violently that I got an extreme headrush, but I held my ground.

Her eyes landed on my hand that was still cupped over her shoulder. She shrugged it off as if my touch seared her skin. “Get your hands off me,” she snarled through clenched teeth, looking like a threatened animal.

“I need to talk to you,” I said as rationally as I could.

Amada eyed me up and down, sizing me up. “I have *nothing* to say to the gutter trash who works in the maintenance room on the misfit robot parts,” she said with a condescending smirk. She was trying to use an assault of verbal insults to bash my confidence. It wasn’t going to work this time.

“You can’t talk to me that way,” I protested, feeling my upper lip twitching in anger.

I glared right back at her. Two could play this contemptuous game. “If you didn’t want me to confront you, then you shouldn’t have touched *me* back there.”

“You shouldn’t have been in my *way*,” Amada sneered.

“It’s a perfectly roomy corridor,” I argued. “You *intentionally* came over to *my* side of it.”

“You don’t *own* the corridors,” Amada said with a catty bat of her eyes that made my blood boil.

Amada took a slow step forward. I knew she was trying to intimidate me. She hovered directly in my face. Our noses were only an inch apart. She glared into my eyes as if she were trying to suck my very soul from my body.

“Let me tell you something you frizzy haired *harlot*. You need to mind your own business and learn when to keep your mouth shut. Watch who you are talking to. You are playing with forces beyond your understanding. If you keep trying to meddle in things you have no business interfering with, you are going to find yourself in a *world* of pain. You need to learn

some respect. I'd be happy to teach you a lesson in that department—”

“Oh, shut *up*,” I interrupted in a loud, snappy tone, indifferent to the fact that she was trying to keep her voice down on purpose.

Amada's mouth opened in shock. She took a step back. She stared at me, clearly stunned that I would even have the *nerve* to interrupt her, much less speak to her in such a callous tone.

“Excuse me?” she hissed in a low growl.

“I am getting really *sick* and tired of your empty threats,” I told her.

Amada's glower was glacial. Her jaw tightened and she regained some of her stamina as she stepped toward me again.

“Watch my personal space if you don't want to get hurt,” I warned. I wasn't above getting physical with her if she tried to lay a hand on me.

“I should say the same thing to *you*,” Amada said, her tone dripping with ice.

“You're so jealous it's comical,” I taunted. “Cyburn is not yours anymore. You guys broke up over a *year* ago. It's sad, really, pathetic. Get over it. Move on. You need to put the past behind you. Pick yourself up. If you are so strong and independent and want to be feared by everyone, you certainly aren't putting on a good show if you're dwelling on an ex-boyfriend who doesn't even want to give you the time of *day* ___”

That must have been the last straw for Amada. She interrupted me by lunging forward. Her hands were on the sides of my head. She had my hair in her fists, and she began violently yanking it in both directions, trying to shake me from side to side. She grimaced and bared her teeth like a wild animal. She had a deranged gleam in her black eyes that frightened me.

Before the attack could go any further, I noticed a huge shape whizzing past my peripheral vision.

“Amada, control yourself,” the male voice bellowed, the sound echoing down the ship’s corridor.

It was Cyburn. I didn’t know where he’d come from, but he was here to clearly save the day and get this tyrant of a woman literally off my back.

Amada paid him no attention. She swiped at my face and arms, attempting to maliciously claw at my exposed skin.

“Amada!” Cyburn shouted, his voice thunderously scolding. “Get your behavior in line at once!”

Amada heeded the message loud and clear. She thrashed once and then tore her hands away from me. Her posture was hunched. Her chest rose and fell rapidly with each panting breath she took. Her hair was a little out of place and the excessive jewelry she wore around her neck and wrists was a little twisted and half hanging off her body now.

Cyburn stared at her, his black eyes wide with shock. He loomed over her as if he was ready to pounce on her if she tried another sneak attack on his lover.

“What has gotten into you?” he reprimanded. There was a measure of disappointment in his voice.

Amada didn’t answer. Her gaze flickered between me and Cyburn. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stood up straight. She poised herself and began repositioning her heavy chains, beads, and dangly earrings.

“I cannot have this kind of violent physical behavior happening aboard my ship,” Cyburn said. “Consider this your last warning, Amada. The next time you won’t get off so easily. If you can’t control your anger, I will have no choice but to relieve you of your duties and your position as a part of my crew.”

Amada’s eyes slowly roamed over Cyburn. The sinister glower on her face tremored a chill through my bones. She looked at my new lover as if she wanted nothing more than to rip his throat out with her teeth.

“*Fuck* you and your crew,” Amada said scathingly.

Cyburn squared his shoulders and studied Amada with a calm expression before responding.

“Amada, as your commander, you are hereby relieved from your post for the day. Maybe that will help shape your actions up a bit,” he commanded. “Please remove yourself from the premises and return to your quarters for the day. I’ll give you some time to think about your choices. If you want to give me a problem about this, I can make arrangements to ensure that you are properly escorted along with a guard of my choosing.”

Amada continued mumbling derogatory expletives about me and Cyburn under her breath as she slowly turned around, licking her emotional wounds and with a metaphorical tail tucked between her legs.

She didn’t cast us a single glance over her shoulder as she departed, sulking, but I was even more worried than ever, now after having that explosive encounter with her.

I glanced over at Cyburn, unable to pacify my frazzled nerves.

“Do you think that she is going to take your warning to heart?” I asked anxiously.

“She better,” Cyburn said flatly, staring off in the direction from which Amada just stalked off and disappeared after having been unwilfully rerouted to her chambers.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” I said warily.

Cyburn turned to face me. He roped his burly arms around my waist and planted a gentle kiss on the top of my forehead. He consolingly stroked my back and gave me a loving smile.

“Don’t worry about it, darling. She is harmless. She is all bark and no bite, remember? She is probably a little embarrassed right now but let her go back to her quarters to blow off some steam and calm down a bit. I promise she won’t be bothering you again. Not on *my* watch.”

He’d promised this before, but I still found myself in situations where Amada had opportunity to patronize me, so I wasn’t entirely convinced.

However, when Cyburn leaned in close to me, the sensual kisses he gave me were full of repairing affection and soothed my soul.

However, it still wasn't enough to appease my shocked system. There was something brewing in my nerves and an anxiousness settling into my bones.

I feared the worst, but if Cyburn told me not to worry, and if I claimed to love him like I did, I had no choice but to trust his protective intuitions.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

CARMELA

Several weeks went by. We continued maneuvering our ship, *The Blade* around in the outer rims of the space lanes, weaving it in and out of the Imperial Fleet's radar. One by one, the rest of the captives were sent back home undetected, and we remained in the safe refuge of our commander and my lover, Cyburn.

I didn't mind it anymore, watching the other people leaving the ship. I was right where I wanted to be, with Cyburn. Our relationship was progressing extremely well. Our love was deepening, and at this point I couldn't imagine going home without him.

We laughed together, ate together, made love together. We stayed up until all hours of the night just talking about our life experiences. He had quite a few *more* life experiences than me, I'll admit.

He had seen more of our universe and the intergalactic space than I could ever *dream* of seeing. It was seriously astounding to me how much of space he'd already conquered. I had so much to learn from him on both an intellectual and a spiritual plane.

"I'm jealous of all your space travel," I told him teasingly as we laid together, naked, after a particularly exquisite and passion filled fuck session.

I lightly brushed my fingertips against Cyburn's muscular green torso and arms. I grinned over at him, delighted with what I saw. He was a gorgeous sight to behold. Beads of sweat

glistened on his skin. When he moved, his muscles contracted, giving him this sexy, warrior look about him that drove me crazy in the best way possible.

We were facing each other, our legs intertwined as we laid on our propped elbows, relaxing on his bed and trying to unwind for the night.

I was only a little sleepy but feeling particularly lazy on this night. I just wanted to cuddle up with him and hold him close all the night through. I surrendered myself to him and allowed him to take care of me because he told me how much he loved to do so.

“You’re *jealous*?” Cyburn chuckled, his smile dashing and amused. “Why is that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. You’ve been everywhere.”

“Well, some of it wasn’t by choice,” he reminded me, but he was still gazing at me with a smile of adoration. “Some of it wasn’t exactly a vacation to the stars.” He paused again and pondered. “*Most* of it wasn’t for fun. *Most* of it has been us ducking and dodging the Belic Imperials and raiding their ships for supplies when we get even a fleeting opportunity. It’s been a tough decade.”

“That’s true, and I’m so sorry about that,” I mentioned. “I really didn’t mean to sound dismissive of your problems.”

Cyburn lightly stroked my cheek and kissed me softly. “I didn’t think you *were*, darling.”

I leaned over and propped my hands behind my head, now laying on my back as I stared up at the metal ceiling of the ship. I turned my head slightly to the left to look at Cyburn. “Tell me more about it.”

“About what?”

“Alesis, your home planet. I want to know what it’s like there.”

“Well right now it’s infested by a Belic Imperial army of savage robots,” Cyburn said with a light chuckle, attempting to

joke around but I saw a flicker of sadness in his black, eyes, a customary color to those of his race and species.

“Well, I know *that* much,” I said, smiling and playfully swatting at his bulky bicep that resembled a tiny hill. I was attempting to keep the humor afloat. “I mean *before* those assholes took over your planet.”

Cyburn laughed. “You are adorable when you curse.”

I shrugged, giving him a flirty smile in return. “Asshole isn’t *that* bad of a word.”

“I suppose there are worse ones,” he agreed.

“And I’ve been called *all* of them at one point or another by Amada,” I joked.

Cyburn laughed. “I’m so sorry you’ve had to deal with her.”

“It’s okay.” I gently poked him in the side of his torso with the tip of my index finger. “Now go on. Tell me all about Alesis.”

Cyburn sighed, his voice pensive as he clearly reflected on an answer. “I might bore you to sleep if I get too detailed.”

I closed my eyes, allowing my imagination to wander. “That’s okay.”

“It is a beautiful planet,” Cyburn began. “However, it is also extremely humid, kind of like your rainforests on Earth.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m familiar. Although I’ve never been to the rainforests on Earth. They were too far away from where I lived in Boston.”

“Was it hot in Boston?”

“Not usually.”

“Well on Alesis, it’s muggy and sticky. As soon as you go outside your whole body feels damp, and it’s not you sweating. It’s just... the *air* in general. Whenever you go back inside, it makes you want to strip naked and wring out all your clothes.”

I opened my eyes and grinned up at him. “I don’t mind you stripping naked.”

My eyes roamed to his cock between his legs. Even when he wasn't hard, it was still huge and tantalizing to the senses. I loved being pressed up against his warm, naked body.

"It is cloudy and rains a lot, but we made the most of it. It's the kind of thing you get used to. Alesis has a vast amount of fresh and saltwater lakes and oceans all equally safe to swim or bathe in."

"Just like on Earth," I mentioned.

Cyburn nodded. "Yes, there are quite a number of similarities between the two planets. You will be able to breathe oxygen there."

"Wonderful." I imagined what it would be like, to make love to Cyburn under a waterfall somewhere out in the forest, just as he started describing a few moments later. He was painting the perfect picture for me of what life was like before all hell broke loose, and the Belic Imperial Army took over.

"*Unlike* Earth," Cyburn continued, "Alesis is the eleventh planet from the sun."

"Wow. Is that why it's cloudy a lot? How does it stay so humid, then?"

Cyburn shrugged. "Maybe, but our sun is far more enormous than your sun, so it's power can stretch farther."

"That's true." I nodded.

"The days are roughly twenty hours long," Cyburn added.

"It sounds like there wouldn't be much adapting for me, then," I said.

"Maybe not." Cyburn shrugged.

"It has to be better than a ship, at least," I joked.

"For sure." Cyburn's eyes twinkled.

I was grateful that he not only understood, but also appreciated my humor.

"I know you miss it," I said in a soft, empathetic voice.

“I do.” Cyburn stared off into space for a moment, but his expression was restful and peaceful.

He finished his description of what it was like in his native world and looked at me with a heartfelt smile that took my breath away.

There was still a dimension of sadness still lingering in his black eyes. “That’s why I’m so desperate to give my planet back to my people. They are so deserving. They have lived on ships for so long. Some of the younger children were even *born* on the ship and don’t know what it’s like to run through grass or hear the wind whispering through the trees. They have never experienced the incredible sensation of looking up at the sun and feeling the rays warm their cheeks and back. They have never swum in the oceans or tasted the salt of the water on their lips. They have never felt the foam of the cresting waves in between their fingers.”

“I want all of that and more for *all* of them,” I said, suddenly feeling emotional. My eyes filled with tears and my nose burned with a little tickle of grief for what had been lost. “Everyone should be lucky enough to experience that kind of magic of nature. It’s just part of life. Even *I* miss it, and I wasn’t exactly the outdoorsy type back on Earth,” I joked.

“I promise to bring you to Alesis as soon as we win this war,” Cyburn said, his eyes flashing with excitement as if he could visualize it happening in the very near future.

“I can’t wait.” I squeezed his hand and leaned in for a kiss. Our lips brushed together and parted. Our tongues delicately caressed together for a moment.

I pulled away a moment later. “I feel more confident about eventually getting to Alesis now that Amada has been on her best behavior lately.”

Cyburn laughed. “She’s just being cautious because she doesn’t want to lose her job.”

“Maybe she’s not as stupid as I first assumed.” I laughed.

“She shapes up when she knows her job is on the line,” Cyburn said. “You just have to know where to ‘hit her where it

hurts.’ Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

“Of course.” I grinned. “But I won’t say that I didn’t have moments where I wanted to punch her.”

Cyburn roared with laughter. “I don’t blame you one bit. She was pretty awful to you.”

“She has left me alone since you threatened her job,” I admitted. “I’m thankful for the silent treatment. It’s better than being antagonized all the time.”

Cyburn stroked my hair and gave me an affectionate smile. “No one will mess with you if *I* have anything to say about it.”

“I know, you have made this transition amazing for me,” I admitted. “I couldn’t have made it this far without your support.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Cyburn acknowledged, “especially because you have been incredible with the robots. Silver is praising your name left and right. It makes me feel proud, because you are all mine.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s impressive, especially coming from her.”

“She can be sentimental when she wants to be. She isn’t overzealous with the compliments, but when you get one, you know she means it.”

“I’m glad that we are bonding,” I told him.

“Everything is going to work out.” Cyburn cradled my hand in his and lifted it before giving it a delicate kiss.

“I know, darling.” I smiled at him, basking in his affection.

For the first time in a while, I finally felt like maybe there was some light at the end of the tunnel, and that just maybe, we would persevere after all was said and done. We would rise to the top together, ready to create a new dynasty of our own.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

CYBURN

I struggled to balance my passionate new love affair with Carmela and maintain my duties as a prince and a captain of a generation ship.

