

# My Own Flesh and Blood

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Rhea Lockman took a deep breath and wrinkled her nose in disgust. God, she was tired of breathing recycled air and walking on carpeted steel. Her feet longed to touch real dirt, not the synthetic stuff they called gardens on these space stations. Just once more she'd like to breathe the sweet scent of damp earth crumbling beneath her feet, full of the fragrance of life. She sighed. Too many years spent rambling around in space. Maybe after this job she could make a trip back to Earth.

Rhea resisted the urge to tug at her wig as she stared at the groups of uniformed officers gathered in the waiting area. She ignored the itch to move, to find someplace devoid of uniforms, and pulled a ball of yarn and a pair of needles from her bag. When she'd thought up this disguise, Rhea had searched for something "grandmotherly" to keep her hands occupied. Her friend Imogene knitted all the time, said it was tradition – her grandmother's grandmother had knitted. Must have been a bunch of masochists, Rhea grumbled under her breath as she fought to keep the yarn on the slippery needle. She dropped her hands into her lap, wriggled her bottom deeper into the supposedly self-conforming chair, and studied her fellow travelers – the ones *not* in uniform.

"Gotta give 'em an angle, a line to punch, if you get my drift. They'll come round eventually." The businessman on Rhea's right sat hunched over with a hand to his ear and his chin tucked into the collar of his embroidered tunic. "You listen to me. Everyone wants this technology. Soon they'll be demanding it in their homes and offices. Bionics is the wave of the future . . ."

The man's voice faded as Rhea focused on one word: Bionics. A tremor raced up her spine as she glanced at the uniforms around her and clenched her jaw. How many of these officers had been outfitted with implants or bionic limbs or both?

She reached out and tapped the man on the arm. He turned, an impatient look on his face.

"Excuse me for prying," Rhea said, keeping her voice meek. Got to stay calm, she reminded herself. But she couldn't let this pass. "But aren't bionics dangerous?"

The man's expression grew blank.

"I saw a special on the vid, dear. And that's what the commentator said." She patted his arm again.

The businessman cleared his throat and tucked his chin. "I'll get back to you, Brad." He looked at Rhea. "Bionic implants and prosthetics are designed to be ultra sensitive, ma'am. To pressure as well as to temperature. There's nothing dangerous about them."

"The man on the vid said that, too." Rhea nodded. "But he also said some people don't realize how strong their new parts can be, even with the best training. Why, innocent people have been killed, purely by accident, of course." She sat back and watched for his reaction.

"That's what this conference is all about, Mrs . . .?" The man lifted an eyebrow.

"Mrs. Lockman. Mrs. Carl Lockman." Rhea watched closely. She hadn't used her real name in a long time. Not since she'd made worldwide news along with the rest of Speckles' grassroots group more than four years ago.

The man handed her a business card. "Name's Eddie. Eddie Poole." He waved a hand at the uniforms. "The Universal Convention of Law Enforcement Officers has been called for just that purpose, Mrs. Lockman, to demonstrate the safety and viability of bionic technology. Now, there's no reason why you yourself shouldn't benefit from this technology . . ."

Rhea let him ramble on for a moment. She knew all about bionics, and there was no way she'd let anyone stick one of those blasted machines in her! Her impatience started to grow. The majority of people didn't know anything about bionics and she could forgive their naiveté. But this man should know better. "Mr. Poole . . ."

"Eddie, please," he corrected with an ingratiating smile.

She gritted her teeth. God, how she hated salesmen! "Mr. Poole. Do you realize that two men and a young woman were killed just last week during a peaceful demonstration? Officers swarmed down on the poor people, claiming they were disturbing the peace. Several of those officers were bionically enhanced and as a result, people were killed." She was stretching the truth a little, but not much. The police were claiming other factions had interfered, but Speckles had his own theory.

"I agree this is somewhat of a problem, Mrs. Lockman," Charles said. "But every day improvements are being made." He shifted in his seat. "Think of it, Rhea. May I call you Rhea?"

“No, you may not,” Rhea said with a smile. “What about rehabilitation methods, Mr. Poole? Who works with the psychological side of bionics?” Her voice rose and several passengers looked their direction. Slow down, Rhea reminded herself. She took a deep breath. “On Earth just last month an Airvan ran itself right into an old bridge abutment, killing itself and nine passengers. Now how do you explain that, Mr. Poole?”

The salesman straightened his shoulders, an eager gleam in his eye. Did these guys ever give up?

“My point exactly, Mrs. Lockman. What we are doing here at . . .”

Point? He hadn’t made any points as far as she was concerned. Rhea slumped back in her seat and let her eyes close. If she listened to his drivel any longer, she was likely to smack him in the nose! She slowed her breathing. She should have known better than to have broached the subject in the first place.