It was tough, because my head was foggy with lust. I couldn't stop thinking about sex. All I ever wanted to do was lay in bed and have sex with Carmela, but of course, that wasn't a realistic or practical goal. Unfortunately, we had to get out of bed sometime.

I also had to deal with the frequent, unsolicited, and cruel remarks from my ex-lover, Amada, who was so intoxicatingly jealous of Carmela that she was trying to ruin everyone else's lives around her, even those that didn't even have anything to *do* with the relationship.

Amada's emotions went up and down. On some days, she didn't give me any problems. On other days, it was all I could do to keep the order on the bridge and command center because of the emotional chaos she stirred up.

Amada was in crisis mode. She was desperate to get me back and nearing the end of her rope. On certain days, and I usually knew it was coming because her attitude would start early, it was all I could do to keep her in line.

I had an overwhelming number of things to juggle in both my career as a captain of not only *this* ship, but multiple others floating out here in deep space.

I often found myself sinking into the trenches of stress, but I tried to focus on the positives—the biggest of which was

Carmela, of course. She was my support system through all of the turmoil.

Sure, there were a lot of factors at play, and I was running on thinner patience than usual, but Carmela always had a way of successfully grounding me again. Then there was the *other* constant worry in my life, the fact that we were desperately trying to stay under the Belic's radar.

I had my work cut out for me, but I tried to keep my crew happy, well fed, and gave them breaks as frequently as time would allow. There was a lot of work to do, and unfortunately the schedule of the ship didn't really cater to much free time — for *anyone* — including myself.

There were a lot of shift changes going on around here, and even I stepped in when I needed to.

A lot of times I found myself participating in two or three jobs at once. I took on a lot more responsibility than I could handle, but unfortunately, I didn't see it panning out any other way for myself.

"You really need to rest," Carmela told me while we were alone, having dinner in my private quarters one evening. "I'm worried about your sanity."

I grinned at her. "My sanity?"

She grinned too. "Yes. I don't want you to go insane."

I laughed. She was so cute. "I won't go insane, I promise."

My ex-lover Amada was insane enough for the both of us, but I didn't mention that out loud to Carmela. Something told me she already knew anyway. I just didn't want Carmela to assume I made a habit out of making questionable choices.

I picked at my food, unable to work up a decent appetite. I stared at my plate. "I don't know how else to get everything accomplished. I have to be there for my crew or else they will turn on me."

Carmela scoffed, but I knew she wasn't trying to put me on the defensive. "They adore you. They respect you. You don't have

to try to be their friend first. They honor the fact that you are their leader.”

I lifted my chin and stared into her deep green eyes, eyes that were so captivating that every time I looked into them, I felt repair happening in my soul.

“Yes,” I mentioned, “and I want to keep it that way. I have to be willing to ‘get my hands dirty’ so to speak, to put in the work and effort on my own. What kind of leader would I be if I just sat around barking orders and never contributed?”

Carmela pondered, her adorable brows knitting with contemplation. “I understand you want to set a good example, but perhaps you’ve raised the bar for even *yourself* too high.”

“Maybe, but sometimes that’s just the way it has to be.”

“By running yourself into the ground, practically?” Carmela gave me a tender smile. She wasn’t trying to argue with me, but more like trying to get me to see her point.

I tightened my jaw and put up a stoic front, straightening my posture and my shoulders into a straight, dignified line.

“I’ll do what I have to do. I’ve always been that way.” I ended with a shrug to let her know that I wasn’t getting upset with her.

“I know, and I respect your drive and your initiative. I just don’t want to see you running on fumes.” Carmela’s adorable features were etched with genuine concern.

“I think it’s sweet that you care about me so much,” I said and reached across the table to give her cheek a light graze of my fingertips.

Carmela sighed, her cheeks transitioning into a sexy, red rouge. “Just don’t spread yourself too thin.”

“I promise you, I won’t. I have had to do this kind of thing for years now.”

Carmela frowned and picked up her fork. “I hate that you have had to endure this level of stress for so long.”

“Yes, but *you* make it easier to deal with,” I mentioned and leaned across the table to give her longer than normal kiss.

I couldn't help it. I wanted to feel her soft lips pressed up against mine, the flutter of her breath on my cheek.

I was addicted to the dopamine rush and the way my cock pounded for her every time we touched, no matter *how* we touched. She could simply brush her arm up against mine and it would still make me hard.

“I'm happy to help.” The grin on her face was paramount and made all my senses spark to life.

“Just your mere presence is enough.” I stared at her, completely serious.

Her cheeks pinked again, and her smile was humble. “I'd hardly think *that's* enough—”

“It is.”

She lifted her gaze and our eyes locked, making my heart pound hard, and my erection as stiff as a steel rod. There wasn't a single moment of my day where I didn't want her. I wanted her *all* the time.

We had sex constantly. We couldn't get enough of each other, and it was fantastic. Our lust thrived. Every time we fucked, it made me want her even more desperately than before.

She didn't even have to *do* anything to turn me on. I was ridiculously attracted to her, and falling madly, deeply in love with her each passing day.

“What are you going to do about the generation ships?” Carmela asked, changing the subject, and making my mind skip ahead again.

“I'm not going to dare try and contact any of them,” I said.

“Do you not feel cut off from the rest of your fleet?” Carmela quizzed.

“I absolutely do.” I nodded. “But I want to keep them safe, and I want to keep everyone on *this* ship safe, too. There's just too

much risk involved. Contact isn't in either of our best interests right now."

"Don't you think they are wondering if we are alright out here?" Carmela asked.

"Yes, and the feeling is mutual," I agreed. "Unfortunately, it's just what the Belic are waiting for. We can't make it easier for them to tag our locations."

"I understand." Carmela nodded and took another bite of food.

She glanced out the window into the blackness of deep space. I watched her jaw move up and down as she chewed. Her expression was slightly vacant, as if she was lost in as much of a deep sleep as the space that surrounded her.

Being with Carmela alone, dining with her, spending time together — it was my best coping mechanism for the torrential storms occurring all around me.

I didn't know how I had survived this long without her, but now that she was in my life, I knew I would never be able to live without her again.

The next morning, Carmela and I had to be up early and out the door of my private quarters at an ungodly hour, but there was a significant amount of work to be done today and we couldn't stall. Even though I knew we *both* would have rather cuddled naked beneath the sheets.

I needed her help with repairing several robots that had gotten 'sick' and needed a few new parts before they could be functionally operational again and return to their programmed duties on the ship.

Carmela squeezed my hand delicately and gave me an affectionate smile.

"I don't want to say goodbye to you this morning," she said, her voice laced with disappointment.

I felt clingy to her, too. "I know, darling." I leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. "Last night was amazing."

Carmela's cheeks turned pink, but she smiled. "I can't stop thinking about it."

“Me either. It was fantastic. I think the best yet.”

“You might be right,” Carmela agreed. “I’m getting tingly all over at the mere memory of it.”

“I never want to erase those sexy images of you from my brain,” I admitted.

We were exiting my room, hand in hand, and started walking down the wing of the corridor when we were abruptly interrupted by a sullen Amada. She seemingly came out of nowhere from behind us, or at least, neither of us had noticed her before.

“Gross. No one wants to hear about your love life. Keep it in the bedroom. No one *cares*. It’s *disgusting*,” Amada complained.

Carmela quickly released my hand and turned around to look at Amada. Carmela’s face was etched in shock that Amada had heard our private conversation.

I glared at Amada and faced her, standing protectively in front of Carmela. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with this drama shit from Amada so early in the morning.

“Amada, please, leave us alone. What are you even doing in this part of the ship?”

“I’m making my rounds,” Amada declared with a casual shrug.

I knew she was lying. She had no reason to be in this area of the ship unless it was to keep tabs on what I was doing with Carmela.

I wasn’t sure what was worse. Amada sneaking up on us and calling us out or the fact that she was clearly intentionally stalking us and spying on us. It made me extremely uncomfortable, either way.

Carmela was red in the face, looking mortified as she warily glanced between me and Amada as if she expected us to start screaming at each other any second.

“You have no business being in this area,” I told Amada flatly, calling *her* out on her lies.

“I’ll see you later,” Carmela quickly said and then gave me a paltry smile as she scurried off down the hallway, trying not to cringe too hard as she departed.

I tried to stop her, but she ducked around a corner before I had a chance to do so.

I directed my frustration and anger toward Amada, which was exactly where it belonged in the first place.

“How dare you interrupt our morning like that,” I scolded. “You embarrassed Carmela. Our private conversations are none of your business.”

Amada’s laughter was vicious and condescending. “I’m allowed to walk wherever I want on the ship to check on things. If your little friend there gets embarrassed *that* easily, then it’s really not *my* problem.”

“You shouldn’t have sneaked up on us,” I said.

“I just happened to walk in the same direction you were going.” Amada gave me a harmless pout. “Call it a coincidence. What, you two own the corridors, now?”

I knew it was no coincidence. “You are spying on us.” I wasn’t afraid to call out Amada and try to make her own up to her mistakes.

Amada twisted her face into disgust. She wasn’t going to take my bait this time, but I knew I’d get her eventually. All it was going to take was one wrong move and then she’d slip up. Predators always got sloppy when they become overconfident.

“Ew. Don’t flatter yourself. As if I want to know about your sex life with that mousy midget.”

“She’s not mousy,” I said, feeling my temper rise to the surface. “She’s not a midget either. She’s just petite. And while we’re on the subject, she is braver than you will ever know. You didn’t see how many Belic robots she was able to disable on that Harvester ship. I was astounded by her skill.”

“I’m sure you’ll find ways to reward her,” Amada hissed scathingly.

“Stop it,” I commanded. “That’s enough of the hurtful comments.”

“I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“And neither am I. You need to find a way to move on with your life, Amada. As our chief engineer, you have plenty to do, so I don’t know why you are so focused on torturing us instead.”

Amada scoffed. “You *really* think I *care* enough about either one of you to focus my entire *day* on what you two are doing? Get *over* yourself, Cyburn. Your little friend should too. Her looks shouldn’t make her as confident as she is.”

“That’s enough.” My blood was boiling now. “Stop insulting her when she is not here to defend herself.”

“I’m not *insulting* her,” Amada said dryly. “I’m just stating facts. I’m an engineer. I only know the facts.”

I cut her a glacial glare. “Now I remember why I broke up with you. You are unnecessarily cruel and bitter about everything. Nothing will ever make you happy. You weren’t even happy being with me, but now that you’ve lost me you seem desperate to win me back. Forget about it, Amada. It’s never going to happen.”

Amada’s jaw dropped open. Her black eyes grew wide with hurt. Her green cheeks drained pale. Her eyes filled with tears, and then she clamped her mouth shut, pursing her lips so tightly that they too turned as pale as the moon.

She didn’t say a single word as she quickly breezed past me, skirting down the hallway as fast as she could, without a single glance back in my direction.

I knew I’d crossed a line with her and that she was probably already thinking about how to set her revenge plan into motion, but I didn’t care.

Amada had crossed half a dozen lines herself, just this morning *alone*. Two could play at this game. If I stunned her into silence, even for a little while, then I’d free up my life and Carmela’s for a little slice of peace and quiet. I’d welcome the

break in the subtle taunting from Amada anytime, and in any way that I could get it.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

CARMELA

I spent most of my days and nights with Cyburn. I clung to him, not because I was feeling particularly needy, but because he made me feel electric and alive.

He made me feel special, like I was important part of not only this operation, but of his life, too.

He doted on me and loved me. He cared for me. He protected me and was possessive over me in a way that made me feel like his queen.

I stuck to him when he wasn't busy or worked with Silver in the maintenance room on the robots. I made myself busy and kept my head down.

Cyburn had a lot of responsibilities. I tried to help him when I could, even if it meant sometimes staying out of the way so he could get his tasks done with minimal distractions. I knew I was a distraction for him, the biggest factor being sexual, so sometimes I kept out of the way so I wouldn't come between him and his captain duties.

I was just trying to maintain the status quo. I wanted to stay out of the way and not stir up any extra trouble for those of whom still had a problem with me, especially Amada.

As much as I desperately tried to avoid her, it wasn't always possible. On one particular day, I was in one of the bathroom stalls in the communal, female-only bathrooms.

I heard someone enter the bathroom while I was still occupying one of the stalls. This wasn't unusual in itself. People came and went. Everyone had to go eventually, but this

particular time, the slow footsteps unnerved me. Especially while I was trying to ‘do my business.’

The footsteps stopped directly in front of the closed door of the stall I was in. I stiffened and held my breath.

“I know you’re in there.” Amada’s icy voice cut through the silence.

I said nothing, but I swallowed hard.

“Carmela. You can’t hide in there forever.”

This woman was a psycho. She must have followed me in here, waited a minute or two, and then entered to chastise me for no reason other than to get on my nerves and make me uncomfortable.

I knew I wasn’t going to avoid this embarrassing experience, so, I spoke up. “Just leave me alone. Respect my privacy while I’m in here.”

“This is the communal bathroom,” Amada jeered in that condescending tone of hers that made my skin crawl. “I’m allowed to be in here.”

“You’re not allowed to bother me while I’m using the bathroom,” I said.

“Oh, what are you going to do, then?” Amada’s laughter was patronizing. “Are you going to go tell on me to your boyfriend?”

My jaw stiffened. I finished doing what I had to do, cleaned myself up, pulled up my pants, flushed, and stood there on the other side of the door, debating whether to come out or not.

“Are you finished?” Amada sneered on the other side of the door.

My cheeks burned red-hot. “You are crossing an uncrossable line,” I warned. “You need to watch yourself.”

Amada’s laughter echoed through the bathroom. “Is the wimpy little human *really* trying to threaten *me*?”

That was the last straw for me. I unlatched the lock and burst through the stall door, fuming. I was rigid. My posture was

defensive. If I had to fight her in this bathroom, I would. I was desperate to get her to leave me alone. I wasn't going to put up with Amada's shit any longer. This ended today.

I was ready to resist her no matter what and stick up for myself.

"How *dare* you ambush me when I'm vulnerable and in a private situation," I hissed through clenched teeth.

Amada sized me up, her eyes roaming over me with contempt. "Do you *really* think you are scaring me?" Her chortle was wicked. "It's pitiful and pathetic, really."

"Leave me alone," I snarled.

Amada's eyes narrowed, the blackness in them a void of hate. "Stay away from him."

"He loves me."

"He doesn't *love* you. You are delusional," she retorted snidely.

"Give up. He is with *me* now, not *you*."

I sounded like I was trying to convince both of us, and I hated it, but I was upset, and my insecurities were coming out.

Amada pursed her lips and crossed her arms tightly across her chest. Her expression was diabolical, as if she were plotting my downfall and watching it play out in her imagination.

"For *now*."

I didn't know what the 'for now' comment meant, but I chose to ignore it.

"Why would he want to be with someone like *you* anyway?" I asked with a bout of comical laughter. "It's hilarious that you would even *assume* that Cyburn would want to go anywhere *near* you. You are so angry at the world. You hate everyone. You want everyone to be as miserable as *you* because you don't get your way."

Amada's glare was glacial. She stepped forward. She was much taller than me, but more petite than other Alesian women.

Her fantastic jewelry flashed in the fluorescent light above the bathroom mirrors. She poised herself, straightened her posture and loomed over me as if she wanted to tear me apart.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I *always* get my way.”

“Not this time.” I matched her chilly, aggressive glower.

“Stay away from him or you’ll regret it,” Amada warned.

“Your threats are empty. I’ve already learned that much,” I said. “You can’t do anything to hurt me.”

“You can’t hide behind him forever,” Amada threatened again.

“I’m not *hiding*,” I fired back through clenched teeth. “*You* are the one who keeps pursuing *me*.”

Amada’s upper lip twitched, and her jaw tightened. She stared at me so viciously that it sent a chill trembling through my bones.

“He doesn’t love you.”

“Yes, he does.”

“He’s just going to end up hurting you.”

“You can’t speak from your own experience,” I said. “My experience with him is totally different.”

“The little human weasel is sounding way too overconfident,” Amada chortled.

“You only call me degrading names because it’s the only defense you have against me,” I said. “But your words don’t hurt me anymore because I know they aren’t true. It’s just your way of trying to get back at me. You’re just jealous because you want what you can’t have — what *I* have.”

Amada took a step backward to size me up again. Her eyes roamed over me in maniacal disbelief. “Excuse me? You *actually* think I am *jealous* of you? You are a scrawny, nothing of a human.”

“That’s your opinion,” I said flatly, trying not to let tears pool in my eyes because Silver was right. If I showed *any* level of

weakness whatsoever, Amada would prey on it. “An opinion of which I care nothing about.”

“You’ll care when the time comes,” Amada said ambiguously.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Amada’s lips curled into a sinister smile. Her eyes were cold and calculated. She simply smiled, saying nothing. She knew she was making me nervous by not elaborating on what she meant.

“You know what? Whatever. I’m not going to stand in here and let you antagonize me anymore.”

I huffed past Amada and went to the sink. I clamped my hand over the faucet and twisted it on. I didn’t dare look in the mirror because I knew Amada was behind me and I didn’t want to look at her reflection. I didn’t want to give her any more attention.

She was like a misbehaving child. The more you addressed their bad behavior, the more they were going to do it. It was just better to ignore it until it stopped. It was like feeding oxygen to a flame. You had to starve it, or it would keep spreading.

It was different with Amada, though. She didn’t seem to have an off switch. She was ruthless. The woman never tired of making my life a living hell. I wasn’t even safe in the *bathroom* for crying out loud. This was the *one* place on the ship — let alone *anywhere* that should be considered sacred.

I didn’t look, but I noticed Amada walking toward me from behind. When she got close, about an inch away, she stopped. Her breath was warm on the back of my neck. I stiffened again and goose bumps prickled on my skin. I shuddered quietly as I washed my hands under the hot water of the sink basin.

Amada inhaled slowly. “Listen up, you human piece of trash. Keep your nose out of things that will never be of your concern,” Amada whispered in a chilly tone directly in my ear. I still refused to look at her face in the reflection of the mirror. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of her seeing me crumble.

I swallowed hard and kept my temper in check. After a moment, I finally worked up the courage to look her in the eye, through the mirror.

“Leave me alone.”

Amada’s lips curled into that twisted smirk again. She started backing away from me.

“I’m telling you,” she warned. “If you don’t stay away from Cyburn, you and I will *both* suffer for it.”

“Shut up and go away,” I said, turning my head to glare at her as she slowly walked toward the bathroom exit. I was done listening to her idle threats.

Amada’s features looked suddenly startled, as if she wasn’t expecting this type of resistance from me.

She turned her back and stalked through the door, leaving me to pick up the pieces left behind by despair and anxiety.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

CYBURN

I walked into the robot laboratory a little before lunchtime to get Carmela. It was something I often did.

We enjoyed eating together, and we were on a bit of a routine with each other when it came to our schedules. Even when we were busy engaging with our own obligations, we tried to make time during the day to visit with each other, or at least eat our meals together.

Catching up with Carmela was always my favorite part of the day. I was always so excited to see her, even if we had only been apart for a few hours.

Carmela had her back turned when I entered the lab. She looked lost in deep thought, studying the robot parts on the table. Her head was down as she leaned over, clearly focusing.

I cleared my throat to let her know I was there. I hated to interrupt her, but I didn't want to startle her either.

She quickly turned around, but her normally bright and cheery face was one of distress. Her cheeks were red, and so were her eyes. Her eyelashes were damp, her eyes a little swollen. She looked like she'd been crying.

I immediately rushed to her side.

"What's wrong, darling?" I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close to me so I could cradle her petite body in my arms.

Carmela rested her head on my chest and sighed. The sound of her breath releasing was one of fatigue and sadness.

I stroked her hair. “Tell me what happened,” I whispered when she didn’t immediately elaborate on what had her so upset.

Carmela shook her head and put her head down. She stared at the robot parts that were spread out across the table.

“Carmela?” I whispered soothingly. I began to stroke her back to comfort her and make her feel safe. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

Carmela’s eyes became red again and pooled with tears. Her somber sigh devastated me. I gave her a moment to compose herself, and little by little, she gradually began to walk me through the problem.

“I don’t want to feel like I’m ‘tattling’ on Amada,” Carmela began. She still wouldn’t look at me, but at least she was talking. “I should be able to handle these issues on my own. I mean... I *did* stick up for myself, but it never seems to be enough.”

“What do you mean?”

Carmela released another exhausted sigh that made my heart break for her. She seemed like she was enduring a vicious emotional battle within herself and that it was taking her an extreme effort to keep herself composed. I wanted nothing more than to help her through her struggle.

“I had a terrible encounter with her earlier.”

“Where? What happened?”

Carmela swallowed hard and stared at her lab table. “I... was in the communal lavatory.”

“Okay...”

“I was... using it... when Amada came in.”

I stiffened. “Did she violate your privacy?”

Carmela slowly raised her head and met my gaze. She licked her lips and nodded. A single tear slowly rolled down her cheek. She hastily brushed it away with the back of her hand and she sniffled softly.

“What did she do?” Anger boiled inside me.

Carmela grimaced and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s done now. I survived it. I’m a survivor, just like everyone else.”

“It *does* matter,” I argued. “Tell me what she did to you.”

“She... confronted me. While I was using the bathroom.” Carmela looked so uncomfortable that part of me told myself to just let it go. “She was so patronizing. She seemed to take delight in the fact that she was making me so uncomfortable.”

If she didn’t want to talk about it, then that was fine. However, the *other* side of me wanted to know exactly what Amada did so I could exercise revenge.

But then I realized that it wasn’t my responsibility to extract that revenge unless Carmela was comfortable with it. Yet somehow, I knew that I would probably have to take matters into my own hands anyway.

“I’m so sorry, darling.” I wanted to be there for her and show her that I supported her no matter what. I continued rubbing her back comfortingly.

“It’s okay.” Carmela tightened her jaw and stared straight ahead with a stony look on her face as if she knew she had no choice but to be as strong as possible. Navigating these challenges were difficult for her, but she never complained.

“No, it’s not. I’m not going to let Amada continue to get away with this.”

Carmela searched my face. Her eyes had a reflection of worry flickering inside them. “What are you going to do?”

I took a deep breath. “I will handle it.”

Carmela nodded stoically but she didn’t say anything to protest otherwise. That was the green light I needed.

I hugged Carmela close and gently kissed the top of her head. I didn’t want to let her go. She felt so good to hold. Her body was warm and soft, but I had to take care of this. Amada wasn’t seeming to get the message.

Along the way to Amada’s private chambers, I was doing my best to keep myself calm but it wasn’t working. I knew I was

going to blow up at Amada in an explosive rage. I was done playing nice with this vile woman.

I couldn't believe that I'd wasted an entire decade of my life being tied down to her. At least I was free now — but in some ways it still didn't feel like I was, especially because I was still having to deal with her jealous tendencies and snarky bullshit on a routine basis.

I stormed into her chamber, not bothering to knock on the door, not waiting for an invitation inside.

Amada was standing next to her dresser. She was wearing her black uniform pants that molded to her body perfectly and accentuated her curvy hips.

Her neck, ears and wrists were bedazzled in more jewelry than even *I* wore on a usual basis.

She wasn't wearing a shirt, but she wore a black bra. I apparently stepped into her chambers while she was mid-changing, but I didn't care.

Amada's black eyes widened as I marched toward her. Her mouth opened in shock. She was absolutely stunned to see me thundering into her private room unannounced.

"I need to talk to you," I demanded.

Amada batted her eyelids innocently as if she had no idea what I might want to discuss with her. "What about?"

"You know."

"Is this about the puny human again?" Amada groaned and rolled her eyes.

She didn't bother to continue dressing, something I knew was deliberate.

"Please put a shirt on."

Amada smiled at me seductively. "*You're* the one who walked in here unannounced. This is *my* room. If you don't like it, you can leave."

"I'm not leaving until we settle this matter."

“I know a way you can release some of that tension.” Amada grinned flirtatiously. She tried to approach me, but I stepped backward to avoid her touch.

“That’s part of the problem,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “Amada, you need to cut the shit. Seriously. It’s enough.”

Amada poised herself and stared at me with a surprised look on her face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you *do*. You know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

Amada folded her arms across her chest and took a slow step toward me. she still refused to put a shirt on even though I’d asked her to.

She loved to mess with my head any chance she got. She was so hostile and bitter. It made me sick. It made my head spin, just how cold and calculated she could be sometimes.

How could one person use *that* much energy to be *so* intentionally hateful to just about everyone who crossed her the wrong way? It exhausted me just to even *think* about it, but it was *Amada’s* life, every day.

“How many times do I need to tell you to move on? It’s not like I *deliberately* went out there and found another woman. These things happen sometimes. I didn’t do it on purpose to hurt you.”

I’d been optimistic that she’d understand, but I couldn’t be more wrong.

The rims of Amada’s eyes became red and swollen. The structure of her jawline stiffened into a sharp and sculpted line. She stared at me as if brooding, her nostrils flaring, undoubtedly her temper flaring to unhinged proportions along with it.

“You think the world revolves around you, precious Cyburn, King of the Universe.”

“I’ve never claimed to be any such thing.”

“You’re *so* self-righteous.” The words dripped maliciously from Amada’s mouth like poison.

“Maybe you should do your own soul searching before claiming that to someone else,” I said, trying to tap into whatever reserves of patience I had left for Amada.

“I’m not the one with the power problem.” Amada’s lips curled wickedly, her mouth forming perfect parentheses on either side.

“I’d beg to differ.”

“We can agree to disagree.” Amada’s shrug was indifferent, but I knew it was all a front to make herself look tougher than she actually felt inside.

“Just stay away from Carmela. I don’t want to have to tell you again. Things won’t end well for you if you continue to harass her,” I warned.

“You’re all talk,” Amada chastised. Her eyes flashed with excitement. “I don’t believe a word you say.”

“Watch me.” I gave her an icy glare. “You still haven’t given me an explanation for *why* you ambushed Carmela in the bathroom. You invaded her privacy. There is no excuse for that.”

“She’s not one of us,” Amada fired back. “She doesn’t belong here. She should have gone back to where she belongs with the other humans.”

“She wants to be here helping us,” I said. “She’s courageous and kind, something you know nothing about.”

“She’s not *doing* anything of value,” Amada argued.

“Yes, she is. She is helping with the robots,” I countered. “Something which you know nothing about because you won’t even bother to get to know her. You won’t even give her a *chance*. It’s not about her being a human. It’s because she’s in a romantic relationship with me. That’s the *real* reason why you hate her so much.”

“I don’t *need* to know her. I *need* to do my job,” Amada protested. Once again, she missed the whole point.

“Well, if you don’t stop antagonizing her, you won’t have a job to *do*,” I threatened.

Amada's laughter was diabolical. "What's done is done."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"If you are waiting on an apology for sneaking up on your little friend in the bathroom, then you'll be waiting forever." The typical darkness shrouded over Amada's features again and she glared at me.

"Just leave her alone," I said.

"You should heed your own advice. If you want to taint the royal blood line by breeding with some inferior human, it's none of *my* business," Amada exclaimed.

She was descending into the madness in her own head, yielding to it. Her smile brightened, but it wasn't cheery. There was still a storm inside her eyes just waiting for the perfect opportunity to wreak havoc on the world.

"What are you trying to say?" I narrowed my eyes and studied her with distrust.

Amada continued with the devilish smile that rattled my senses. "Maybe my opinion doesn't carry much weight, but I know some whose opinions *do* matter."

"Who?" My heart drummed anxiously. I knew where Amada was taking this, but I wanted her to confirm. I needed to hear her say the words.

"The Elders. Our own kind who are still at large. What will *they* think? Will *they* approve?" Her features twisted impishly. "I should certainly think *not*."

"What are you trying to say?" I hissed through clenched teeth.

"Maybe you should re-think your decision to be with the lowly human," Amada declared with a casual shrug, and a breezy tone to inflict more damage to my psyche.

"Are you trying to blackmail me by threatening my reputation with the remaining Elders? Are you *really* going to stoop *that* low to put my position at risk?"

Amada's smile was glacial. "See? I *told* you that all you cared about was power. As soon as I mentioned *anything* about your

reputation, you start to panic. *That* got your attention quick enough.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I stiffened. Every muscle in my body became taut as if I were preparing to go into battle. Perhaps in some ways I was.

“No.” Amada made a clicking sound with her tongue. Her tone was chirpy and rage-inducing. “I think you are getting the message *loud* and clear.”

I turned my back to her. I couldn’t look at her another second. Everything about her disgusted me. Her attitude made her incorrigible. A throbbing headache pounded between my temples, caused by the stress of having to deal with my scorned ex-lover. I began to question my decisions. Was any of this worth it in the end? What was I even working for, if I couldn’t get the respect and dignity, I felt like I deserved?

“As soon as the remaining rescued people are returned to their home worlds or embassy bases, I will be replacing you as the ship’s chief engineer, Amada.”