Oh, yes. She knew about bionics. Five years ago a pair of policemen had taken her husband in for questioning on a minor matter. She’d found him in the hospital twenty-four hours later, an empty shell. The official report claimed he’d suffered heart failure during the interrogation, but she’d seen the bruises on his throat and stomach. No response came from her accusations of brutality; in fact, they’d threatened to arrest her for “obstructing justice” if she pursued her story. And she was naive enough in those days to back down.

Ironically, the incident sent their son Patrick into law enforcement training. He figured he could better fight the system from inside.

Rhea found other people who felt as she did and gradually learned the only way to change the “Establishment” was through force. You had to *make* them sit up and take notice. She joined demonstrations and rallies. The day she was arrested for assaulting an officer, she and Patrick had argued – a bitter fight full of accusations and hateful words.

“. . . now wouldn’t you agree, Mrs. Lockman? Mrs. Lockman?”

Rhea kept her eyes closed and her breathing slow. The chair next to her creaked.

“Hey, Brad. Yeah, it’s me. Listen . . .”

The seat back pressed hard against her spine, and Rhea focused on the meditation Speckles had taught her. She tried to concentrate on her breathing, but her mind was a whirlwind. Today she had a chance to make up for all the pain of the past and try to bring sanity back to a world gone mad. She shifted restlessly in her seat and tried to ignore her racing pulse. So much for

relaxation training. She'd be better off with a drink.

“What're you doing?”

Rhea opened her eyes to find a young girl and her even younger brother standing in front of her. “Are you talking to me, young lady?”

The girl nodded and pointed at the yarn in Rhea's lap. The toddler looked up at her a bit uncertainly, then smiled and held up his hand. Rhea forced a smile to her face and shook her head, declining the generous offer of goo dribbling from the young boy's hand. No telling what it once was; now the only sign it was even edible was the equally unidentifiable smear about the boy's mouth.

“Just knitting,” she said, tucking the ball and needles into her bag. “Why don't you go find your mother and get your little brother cleaned up?”

“Mommy!” A bright smile spread across the boy's face and Rhea's heart clenched. It had been so long since she'd seen a smile that sweet, that innocent. She reached out on impulse and gave the boy a hug, ignoring his gooey hands and face. The comforting odor of baby powder made the years seem to disappear. She sat back and ran a finger across the silken softness of his cheek.

“Do you have children?” the little girl asked as she took her brother's hand.

Rhea shook her head. “Not any more, honey. My son died almost five years ago.” Four days, thirteen hours, and twenty-one minutes after their last argument.

“Interplanetary Spaceways Flight #2078 to Glenn Lunar Station is almost ready for boarding, ladies and gentlemen.” The harsh sound of the public address system left Rhea slightly disoriented. She stared at the boy, seeing Patrick for a moment in those wide, blue eyes.

They say time heals all wounds, Rhea thought as she gently pushed the boy away. But they're wrong. She blinked back burning tears. “You go on now and find your mama.” She gave the boy a soft smack on his bottom. “It's time for me to get going.” It was times like these Patrick's death reached out and punched her in the stomach.

A young officer helped Rhea to her feet. “Thank you.” She glanced at the name tag pinned to the man's khaki uniform. “*Commander* Jordan? You seem awfully young to be a commander.” She sighed. “I suppose I'm just getting on in years. Keep going like this, everyone will look like babies!” Quickly, she swept her gaze over the officer's uniform, keeping her smile casual and her look curious while at the same time noting the empty holster at his

waist.

Commander Jordan chuckled and nodded at the toddler being towed away by his sister. “Just as long as you don’t make me wear diapers, ma’am.” He touched his forehead in a light salute and turned away.

Rhea clutched her bag and shuffled over to the gate attendant. “It takes me a while to get where I’m going, son. Do you mind if I get started?” Acting old is hell, she thought, struggling against a growing sense of impatience. Good thing she wouldn’t have to keep up this masquerade for too long. She glanced at her watch. Less than an hour and a half, if all went well.

“Hold on just a moment, ma’am.” The attendant turned away from her and put his hand to his ear.

Damned implants. They were everywhere these days. It was getting so you’d never be able to tell if the person sitting next to you was human or robot. Or a combination of both.

The attendant turned back to her. “Step up to the scanner, ma’am, and try not to blink.” He watched as Rhea put her face to the retinal scanner and stared hard. Every time she faced one of these things, she had to force her eyes open. Silly, really. It didn’t hurt – the worst thing about these scanners was the anticipation. She stepped back and blinked as her eyes readjusted.

After a glance at his monitor, the attendant nodded. “You can go on board, Mrs. Lockman. Cindy will help you once you get to the ship. Do you need help with anything?” When Rhea shook her head, he continued. “Sorry for the delay. Normally, preboarding is not a problem. But you may have heard we have a law enforcement convention going on at the Lunar Station. Two-thirds of our passengers today are officers of one type or another.” Rhea flashed him a curious look.

“I would think things would be extra safe then,” she said, raising her eyebrow.

“Yes, ma’am. It would seem that way, wouldn’t it?”