There, I said it. I enacted the warning, and I was going to follow through no matter what. I was done being Amada’s door mat.

Amada burst into hysterical laughter. The shrill tone in her voice was maniacal. I turned around to look at her with a mixture of pity and loathing.

Amada continued shrieking with laughter until her eyes turned red again and fat tears began rolling down her cheeks. The hysteria continued, but her features became tortured. The laughter became pained, almost forced until it cracked into full-blown sobs.

I slowly turned around and began walking from the room, wincing cautiously along the way, halfway expecting her to reach out and start clawing at my skin in fury and revenge.

The entire encounter left me feeling unnerved about an unsettled future. My engineer was crumbling, and so was the very foundation of everything I had worked tirelessly to achieve.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

CARMELA

A large hand lightly touched me on the back, right below my shoulder blade.

I was in the line at the cafeteria, standing there with my tray, waiting to be served dinner from the kitchen staff.

I'd already picked out my drink and dessert, and now I was just waiting patiently for the main course as the assembly line slowly shuffled forward.

I warily turned around to see who was touching me, but relaxed when I saw Cyburn standing there behind me. He was dressed in his warrior battle uniform, wearing all the gear aside from his protective helmet.

His white-blond hair looked glossy under the sharp, silver light of the dining area. His almond-shaped black eyes were wider than usual, his pupils barely visible because of how dark his eyes were, but I could tell that they were dilated.

"Hi," I said cheerily, giving him the most charismatic smile I had to offer.

Unfortunately, Cyburn didn't share my enthusiasm. Nor did he return my smile. He had a somber expression on his face, and his eyes were both concentrated and distant when he stared at me.

"I need to talk to you," he said gravely.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

"Is everything alright?" I asked, my hands now shaking. I coiled my fingers tighter around the rim of the tray to hold it

steady.

Cyburn glanced down at my tray. He gently touched my shoulder. “The food can wait. We need to talk in private, now.”

“Alright...” I trailed off as an entire family of butterflies pattered around in my stomach.

Cyburn took my tray from me and set it down on an empty table. He tugged me along with some urgency, discarding the tray and abandoning the dining hall completely.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as soon as we were out of earshot from anyone else and had vacated the cafeteria.

Cyburn tossed a paranoid glance over his shoulder and didn’t respond. He kept pulling me forward. I started to resist him, which made him yank at me even more compellingly.

“Cyburn,” I said a little more forcefully to get my voice heard. “Where are you taking me? You’re hurting my wrist.”

I tried to wiggle free from his grasp to get some control over the situation.

The fog over Cyburn’s face lifted as if he were suddenly released from a spell, or some kind of binding hypnosis had suddenly stopped its hold over him.

Cyburn blinked at me, his lips slightly parted, an alarmed expression worn into the grooves of his face.

“I’m... sorry. I am just under a lot of pressure this evening.” His shoulders hung loosely as if he felt ashamed of himself for his behavior.

“Tell me what’s wrong so I can help you,” I offered as gently as I could, but his behavior was still unsettling me.

Cyburn continued glancing around the ship’s corridors with increasing paranoia and shook his head. “I wanted to bring you to my private office chambers so we could talk alone.”

“Alright,” I said cautiously. “You didn’t have to yank me so hard, though. I will always be willing to go with you.”

Cyburn’s features softened apologetically. He approached me and gently swooped his arms around my waist. He kissed me

with passion and longing.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I should have been taking your feelings into account.”

“You startled me a little.”

“I didn’t mean to.” His voice was sincere.

I relaxed and took his word for it. “It’s okay.”

Cyburn gently stroked my cheek, his eyes glazing over with an expression I couldn’t identify. “I’m madly in love with you. All I want to do is protect you.”

“I trust you.”

Cyburn took my hand. There was still an urgency in his movements, but he was more tender this time.

“Then come with me. We don’t have much time to talk.”

The moment we stepped inside Cyburn’s office chambers, he immediately closed the door and locked it hastily behind us.

“Please, sit down,” he said.

“Did someone die?” I asked, unnerved by his aloofness.

Cyburn shook his head. I was getting ready to ask him why he was dressed in his battle suit when he began to explain himself.

“We’re in contact with the Vorgon Consortium,” Cyburn began.

“What is that?”

“It’s one of our highly secured, secret bases. Our allies are there,” Cyburn explained.

“What are they saying?” I asked.

“We’ve made some plans with them,” Cyburn continued. “They also have three of the freed humans from another harvest ship. We will meet up with them to make an exchange because they don’t have the resources to take care of them. From there we will take them where they need to go.”

“Alright...” I trailed off with some apprehension building inside me.

“The next part of the plan might become a little more challenging,” Cyburn said, the grim features returning to form foreboding lines on his face.

“What is it?” I asked. My heart pounded with uncertainty at his behavior.

Cyburn swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

“I told Amada that once we docked, I would be replacing her as the ship’s chief engineer.”

My heart flipped. My jaw dropped open and I stared at Cyburn with widened eyes. “Are you serious?”

I couldn’t believe he’d actually put his foot down about this and was planning to keep his word to do something about it. Now that there were other people involved, it seemed more of a realistic goal.

“Wow, Cyburn. I can’t believe it. That’s amazing. I mean, I’m sorry that you have to lose your chief engineer but maybe it will finally teach Amada a lesson about how to behave. I’m sure she didn’t take the news lightly.”

Cyburn’s head slowly hung downcast as if it were a heavy bowling ball he could no longer easily carry. His gaze became fixed on the floor, and he blinked briefly. Traces of guilt clung to his face like a shroud.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, reaching out to affectionately stroke his arm.

Cyburn slowly lifted his gaze and looked at me. “I’m not *really* going to replace Amada as the ship’s chief engineer. However, she doesn’t know that yet.”

My heart all but turned to stone. “So, you were just bluffing with her?” I couldn’t hide the disappointment in my voice.

Cyburn solemnly shook his head. “No, I’m not bluffing with her, that’s not what I mean. What I mean is that I’m not going to use her as a mechanic or an engineer. She no longer has a job... or a place... aboard the *Blade* with us.”

I gawked at Cyburn, trying to wager whether he actually meant the words he was saying.

“Cyburn...”

“What’s done is done,” Cyburn said stoically. His handsome jawline tightened into a line of pride.

“It’s not done *yet*,” I said.

Cyburn held my gaze. “It will be soon.”

“How will you get her to leave?” I asked, my mind boggled and trying to comprehend how a plan this diabolical against the chief engineer was actually going to be pulled off.

“We’ll be dropping Amada off at the next port,” Cyburn said defiantly as if there was no room for debate.

Not that I would be the one to argue with him. I was all for it. I couldn’t wait for this ship to finally be rid of Amada’s toxic energy.

“What if she tries to fight or protest against it?” I asked, feeling a plague of nervous energy starting to settle into the pit of my stomach.

“We are already expecting her to push against my authority,” Cyburn mentioned. “It will be taken care of at the time of the port drop off.”

“How?” I blinked at him, studying him. “Sorry, I just want to know all the details so I can be prepared, too.”

“I know,” Cyburn said. The ‘boyfriend and lover’ aspect of his personality seemed to have gone dormant, suppressed during the course of our conversation. “I don’t mind you asking questions. I will have my best security guards escorting her off the ship. She will be overpowered if she tries anything stupid.”

“Okay. I’m glad you’ve thought about it and prepared for it.” I gave him a warm smile to let him know I felt relief about the plan and wanted to wholeheartedly support him, but Cyburn barely returned it with one of his own.

There was an air of professionalism about him that made me feel like he might be upset with me.

I tried to remind myself that it probably had more to do with the fact that he was going to have to boot his unpredictable and edgy ex-lover off the ship without her compliance or awareness in advance.

“After Amada’s drop off, I will have my crew start working immediately to change all the access codes throughout the ship. I’ll also make sure they cover all the other relevant vulnerabilities that Amada might try to get her hands on after the fact,” Cyburn said.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said, grateful that Cyburn had clearly taken the time to think this plan through to make sure it was pulled off without any extra complications.

“Amada will undoubtedly be out for revenge,” Cyburn said. “I know how her mind works. I was with her for a decade, as you know, and also as you know I hate admitting that fact. However, it wasn’t *all* for nothing. I feel like I know her better than anyone else, and I *hope* that means I’ll be able to predict her reactions better than anyone, too.”

“You’ll see them coming a mile away,” I said, aiming to compliment his efforts. “It sounds like you already do. You’re ahead of the game.”

Cyburn sighed, but his eyebrows knitted worriedly. “Amada will be both devastated and furious. I can *try* to predict what she’ll do, but I won’t know for sure, unfortunately, until it happens.”

“Maybe nothing will happen.” I shrugged.

“We can’t get our hopes up on that,” Cyburn said. “We need to be prepared. Which is why we need to protect this ship and all the intelligence information, the computers, the programs, the robots — everything from Amada once she is gone. She could try to use anything she can as evidence against me to bring me down. She might stop at nothing to exploit us if she happens to befriend space raiders along the way.”

“Do you *really* think she would switch teams like that?” I asked, feeling a wavy sensation rolling in my stomach. “Could she go to the enemy side?”

“I wouldn’t rule it out,” Cyburn said, his features sad and exhausted. “She could really go for my jugular and befriend the Belics to get back at me for all I know.”

I felt so sorry for him. What an enormous amount of pressure he was under. I just wanted to hold him and make him feel like everything he was doing would end up all being worth it in the end, but unfortunately, I didn’t have a crystal ball to predict the future any more than he or anyone else could.

“Are you *sure* this is the only way?” I asked.

Cyburn’s eyes glistened with dread. “I have exhausted every other opportunity to get through to Amada. Nothing is working. This might have disastrous consequences, but like I said, a lesson needs to be taught here.”

I frowned, not sure that putting *our* lives in jeopardy was the best way to teach a lesson to Amada. She wasn’t exactly the type who bowed down to authority, anyway. The more resistance she received, the more combative she seemed to get.

However, I didn’t argue with Cyburn. If he had already made up his mind, I trusted him and I wasn’t going to try and make him second guess his decisions. Not now.

Maybe I could try to talk to Amada in private to get her to reason with us, but I couldn’t let Cyburn know because he would never agree to let me do it.

Cyburn’s features softened and some of the fear there melted away like snow on a warm spring afternoon.

“I didn’t tell you all this to scare you,” he mentioned. “I’m not as intimidated as I might appear. I’m just nervous because I want the drop off to go well. You know I *have* to think about all the worst case scenarios, but that’s just it. That’s all they are. In the end, I highly doubt Amada will do anything more than throw a fit. She might scream and call me names. She might try to claw at me or spit in my face. I *do* expect these milder reactions from her, compared to what *else* she could be capable of — but I have to trust the potential that this decision will restore more peace to our lives. Amada loathes the Belic Empire with a passion. I can’t *really* see her turning toward

their side. However, she is behaving so erratically lately that I can't really be sure what exactly is going through her head right now. I'm hoping she'll just take some time to lick her wounds in private by disappearing off our radar for a while."

"I know it's a struggle for everyone. Everyone is on edge because of her. The tension is mounting." I supportively roped my arms around Cyburn's torso and gave him a compassionate hug.

"You make it easier to cope with," Cyburn whispered lazily, kissing the top of my head.

Cyburn yielded to my touch at once and began stroking my hair, hugging me close to him as well.

I loved feeling his strong, hard body pressed against mine. I couldn't judge his decision making process. Sometimes things just needed to run their course.

He knew what he was doing. He'd promised to protect us all. He was our leader and commander, the King of Alesis. Nothing could stand in his way as far as *I* was concerned, and I would be there for him no matter what, every step of the way.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

CARMELA

I was in Cyburn's private quarters late one evening. I'd all but abandoned my own living space on the other side of the ship and was now living full time with him on *his* side of the ship. We were always together anyway, so we figured it would be easier if I just moved my things, not that I had that many to start with, to his private quarters and set up there.

Besides, he didn't want me staying by myself with Amada on the prow. What he *didn't* know was that I'd planned on catching Amada off guard tonight before she retired to her own chambers. If Cyburn knew about it, he'd probably have a fit. That was why I was trying to do this before he finished working his rounds on the complete opposite end of the ship.

For the past few days, I'd stalked Amada. Well, maybe *stalked* was a bit of a stretch, but I'd gotten myself familiar with her schedule and her routine.

I wanted to make sure I didn't notice her really *straying* from that routine so that I'd be able to corner her when she came out of the communal women's lavatory for the last time of the evening. Hey, she'd done it to me, so I figured it wouldn't be a terrible injustice if I gave her a little taste of her own medicine. Besides, I'd be planning to wait in the corridor directly *outside* of the bathroom instead of following her in, so I was already doing better than *she* was on that front.

There wasn't room to feel guilty about anything I planned on doing tonight. Fair was fair. If she dished it, she could take it as far as I was concerned. I wasn't really worried about sparing her feelings anymore.

Well *anyway*, tonight was the night I was going to follow through on my plan. I was *super* nervous, to the point where I wasn't sure I could actually pull it off, but I knew deep down that I had to at least try.

I didn't know *why* I cared so much, but I just had a really bad feeling about what might happen if Cyburn booted Amada off the ship and stripped her of all her dignified titles.

It was probably more about the fact that I wanted to make sure that *we* were going to be safe once he kicked her off the ship, rather than to spare or salvage her feelings on the matter.

I wasn't one for confrontation, but if I didn't try one last time, things could get even worse for us, Amada excluded.

The more time I'd had to think about Cyburn's plan, the more unsettled I became about it. Sure, I probably should have talked to *him* about my misgivings instead of trying to trap Amada, but I knew Cyburn. He was stubborn enough on his own accord and even if I pled my case, he'd probably hear none of it.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and took a deep breath, trying to breath in bravery and resolve.

It was difficult. My lips were taut, my cheekbones sunken in, my cheeks pale. I was exhausted. I'd been working myself into the ground lately in the robot laboratory, and when I came back on those late nights, Cyburn and I stayed up half the night either talking or making love.

I wasn't getting much sleep, but I didn't mind it if it meant being intimate with Cyburn. Our connection was fierce, and he gave me the most mind-blowing orgasms I'd ever experienced in my life.

Not that I *had* a lot of experience anyway, but they left me feeling dizzy, delirious, and as if I'd just launched myself to the moon on a rocket of pleasure.

In the aftermath of our passion-fury sessions and intense love-making, I always felt like I was glowing. I always felt drunk with ecstasy as if my limbs were numb, tingly, and made of jelly instead of flesh and bone.

Sex with Cyburn was sensational. It was also a wonderful distraction from the stress in my life. It was my own personal way of detoxing.

I was stressed out from a *ton* of different factors, but the biggest ones I was dealing with at the moment had to do with not knowing if I had a rock solid future — and trying my best to avoid Amada and her antagonistic antics any chance I got.

Cyburn usually managed to relieve my stressors, but he wasn't here right now, and I had to deal with this all by myself while he wasn't around to know what I was up to.

I knew he would forbid me to go and talk to Amada. I hated keeping this secret from him, but it was for his own good.

Now, here I was getting ready to *deliberately* throw myself into the snake pit with her, but I promised myself my reasonings were as legitimate as they could possibly be.

“You can do this,” I whispered to myself in the mirror, staring at myself and psyching myself up to position into a role of a freedom fighter and defender. I was ready to throw myself into battle if it meant trying one last time to get through to her and get her to leave us alone.

My tactic this time?

Well, let's just say I was going to use a *new* approach, one that had more to do with logic instead of desperately trying to appeal to Amada's morality. Let's face it. She didn't *have* any morality to appeal to in the first place.

“You'll get her to back down,” I said to myself defiantly. I was my own cheerleader in this case. I had to be that way my entire life. Why should *now* be any different, right?

I took one last deep breath of courage and spun on a heel, marching from the room, and praying I wouldn't run into Cyburn along the way.

Right now, I viewed him as a road-block to Amada. I couldn't have him standing in my way. The only deterrent I was going to face *now*, was Amada herself, and I was mentally and physically prepared to do so.

I started stomping down the corridor in the direction of the female lavatories that were nearest to Amada's quarters.

Anxious swells of doubt crested in my stomach, thrashing around like an angry sea. I was second guessing myself, treading over some dangerous mental territory.

I had to stand my ground, and most importantly stand up for *myself*.

"Don't give up now," I whispered to myself. "You're almost there."

I had studied the pattern of Amada's activities for *days* now. I was just hoping above all that *tonight* of all nights she wouldn't chose to steer wildly off course from what she'd been doing lately.

Sure enough, as soon as I approached the area of the bathrooms, I saw Amada stepping out of it.

Jackpot!

Got you... bitch.

I was so relieved I could feel the tingle in my bones.

All my indecision melted away. All my fear and dread of the situation vanished completely, and I was left with the shelter of confidence hanging like a protective umbrella above me.

Let Amada come after me. Let her try to rain her hellfire upon me. I could fend for myself out here in this shitstorm.

"Hey!" I shouted to grab her attention before she wheeled herself around the corner.

Amada stopped dead in her tracks. She slowly turned around. Her eyes narrowed on me.

"What do *you* want?" she barked.

"I want to talk to you."

Amada's laughter was sharp like the slice of the sword through a heart. Her expression was patronizing. She was *such* a *snob*. I couldn't stand her. We were either going to settle this matter tonight or not. There was no turning back now.

The choice was hers. I wasn't about to reveal Cyburn's plan to her, either. If she was smart enough, she'd make the right decision on her own. If not, I wasn't going to do her any favors by helping her out or giving her any clues otherwise.

She thought she was better than *everybody*. It wasn't just *me* to whom she directed her animosity, but I was her biggest victim.

Well, look out, universe. I was a victim no more.

"Too bad. I'm *busy*," Amada's voice dripped with venom. Her glower was glacial, turning my blood to ice.

"I'm sorry," I said smugly. "I don't remember asking for your permission to talk to you."

This got Amada's attention. She loved a good catfight whenever she could find a perfect opportunity.

She slowly strutted toward me with a devious smile on her face as if everything I did or said amused her in a cutesy way.

"The puny human has grown some balls, I see," she snapped, slapping on the fakest smile I'd ever seen.

"I just have one thing to say to you," I said resentfully, ignoring her jabs at my size and the fact that I was a human. She was always trying to segregate me from the others and make me feel unworthy of their presence, including her own.

She thought she was so perfect, but she was clueless on most everything. She only saw what she wanted to see. Amada had tunnel vision for Cyburn, and I was ready to snap her back to face cold, hard reality.

Amada might have felt like she had the warmth of Cyburn as a blanket of protection for her, but she would soon realize that jarring truth — the truth where deep, desolate isolation was nothing more than an empty void of blackness, just like the blackness in her eyes.

It was a place where she was alone and trapped in the dark and cold, shivering and wishing she'd made better life choices.

I was the one who could either push her further into that abyss or help yank her out. Her own actions tonight would be the very things to prove her own fate.

Amada maintained that amused smirk. I was itching to smack it right off her face.

“Oh yeah, scrawny shrimp? What is *that*, then? I can’t *wait* to hear,” she chastised.

Her eyes danced as if I was nothing more than a source of entertainment for her.

“How *dare* you try to come between me and Cyburn. Who the *hell* do you think you *are*, anyway? You really have *some* nerve. You are *so* pathetic. It’s *sad* really, how much you desperately fawn all over him.”

I had rehearsed this moment in my head over and over again. I had choreographed every move I was going to make, everything I was going to say was intricately and precisely laid out specifically for Amada.

Yes, I was trying to get a rise out of her, to berate her and cause friction in her temper — just like she’d done to me so many times before.

At the mention of Cyburn’s name, and the row of insults directed toward her, Amada’s black eyes flashed with malice. Her jawline formed a carved line of anger. Her lips also formed a line of disdain, pressed together so tightly they turned stark white.

“Listen to me, you human *bitch*,” she hissed. “Don’t you *dare* come near me again, or you’ll be sorry that you did.”

Her threats sounded sugar coated and hollow. She was bluffing. Everything she said had no merit. I knew her better than she thought.

I returned her combative smile. I slathered on a thicker layer of charm than peanut butter on a cracker.

“No, *you* listen to *me*. I’m *done* doing the listening. Did you *really* think that your efforts would pay off for you in the end? What did you *really* think would happen to you if you openly attacked the captain’s woman? Do you *really* think that threatening me is going to do you any good in the end?” I took a step backward, gave her a callous glance up and down, and

let out a heartless laugh. “I guess you are stupider than you look after all.”

Amada’s green cheeks burned a dragon fire red. The wrath of hell swirled around in her dilated pupils.

“I think you are confusing me with yourself,” Amada snarled.

She got close enough to me that I could smell her sickening, flowery perfume that was overbearing enough from a few feet away, much less only inches. My nostrils burned and my temper flared.

“I’m not confused. *You* are. Cyburn is in love with *me*, which means no matter *what* you want to do to me, you can’t *touch* me. I’m off limits. You have *no* idea what Cyburn is capable of if you hurt me. I would heed that as a warning if I were you.”

For a moment, I thought that I had her right where I wanted her. I thought that I finally scared her into submission, that she was going to heed my words and back off. I thought that she was finally listening, but I was wrong.

None of that happened. Instead, Amada retaliated with even *more* rebellious force. Her lips curled up into a twisted smile. She looked like she was only one tattered thread away from losing her mind completely.

“I’m *never* going to be scared of you. You’re nothing more than an impostor. You should have been left to be reduced to brain scraps that live inside the Belic robot bodies.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but Amada put a stop to that immediately.

I didn’t have time to react. It happened too fast. Amada’s arm swung upward. Her jaw stiffened. Her eyes narrowed in concentration. Her fist formed a solid rock of knuckle and bone. The torrential downward motion of her hand went thundering down like steel as she belted it directly into my face.

I heard the crack next. I wasn’t sure if it was my bones or hers. Searing pain ran like a hot fire-poker through my nose and cheekbones, then went trembling through my jaw.

The pain made my eyes water and blurred my vision. I let out a deafening scream as my knees buckled. I dropped like a limp rag doll to the ground, clutching my wounded face. I was down, but not out.

Fury raged inside me like a tornado — one born of violence and destruction. I rose like a phoenix to my feet and lunged toward Amada with adrenaline fueled revenge pumping through my veins.

I meant what I said. If this bitch refused to listen to me, she was going down tonight.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

CYBURN

I followed the shouting voices of Amada and Carmela. It didn't take me long to find them. They were standing in the hallway near the female communal bathrooms on wing 'A' of the ship.

Carmela was scrambling to her feet by the time I swooped in to intervene. Crimson blood poured from her nose. Her eyes were swollen and the sensitive area underneath them was already turning into purplish-black, half-moons.

Carmela scrappily hurried in Amada's direction, undoubtedly, to seek retaliation on Amada. I intercepted her before she was able to send a blow back to Amada's face. Not that I would necessarily *care* about Amada's face, but I cared if Amada tried to punch Carmela again, which, judging by the look of Carmela's face that was exactly what had happened.

I lunged for Carmela just as she was diving for Amada. Carmela's fist was raised above her head, ready to come crashing down onto Amada's jaw.

"Wait, no!" I shouted and grabbed Carmela by the jacket of her utility suit. "Carmela — stop. It's not worth it."

I was able to successfully yank her backward. Carmela went propelling into my arms. She was panting hard and scowling at me with seething fury.

I made sure she wasn't hurt worse before letting her go. It looked like she may end up with some bruising for a while under the eyes, especially since it had already started, but her nose wasn't twisted or mangled so I thankfully doubted it was

broken. She might need some ice, but she looked like she would repair quite nicely.

“Why didn’t you let me have a go at her?” Carmela cried as soon as I released her. “*Look* at me.”

“I know,” I said as sympathetically as I could. She was dripping blood everywhere. It splattered down her clothing and onto the floor. “I’m so sorry. I’ll take care of the problem in a less violent way.”

Amada was hastily trying to scamper off, but I was too fast for *her*, too.

“Go get yourself cleaned up,” I called out over my shoulder to Carmela, pointing to the bathroom which conveniently enough she was already standing outside of it.

Carmela gave me a blank stare as the faucet of blood continued to leak out of her nostrils.

“Carmela!” I shouted again, this time with more urgency to get her to snap out of the stupor that had temporarily laid hold over her brain. “Go!”

Carmela shook her head as if to loosen up the cobwebs inside. “Right.”

She spun on a heel and hustled into the bathroom.

“Not so fast,” I said and grabbed a fist-full of Amada’s hair because it was all I could reach.

Amada wailed in pain.

“You’re not going *anywhere*,” I hissed through clenched teeth, yanking Amada toward me.

I swiveled her around and pressed her to my chest so she wouldn’t be able to wiggle free. I had a tight hold on her, but she struggled and grunted against me anyway.

“You’re wasting your energy,” I said, out of breath too as I adamantly tried to hold her in place. “The harder you struggle, the tighter I’ll keep my grip until it hurts us both. I don’t give a shit anymore.”

“Fuck you,” Amada exclaimed. Her eyes were dark and full of hate and evil.

“You will pay for what you’ve done to my lover’s face,” I threatened.

“It was an ugly face anyway,” Amada cried with scorn.

Fat teardrops slowly rolled down her cheeks. The rims of her eyes were red, her eyelashes damp.

“You made your choices,” I told her. “Sometimes choices have consequences. None of this had to end this way, Amada.”

She stopped crying and struggling against me. She stared at me in disbelief and shock. She wiped the streaks of tears away from her cheeks with the back of her hand and sniffled, blinking up at me.

“What does that mean, ‘end’?” she asked, her voice on the verge of hysteria.

“You’ll soon find out,” I said.

Fear glazed in Amada’s eyes and her mouth dropped open in surprise. Her entire face was etched in dread. Let her fear me. She deserved it now for all the havoc she had put us through.

“You will not use violence on *my* ship,” I told her. “There is no enemy aboard this ship.” I paused. “Aside from *you*.”

Amada began to struggle again. She screamed a blood curdling scream that pierced my ears and temporarily deafened me.

I tensed my grip on her so hard that my muscles began to cramp, but I had no choice. Amada was really giving back a fight.

Her anger wasn’t enough to overcome *mine*. I was beyond livid at this point.

“How *dare* you physically strike Carmela,” I breathed into Amada’s neck, grabbing her by the hair again as I pulled.

She cried in pain again and met my gaze. There was still lust burning in her eyes. There was still an insurmountable level of

desperation peering back at me. It made me sick. I no longer felt sorry for Amada. She was truly pathetic.

“You’re coming with me,” I said and began to march down the corridor with Amada still struggling under my grip.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Amada proclaimed in a spitefully loud voice.

I laughed at her mockingly. “It’s funny that you assume you have a choice.”

Amada’s lips straightened and she tightened her jaw, cutting me with a slashing glare.

I yanked her forward, forcing her to put one foot in front of the other.

“Come on,” I grimaced, struggling harder than I thought I would have against Amada’s resistive weight.

“Where are we *going*?” Amada whined. “You could at *least* give me the decency of an answer there.”

I hesitated. Amada didn’t deserve any decency anymore. She’d all but lost that right as far as I was concerned.

“We’re going to the bridge,” I grumbled through clenched teeth. “Where I’ll have guards keep watch over you.”

“That’s *ridiculous*.” Amada’s voice dripped with venom.

“Given your explosive behavior, I think it’s more than necessary,” I countered.

We arrived at the bridge. I had called in several guards to keep an eye on her because Amada was sometimes able to successfully cajole Silver, and now wasn’t the time to give Amada any extra loopholes to disregard my authority.

However, as soon as we arrived, I noticed that portions of the bridge had been burned through.

“Assess the damage,” I told Nix, whom I’d called on to help with the problem. “I need to go check on Carmela in the women’s lavatory. This one here gave her a pretty nasty punch in the face.”

I nudged my chin in Amada's direction, referring to her.

Nix's dark eyes narrowed suspiciously on Amada. "Don't worry. At least the fire is contained now. I'll try to see if I can pull the tapes and see what might have caused it and what we can salvage."

"Thank you."

I had no idea how this had gone unnoticed, but I didn't have time to worry about it right now because Carmela's physical and emotional wellbeing was the biggest concern of mine at the moment.

Besides, I had faith in Nix. He would keep everything under control and make sure nothing *else* got burned or destroyed or maimed in the meantime. I had a sneaking suspicion that as long as Amada was being watched over, nothing else catastrophic would happen.

I raced back to the wing where I'd left Carmela, jogging to get there as fast as I could because I was desperate to comfort her.

I found her standing over the sink, inspecting her swollen, bloody face. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. Her shoulders wilted and occasionally sputtered as she tried her hardest to suppress her sobs. She was so brave and pitiful at the same time.

"Amada is being held prisoner on the bridge," I said, cautiously entering the room. I wasn't sure how she was going to react to me. I felt exclusively to blame for this. The guilt ripped through my heart and tore me apart. "I am so sorry this happened to you."

I slowly approached her and gently placed my hand on her shoulder, gazing at her tenderly in the mirror.

I was relieved when she didn't immediately try to shy away from me. She let me touch her. She turned around and sobbed into my chest. She let me hold her and comfort her. She let me take her in my arms and make her feel safer than she had in weeks after being on the *Blade* with me.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to her softly, over and over again as I fervently tried to console her. I let her cry. I let her get it

all out. The pain and suffering left her body with each heavy sob and cry. The emotion drained her until she went limp in my arms.

Wordlessly, I picked her up and carried her back to my private quarters. Neither of us said a word. The silence held above us like a heavy fog.

I closed the door and gently laid her on the bed. I wiped away her tears. Her face was no longer bloody, but it was stained with bruising. I wanted revenge, but I wanted *her* more, which was probably a good thing because if I lost my head tonight and sought my revenge on Amada, I was at risk to lose a whole lot more than just my temper.

Carmela gazed up at me with vulnerability flickering in her eyes. She looked lost, hopeless, but at the same time, a shimmer of hope was kept alive by a sparkle in her green irises. It was enough hope to keep me going. She looked up at me with longing, with a desperation to escape from reality.

I wanted to make her forget everything that went wrong in her life since she had met me.

“It’s okay,” Carmela whispered. “I’m not upset with you. You did everything you could to get through to Amada, and so did I. If it weren’t for you, I’d be nothing but spare parts for the Belic robots.” Carmela’s eyes flooded with fresh tears. “Amada was right.”

As soon as her chin began to quiver, I leaned down and softly brushed my lips against hers. The kiss turned into urgency. Carmela roped her arms around my neck and pulled me closer. She whined into my ear, begging me for more.

She raked her nails across my scalp and tugged on my hair. She pushed my head further down, deeper into her lips. Her tongue tangled with mine. The passion was incredible. It was like nothing we’d experienced before. It was as if the adrenaline from the night was exploding within us. All the tension and pressure were finally lifting its burdensome cloak over us. Each kiss we gave each other was equally as urgent as the one that came before it.

Carmela coiled her thighs around me. Her expression pleaded with me to fuck her. She didn't say the words. I knew exactly what she wanted.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered delicately in her ear, while my hands fumbled to undress her. I was so desperate to reveal her naked body that my fingers were shaking.

"I'm a mess," Carmela said and choked back another sob.

I cradled her chin in my hands and slipped my tongue into her mouth again.

"Hey," I whispered. "Don't talk like that. The wounds will heal. You are the strongest woman I've ever met. You are beautiful to me."

Carmela's eyes shone brighter after I complimented her. She was radiant in every way. My fingers slipped around her naked breasts. I cupped them in my hands and listened to her gloriously whispered moans as they fluttered like silk through my ears.

My cock throbbed, eager to be buried deep inside her. I groaned as she cuffed her hand around my shaft and began to slowly pump it up and down, working it with careful thrusts that made my heart pound with desire.

Carmela made eye contact with me. Her stare was intense, stinging at my soul. I brushed my fingers across her naked torso and plucked her heavenly pink nipples into my mouth.

I stroked her hair and gazed compassionately into her eyes. "I promise you that I'll never let Amada — nor anyone else ever hurt you again. I'll never take my eyes off you if that's what you want."

Carmela's eyes pooled with tears again, but this time she had a smile on her face. She was crying happy tears.

I was just overjoyed that she was talking to me.

"Let's have make-up sex, darling," she whispered in a sexy voice. Her smile was seductive, making my hard cock throb even harder.

I grinned, elated that she was willing to give me another chance. I gazed down at her juicy pussy. Her lips were delicate and swollen, pink and tender with lust. I reached for my cock and gently pushed her sensitive folds apart with the tip of my shaft.

Carmela moaned and arched her back. Her eyes briefly fluttered closed. She looked like she was soaring to the heavens already, and so was I.

I couldn't suppress my longing for her another second, and clearly Carmela felt the same. She yielded to me. She relaxed in my arms and moaned, begging me to fuck her.

As I slowly fed her sweet pussy my cock, one sensational inch at a time, she cried harder with desire. Her cheeks were stained red with ecstasy. Her body wiggled under me. She bucked her hips upward and begged me for mercy after I wedged myself balls deep inside her.

I began to grind my hips against hers. She squeezed her thighs around my torso and grinned like a wild animal. Sparks flew between us. I'd never felt more alive.

Her touch felt so incredible. Her kisses were passion fueled. Her movements were fevered, urgent. I buried myself deeper and groaned with satisfaction. She was so tight and wet — nothing short of perfect.

Carmela continued wiggling under me. Her eyes were wide and manic, unfocused. She was delirious with pleasure. She looked drunk with euphoria. I pounded into her, nailing her harder when she pleaded for it and slowed down the rhythm of my thrusts when she whined for me to do so.

I kissed her again and she pulled away, arching her back as she stiffened. Her body contorted. I held her in place. The veins in her neck bulged and her eyes rolled back in her head. She cried out with fervent passion. The ecstasy poured from her body like atoms bursting. Her energy swept me away with the tide of arousal. The sounds of her moans thundered through my cock and a massive surge of blood went through it.

I groaned as the tingle of orgasm took over. I lost all control. Carmela went limp in my arms, breathing hard. Her eyes were dazed and clouded over. I pulled out right as the climax furiously destroyed me.

I wailed with delight, my groans sounding primal and animalistic. I exploded my hot seed all over her. She was drenched in my warm cum. The milky substance splattered out across her naked breasts and flat tummy.

Carmela didn't seem to mind much. She was still acting like she was in a haze of pleasure, and nothing could burst her bubble. Her movements were lazy and fatigued. She was still panting hard.

I reached for a towel to mop up the enormous mess I'd made on her body. Carmela's eyes sparkled with mischief. Her grin was exceptional. Everything about her was adorable, even when she was littered by the spray of my cum.

"That feels sticky," she said and laughed.

I laughed too, grateful for the lighter energy surrounding us now. I kissed the top of her forehead. "Sorry about that."

Carmela reached up and linked her hand over my forearm. She gave me a stunning stare. There was nothing teasing about her expression anymore.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for, Cyburn. All is forgiven."

CHAPTER
TWENTY

CARMELA

Life had gotten relatively easier for me now that the guards were watching Amada like a hawk, and around the clock. She was never alone, not even to go to the bathroom. All her rights, titles, and privacy had been stripped away, rightfully so. I didn't feel sorry for her. She'd made her bed. Let her lie in it.

However, we still had to get rid of her, and that part was still gnawing at my brain. I was nervous for how the exchange was going to go. I knew that Amada wasn't going to take the news very well, and that she'd probably put up a fight.

Or maybe she wouldn't. Who knew, really? At this point, why would she *want* to stay on the ship with us — with everyone who hated her, especially her estranged lover, *my* current lover, Cyburn.

We were waiting for the diplomatic ship from Vorgon. I was nervous about how things would go when it arrived, and my anxiety about the situation was distracting me and preventing me from doing my work properly in the robot lab.

Cyburn was with me while I was diligently trying to concentrate on putting some spare parts together to make a weapon out of them.

"Why don't you just take a rest?" Cyburn suggested.

I gave him a wan look. "I don't think so."

"You need the rest," Cyburn said with gentle lecturing.

"I need the distraction," I mentioned.

“It doesn’t seem to be working,” Cyburn said.

I gave him a smirk. “Gee, thanks.”

“I meant no offense.” He offered a lukewarm smile.

I sighed. “I know that you’re worried about me, but I promise that I’m fine. I’m a workaholic.”

“You are also a sexaholic,” Cyburn joked.

I laughed. He got me good on that one. “You might be right, but just look at it as making up for lost time.”

Cyburn feigned offense. “And here I was thinking that *I* had something to do with the fact that you want sex all the time.”

I grinned and stood on my tip-toes to kiss his lips. “You *are* the reason.”

“Good.” He looked a little prouder, puffing his chest out.

Cyburn’s features melted into a sudden and detrimental worry. “We have a big goal to accomplish tonight.”

I put my head down and nodded. I knew exactly what he was referring to. “Yeah. We do.”

Tonight, was the night when the ship would be arriving from Vorgon. Tonight would hopefully be the last night we had to worry about Amada ever again, but somehow, I knew we both doubted it — although neither of us were bold enough to say it out loud.

Cyburn took my hand and led me away from the table where I was working. “Come on,” he gently escorted. “Let’s go have some fun while it lasts.”

He didn’t have to convince me. My head and my heart were already in sync. I didn’t want to work right now anymore, anyway.



LATER THAT NIGHT WE WERE IN THE HANGAR. IT WAS LATE, after midnight. My eyes burned from exhaustion, but my heart

pounded with anxiety. My nerves were frazzled, and my stomach had already twisted itself into a million little tight knots.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, giving me a prickly feeling. I was in desperate need of sleep, but also wide awake with adrenaline.

I was locked in my own personal orbit of hell, just wanting to get this night over with. We were so close, yet it still somehow felt worlds away from our goal of booting Amada from the ship.

She was acting really strangely, too, which didn't do much to help settle my nerves.

“What is up with her?” I whispered to Cyburn who was fully decked out in his protective battle gear and life support armor — wearing it just in case anything went wrong. He had me wearing the same, which made me feel like this mission was going to end up being more than what it appeared.

I had an incredible sinking feeling about this. I just hated not knowing what was going to happen. If only I could build and program a robot who would be able to successfully predict the future for me.

For now, I just had to wipe my clammy palms on my suit and hope for the best. I was so stiff from the nervous tension that my muscles ached.

Cyburn subtly glanced at Amada. “What do you mean?”

“Isn't she acting suspicious to you?”

“She *always* acts suspicious to me.”

“I know... but worse than usual.” I frowned at her, pondering.

My heart was in my throat and a bout of nausea began churning uncomfortably in my stomach.

“I feel like I'm going to be sick,” I whispered to Cyburn.

His eyes wandered over me, inspecting. “Why?”

I shook my head, feeling the blood literally draining from my face. “I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about this.”

I wanted to appear assertive in front of him and the others. I would be utterly mortified if I vomited in front of them, especially Amada. I had to pull myself together.

“Just take a few deep breaths,” Cyburn murmured sympathetically. He wasn’t judging me, thank God. “I need you with me. I don’t want to let you out of my sight until Amada is gone.”

I swallowed hard and took the deep breaths as he instructed. “I know. You’re right.”

“Are the breaths helping?”

I glanced at him and nodded. “Yes, I feel a little better.”

“Good.”

Cyburn breathed in deep, too.

“The ship should be here soon,” he whispered and cracked his knuckles as if he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince me.

A weird blinking sound started pulsating through the hangar. The low hum of confused chatter and disbelief began to charge through the room.

Cyburn and Nix exchanged a troubled look with each other. Their black eyes shimmered with dread.

“What is it?” I snapped to attention, sitting up straight. My heart hammered so noisily in my chest that I felt like it was going to burst.

Nix and Cyburn began scrambling around. It was Silver who answered me, in her steely, cool, robotic voice as if there was nothing to panic about. Or maybe she just stopped caring at this point.

“That’s the ship sensors,” Silver explained. “They make that sound when the sensors register a spatial disturbance outside.”

My heart jumped into my throat and the nausea was in full swing. A sour taste began to bubble up on my tongue and my mouth watered with worry.

Then, a giggling, cackling, wild, manic sound rushed through the hangar. It took me a moment to realize the sound was coming from Amada's mouth. She was laughing... hysterically.

My stomach seized. It felt like a rock was sitting in there, just waiting to be retched up through my throat.

Cyburn quickly whipped around and stared at her. His black eyes had suddenly become mysteriously bloodshot. His jaw was taut. He had the stance of a boxer, ready to explode fury on the face of his opponent in the ring.

I was terrified.

Cyburn rushed toward Amada. He loomed over her, seething, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he struggled to keep control over his temper. He looked at her as if he wanted nothing more than to throw her through the wall.

"What did you do?" he demanded. His voice bellowed and crashed like thunder and lightning, unrecognizable to anything I'd ever heard before.

Amada didn't answer.

Cyburn persisted. "Amada. What. Did. You. *Do*?"

Amada's shrill laughter continued, and became harsher, louder. Crazy spittle sprayed from her mouth. Her green cheeks turned a fiery red.

Then, several warp gates abruptly opened. I forced myself to peer outside of them with a torturous dread stirring inside me.

We were surrounded by Belic ships. The realization went shattering through me at what Amada had done. She had given our position away to the Belics.

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PREVIEW OF ALIEN PRINCE CHARMING

CHAPTER 1 - GARDAX

I cleared my throat, pinched the bridge of my nose, and for the third time, inhaled deeply. The many eyes of my brothers were upon me. I braced myself as I prepared to upend their lives. You could hear a pin drop into the abyss of silence swirling through the room, but the quiet would soon come to a crashing and abrupt end.

In any lifetime, there comes a point where one is called to measure up, to rise to the occasion and do what we must to become the person we were meant to be. I was about to ask that of my brothers, and more to the point, myself.

“For the love of Trilynia, do you plan to explain sometime tonight why you’ve summoned us here, Gardax?” Rawklix asked, rolling his bright blue eyes.

The rest of my brothers grumbled their own muted impatience. Rawklix, the youngest at 18, was still callow enough to give voice to his impudent complaints.

“Mind your place, little one,” warned Manzar, squaring his jaw and leveling Rawklix with an icy stare that begged to be challenged.

Rawklix lifted one side of his mouth into a smirk. “Always such a foul mood, Manzar! You need to take a trip to my islands. If you’d tasted the pleasures of paradise, you might not be so content to sit around scratching your balls. Regardless, I have better things to be doing, and they involve naked women, so if you don’t mind hurrying this little reunion along, I’d be quite grateful.” He drummed his long fingers on the table as if his patience were wearing thin and he were warning us of an impending repercussion to that fact.

The massive square muscles of Manzar’s shoulders tensed, so I held up my hand, stemming the violence before it began. I knew a brewing fight when I saw one, and I had neither the time nor the energy to feed into these men’s egos.

Manzar was a military man and nearly as adept a warrior as myself. Rawklix stood no chance against him, but more importantly, there were matters far more pressing than the posturing egos of my younger brothers. They could clash at each other's throats on their own time.

“Enough, both of you. Bloody each other on your own time. I will not keep you here long, for obvious reasons, but for now, Trilynian business takes precedence, and you will all sit and hear what I have to share with you,” I said, gaining the attention of all six of my brothers. My voice boomed and barreled through the room, crashing down upon them like waves pelting the sand.

I nodded to Coel, my burly guardsman, and he silently swung open the thick metal door that was the only way in or out of the council room. The room was heavily fortified and operated on its own power source, completely distinct from the rest of the palace, making it the most secure space and ideal for such a conference. If you needed to discuss private matters, the council room was where you could operate under the most discrete of circumstances.

A few seconds later, in marched my two top scientists, looking a bit bewildered by the company before them. It was clear by their rattled expressions that they hadn't been expecting the entire council to be together in this situation.

The viral outbreak that had ravaged Trilynia had resulted in tight precautions that meant my brothers and I were rarely in the same location at once, the risks of infection too grave. Everyone had to be under tight lock and security. There was no room for error in the world we now lived in.

“Your Highnesses,” Lifiya, the lead researcher said, dropping to the floor and kowtowing beside her assistant, a thin man, at least by Trilyn standards, with messy brown hair and anxious eyes. She awaited a command or response before lifting her head.

“Please rise. I do not wish to be burdened with ceremony. Proceed with your presentation.” I strained not to let my

failing attitude in the moment leak through my voice, but it was a nearly impossible challenge.

“Of course, Your Highness.” She nodded, blinking owlily. “Please forgive my surprise. I assumed this would be a remote conference,” she said, setting the small box in her faintly trembling hands on the table before us. Her eyes briefly flickered across the table, skirting from brother to brother with subtle apprehension.

Pressing her hand into the gooey biometric scanning port, she unlocked and opened it, lifting the small metal device in front of her face. Now, she had stoic determination and precise concentration reflecting in her features.

“Your Graces, may I present you with our prototype Biostatistical Information Assessment and Symbiosis Scanner,” she said reverently, staring at the item like it contained the secret to life itself. The pride radiating from her aura as she displayed the object was remarkable and unmatched.

“We call it the BIAS scanner,” added her assistant, looking eager to participate. She shifted her weight and licked her lips, eyeing each of us as if she were proud of her contribution to the conversation.

“A dubious acronym,” my younger brother Jinurak responded, his twin Lortnam nodding in agreement. They seldom exchanged a difference of opinion.

Lifiya flashed an irritated look at her assistant then offered the device to me. It was weightier than I expected. I held it in my palms and gave it a thorough inspection.

“Dubious as it may sound, this will ensure the future of our people,” I announced, passing it to Darbnix who sat nearest me. “Be careful,” I advised. “Don’t drop it.”

The small blue watch-lizard on his shoulder scrambled down and inspected the device as he did. How he could be so comfortable with the tiny reptile crawling on him was beyond me. The lizard curled its prickly red tongue out of its snarly

little mouth. Its eyes narrowed with curiosity and it cocked its head to the side.

Lifiya seemed to tense nervously and reached out before stopping herself. “It’s our only model so far, though we will have the others completed soon.” Her voice was raspy and squeaky at the same time. She eyed the lizard with weary caution as she spoke.

“And? What does it do?” Rawklix asked, still looking bored and impatient. He rolled his eyes and let out a deliberately large and long-winded sigh, leaning back in his chair.

“It scans the genetic markers and biocomposition of an organism to identify compatibility between two specimens. A device will be created for each of Your Highnesses and programmed to each of your unique genetic configurations. Once formatted, the scanner can accurately detect the reproductive compatibility of any specimen surveyed and identify the individual whose markers offer optimal genetic potential for the production of viable progeny, your perfect match.”

“In other words, my brothers, meet our new matchmakers. There will be no more delay in acquiring a bride for any of us,” I said solemnly, feeling the weight of the matter acutely myself. My emotions on the subject were still floating up in the air and up for debate.

A hush fell over the room as the moment sank in. It was true. We were each of us well-acquainted with our mission. The future of our race depended upon our success in locating human mates, who were, incredibly, immune to the virus which had devastated our race, and producing virally resistant offspring. We were out of resources, out of options.

“And what qualifies as a ‘perfect match’?” Darbnix inquired, popping the knuckles of his large dark hands, an expression of concern crossing his face. He frowned skeptically. The watch lizard on his arm had returned to its post at his shoulder, tensing nervously as it mimicked the apprehension of its master. Its huge glassy eyes harbored slits for pupils that dilated when the creature engaged in anxiety of any kind.

Lifiya chewed her lip for a moment before continuing. Perhaps it might have been a nervous habit. Perhaps it was the pressure of promoting the device.

“What we have concerned ourselves with in this endeavor was genetic compatibility—locating an individual with whom you’ll have the most success in producing healthy offspring. I understand that there are other factors involved in the mating process . . .” She trailed off as she assessed the response and reaction of the assembly in front of her.

Darbnix gave a humorless laugh that was laced with palpable cynical flair.

“However, such matters are certainly not the province of science,” she finished. I noticed how her throat moved as she took a hard swallow.

“So, you’re saying that this trifling gadget” —Rawklix gestured at the scanner, which was now on the glass-like surface of the table before us— “could match us with a warty, bearded pit-dweller and we’ll have no choice but to bed them?”

The unease rolled through each of my brothers at the notion that their choice of future bride was now left so blindly to science. The scenario didn’t sit well with any of us, and I mentally stewed in my seat, stoically adhering to serenity. I wanted to fully understand the device and how it worked before I made any knee-jerk conclusions.

Suddenly, Darbnix let loose a loud laugh, the force of it sending his lizard scrambling up to perch in Darbnix’s short brown hair. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, boy. As wet behind the ears as you are, Rawklix, you should be happy for any woman who will take you.” It was common for him to playfully tease his brother in a patronizing way.

“Perhaps I should stick to animals then, like you, Darbnix?” Rawklix sneered. He was always easily defensive. Quippy retorts came naturally to him, and I found them at the very least amusing as long as I wasn’t the one facing the backlash.

Darbnix barely registered the insult, but the little lizard on his arm shimmered to a brilliant fiery red and launched itself at Rawklix, hissing and biting as he struggled to shake free of it. The little creature was feisty and animated as it enthusiastically thrashed on top of Rawklix.

“*Argh!* Call off your vile little worm!” Rawklix shouted, spitting as his hair became askew and disheveled in the struggle. His cheeks burned bright red with fresh fury.

Laughing, Darbnix reached out and grabbed the lizard by the tail. “Come, Vigo, let the boy and his wounded ego alone. We wouldn’t want to scratch that pretty face, after all.” The lizard emitted a strange clicking, shimmering back to blue, and settled on Darbnix’s arm. It perched there with smug satisfaction.

I stood. “Enough squabbling. Rawklix—all of you—*this* is our duty. It doesn’t matter what we sacrifice in the process. We must do what is right by our planet and by our people. The seven of us are the best chance of survival for Trilynia. If that means you must compromise your shallow standards, Rawklix, then you will do so without complaint, for there are far greater consequences at stake.” My voice left little room for debate. This was a somber subject, but I wasn’t going to stand idly by as I watched my planet deplete of living beings who no longer had the ability to procreate.

“And what is so wrong with satisfying my own standards in a mate as well as those demanded of me by Trilynia? I’m perfectly capable of finding a woman. Why must I obey some gadget?” Rileen was confrontational and morose. He always asked questions. He never took no for an answer.

“There are 14 billion humans on Earth, and roughly half of those are females. Divided evenly among us, that is still approximately one billion human women for each of us to weed through,” I answered patiently so that he would finally see the point. “Under ideal circumstances, we would all have the freedom to select the mate of our choice, but these are not those circumstances. We have had more than enough time to find brides in the typical way and none of us has done so. Results are due now, and it is our responsibility to deliver.

Having the choice taken from you . . . well, I don't expect any of you to be happy about the situation, but I do expect you to honor your duties," I finished soberly.

No one contradicted me, even Rawklix, as we all thought back to the state of our home planet two dwarf stars away. I was the eldest brother. In the end, I was the established voice of reason. I had the final say in decisions made around this council table.

Life managed to continue on there, even with the looming threat of extinction, but we all knew that matters would not remain peaceful for long if we did not send word back soon of our success in locating mates. The people of this planet would be hunting for answers, and it was me and my brothers they would be looking to.

The Great Plan had been conceived by the Royal Council in one of the darkest hours of Trilynian history. The virus that had swept through our people had rendered the majority of our women infertile, and without the promise of a future, chaos had threatened to unravel the very fabric of our society. Panic rippled through the communities like a Tsunami wreaking havoc and flooding the areas around its destructive path.

Our expedition, the chance that we might be able to ensure the next generation of Trilyns, had reignited some small spark of hope. Hope might seem a trifling, sentimental notion, but without it, the worst of society emerged. Anger erupted in people's minds. Chaos ensued. There were many protests.

"You are right, of course, Gardax," Manzar, ever loyal, agreed. If I ever needed a right-hand man, he was the one I turned to. He was the one I could trust under any taxing situation.

"We'll need some sort of system for this," Lortnam added contemplatively. Among my brothers, his mind was the one most suited toward matters of organization and resource management. He was the type to always process and digest information and then carefully and measuredly come to the best solution.

"Agreed," I answered. "We have already reached a diplomatic agreement with the Union of Terran Inhabitants. I think the

matter should not be too complicated. Do any of you have suggestions?” I raised my eyebrows and scanned the room, tensing my muscles while I braced for impact.

“If I may interject, Your Highness,” Lifiya said, “It may clarify your plans to know that the scanners do have a significant range.”

“How significant?” I asked with intrigue.

She looked to her assistant, who meekly added, “Based upon the density of specimens in the environment, the range of accurate detection can fluctuate some, but approximate range is between 100 and 300 parcils, Your Highness.”

“Not bad.” I nodded. I was impressed with the measurements. A device so significant needed to be as precise and advanced as possible.

Akrawn, who had kept quiet until now, finally joined in. “I have been informed that excitement among the human females has begun to grow at the prospect of marriage to Trilyn Royalty.”

He folded his pale hands in front of him, coal-black hair falling around the harsh angles of his face. “Our society is wealthier, infinitely more technologically advanced, and we have none of the issues of political instability or resource mismanagement they do here on Earth. I say we have the upper hand. We should use it. Let them come to us. A contained space will also make detection easier.”

Manzar grunted. “There is sense in this. We make ourselves vulnerable by going out and moving through their world. Far safer for us to conduct this search on our own territory.”

Lortnam scratched the olive skin of his chin as he thought. “It needs to be done in an orderly, controlled fashion then. We can host a forum at a set time and announce it with an open invitation?” His voice showed enthusiasm.

Rawklix yawned. “A forum? Could we make the mating process any more methodical or dry? Let us throw a party, at least. If we must chain ourselves to some random human, why

shouldn't we have a good time in the process?" He smirked with youthful arrogance.

For once, I agreed with my pleasure-seeking youngest brother. "Rawklix, though tactless, makes a good point. There is no reason we cannot enjoy ourselves. Besides, making the occasion festive may ensure a greater number of attendees, which will improve our chance of success."

Agreement was murmured, and plans began to take shape. Finally, we were getting somewhere. I loved to see unity come together. Brainstorming held an important place in this palace.

I thanked Lifiya and her assistant and dismissed them to resume their work. After collecting samples from myself and each of my brothers, they rushed off to finish the devices. They hurried away with chattering and bubbly enthusiasm. At least they were engrossed in their work and loved to produce something that would reach the masses and change the world we lived in.

An hour later, the matter was settled. We would host a gathering at the week's end, here on my ship, which functioned as a remote Central Palace. Depending on how successful the occasion turned out, we would do the same at each of my brother's ships. We were aiming for the highest numbers possible, and we had to make the first event engaging, enticing, and thrillingly entertaining.

"We'll want to contract more human staffers beyond the few who have already been employed," Lortnam added. "This event should conform to Earth culture wherever possible and be as close to their traditional gatherings as we can make it."

Rawklix closed his eyes. "Please let that include orgies! Please let that include orgies!" His lips curled into a mischievous grin.

"Pardon me, Your Highness." Coel cleared his throat. "But we've surpassed the allotted time for today's council." He was right, I realized. The concentration of us all being here on one ship made us all vulnerable. As the future rulers of our planet, we did not have the luxury of taking such things for granted.

I nodded professionally. “Thank you.” I turned back to my brothers. “We will conduct remote conferences for the preparations.” I gave them each a glance, locking eyes with them to ensure they understood the protocol and plans to take off from here.

Each of my brothers excused themselves from the council room, making their way to their own itinerant pods that would return them to their individual vessels. One by one, they disembarked, and I was left alone in the great council room with my own thoughts. My head screamed with ideas, fantasies, and hope for the future. There was no shutting off my emotions. I was always going to be spinning in the web of my own making.

I shared Rawklix’s concerns about being linked to a female I would not otherwise have chosen for myself, of course, but what good did it do to give space to such worry in my mind? There was, after all, nothing to be done about it. I was born into a position of the highest privilege, and along with it came the weight of duty. I would not shirk it now, when my service mattered most. Cosmetic and surface beauty were always fixable. Saving my species was of the utmost importance now.

The idea of returning to Trilyn appealed to me, as well. As the future High King, my successful return would do a great deal toward restoring stability to our kingdom. Indeed, though I may never fully silence the fears at the periphery of my mind, I felt quite pleased at the prospect of fulfilling my duty to my people and ensuring the survival of our race. Surely, there could be no greater honor.

I walked down the great hall with its transparent floor, allowing me an unimpeded view of the Earth metropolis below. We hovered in the atmosphere above what was called New York, I was told. Though I longed to set foot once more on Trilynian soil, there was a certain beauty to the glitter of lights that spread across the land, twinkling like burning embers.

The lights from the city below twinkled like tiny stars. The energy was electric and was already rubbing off on me. My heart raced as I stared down at the earth below. Was my future

mate somewhere down there? Would we fall in love easily? So many unanswered questions lingered, begging to be answered.

The artificial lights would fade soon as the planet's rotation caused the city to be bathed in the life-giving rays of Earth's sun. Somewhere, down below in the sparkling ether of the night, was the woman whom I would wed and share my life with. For a moment, I let myself feel the warmth of hope. If I embarked on this adventure with an open mind and a positive attitude, I was bound to succeed.

CHAPTER 2 - AMY

“Tell me something, Amy,” Darla said, her lean frame silhouetted in the wide doorway of the dark kitchen where I’d been working all day.

I looked up, the sick feeling of dread coiling in my stomach as I asked, “Yes, Darla?” I swallowed hard and willed myself not to allow any of my fears or trepidation to escape.

“How is it that you are so incompetent? Do you think you were just born a simpleton, or was it growing up as gutter skuzz that did it?” I looked down, avoiding her catty grey eyes and willing myself to be numb and remain silent. If I didn’t respond to the jabs, then I hoped this encounter wouldn’t last as long.

The other kitchen workers had the good sense to scurry away from the central prepping table I was working at, anticipating Darla’s tirade. If she was in the kitchens, it was to chew on someone. Luckily for the other workers, we all knew I was her preferred victim. I could hardly blame them for withdrawing, though just once, it would be nice to go a day without her abuse. I didn’t expect anyone to stick up for me, but it was just as well. I didn’t want to hold onto false hope.

Darla came forward, surveying the racks of delicate pastries and confections I’d been frantically churning out as quickly as I was physically able. She grabbed a plaited brioche, still warm from the oven, inspecting it. She scrutinized the treat as if she were just ready to pounce on any microscopic flaw. It seemed silly that she bothered with the pretense. We both knew it wouldn’t meet her standards, no matter how perfectly prepared the item was.

“By now, I should know better than to expect anything else,” she said, tossing the fluffy, buttery brioche in the waste shoot along with the rest of the tray. My heart dropped through my shoe at her hateful gesture, but I didn’t flinch. “Since your dim-witted goldfish brain is incapable of holding onto information for more than a few minutes, let me remind you

that we are preparing a feast for royalty. *Royalty!* Do you understand what that means? That means that this has to be *flawless!*” Her voice carried through the room like a siren screeching through the night.

She knocked over several more trays, the metal clattering in a deafening clamor. “This is all shit!”

I held my breath and waited for her tantrum to end, if it ever would. Sometimes, it was better to ride out the storm than to avoid it.

My knuckles turned white as I forcefully kneaded the massive mound of dough, refusing to give in to the anger bubbling inside me. In the refugee camp, on the streets, I’d done what I had to survive, things that in a perfect world, I’d maybe regret.

But violence wasn’t something I got to shy away from. Life isn’t sunshine and peaches for a homeless teenage girl with a baby. Hard times were a way of life for me.

It was different now, though. I had something to lose. I was on the way to getting Corinne and me out of that and into a better life, and the instincts that kept me alive before had no place here. I had to bite my tongue until I tasted the bitter, coppery taste of blood in order to prevent myself from spewing vile words at this terrible woman in front of me.

“You know what gets at me?” Darla said, coming up behind me, oblivious to the well of anger inside me. “I gave you every opportunity, took you out of the gutter, took you under my wing, and this is how you repay me? This is the most important event we’ve hosted. If it doesn’t go off perfectly, it reflects on *me!*” She yelled dramatically and waved her hands in the air as if she were swimming against the swell of a panic attack. “And isn’t it just my luck that I have little bitches like you down here, sabotaging everything I’ve worked so hard for! What is that wretched smell?” She turned toward the saucier and scowled. Her nose wrinkled with patronizing disapproval.

He was a bow-legged man with a deep scar that extended from his hairline to his chin. He’d seen his share of horror. All of us had our scars, though. Some were just better hidden than

others. Mine were tucked away beneath the surface and I never wanted them to see the light of day.

She marched around the room, laying into the other staff members who were unfortunate enough to still be stuck at their stations, and I let my mind wander, letting go of my anger in favor of better thoughts. You learn little tricks like that as a refugee. When things get too rough, too hard to process, you shut it out. Little tactics for preserving your sanity. It was a survival instinct of sorts, and I did what I could in order to not implode on myself.

I felt sorry for the ones currently receiving the brunt of her fury, but I'd endured my fair share in the process along the way. I blocked Darla's shrill screeching out and let my thoughts drift to that secret place in my mind. The place I escaped to with *him*. In reality, my existence wasn't even a speck on Prince Gardax's radar, but in my mind, he was *mine*.

And in my mind, he made me his. Just the way I wanted it to be. The private seclusion of my mind was my oasis in a desert of chaos.

If I closed my eyes, I could almost feel the warmth of his skin, pretend that he was holding me to him. He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen, and he wasn't even a man—not a human one, anyway. It didn't matter, though, because he made me feel more like a woman than I had ever felt. Shivers and trembles of pleasure ran up and down my spine. There was no euphoria that could ever match the depth of passion that I felt toward him.

He would kiss me gently, drawing all the stress and aches from my body as he murmured softly, assuring me that I was safe, that Corinne would be safe, that everything was going to get better. His hands were so strong as they stroked my back, my shoulders, massaging my tired muscles . . . not that princes probably gave massages, but it was my fantasy, so why not? There were no rules in the cobwebs of my lust-clouded mind.

It would have been the ultimate humiliation if anyone knew what went through my mind in moments like that. The heat of

desire and shame flushed my cheeks and sprinkled them a rosy red color.

How ridiculous that I, a lowly, pathetic cook and maid, dreamed of Prince Gardax's lips curving in a secret smile meant just for me. It was pitiful, no doubt, but when you live most of your life in either a warzone or a refugee camp, you don't exactly have a lot of happy memories to pull from.

So naturally, I created my own pleasurable world where I was in charge of my fate and blissful serenity accompanied me from all sides. I created little stories in my mind, dreamy, romantic scenes that were about as far removed from reality as I could get. It helped me get through the grueling, insufferable days. I tried not to stay locked in the daydreams for long. I reserved those times mainly for sleep or when Darla was yelling at me and everyone else in her tornadic path.

Sometimes, when I was there well before dawn, baking pastries for his breakfast in the dark, warm kitchens, I'd imagine him coming in, taking the rolling pin out of my hands, and carrying me to his private chamber. Maybe we'd curl up together and talk for hours or maybe we'd sleep. Maybe we would do a combination of both. I yearned for the touch of another. I craved conversation and someone who would be interested in me and would want to get to know me.

Was it sad that my fantasies with a gorgeous alien prince involved sleep? Definitely, but when you only get an average of four to five hours of sleep a night, that deprivation seeps into everything. Of course, there were plenty of daydreams where we did more than sleep.

Whatever we did, it was far, far away from this awful, crowded, heated room. I'd never seen the private wing of his ship, if 'ship' was even the right term for it, but anything had to be better than the sweltering kitchens. It was like a sweat lodge in here, and I was layered in chef's clothing that didn't do my perspiration any favors. I wanted to sweat in other ways. Other ways that involved Gardax.

Cloaked as the structure was with stealth technology, all but the main hull was invisible from the exterior. From the ground,

it was almost imperceptible, just a small aircraft among the clouds. But if the chatter among the staff was to be believed, there was much, much more to it. The shuttle that carried us to work dropped us at the service port and we exchanged stories of the glimpses we caught.

Few knew how large the place really was, and I certainly was never given leave to go exploring, but it sounded massive, a maze of finely furnished chambers and passages that I would have loved to wander. In my deepest fantasies, I'd be waltzing through those doors with elegance and grace, adorned with the finest jewelry that money could buy. I wasn't materialistic in reality, but like I said before, a girl can dream.

I'd only seen the prince a few times. There was my first day, when I came to work with a group of new recruits aboard his vessel, two months prior. It was brief, and I was so nervous I'm not sure I remembered to breathe. That whole time was a bit of a fuzzy blur in my mind. I naturally blocked out trauma in my life.

He was the first alien I'd ever seen. Before the Trilyns arrived seeking a treaty, the only other alien life-forms humans had encountered were little more than single-celled organisms on one of Jupiter's moons. It was utterly shocking to discover that there was a sentient, intelligent, and frankly, gorgeous race out there. I wasn't ever afraid of them, especially if they were here seeking peace and unity. I was more infatuated and curious of them than anything.

Aside from being incredibly tall, with muscles carved so finely he might have been a statue and eyes the exact shade of the freshly ripened corn that covered the plains of the home I was forced to flee, he looked like any other inordinately stunning human. I'd heard whispers that they were trained warriors as well, despite their royal upbringing, and it didn't surprise me. The way he moved was so controlled, so powerful. His physique was mesmerizing, intoxicating.

There had been a handful of times I'd passed him in the main hall, but he hadn't seen me. He was always speaking to someone or occupied in some way, always distracted, always serious. I had imagined royalty—alien or otherwise—led lives

of luxury and relaxation, but I had yet to see Prince Gardax in any state of ease. I wondered if he took his own mental vacations, if he checked out and ran away to some happy place in his mind . . . and if he did, what sort of things he daydreamed about. I knew that he had to keep his air of confidence and leadership. He had a lot on his plate, as I could imagine.

Then there was the day he gathered the human staff aboard the ship to inform us of the impending party. His piercing yellow eyes had passed over me as he spoke, surveying the crew. It was completely idiotic, but my nerves had a field day as I sat there listening to his deep, commanding voice, hoping he'd notice me. I didn't know how I could stand out from the crowd to draw his attention, but I wanted his eyes, those piercing eyes to land on me and lock.

Then again, I thought as I looked down at my dingy apron, a wisp of flour-coated hair fluttering into my eyes, there wasn't much to notice, especially when Prince Gardax could literally take his pick of women. I'm sure I wasn't even on his radar. He was a prince, after all, and probably had women all over him.

Everyone knew why the princes had come. Their planet had been overtaken by some kind of virus that had rendered their females infertile. To ensure the continuation of their species, the princes had been sent to find human brides, and there was definitely no shortage of beautiful women who were dying to volunteer for the position . . . women I could never compete with. I was ordinary, a refugee who would never stick out.

What was I? I had nothing to recommend me. I was little more than an underfed refugee living in Union housing with no advanced education and no prospects beyond domestic work. I would never hold his interest in my condition or situation.

I sighed and refocused my attention on the sound of Darla's voice getting closer to me again. My muscles immediately tensed up, bracing for impact of the plume of anger she always had, ready to lash out.

“Do any of you have even the faintest concept of how big of a deal this is? Apparently not, or else I wouldn’t be looking at a bunch of slack-jawed ingrates doing the bare minimum! We’re behind schedule, and unless you want to work through the night, I suggest you all start picking up the pace!” She tossed another tray on the floor.

For someone who claimed to be concerned about completing our tasks on time, she had a funny way of showing it. Time was wasting while we all stood there, fearfully cowering under her command. We could be spending the time being productive, but she was throwing our supplies all over the room. It was a wonder that she didn’t get a sore throat from all the screaming and yelling she liked to do.

“These racks are supposed to be half-full already.” She motioned to the line of preservation racks that would keep the food in stasis until it was laid out for the hundreds of anticipated guests. “Look at this! This is pathetic! If the party wasn’t in three days, I would fire the lot of you!” The veins in her neck bulged in protest.

“We’re all working as hard as we can, Darla,” I ventured, unable to bite back the comment. It had dripped from my tongue before I had a chance to convince myself not to do it. I couldn’t afford to lose this job. Employment was too scarce and I had more than just myself to look out for.

“Oh? Oh, really? Well, then why is it I got a request from you to take tomorrow night off?” She sneered down at me, an evil glint in her eye. She stared at me as if she despised me and wanted to squash me like a bug under her shoe.

I looked up, surprised. She had already told me I could have the night off. My heart dropped with disappointment.

“It’s Corinne’s birthday—” I started, but she cackled in that creepy, brittle voice of hers as if my personal affairs were none of her concern and she couldn’t care less about them.

“So, the little sponger is having a birthday? Well, wouldn’t it be a nice present for her to have a big sister who doesn’t just expect handouts? You’re not going anywhere.” She spun, eyeing the other prep workers and cooks. “Any of you! Don’t

think I won't be coming back before your shifts are over to see what you've got to show for yourselves . . . and if I'm not happy with what I find, no one is going anywhere."

She stomped out of the kitchen, and for a beat, we all held our breath, waiting to hear her if she'd come back before the collective sigh was released. I stared at the ceiling so the well of hot tears wouldn't instantly pour down my face like a broken-hearted waterfall.

"What a pain in the ass." Felix, one of the grill cooks, grumbled and kicked the side of a table with resentful scorn.

Quiet murmurs of agreement were shared, but I kept quiet. If I'd learned anything from all the years on my own, it's not to trust anyone. I couldn't be certain if any one of them might turn on me. Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. In this day and age, I had little time to make either.

Of course, I wanted to defend myself against Darla's rants. And sure, I'd like to vent with everyone else about pulling fourteen-hour days of grueling work in the stifling heat of the kitchens in this floating alien palace. But I also need to survive. So, I bit my lip, swallowed my frustration, and kept my head down. There was no room for error or protest. I had to think of Corinne above all else. Her wellbeing was front and center in my mind.

When I first got hired on the ship, I'd been foolish. I'd thought I could trust people, thought that this was my magic ticket to a better life for Corinne and me. Darla had been so friendly at first. Looking back, it was clear that she was looking for weakness to manipulate. She was nothing if not crafty. Darla knew exactly how to put pressure on people, how to bully them, how to get under their skin and make them feel like the tiniest scrap of human existence. She also knew how to extract information.

She was a snake in the grass, ready to pounce. She was a wolf in sheep's clothing, or any other common phrase used to describe people like her. Well-meaning as my coworkers might have been, I didn't trust any of them not to repeat my

complaints to her to save their own skin. It just wasn't worth the risk.

I could almost laugh, looking back at how misguided and naïve my first impressions of her had been. She'd seemed so genuinely interested in being friends, checking in with me through training, even coming over to our apartment and meeting Corinne. The reversal had slapped any foolish notions of friendship clean out of my mind though. It was as if Darla had flipped a switch and completely altered her demeanor in a flash.

You'd think it wouldn't have surprised me so much. After narrowly escaping a violent, bloody war that claimed my parents and scrounging to survive as a thirteen-year-old taking care of her baby sister, there shouldn't be much optimism left in me. I've seen enough backstabbing, enough betrayal, enough violence to last ten lifetimes. Maybe I was just too tired, too relieved at the idea of someone looking out for me for once, that I didn't want to see it.

Either way, Darla reminded me of the truth. No one would ever have my back, no one except Corinne, and for Corinne, I had to endure. There was no other option. We were family, and we had to preserve that tie at any and all cost. I'd do anything to keep Corinne under the umbrella and blanket of my security.

I started plaiting the dough for another tray of brioche and let my thoughts drift back to that happy place, the place that didn't have to be tainted by reality. My hands were shaking with anger and anxiety, but after a few minutes, I began to plateau and calm down.

I wondered what Prince Gardax would look like at the party, whether he'd eat the cakes and tarts I'd made while dreaming of him . . . if he'd find his bride. Envy lashed at me like a whip, but it was no use in dreaming that he'd ever be mine.

With a sad smile, I let myself imagine what it would be like to be one of the guests, to have his eyes upon me, to be the focus of his attention. The sigh that escaped was entirely

involuntary, but I was fully immersed in my own little world while I worked.

“Contents of bay four have surpassed maximum preparation cook time,” the automated voice announced.

Sure enough, the distinctive smell of charred dough filled the space. I rushed forward and sent up a silent plea that Darla wouldn't smell the burned fumes and come charging back into the kitchens.

I pulled the pan out and singed my wrist in the process, a painful reminder to get my head out of the clouds and back to reality. I lived to dream but dreamed to live.

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